



# Lao Buddhist Tradition: An Examination Of Its Interplay With Animism And Changing Contours In The Twenty-First Century

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## Abstract

Buddhism is one of the major religions followed in Southeast Asia. The Buddhist traditions of the Lao people possess distinctive characteristics arising from the integration of Theravada Buddhism with indigenous animistic beliefs, which have played a significant role in the way of life, society, and culture of Lao communities over an extended period. The concepts of the concerned spirits, such as household spirits, ancestral spirits, guardian spirits, ancestor veneration, and rituals for protection and prosperity, continue to coexist alongside Buddhist tradition in Laos, such as karma, the cycle of death and rebirth, and merit-making through dedication of merit.

Alongside economic transformations, urbanization, globalization, technological advancements, and governmental regulations in the twenty-first century, several customs have been altered or are now seen as cultural heritage rather than adherence to faith. However, this integration still demonstrates the adaptability and flexibility of Lao Buddhism, which continues to play a vital part in preserving Lao society's uniqueness and cohesion. Furthermore, indigenous beliefs are interpreted within the moral framework of Buddhism, and Lao Buddhist monks frequently act as a bridge between ceremonies associated with animist tradition beliefs, such as the dispelling of misfortune.

This article, “**Lao Buddhist Tradition: An Examination of its Interplay with Animism and Changing Contours in the Twenty-First Century**,” focuses on the pre-Buddhist and modern amalgamations of Animism and Buddhism in Lao civilization. I will also discuss Buddhism in Lane Xang from the 13<sup>th</sup> century C.E. onward, making it the primary religion of the Lane Xang people and uniting all the sub-lands into one Kingdom. Furthermore, King Fa Ngum, the first great king, and other Kings of Lane Xang, who patronized Buddhism in the land. In addition, I'll discuss the mixture of Buddhist tradition with

other Laotian faiths. Finally, I'll discuss and analyze the interaction between Buddhism and animism in Lao society and examine the transformation of Buddhist traditions in the twenty-first century.

**Keywords:** Lao Buddhist Tradition, Lao Buddhist monk, Theravada Buddhism, Animal worship, Animism, Lao culture, Lao Tradition, Buddhist Festival, Phi cults, Social transformation.

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) is a landlocked country without a coastline, located in the center of Southeast Asia. It shares borders with China to the north, Vietnam to the east, Thailand to the west, Cambodia to the south, and Myanmar to the northwest.<sup>1</sup> Theravāda Buddhism was first introduced into Laos and other countries in Southeast Asia during the reign of Asoka, the great king of ancient India. King Asoka sent the missionary Buddhist monks, named Venerable Sona and Venerable Uttara, to the *Suvarṇabhūmi* area after the third Buddhist council.<sup>2</sup> When Buddhism was introduced into Laos, it was Mahāyāna Buddhism, brought from China. At this time, no religion was followed and practiced, except the native belief, i.e., Animism; then Mahāyāna Buddhism was introduced into the Lao people<sup>3</sup> as their first faith.<sup>4</sup>

Theravāda Buddhism was then introduced into Lane Xang again during the 13th century CE under the reign of King Fa Ngum, the great king of the Lane Xang Kingdom, whose wife was a Khmer princess (Khampui: 168). Since this period, Theravāda Buddhism has been established in the Lane Xang Kingdom until the present day. It seems to be the value system of the people of Lane Xang, across the land and in remote areas. The Lane Xang people are thus nowadays following and practicing Theravāda Buddhism.<sup>5</sup>

Theravāda Buddhism had spread to the capital of the Lane Xang Kingdom, named Muang Xieng Thong (SisattanakanahutRajjatani)<sup>6</sup> or Muang Sawa/Sua. At this time, Theravāda Buddhism was flourishing and quickly spreading. The King of Khmer sent the Venerable Phramaha Pasaman along with other members of the Sangha and the *Phra Bang* Buddha image to *Muang Xieng Thong*. Venerable Phramaha Pasaman was leading the delegation.<sup>7</sup> He knew the entire Tripiṭaka and doctrine of the Buddha. On this occasion, temples and stupas, which still stand today, were constructed. This venerable monk wisely disseminated the Tripiṭaka and taught the Buddha's fundamental doctrine to the community's laypeople. Some families then reduced their Animist worship and practice and began following only Theravada Buddhism.

