Kindong: Tradition, Memory and Identity in Lao Weddings

by
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Australian National University
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Kindong:
Tradition, Memory and Identity in Lao Weddings

Submitted by

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Declaration of Candidate

I declare that this thesis has been researched and written by me and that any help I have received in its preparation has been acknowledged in the thesis.

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

No other person’s work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

Thongrith PHOUMIRATH

Canberra, 27 October 2004
Abstract

Kindong: Tradition, Memory and Identity in Lao Weddings

The purpose of this thesis is two-fold: to describe and discuss the kindong - the Lao ‘traditional’ wedding ceremony, as it is remembered and performed by the Lao people, and to situate this remembrance and performance in the broader analytical framework of political and social context of the discourse on an ethnic identity known as ‘Laoness’. The description and analysis is based on case studies gathered from three principal research sites: Canberra in Australia, Vientiane in Laos and Washington DC area in the USA.

The performance of the Lao traditional wedding ceremony – the kindong – by the Lao, especially since 1975 when the current Lao diaspora began, depends largely on the remembrance of the rituals by members of the older generation who, by their very performance, then pass it down to the next generation by osmosis in the environment of a traditional habitus. Paul Connerton’s How Societies Remember (1989) with its focus on rituals as a memorizing practice fits well with this thesis’ attempt to investigate the wedding ceremony as a vehicle of social memory and its part in the support and sustain of a group identity. This is the premise of this thesis: performing of rituals, such as the wedding ceremony, is ultimately about remembering the ancestors who initiated them and passed them down to the present generation. By so doing, the people honour the past as they think their ancestors experienced it, thus supporting and sustaining their group identity. Thus, remembrance of the cultural significance of the performance and the embodiment of the wedding plays a significant part in the community’s attempt to rejuvenate, recreate and reinvent its own identity.

The choice of the wedding ceremony is deliberate. The wedding, in any culture, is one the most traditional of ceremonies. While ever changing and evolving, it indeed expresses, represents and embodies the cultural being of that community. The Lao wedding embraces the ideals, images, mode of self-presentation that are known as
'Laoness', encompassing, as it does, issues of kinship ideology, power and gender relationship and, of course, ethnic identity. In effect, to study wedding is a study of tradition and change, and of the consequence of change. To study the Lao wedding becomes a study of the Lao identity.
Dedication

To the three women in my life

• Thinh Phoumivath - my birth mother who gave me the seed of love of learning and a life-long thirst for education. She taught me the value of knowledge, and the courage and wisdom to use it properly to do the right thing by everyone;

• Dolores (Joseph) Lenihan - my Australian mother who adopted me and planted me the fertile soil of intellectual curiosity and academic pursuit;

• Intong (Chanthapany) Phoumivath - my wife, my mate, my confident, my harshest critic and strongest supporter, who provides lots of fertilisers and tender loving care to help me grow and sustain me psychologically, mentally, spiritually and physically.

The three of them - collectively and individually in their own loving way - help shape me to be the person I am.
Acknowledgment

Never in the history of writing a thesis is so much gratitude owed by one person to so many for so much time and energy, encouragement and support, and information in the forms of discussion, photos and videotapes. (with apologies to Sir Winston Churchill).

First and foremost, my big thank you to my family, especially my wife, Intong. Not only is she my greatest supporter and my harshest critic, she is a fount of knowledge and memory of things Lao cultural. Her sharp observation and critique help shape the thesis to be more friendly to Lao people born in diaspora. She provides me with many photos (some of which she took and processed for me ready to be included in the thesis) and with access to many contacts with members of her family. To my son, Ritthideth, my big thanks for being so patient with a periodically absent and continually absent-minded father. He is also the computer wiz behind the nice pictures included in the thesis. Not only do mother and son tolerate my swinging moods all through the process, but they sustain me with TLC beyond my expectation.

