



Lao New Year

Lao traditions and festivals come from Buddhist and animist beliefs.

Lao New Year: April 13-15

Lao New Year follows the lunar calendar. Lao New Year comprise of three days:

1. **Won sung kan long**- people clean their house, office, and the temple and they clean the Buddha statues at home and get it ready to be washed with holy water.
2. **Won Now**-this is a day off for all people. This is a day when people visit family and friends. In the evening, they gather at the temple and listen to the chanting and parade of candles around the temple.
3. **Won sung kan koon**-first day of the new year. In the morning people go to give alms and their is a baci ceremony for the monks and festivities at each other's houses. In the evening people would go to the temple and listen to the chanting of monks and parade of candles around the temple.

Other activities of Lao New Year includes:

- building sand mounds at the temple
- listen to chanting
- parading of candles and flowers around the temple
- washing of the Buddha with holy water
- splashing of water
- Baci
- freeing of animals such as fishes or birds

The elements of Lao New Year came from an animist legend of Nang Sungkhan. Which includes the washing of the Buddha, the splashing of water, the beauty pageant and parading of the winner of the pageant as well as the building of sand mounds.

The story of Nang Sungkan:

Long ago there was a richman's son name Tao Thamapala who was very smart and wise. I taught people dharma and karma and other things. He became well known

throughout the land. A deity by the name of Gabinlaporm came and ask Thamapala three questions. They have an agreement that if Tao Thamapala can answer all three questions, Gabinlaporm will cut his head off, but if he can answer all three questions, he will cut off his own head and put it on the tray as a prize for Tao Thamapala. The question as where is Si Li in the morning, afternoon, and evening?

Thamapala could not answer the riddle right away, so he asked for 7 days. After three days, he still could not answer the question and was embarrassed and went away into the forest. He fell asleep under a tree and heard a pair of birds talking. What are we going to eat tomorrow ask the wife? We are going to eat Thamapala. He will be killed tomorrow because he cannot answer the riddle. What riddle? The husband told his wife and answer the riddle for her. In the morning SiLi is on your face because you wash your face every morning for good karma, in the afternoon it is on your chest because you have to wash your chest every afternoon for good kharma, and before bed you must wash your feet. Once he heard the answer to the riddle, he hurried back to town to answer the riddle. Once he answer the riddle, Gabinlaporm agreed to cut his own head. But he called his 7 daughters who lived under the sea to tell them about his deal with Thamapala. He told his daughter that his head cannot touch the ground because it will burn the whole earth. If he throws it up to the sky, it will not rain. If his head is toss into the water, it will dry up the water. He asked that the daughters bring a (thong) platter to put the head on and put it in a cave in the farthest mountain. Each year, one of the seven daughters would bring the platter down and wash the his head. Once his head is wash, the daughter would parade the head around the mountain once before it is placed back in the cave. Each of the daughter has a name based on the day of the week and rode a different animal to the mountain. On Sunday she rode a Garuda, on Monday she rode a tiger, on Tuesday she rode a pig, on Wednesday she rode a Lo, on Thursday she rode an elephant, on Friday she rode a water buffalo, on Saturday she rode a peacock. If she comes between morning and noon she would stand. If she comes between noon and night she would sit. If she comes in the evening to midnight she would sleep with her eyes open. If she comes between midnight and dawn she would sleep with her eyes close.

Adaptation of the Myth to Buddhism:

This myth came from the Mon khmer ancestry. As a result, people now use legends and incorporate it into the Lao New Year tradition which includes having a pageant each year. The winner of the pageant would ride a different animal like the daughters of Gabinlaporm. They are also paraded around the temple like the head of Gabinlaporm. Instead of washing the head of Gabinlaporm, the modern day adaptation of the legend is added to Buddhism. People would use holy water and wash the Buddha statue for

good luck instead and well as spray water on each other to wash away the old year and bad luck.

On the first day of New Year, traditionally Lao people would build a sand mound. It is to symbolize the mountain that the head of Gabilaporm is kept. Later with the introduction of Buddhism, it was changed so that people would build the sand mounds in the temple grounds to gain more good Karma. In reality the temples needs sand to keep the grass from growing or for building purposes. The animist legends and beliefs were changed when Buddhism came to Laos. Many of the Buddhist elements were added to the legend to benefit Buddhism.