Lao people have followed Buddhism, it neither teaches the positive act of the *kaya* (body), *Vaca* (speech) and *citta*(mind/thought) nor negative act of the body, speech and mind/thought, but Buddhism taught the way of living according to the *Majjhimāpaṭipadā* (middle way), the Eightfold Noble Truth, the Fourth Noble Truth, and based on the karma (action) as well as strictly follow and practice from the *Sila* (morality). Laotians also believe in Samsara: birth, death, and rebirth according to their good and bad karma. If one earns a lot of merit by performing only good actions in the proper manner in this life, such as helping other human beings in society, one will reincarnate in heaven after death. If one, however, does not concentrate on *Pancha Sila* (Five Precepts) and only perform the *Akusara karma* (bad action) such as avoiding the killing of living beings, avoiding stealing, avoiding sexual misconduct, avoiding telling lie

<sup>1</sup> Khampui Phonlueza, Vanpeng Chanthavong. *LAO-SUEK-SA (A Study of Laos)*. Banking Institute of Lao. P. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Kanai Lal Hazra. (1981). *History of Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asia*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publisher. P. 37-39.

<sup>3</sup> At this period, Lao was not established as a state yet, but the Lao race dwelt at the Nong-Se, southern Yunnan Province in the present day, and these people inhabited the modern territory of Laos.

<sup>4</sup> Vachirapanyo Maha Daosiam. (2555 A.D). *Buddhism in Laos*. Bangkok: Medzay Printing. P. 32-33.

<sup>5</sup> Singh, Arvind Kumar. (2009) *Buddhism in Southeast Asia*. New Delhi: M.D. Publications. P. 135-136

<sup>6</sup> Muang Xieng Thong (Sisattanakanahut Rajjatani) is the capital name of the Lane Xang Kingdom under the reign of the King Fa Ngum.

<sup>7</sup> D.C. Ahir. (2001). *Buddhism in Southeast Asia*. New Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications. P. 87-88.

and false speech, and avoiding all intoxicants, after death one will reincarnate in hell according to the law of karma and rebirth's cycle.<sup>8</sup>

Apart from the Eightfold Paths, Fourth Noble Truth, karma (action), and *Samsāra*, Laotians strictly focus on compassion and loving-kindness to all in society and on the three main aims of Punnakiriyavatthu (meritorious deeds) in the Theravāda Buddhism, which are *Dāna* (charity/ giving/generosity), *Sila* (morality), and *Bhāvanā* (meditation/ peace in mind). They follow the fundamental teachings of the Buddha, regard the Triple Gems (Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha) as a *Sarana* (refuge). All these conducts are still in the soul of the young generation and have been transmitted from generation to generation.

For Laotians, *dāna* does not mean giving something to someone; rather, it is one of the three main aims that every Lao Buddhist devotee must adhere to daily. According to Lao people, *dāna* is related to the *Kusara* karma (good deeds) and the *Akusara* karma (bad deeds), which bridges them to earn the merit in this incarnation, and carry these merits to the next incarnation, as the consequences of *dāna*, they will be born in the luxurious life, which the help of the monks, because monks are the channel of transferences and they received *dāna* from lay devotees is the role of their ritual practice, while the donors do that *dāna* for dedicating the merit to their ancestral spirit.<sup>9</sup> The concept of such conduct was inspired by the narratives and teachings of the Buddha.

For example, one past life of the Buddha mentioned in the *Vessantara Jātaka*<sup>10</sup> is very popular in an annually Theravāda Buddhist Festival such as Laos, Thailand and Cambodia, especially during March or April following by the lunar calendar, when the *Vessantara* is chanted all day, starting from midnight to the next evening by the monks in the *Sala* (preaching hall) of the temple. According to Southeast Asian cultures, including Sri Lankan culture, it is believed that Prince *Vessantara* is one of the Buddha's past incarnations, and he especially focused on *dāna* (Rasdavong, 2006: 208-209). He gave away everything he had, including his vehicle,<sup>11</sup> children, and his wife.

