Animism and the “Baci (Bai Sii) Su Kwan” Ceremony

Despite the importance of Buddhism to Lao people, animist beliefs are widespread among all segments of the Lao population. The belief in *phi* (spirits) colors the relationships of many Lao with nature and community and provides one explanation for illness and disease. Belief in *phi* is blended with Buddhism, particularly at the village level, and some monks are respected as having particular abilities to exorcise malevolent spirits from a sick person or to keep them out of a house. Many *wats* (temples) have a small spirit hut built in one corner of the grounds that is associated with the *phi khoun wat*, the beneficent spirit of the monastery.

*Phi* are ubiquitous and diverse. Some are connected with the universal elements - earth, heaven, fire, and water. Many lowland Lao also believe that they are being protected by *khwan* (thirty-two spirits). Illness occurs when one or more of these spirits leaves the body; this condition may be reversed by the *soukhwans* - more commonly called the *baci* - a ceremony that calls all thirty-two *khwan* back to bestow health, prosperity, and well-being on the affected participants. Cotton strings are tied around the wrists of the participants to keep the spirits in place. The ceremony is often performed to welcome guests, before and after making long trips, and as a curing ritual or after recovery from an illness; it is also the central ritual in the Lao Loum wedding ceremony and naming ceremony for newborn children.

Many Lao believe that the *khwan* of persons who die by accident, violence, or in childbirth are not reincarnated, becoming instead *phi phetu* (malevolent spirits). Animist believers also fear wild spirits of the forests. Other spirits associated with specific places such as the household, the river, or a grove of trees are neither inherently benevolent nor evil. However, occasional offerings ensure their favor and assistance in human affairs. In the past, it was common to perform similar rituals before the beginning of the farming season to ensure the favor of the spirit of the rice. These ceremonies, beginning in the late 1960s, were discouraged by the government as successive areas began to be liberated. This practice had apparently died out by the mid1980s, at least in the extended area around Vientiane.

Ceremonies oriented to the *phi* commonly involve an offering of a chicken and rice liquor. Once the *phi* have taken the spiritual essence of the offering, people may consume the earthly remains. The head of a household or the individual who wants to gain the favor of the spirit usually performs the ritual. In many villages, a person, usually an older man believed to have special knowledge of the *phi*, may be asked to choose an auspicious day for weddings or other important events, or for household rites. Each lowland village believes itself protected by the *phi ban*, which requires an annual offering to ensure the continued prosperity of the village. The village spirit specialist presides over this major ritual, which in the past often involved the sacrifice of a water buffalo and is still an occasion for closing the village to any outsiders for a day. To *liang phi ban* (feed the village spirit) also serves an important social function by reaffirming the village boundaries and the shared interests of all villagers.