To my thesis supervising panel

• Professor Ann Curthoys, History Program, Research School of Social Sciences, ANU; Chair;
• Dr John Docker, Visiting Fellow, Centre for Humanities Research, ANU, Member;
• Dr Craig Reynolds, Centre for Asian Societies and Histories, Faculty of Asian Studies, ANU, Member

for their patience in waiting for the draft chapters to come their way; for their expert guidance in their subject matters, and most of all for their support and encouragement through the long years. Professor Ann Curthoys deserves special thanks for many discussions, probing questions and helpful suggestion that assist greatly in my writing style and the presentation of the finished work.
My hosts in the research sites: Pakasith Chanthapanya and Kaysone Vongsaly in Vientiane; Kotkham and Somsanith Khamvongsa, and Daosadeth and Phousacksith Chanthapanya in Washington DC; Tho and Toui Tran in San Diego. Thank you for their hospitality and conduit into their respective circles of friends. Most of all, I thank them for sharing with me their own stories, memories and experiences of Lao kindong and their permission for me to use them in the thesis.

Many newlyweds and their parents and families make enormous contribution to this thesis with their generous time to talk to the author, and their willingness to allow me access to their family affairs as well as their supply of and permission for the use photos and videos of their kindongs. Among them are

- Miss Tina Siri and Mr Souliphone Pholsena and their parents, Toy and Somchit Siri and their grand-father, Tiao Nith Nokham;
- Miss Thipphaphone Keomoungkhoun and Mr Ouday Chanthavong, their parents Mr and Mrs Sengritdeth Keomoungkhoun, great-aunt Xoumkham, and Uncle Champadeng Keomoungkhoun;
- Anothay (Rick) and Miss Southisa (Nok) Outhensackda, his parents Mrs Kalong and Mr Toui Outhensackda; and grand-parents Mr Nouane and Pa Bao Outhensackda;
- Mr Khampheng Thepphavong and Miss Silivone Thavisack, their parents, and his sister Phansouk Vongpraseuth;
- Mr Sisophone and Mrs Sompraseuth Sirimanotham and their daughter Miss Soraya and her husband, Mr Yang;
- Mr Khamou and Mrs Paulette Sundara for their own wedding and that of their daughter;
- Mrs Khammeuan Sramany, for her story and the wedding of her son, Monireth;
- Mr Kambay and Mrs Vrathephy Keodara, of San Diego;
- Mrs Vatsana Souvannavong and daughters, Mimi and Lily;
- Mrs Mayoura and Mr Songyod Phoumirath, for their own marriage and weddings of Mayoura’s brother Tinh, niece Chanh and daughter Vanh;
- Mr Phoukeo and Mrs Bouaphanh Taysavang about the weddings of their two daughters;
- Mr Tanh-Avong and Mrs Somros Vorabout for their own story and the wedding of their daughters;
My siblings and their families for their stories, especially Mr Khamleck Praphone, my brother-in-law;
Mrs Chanhla Khanthavongsa and her son, Vatthana (Lou) and daughter-in-law, Tam;
Mrs Orady Souvannavong, her daughter Miss Fongsamouth and her son-in-law, Theppradith Sylaprany.

To my informants, near and far, most of all

♦ in Laos: Maha Kykeo Bouлом, Phagna Pane Rasphangthong, Mr Khamphoui Luangkhot, Dr Thongkham Onemanisone, Mrs Bouaphanh Phoumivong (nee Sundara); the late Mr Singkham Srivatthana (Loung Thit Gnaï), the late Mr Singkham Intavong, Tiao Boungnarith and wife; Tiao Mounivong; Mr and Mrs Bounthan Viravongs; Mr Singkham Viravongs, Mr Phoui Chittranonh;
♦ in Australia: Mrs Orady Souvannavong, Mr and Mrs Viliam and Sakone Prayayavong; Maha Inpeng; Mrs Kotamy Thattamanivong; Mr and Mrs Soukanh Chanthaphanya; Maha Pho; Maha Phanh; Mr Pheng and the late Mrs Thongsy Thammavong; Mr and Mrs Anò Thammavong; Loung Bouapha Khanhanouvong; Tiao Savay and Kindarath Kindavong; Mr and Mrs Si and Douangmala Ungsuprasert; Mr and Mrs Balakhone and Seng Sisourath and family; Tiao Saya Rangsy; Tiao Rattasinh Sayasane;
♦ in the USA, Mr Kayasith Rattanavongkhot, Mr Pheng Chanthavilay, Mr Khamthene Chinyavong, Mr Amphone Vannalom; Mr Boumphong Phomthavong; Mr Vilay Chaleunrath, Mr Narin Sihavong, Dr William Niedzwiecki and Dr Valerie Sutter of the Southeast Asia Resource Action Centre, Washington DC.