Over 2000 years ago, before Buddhism was introduced and established in Laos, the Lao people already believed and followed Animism or *Phi* (spirit) (Radavong, 2006: 11). Animist tradition in Laos is one of the major components in the infrastructure of the religious beliefs in the country, and the concept of this belief is the *Phi*.<sup>12</sup> They believed that everything or every phenomenon was made by the natural power and spirit. Even though all kinds of things in this illusion are created by the spirit, and that spirit is called *Thean*. According to the belief of animist and the narrative of *Nam Tao Pung* say that, at the millennium of time, there was no any creatures exist in this world, there is only the supreme *Thean*, which led by *Phraya Thean Luang*, who held power over the all other deities and all humankind, who lived in the lower world, subjected to the deities, *Phraya Thean Luang* is the ruler of all humankind and guides them in livelihoods.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, they still believe in a big tree, livers, mountains, the *Lak Mueang Pillar* spirit, and also a couple of ancestral spirits named *Pou-Ye and Ya-Ye*<sup>14</sup> or *Pou-San-Ka-Sa and Ya-Sang-Ka-Si*, which are the first couple in the world. This ideology is similar to that of Adam and Eve in Christianity. Moreover, even the birth, death, wedding, and the livelihoods of humankind depend on the external power force of *Phraya Thean* gives them.<sup>15</sup>

Lao people believed that spirits, ghosts, and other supernatural powers lived in hills, mountains, rivers, and big trees (Peepal, Banyan, etc.), villages, and houses. The *Phi cult* is still deeply rooted in the

<sup>8</sup> In the Buddhist context, the ultimate goal is to attain the Enlightenment, whereas in Lao Animist beliefs, heaven and hell are two ultimate goals.

<sup>9</sup> Anand Singh., ed. (2017) *Dāna: Reciprocity and Patronage in Buddhism*. Delhi: Primus Books. P. 14.

<sup>10</sup> The *Vessantara Jātaka* has 13 verses, and each verse represents the different merits earned by the Prince *Vessantara*, from the moment he was punished in the palace by his father and went to the forest until his return to the palace.

<sup>11</sup> The vehicle of Prince *Vessantara* is considered a white elephant, named *Peccaya*.

<sup>12</sup> Andrea Matles Savada, ed. (1994). *Laos: A Country Study*. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress. Accessed on 20/01/2026. <http://countrystudies.us/laos/59.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> Khabkeo Thammavong. (2020). *Lao: a history of 5,000 years*. Vientiane: Sengsouvan Printing. P. 932-935.

<sup>14</sup> *Phou-Ye and Ya-Ye* are the protectors, ancestral guardian spirits, and the Lao people believe that this ancestral couple is the first couple who created the world.

<sup>15</sup> Vachirapanyo Maha Daosiam. (2555 A.D). *Buddhism in Laos*. Bangkok: Medzay Printing. P. 26-27.

beliefs of the Lao people. At almost every home in the Lao, there are spirit shrines either inside or outside the house. The spirit shrine is a focus point for worshipping the particular *Phi* protector of that land. And every morning, householders, families, and devotees have to provide food, water, sweets, flowers, and other offerings in front of the spirit shrine, which they will replace day by day.

*Phi cult* is one of the main beliefs of the minority ethnic groups inhabiting Southeast Asia. Most people in Southeast Asia believe in supernatural forces, ancestral ghosts, and Bonism.<sup>16</sup> This belief in spirits is a descendant of Animistic spirituality, which remains influential in Southeast Asia's religious life and is invisible to human eyes. *Phi* looks like the energy of the forest, but later it became a source of faith for the population in this area. Especially in Laos, the *Phi cult* or Animistic practice/ritual was first practiced and followed by the minor ethnic groups, but later it spread widely across the nation. In Laos, there were various minorities; at times, they were isolated and held beliefs different from those of the mainland. When the *Phi cult* is performed, various spirits are the focus of ritual activity. Most of these rituals include elements found in other rituals, both within the *Phi cult* and among neighboring groups such as Cambodia and Thailand.

Sometimes, *Phi cults* sacrifice animals to please gods and ghost ancestors to fulfill their desires. However, the celebrants killed animals and presented or sacrificed them to the gods as a form of worship. In this way, they were worshipping ghosts and spiritual ancestors, and this kind of ritual is still practiced in rural and mountainous areas across the country.<sup>17</sup> Animism or *Phi cult* emerged as they saw nature's sudden and impressive variation (climatic events), such as earthquakes, windy storms, thunder and lightning in the sky, as well as heavy rains. They believed that gods were responsible for natural events, so the belief in the gods' action arose. These kinds of natural events are considered as the gods' anger or punishment on people through such kinds of action.<sup>18</sup>

The Lao people believed that *Phi-Fa-Phi-Thaen* were their state gods who had created the land (Khampui: 159). According to the tradition of Lane Xang/Laos, the Rocket Festival,<sup>19</sup> is performed in June of every year, not only to enjoy and celebrate the Rocket Festival<sup>20</sup> in the rice field, but also to worship and sacrifice to *Phi-Fa-Phi-Thaen* to request the rain from the deity. Even though Theravāda Buddhism flourished and spread in Lane Xang, *Phi cult* remained a significant religion in the nation.<sup>21</sup> There were many types of *Phi* in the Lao belief system, and each *Phi* had some specific task to serve according to the demand of the householder and devotees. Some *Phis* are used to protect the house, the land, and all other properties. Some of the important and common *Phi* worships in daily life are the following:

1. Hor Phi is protecting only one part of the house for his dwelling. Every household has one small room or a small hut in the corner of the house where the ghost resides. They will offer Hor Phi food items such as fruits, water, alcohol, and sweets, as well as animals. Sometimes animal sacrifices are also performed as a form of worship.
2. Phi Mueng, or *San Lak Mueang*, is a ghost that protects the district or a particular sector of town; the shrine is located at the center of the district (Kideang, 2006: 178). This Lak Mueang is a big shrine which is decorated with beautiful and exquisite patterns similar to the Sima but does not contain a Buddha image inside; instead of a Buddha image, they replace it with a stone pillar, which

<sup>16</sup> According to the Lao people's beliefs, Bonism is the worship of the natural elements such as forest spirits, sun, moon, and so on.

<sup>17</sup> Rasdavong Maha Khamyad. (2006). *The History of Buddhism in Laos*. Printed in Laos: Xangkhon printing. P. 22-23.

<sup>18</sup> Kislenko, Arne. (2009) *Culture and Customs of Laos*. London: Greenwood Press, P. 57.

<sup>19</sup> Rocket is not the same as the Rocket, which is used to carry an astronaut traveling to space. It is similar to a firecracker, but it has a very long bamboo tail. It was once presented as a form of worship to gods in Southeast Asia, especially in Laos and Thailand.

<sup>20</sup> According to the beliefs of Lao and Thai people, the rocket festival is also a celebration or a form of worship of *Pha-Ya-Thean* (God of the sky) to bring proper rain or less rain during the planting season.

<sup>21</sup> John Clifford Holt. (2009). *Spirits of the Place: Buddhism and Lao Religious Culture*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. P. 18-19.

looks like a stone Shivalingha; in some areas, they just use a wooden pillar. You can observe this shrine in every district or province across Laos.<sup>22</sup>

3. Phi Phuo Ta is the ancestral spirit of the grandfather and grandmother, who could not remember how long they had been away from this world. This Phi is the ancestral protector of the family member and the member in the particular village. In one village, there is a shrine built in an isolated place or at the far corner of the village. That particular land or area is called *Don Pou Ta*, and it is taken care of by a priest, an elderly man, or a woman; that priest is called Cham Ban. This Cham Ban is a person who takes care of and prepares for all rituals related to the village's animist rites, and he/she is also the medium connecting the spirit world and the human world.<sup>23</sup>
4. San Pha Bhumi is the spirit that protects people in houses and offices, with a pillar and a shrine at the top, decorated with beautiful, exquisite patterns on the outside and always kept outside every house, but inside the main area of the land near the main gate. The main gate of this shrine always faces the street to protect people in the house. It is also called *Phi Chao Thi* in Lao.
5. *Mae Tho La Nii* (Earth Goddess) is a goddess who protects the earth. She is also a messenger and carries the merit to the ancestor ghosts who have passed away.<sup>24</sup>
6. *Phi Sang Nang Mai* or *Phi Chao Pa* is the spirit protector at the border of the village and forest, when Lao people will go to hunt the wild animals or finding the wild products; before entering into the forest, they will be make a small *Bucha* or inform to *Phi San Nang Mai* or *Phi Chao Pa* by offering some eating item in the *San Pieng Ta / Hor* at the corner of the forest to ask the permission. This belief is still followed and practiced from generation to generation; if someone enters without permission, it may cause that person to go missing or to lose their way home in the forest.