To my critical friends - Dr Simon Hewlett (who is married to Jane Phoumivong), Dr Wendy Patterson, Dr Gary Yia Lee and Dr Adam Chapman – for their perceptive and incisive comments, and their probing and questioning of what they were reading.

Acknowledgment of financial support from the ANU’s Australian Post-Graduate Award and the research fund is hereby made with gratitude and appreciation.
Although this thesis has benefited greatly from the contributions from the people mentioned above, and many other, the author remains solely responsible for the opinions expressed herein and for errors it may still contain.
A note on the 
transliteration of Lao words.

The transliteration of Lao words and names into roman script has been a problem for a long time. There is no officially sanctioned system, and many scholars use the system thought suitable to their purpose. Grant Evans, Nick Enfield (working on Lao grammar) and Adam Chapman (working on Lao musicology) tend to use their own modified system; whereas Mary Lou Robertson, working in traditional medicine practices in Lao communities in Elgin and Rockford, Illinois, uses the system developed earlier by Dr John Hartman. Many of the works consulted for this thesis are in French and some have been written more than thirty years ago. The systems of transliteration used in these works are, to a great extent, different from the English works consulted. Newer works, like that of Martin Stuart-Fox, tend to adopt another system altogether. However, Souneth Phothisane, who wrote a PhD thesis on an ancient Lao text, settled on the use of three systems of transliteration (Pali Text Society, spelling according to the sound of a Lao word, and a spelling indicative of Indic or non-Indic source of a word). Even then Souneth has to specify so many exceptions to this ‘rule’\(^1\). Souneth’s work is similar to the use by Acharn Kongmy Khouangvichit, of the Brisbane Lao Buddhist temple, in his Dharma books for Lao youth who can read Lao.

This thesis, for want of time and space, will adopt a ‘system’ popularly used by the Lao diasporic communities in Australia. To illustrate, here are some examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>French works</th>
<th>Stuart-Fox</th>
<th>This thesis</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>🫐</td>
<td>Vat</td>
<td>Wat</td>
<td>Wat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ໂຕ່ານ</td>
<td>Vientiane</td>
<td>Vieng Chan</td>
<td>Vientiane</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) All the above mentioned works are listed in the bibliography.
To avoid possible confusion, this thesis will provide a Lao script for every Lao word used in the body of the thesis. For example, the highlighted words in the following transliterations could cause some confusion without the Lao words:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Transliteration</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>นิ่มฤๅ</td>
<td>Phi Nong</td>
<td>relatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ฎี ฎี</td>
<td>Theu Phi</td>
<td>cult of Phi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ฆ้าน</td>
<td>khene</td>
<td>arms (bodily parts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ฆ้า</td>
<td>khene</td>
<td>a Lao musical instrument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>สินสิน</td>
<td>sin</td>
<td>Sila (religious observance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>สินสิน</td>
<td>sin</td>
<td>Lao traditional ‘skirt’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ไม้ไม้</td>
<td>mai</td>
<td>silk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ไม้ไม้</td>
<td>mai</td>
<td>new</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ไม้ไม้</td>
<td>mai</td>
<td>to burn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ไม้ไม้</td>
<td>mai</td>
<td>to mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ไม้ไม้</td>
<td>mai</td>
<td>widow, widower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ไม้ไม้</td>
<td>mai</td>
<td>wood, timber</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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MAP OF LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

(By the author based on Map No. 3489 Rev. 3, UN, Oct 1990 and ‘Welcome to Laos’, publicity pamphlet by Lao Travel Service, 2000)
Every picture tells a story. The two pictures on the front cover of this thesis do indeed tell a story – a long story. It is a story of a diasporic journey of the Lao people, from their displacement from their native land, through their enforced internment in refugee camps and through traumatic adjustment to their new existence in the land of their final resettlement. It is also a story of the survival of one of the Lao people’s most treasured traditions, the traditional wedding ceremony: គុយ កុ៊រពី  the phiti kindong.

The picture on the top left corner, Picture P1, shows Mr Chanhpheng and Mrs Khammeuan Sramany of Luang Prabang taken just after their ឈឺឡូវេ  soukhouane ceremony in front of the bride’s residence on 14 December 1949. The soukhouane is a ritual of calling, welcoming and binding the ឈឺេ khouane to the physical body of the guest of honor in order to strengthen the psychological and spiritual well-being of the person while making a cultural, social and political statement about the person’s position vis-à-vis his/her worldly surrounding. The word khouane is defined in this thesis as an indefinable, invisible and intangible vital essence of a person’s spiritual and psychological make-up that possesses its own volition and fickle nature whose absence from the physical body can cause harm. Although the picture is in black and white, the magnificence of the wedding dress and the intricate beauty of the jewelry worn by the bride and the groom can still be seen.

1 Kindong ឈឺឡូវេ a Lao word for wedding. The first time a Lao word is used, the Lao word will be given and followed by the transliterated form. Detailed discussion of this term, as well as associated terms and concepts, is to be found in Chapter II. A full list of Lao words, in Lao script and in its transliterated form, with English meaning, is given in Appendix E.

2 My thanks to Mrs Khammeuan Sramany of Virginia, USA, for permission to use this picture, and for providing an explanation of it during my interview with her and her brother-in-law, Mr Houmphen Sramany, on 11 May 2000 at her residence.
In Picture P2, at bottom right, resplendent in full colour in their wedding costumes, are Mr Vannasith Keodara and Miss Anongkhan Phraphone, taken just after their soukhouane for the wedding in San Diego, USA, on 9 September 1992.

Any Lao person, seeing these two photos, would instantly and instinctively recognize them as photos from a Lao traditional wedding. The distinctive costumes of the couples, the bride’s jewelry, hair-do and the white cotton threads on their wrists are the telltale signs of a wedding ceremony. Indeed, these signs in the two photos are uncannily similar. Taken some fifty-three years apart, they tell a story of resilience, survival of and pride in one’s ethnic identity and cultural heritage. They can, and will in this thesis, be interpreted as being intrinsic to what is to be an ‘ethnie’ and as being inherent to the core membership of that ethnic identity, that of the Lao people.

The use of photographs as ‘technologies of memory’ (Struk: 1997; 9) of the Lao wedding ceremony continues with the next four pictures. Picture P3 shows the wedding of Miss Somros Chanthapanya and Mr Tanh-Avong Vorabout, in Vientiane in 1964. In the middle of the picture is the ປາກຂໍ້ມ ປາກວົນ, resplendent with the most auspicious of flowers for the wedding, ປາກຂໍ້ມ ປ່ວຍກ ແລະ - flowers of love. The phakhouane is a central and indispensable ritual object for a soukhouane ceremony. It is at one and the same time a floral arrangement that decorates the setting, but more importantly it is a welcome mat for and a symbolic offering to the gods and the returning khouanes.

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1 My thanks to Mr and Mrs Vannasith Keodara of San Diego for their kind permission to use this picture.

4 A small white flower with the scientific name of Calotropis Gigantea Br.
The wedding *soukhouane* of Miss Somros Chanthapanya and Mr Tanh-Avong Vorabout, Vientiane 1964.

The bride and the groom can be seen seated immediately to the right of the *phakhouane*, with their hands extended to receive the blessing from the *mophone* who is partly obscured by the *phakhouane*. The word *mophone* is a Lao word denoting a person who possesses an expert knowledge in the field of calling and blessing the *khouane* and who performs the invocation at a traditional *soukhouane* ceremony. The bride and groom are surrounded by their parents (partly obscured by the flowers) and friends.

Picture P4 travels through time and space to witness the wedding of Mr Mouksamouth Phengsi-aroun and Miss Sisouk Rajbandhit in Canberra, Australia, on 12 March 1994. The bride and groom, seated to the right of the *phakhouane* in the picture, are receiving the blessings from the *mophone*, with family and friends looking on.
The wedding *soukhouane* of Miss Sisouk Rajbandhit and Mr Mouksamouth Phengsi-aroun, Canberra, Australia, 12 March 1994.

Picture P5 moves across to the State of Maryland, USA, for the wedding of Mr Phonesavath Phimmakaysone and Miss Veunekham Sayasithsena held in May 2000. The bride and groom are facing the *phakhouane*, with family members and friends immediately behind them. Again, the ever-present *phakhouane* and the *mophone* are there.