Theravāda Buddhism is unquestionably the dominant religion in Laos. At the same time, there is a combination of Animistic beliefs within the spiritual system, especially in minority ethnic groups. Even the Buddhist monks have incorporated a belief in Animist spirits (*Phi*) into their religious teachings and duties. For example, some monks are regarded as having the ability to exorcise malevolent spirits from the sick or to keep them out of a house.<sup>25</sup> Monks played a crucial role not only in teaching the dharma of the Buddha but also in giving them a clear view of the doctrine to help them get out of illusion and all kinds of suffering and pain. Buddhist monks and Animist practices in Laos are intertwined, and it is not possible to separate them, like a wheel to a car. If a car has no wheels, then how can that particular car run on the road? Hence, Buddhist monks and Animism go together.

*Basi* ceremony is based on *Phi cult*, but it is also associated with Buddhist monks in Lao in the 21st century. *Khouan/khwan*<sup>26</sup> can be thought of as the unique components that are part of one's soul or morale (Arne, 2009: 58). Occasionally, *Khwan* is believed to wander, and a *Sou Khouan* is performed to bring them back together, hence the name *Sou Khouan*, which translates to the meeting or coming together of *Khouan*. (Stobbe 2015: 199). Why did *Phi cult* play a crucial role in the Lao people's beliefs? And why were they associated with the *Basi* ceremony? There is a reason behind this scenario: the *Basi* ceremony is based on the *Phi cult* ritual practice. As we know, the *Phi cult* was the first religious belief in Laos before Buddhism was introduced to the land. And because of the cultural exchange between Buddhism and *Phi cult*, the *Basi* ceremony became part of the Buddhist ritual. Later on, monks were also associated with the

<sup>22</sup> Philavong Khamphun. (2013). *Lao Culture and Ancient Tradition*. Vientiane: Sengsouvanh Press. P. 78.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. P. 79.

<sup>24</sup> According to the Buddhist-Animist practice context in Laos, this earth goddess works as the post-messenger to carry the merit from the human world to the spirit world, and she is also a person who notes all the actions of humankind who made a *kusara* (good deeds) and *akusara karma* (bad deeds) when they are still alive in this world.

<sup>25</sup> Phetsamay Stephanie Stobbe. *Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding in Laos: Perspective for Today's World*. (Routledge: University of Winnipeg, Canada, 2015). P. 198-199.

<sup>26</sup> In the Buddhist-Animist context, there are 32 *Khwan* in the human body. If one of them is missing or lost due to heavy excitement or spirit, that particular person will get sick or develop a mental issue. Therefore, they will make the *Basi* ceremony for him/her.

Basi ceremony. The Basi ceremony concerns Kwan (the soul/spirit of a human), and it was one of the common ritual practices in Lane Xang and is still practiced today in Laos.

The *Basi* is made of banana leaves and looks like a mountain: large at the bottom and small at the top, decorated with flowers, fruits, and so on. The *Basi* ceremony is held only on special occasions. For instance, almost every house holds this ceremony during the Lao New Year celebration from April 13th to 16th, according to the Lao Buddhist calendar. Before the *Basi* ceremony begins, the householder will invite the monks to the house, offer food, and make a *dāna*, or donation, to them. Afterward, the monks will chant and bless the householder. After finishing the *Sanghadāna*,<sup>27</sup> the *Basi* ceremony will start. By starting this ceremony, the leader monk will say a mantra either in Pāli or Lao language, collect the thread in white color from the *Basi*, and tie it to both arms of the householder.<sup>28</sup>

In Lao culture, women could not touch monks, while novices could not give anything directly to them or sit next to them in any situation; they should sit lower. If one wanted to offer them something, they should have a small rope or cloth to receive the gifts. Particularly, Lao people in the countryside have great respect for monks and novices. In Lao culture, people are required to sit when talking to monks and to communicate properly with parents or ancestors. Especially, the Buddha image or a picture of a venerable monk must be treated with high respect and hung very high. About 80 percent of Lao people's homes have Buddha images, which they respect so much (Rasdavong, 2006: 215). Additionally, in the Lao Buddhist calendar, on the 8th, 14th, and 15th of the waxing or waning moon,<sup>29</sup> they pick flowers to worship Buddha images at the temple or at home.