The wedding *soukhouane* of Mr Phonesavath Phimmakaysone and Miss Veunekham Sayasithsena, Maryland, USA, 13 May 2000.
For Picture P6, we journey back to where it all began, Laos, for the wedding of Mr Souliphone Pholsena and Miss Tina Siri, on 12 February 2000. This wedding is symptomatic of the diasporic journey of a Lao traditional wedding, being the union of a diasporic Lao and a Lao person from the Homeland.

In the pictures, the young couples solemnly hold their hands in a gesture of respect, listening to the calling of their *khouane*, absorbed in the moments of the occasion. The *mophone* is in full flight in his calling of the *khouane* of the couple, his voice reverberating around the room. The proud and happy parents and relatives sit in a sort of circle around the couple. In the middle, the splendid *phakhouane* stands witness to the performance of the Lao traditional wedding ceremony. The scent of the bee’s wax candles on top of the *phakhouane* mingles with the aroma of the flowers that decorate them. The colours in the room are bright and cheerful – from the finest of fineries that were the bride’s traditional wedding dress to the flowers that decorate the *phakhouane*.

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5 I am indebted to the four couples shown in these pictures for their kind permission to use the photos, and their willingness to participate in the interviews and discussion of their wedding, as well as their support and encouragement to me for this work. These weddings are discussed further in the thesis.
In the background, from outside the room where the soukhouane is being held, rises a cacophony from people at work in the kitchen finalising food for lunch, and a symphony of merriment from the guests sitting outside the immediate circle of the soukhouane. From the costumes and the happiness that radiates through the pictures, it is evident that the couples and the assembled groups of family and friends in the photos are participating in the performance of the ceremony which has been passed down to them through the generations.

These are the scenes, atmosphere and feeling one can experience, witness and remember from attending any kindong wherever or whenever these weddings are held. The choice of these four pictures is deliberate. Together they represent the Lao ‘traditional’ wedding across time and space: from Vientiane before the Great Political Divide of 1975 to diasporic Lao ‘homes’ in Canberra, 1994 and Maryland, USA, 2000, and back to post-1975 Communist Laos. Despite their different historical and geographical contexts, these weddings retain a sense of similarity and continuity of a traditional ritual that had been passed down from one generation to the next. The four weddings share many elements and characteristics of a Lao traditional wedding: the costumes of the bride and groom look the same; the bride’s coiffure; the gathering of family and friends and, of course, the presence of the phakhouane and the mophone.

What is not apparent in these pictures is that these weddings are performed from the collective memory of members of the Lao communities where these weddings take place. They are recreated from the collective remembrance of what took place in the past, from acquired and observed knowledge, and from practised experiences and expertise: from the construction and decoration of the phakhouane, to the bridal dresses for the bride and groom, and the procedures of the wedding ceremony and the ritual of the soukhouane. The performance of the Lao traditional wedding, while transcending time and space, carries on the memory of the wedding ritual and tradition as well as expresses the ethnic identity of the protagonists and participants alike. It is being replicated through the years, both in present day Communist Laos and in diasporic Lao communities throughout the world. On closer scrutiny, however, it is in
fact an approximation of what the Lao people think and believe to be the replica of the 'traditional practice' they had learnt from previous generations.

The fact that this Lao *kindong* is still being performed by the Lao in Communist Laos and in Lao diasporic settlements throughout the world, albeit in a compromised way, is indeed a phenomenon worthy of investigation. These pictures transcend time and space in such a way that they encompass - indeed embody - the notion of uprootedness and diasporic journey and of adaptation and survival, if not of the persons involved, then and more importantly of the memory, the tradition and the identity of the ethnic group these six couples represent.

This is the story being told by these pictures.

This is the story of this thesis.
INTRODUCTION

Towards a Construction of ‘Laoness’

The ancestral ways of life being evoked rhetorically may bear little relation to those documented historically, recorded ethnographically, and reconstructed archeologically - yet their symbolic power and political force are undeniable.

(Keesing, 1989:19)

March 6 1974 is a day I will remember for the rest of my life. It was the day when I married my wife, Intong, in a Lao traditional wedding ceremony, the kindong. It was at her parental home in Vientiane. Everything concerned with our wedding followed the ‘tradition’ – from the choosing of the day and time, the ‘borrowed’ item, the flowers for the phakhouane, all other associated rituals and the tying of the white cotton on the newlyweds (only six auspicious couples did the honour during the ceremony, and other family members and friends did that afterwards). The lunch festivity was under a parachute in the side yard of her parent’s house. We did not have an evening reception, and I had to co-opt my boss at work to be my chaokhot loungta.