The teachings of the Buddha were deeply integrated into Lao culture, which made people have a correct way of living in the society; especially the young people, or the new generation in Laos, are obliged to follow the teachings of Buddhism of doing good deeds, in families, at school, in organization, and in all other places. Moreover, we can see these practices and conduct in the everyday lives of the villagers. It is not only in urban areas but also in the countryside that both *Upāsakas* (Laymen devotees) and *Upāsikās* (Laywomen devotees) prepared food and other necessary items (yellow ropes, medicines, kitchen utensils, etc.) to offer to the monks and novices at the temple. Buddhist doctrine taught them to give to others without expecting anything in return. The temple is the central place for all people to practice the ritual. It is also the place of education, teaching, and training for lay followers. In the temples, people are taught to practice morality and good behavior in society, and to avoid bad behavior. People are taught to avoid all kinds of evil things and to live in society without any sorrow or suffering. And there are other crucial Buddhist practices for Lao culture, important for every generation, as follows:

- Khao-Lob, Lao people in the country have great respect for monks and novices, and sit down before speaking with them. People respect parents, elderly people, and Holy places, etc.<sup>30</sup>
- Nop<sup>31</sup> or Wai,<sup>32</sup> is a greeting among Lao people. It is a greeting or mutual recognition sign made by raising both hands, palms joined, to a position that lightly touches the body, somewhere between the chest and the forehead. The upper arm and elbows are kept close to the body. Therefore, there are many levels of Nop or Wai in a different position by putting the hand as indicated below:

<sup>27</sup> Offering food to groups of monks during specific ritual practices, such as the funeral ceremony, getting married, the new year festival, celebrating a new house, etc., at a specific place, either the temple or the house, is called *Sanghadāna*.

<sup>28</sup> Kideang Phonekasermouk. (2006). *The Lao culture: The living of 12 traditions and 14 customs* (Lao version) Vientiane: Phitsavong printing. P. 43-44.

<sup>29</sup> This is a day when everyone goes to the temple and makes *dāna* to the Buddhist monks. During the day, there may be almsgivings and donations for the construction of the temple. At night, there may be a dharma lecture, or monks preaching dharma, and meditation practice according to the convenience and requests of the laypeople. If one cannot attend the event held at the temple in the morning, then he/she can do so by her/himself in the prayer room at home.

<sup>30</sup> Kideang Phonekasermouk. *The Lao culture: The living of 12 traditions and 14 customs* (Lao version). (Vientiane: Phitsavong printing, 2006). P. 11.

<sup>31</sup> Brother Tour. (2019). Accessed on 25/01/2026 <https://shorturl.at/FeTb3>.

<sup>32</sup> Kideang Phonekasermouk. *The Lao culture: The living of 12 traditions and 14 customs* (Lao version). (Vientiane: Phitsavong printing, 2006). P. 12.

- If the young people Nop or Wai of the same age, their palms will be placed between their chests.
- If young people Nop or Wai to elders or parents, the palms will be placed between the upper lip and the nose.
- If young people Nop or Wai to a statue of the Buddha or a Venerable monk, two palms joined will be placed between the elbows and the forehead.
- *Nab-Thue*,<sup>33</sup> the Buddha image or a picture of a venerable monk must be treated with high respect and hung very high.
- *Bhuja*,<sup>34</sup> worshiped on the 8th, 14th, and 15th of the waxing or waning moon according to the Lao Buddhist calendar, pick flowers to worship Buddha images or go to homage at the Wat or Vat (temple).

According to Lao tradition, Lao people practice the basic rules of moral conduct and the principles of karma (good and bad), which can improve their condition in the next incarnation. Although any act of generosity to the other in the community can help him/her earn merit, and this kind of benefit can help him/her in the next life or incarnation. The Lao people believe that the best opportunities for goodness come from support for the Sangha. In addition, all males are expected to spend a period of time as a monk or novice before marriage and possibly also in old age (Ahir, 2001:88). The majority of Lao young men probably did so until now. During ordination as monks and novices in the monastery, they can also earn merit or goodness, which they can share with their parents and relatives. The period of ordination need not be long or short; it depends on how long that person wants to remain an ordained person. The minimum is, however, three months during the Vassa (the rain retreat) period, which extends from August to November, and the maximum is the entire life.