The latest wedding Intong and I attended was that of Vanh, Mayoura’s eldest daughter.¹ Vanh had married her Muslim husband in Sydney sometime earlier (cf. Chapter IV). Mayoura persuaded her to have a Lao traditional wedding. The day of the wedding was chosen to suit Vanh and her husband so they could come down to Canberra for the ceremony. Mayoura provided most of the wedding dresses for both the bride and the groom, and bore most of the cost for the day. My wife and I were co-opted to act as the groom’s chaokhot loungta. The phakhouane was based on the makbeng that Mayoura’s mother had made when she last visited the family, and decorated partly with plastic flowers. Many associated rituals were performed, albeit surreptitiously.

¹ This is the latest wedding for the purpose of this thesis only. My wife and I of course attended and assisted in many more other weddings both in Canberra and Sydney since then.
These two *kindong* exemplify the parallel between the diasporic journey of the Lao people after the 1975 political upheaval in Laos and the journey of adaptation and survival of the *kindong* as a ceremony. They exemplify also the link between the two "journeys"- the performance of the *kindong* triggers the collective memory of the Lao people about who they are and how they arrive to be where they are. They inscribe the diasporic journey on the psyche and the identity of the Lao people.

Taking the remembrance of the performance of the Lao traditional wedding ceremony, the *kindong* as a point of departure, this thesis examines the role of memory in the study of Lao tradition and identity. It addresses the relationship between space and time, as manifested in diaspora and the political changes in the homeland, in the re-construction of memory and identity of the Lao people.

It analyses the links between the construction of ethnic identity and Lao oral/textual traditions, and argues that the Lao identity and tradition, through the performance of the *kindong*, has re-emerged from the traumatic political upheaval of 1975, albeit transformed, within the problematic of diasporic ‘boundaries’ (Barth). As it is the *kindong*, as performed by the present generation of Lao people in both environments, is not the mirror of the ‘ancestral way of life’ but a ‘mirage’.

The thesis explores how the performance of a *kindong* underscores the survival of a tradition and the ethnic identity of a people caught in a different and alien social, cultural and political environment. The performance of the *kindong* necessarily encompasses issues of gender relations, generational conflict, adaptation and invention of new traditions (and discarding of old ones)- the re-evaluation of tradition in the face of exigencies of new living environments.

In the thesis, my focus is on the role of the *kindong* in constructing and deconstructing traditional meaning, identity and community, and in mediating tensions between the values of the old and new generations. The thesis focuses on case studies of the performance of the *kindong* in various Lao community settings. It foregrounds three
issues. The first centres on the performance of the *kindong* and the politics of diaspora and examines the use of tradition in the construction of ethnic identity. The second highlights the *kindong* and the social implications and explores ways in which cultural identity of the Lao is constructed and challenged through the performance of the wedding. The third spotlights the *kindong* and the cultural impact on the new generation of Lao people, highlighting the ways in which cultural meanings are transformed through the loss and recovery of collective memory and the adoption of new traditions.

*Tradition and Habitus*

Apart from the scenes and the atmosphere described of the *kindong* in the prologue, one other thing they all shared was the claim by the host families that the ceremony they held for the betrothed was

 herramienta del pasado, del presente y del futuro, de forma que se transmita de generación en generación.

*done correctly in accordance with the ways shown by our ancestors*

This Lao understanding of the term accords well with its modern usage. Writing on rugby union in a Sydney newspaper, Mark Ella, one of the game’s great players, remarked that “South Africa will play their traditional style of rugby when they play against the ‘traditional’ foe like the NZ All Blacks”. Thus the words ‘tradition’ or ‘traditional’ have become common terms used in works ranging from sociology,

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2 This claim is also echoed, during interviews with the author, by the subjects featured in the pictures themselves. As will be seen in the discussion of Lao weddings in Chapters IV, V and VI, most if not all wedding ‘speeches’ by representatives of the families would inevitably and invariably mention this fact.

anthropology, the arts to architecture and sports, implying the continuity of an accepted past practice.

The Lao words ອຸປະລາໄກ and ອື່ນມີ are synonymous and translate into English as 'tradition' and 'customs'. In The Invention of Tradition, Terrance Ranger and Eric Hobsbawm (1983:2-3) differentiate between 'tradition' and 'customs', but admit that they are 'habitually intertwined'. Their work, as the title suggests, deals with the invention of tradition, thus ‘...traditions which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented’. This is the exact case with the Lao ‘traditional’ wedding ceremony: it is quite evident from interviews with my informants that many ‘traditional’ rituals are of quite recent origin, while many aspects of the wedding ceremony have been discarded. As Yogesh Atal (1997:340) suggests

*Traditions are not dead wood. They are elements of a living culture. People who follow them also change and modify them. They may also discard a few which have lost their utility, and new traditions may emerge as a result of interactions with other cultures, as also from within. Traditions are neither static, nor immutable.*

Tradition is often seen as the opposite of modernity. Certainly, in the performance of Lao weddings nowadays, many adoptions of new ways or practices – or inventions of new traditions - are carried out in order to be seen ‘to be modern’. As such, it can be regarded both as a binary opposition (new against old, traditional against modern) and a linear progression (from traditional to modern).

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4 The two terms are more often than not used together to mean the same thing - tradition. ອຸປະລາໄກ is the Lao word derived from the Pali Jarita สารีรา which becomes ອຸປະລາໄກ and then ອຸປະລາໄກ with the dropping of the R sound. As with Lao practice, this word has been shortened to ອຸປ. The word ອື່ນມີ is translated as ‘example, the mould, the path, the track’, and is synonymous with ‘tradition’ ອຸກະມີ. See Lao Dictionary, Ministry of Education, 2nd Printing, B.E 2505, Vientiane; p. 201 and Dr Thongkham Onemanisone: Lao Dictionary, Sponsored by the Toyota Foundation, Vientiane, 1992, p.154
Thus, this thesis contends that a ‘tradition’ should have most if not all of the following features:

- it consists of ‘cultural things’ (beliefs, rituals, myths, gestures and utterances etc.);
- it claims origins in the past (however recent or distant), thus continuity;
- it has been conserved – memorized as oral tradition or in written sources;
- it has been handed down from one generation to the next;
- it is accepted or practiced by the majority of a community, thus is a living performance;
- it can be replicated (albeit sometimes adapted to new situations and environments).

All the above features of a tradition can certainly be applied to the Lao kindong, especially the notion that a tradition is ‘memorized’ and transmitted. In Lao society, memorization and transmission of knowledge takes place principally through participation in social practice in a particular situation. Preparations for a wedding are such occasions when people of a younger generation can observe and learn from their elders. Many rituals of the Lao wedding, especially the soukhouane invocation, have been learned and committed to memory by the practitioners. The ladies who construct the phakhoucme, the ladies who perform the rituals (such as the sacrifice to the spirit of the kitchen) and the mophone who conducts the soukhouane do not have any handbooks or guidebooks to tell them how to perform their duties, or how to conduct a ritual. They perform these tasks and rituals from memory of what they had learned from their elders usually through what the French anthropologist, Pierre Bourdieu calls ‘habitus’ (1977).

Bourdieu coins the term ‘habitus’ to refer to a type of cultural habitat which becomes internalised in the form of a disposition to act, think and feel in certain ways. Bourdieu gives the following definition of ‘habitus’

The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce habitus, system of durable, transportable dispositions, structured
structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them.5

One feature of habitus is that it is acquired through acculturation into certain social groups such as social classes, a particular gender, the family, one’s peer group or even one’s nationality. As an aspect of acculturation, habitus is made up of communication between people, making use of what Bourdieu calls instruments of power: the economic capital (income, possession), symbolic capital (education, language, customs) and social capital (network of relationships, ethnic origin, group affiliation). This communication makes us what we are, how we think and how we act. But, for us to participate in this communication, these activities have to make sense to us. However, these activities do not make sense in and of themselves; they make sense only in the context of a particular habitus.