All the ceremonies/festivals are associated with Buddhism and, at the same time, are based on Animistic practices. Even those who follow today's Theravāda Buddhism still perform Animistic practices or believe in *Phi cult*. In Laos, people celebrate many festivals each year, called *Boun or Boon in Lao*. All festivals are held according to the Lao Buddhist Calendar. And all kinds of *Boun* are related to the Sangha community, which can serve as a channel for transferring merit to hungry ghosts, spirits, and ancestors. The festivals run from *Mung-Kon* (January) to *Thun-Wa* (December), and all ceremonies begin at the temple with the help of the monks, novices, and *Mae-Chi*. During some festivals, however, the *Sanghas* are not part of the celebration. Some festivals are celebrated only by the devotees themselves or by shamans. There are many festivals of the Buddhist monks in Lao associated with the animist tradition as follows:

- ❖ *Boun Khoun-Lan* (Harvest festival), or the ceremony giving thanks to the spirit of the land, is held in the second month of *Kum-Pha* (February) of the lunar calendar. Most farmers believe that there is an earth spirit that protects the rice field from pests, such as rats and birds, which can destroy the plants. The spirit of the land prevents these animals from destroying or ruining the rice. Additionally, in some regions, they will invite a group of Buddhist monks to the rice field and make the Sanghadāna follow with the preaching of Dhamma or invite the *Mor Phon* (animist priest) to make a Baci ceremony for the rice. So, the ceremony is held to show thanks to the spirit of the land and wish for a plentiful harvest in the next planting season.<sup>35</sup>
- ❖ *Boun Pee Mai Lao* or *Song Karn* (Lao new year festival) is the festival which is held in the fourth month or *Phuet-Sa-Pha* (May) of the lunar calendar, and the characteristics that blend with the Brahmanical tradition, animist tradition, and Buddhist tradition, such as pour the water to the Buddha image at the shrines in the temple; play the gratitude to the parents and elders by pour the water on them for their blessing; cleansing of all bad fortune from the old year, which welcome the

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. P. 12

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. P. 13

<sup>35</sup> Khampui Phonlueza, Vanpeng Chanthavong. *LAO-SUEK-SA (A Study of Laos)*: Banking Institute of Lao. P. 177.

good luck and prosperity from the upcoming New Year; and making the solidarity among the house and societies by making Basi ceremony in the specific place either in the house or factory office.<sup>36</sup>

The *Lao New Year* is slightly different from other *Tai New Year* festivals and from those in other countries in Southeast Asia, such as Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, China, and Sri Lanka, including in Assam, India, which are called *Sangken/Sangkran*. The *Lao New Year* festival runs from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> of April, while in Thailand and other countries it may run from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> of April each year. This festival is similar to Holi in India but is held in a different month. They substituted for April, which is the hot season, and enjoyed the water and color. People sprinkle water on each other to wash away past bad things and welcome good luck in the coming New Year (Kideang, 2006: 35).

The highlight of the Lao New Year, especially in Luang Prabang province, is an interesting event that the caravans of Buddhist monks, a statue of Buddha image, *Sing-Keo* (Lion-man), *Pou-Ye*, and *Ya-Ye*, and the processions of *Nang-Sankhan* (beautiful lady decorated with different ornaments) walk around the city and make the *Top-Pa-That-Xay* (Sand Stupa). *Nang-Sankhan* rides different animal images every year, such as wild pigs, tigers, and goats, according to the zodiac year, and she holds a different weapon, such as a spear or a gear wheel, in her hand.

The first day of the festival starts from the north to the south of the country, called in Lao, *Sang Khan Long* (the bad thing has gone), the second day is called *Sang Khan Nao* or *Van Nao* (enjoy the New Year), and the third day is called *Sang Khan Khuen* (end of New Year). The festival highlights the significance of ancient Lao Buddhist tradition and culture, as well as the mixture of animist traditions among the ethnic groups in Laos. Every ethnic group dresses in clothes that indicate their belonging to the particular tribe, especially that of the *Lao-Loum*,<sup>37</sup> the *Lao-Theung*,<sup>38</sup> and the *Lao Soung*<sup>39</sup> and other sub-tribes (Kideang, 2006: 33).

- ❖ *Boun Khao-Pa-Dap-Dinh*, or Dead Festival, is the festival that is held in the ninth month or *Khan-Ya* (September) of the lunar calendar. This festival blends Buddhist and animist traditions in Laos, dating back to ancient times. This festival is directly concerned with the Buddhist monk, who is the bridge connecting by dedicating the merit of the lay devotees to their ancestral ghosts or *Petas* (Anand, 2017: 14). The purpose of celebrating this festival is that people make special rice-packet offerings to all deceased or *Petas*, who are ancestors and non-ancestors, including the hungry ghosts. Additionally, the rice packet is made from a banana leaf. Inside the package, they put food items such as sticky rice, steamed peanuts, flesh, small cucumbers, sugarcane, yellow bananas, and so on, then placed them in the corner of the house, the triangle road, and along the temple wall.<sup>40</sup>
- ❖ *Boun Khao-Sa-Lak* is the festival that is held in the tenth month or *Tu-La* (October) of the lunar calendar. This festival is similar to *Boun Khao-Pa-Dap-Dinh* in that the main process is dedicated to the merit of the ancestral spirit, and also the concept of merit-making in this incarnation, but the procession of this festival is different from that of *Boun Khao-Pa-Dap-Dinh*; people put offerings of edible items into a plastic or bamboo package, called *Sa-Lak-Ka-Put*. The packages are gathered in the *Vihāra* or *Sala*, and the ceremony lasts from morning to afternoon. Moreover, all devotees wrote their names on paper and put them inside the packages. During this ceremony, all devotees started by paying homage to the triple gems, reciting the five precepts, and listening to the Dhamma, and then continued with offering the *Sa-Lak-Ka-Put* to the monks. When the committees called or selected any packages, if the name of any devotee was announced, then that particular devotee would come and offer the *Sa-Lak-Ka-Put* to the particular monks. This festival not only includes the rites for dedicating merits to the deceased ancestors but also the merit-making for the Lao

<sup>36</sup> Philavong Khamphun. (2013). *Lao Culture and Ancient Tradition*. Vientiane: Sengsouvanh Press. P. 66-69.

<sup>37</sup> Lao-Loum, the minority ethnic groups in Laos, who reside in the lowland or on the banks of the river.

<sup>38</sup> Lao-Theung, the minority ethnic groups in Laos, who reside in the higher region or plateau area.

<sup>39</sup> Lao Soung, the minority ethnic groups in Laos, who reside in the mountains.

<sup>40</sup> Kideang Phonekasermouk. *The Lao culture: The living of 12 traditions and 14 customs* (Lao version). (Vientiane: Phitsavong printing, 2006). P. 67.

Buddhist tradition in the future after death as well, and this kind of practice was taught from generation to generation until the present day.<sup>41</sup>

Based on clearly historical consensus, it is claimed that Buddhism flourished into Laos over 700 years ago. However, when we consider the Lao culture, tradition, and festivals, we can observe that the Buddhist practice is still prevailing in Laos. The fact that people followed the doctrine of the Buddha prevented from any conflict in the society. All Lao King was the patron of Buddhism from the first great King, Fa Ngum onwards, who built up the kingdom and established Buddhism here. King Saisethathirath built many temples and important Buddha images, which were kept in the temples around the country which stands up to the present day. Moreover, King Phodhisararath had a royal decree that Buddhism was a National faith of the Kingdom and recommended all the people in the Kingdom follow Buddhism and abolish the animist cult (Arne, 2009: 21), but every festival in modern Laos, or at the time of the Lane Xang Kingdom around 13<sup>th</sup> century CE onward, is associated with Animism or *Phi cult* and merit-making.

According to Lao culture, the extensive meaning of Boon (merit-making) is the *Kusara Karma* (good deed), and this *Boon* can be done with the assistance of Buddhist monks only. Then, at this point, the mixture of the Buddhist tradition and Animistic ritual practice takes place. Therefore, all celebration practices related to worship, sacrifices, and dedicates the merit to the ancestral by means of festivals are the blend of Buddhist or Animatic ritual practice. Furthermore, The *Phi cult* was deeply embedded in the hearts of the Lao people and cannot be separated, and which stand until the present day.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. P. 70-76