Habitus is what accounts for people acting reasonably. The notion of habitus enables us to account for consistency with respect to dispositions, tastes, preferences, and so on. It is adaptable because it is constantly subjected to experiences that can reinforce or modify its structures. Generally, however, experiences will confirm habitus because most people will encounter circumstances that tend to agree with those originally fashioned by habitus... (with)... all external stimuli and conditioning experiences are at every moment perceived through categories already constructed by prior experiences.6

Thus, habitus can be understood as the sets of values and dispositions gained from our cultural history that stay with us across contexts. Habitus is durable and transportable. These values and dispositions allow us to respond to cultural rules and contexts in a variety of ways; but those responses are always largely determined by where we have been in a culture. In the Lao social and cultural context, habitus is essentially a fundamental form of learning in a family situation where elders can communicate in words and actions: participation and communication lead to comprehension and

5 Pierre Bourdieu: The Logic of Practice, quoted in http://www.sociology.ohio-state.edu/classes/soc884/moody/N.../Condron_Bourdieu.htm
absorption. This form of learning requires the assistance and support of more knowledgeable people who can point out and talk about the relevant aspects, forms and meanings, making links between contexts and concepts.

Habitus provides a supportive context of the family and the social and cultural environment through the kind of activities in which the elders engage the younger generation. These activities provide the younger generation with the structure and interpretation of the culture's norms and rules. Through numerous and repeated interactions, habitus ensures that the activities of the younger generation are internalised, complemented by relationships that encourage their gradual involvement and integration into the skilled and valued activities of the family and tradition in which they live.

Pascal Boyer (1987:65) expands on the notion of a 'tradition' being memorized and transmitted, and that "nothing can be traditional if it has not been memorized by some people." Thus according to Boyer (1987:65)

> Some of the properties of tradition might be due to the properties of the mechanisms involved in people's memorization; indeed, some crucial properties of traditional phenomena might be those which make them especially memorable. This hypothesis makes it possible to throw into doubt the relevance of such constructs as 'world-views', Weltanschauungen or 'theories' about the world. Such cultural things might well exist, but in the empirical study of tradition it is certainly not necessary to suppose so. It follows that, if 'tradition' is to be conceived as a meaningful analytical concept, the stuff tradition is made of is neither symbols nor theories: it only consists of memories.

If 'tradition' consists of memory and if the kindong, with all the features of a 'tradition', depends on habitus as a site of transmission of memory, it is pertinent now to investigate the linkage between these three elements – habitus, memory and tradition – as they impact on the transmission of traditional knowledge of the kindong among the Lao in Laos and in diasporic communities.
Memory

As discussed in Omethip’s wedding (Chapter IV), I found that the elders who helped in both the preparation and the conduct of the rituals remembered the ‘traditional’ things differently. They all performed their duties from their personal memory, from the remembrance of things they learned through their habitus. It is quite evident to me now that in the performance of their duties, they were using their memory to express their identity, displaying their locality, their social standing and their experiences in things Lao cultural.\(^7\) In and through the performance of these rituals, the links between tradition, habitus and identity were established, albeit unwittingly (or as Bourdieu would have said ‘unconsciously’). Memory has been a subject of scientific investigation for quite some time now. A plethora of books and articles on various aspects of ‘memory’ from ‘the collective’ to the ‘personal’, to the linkage of ‘memory’ to national identity attests to the interest in this growing field. This is not counting works in the purely ‘scientific’ fields such as psychology, biology and the like.\(^8\) But, it was Maurice Halbwachs (1992) who postulated that memories are always constructed in dialogue with our social surroundings. Since social surroundings change, so do our memories; therefore memories need to be anchored in commemorations and rituals, as links to and representations of, the past. Halbwachs’ work has three aspects that provide the theoretical groundings for this thesis: the political nature of social memory,

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\(^7\) As was the case then in Lao communities, families holding a ceremony would invite as many elderly persons as they could to lend the aura of auspiciousness to the occasion. Therefore the guest lists would reflect the demographics of Lao refugee communities of the time – people from different parts of Laos. See Chapter III for discussion of the formation of Lao diasporas.

its localization in commemorative practices and the way memory supports and sustains a group's identity.\(^9\) Paul Connerton (1989), taking Halbwachs' work further, focuses on rituals as one of the ways memory of the past is reproduced.

This focussing on rituals as a memorizing practice fits well with my attempt to investigate the wedding ceremony as a vehicle of social memory and its part in the support and sustenance of a group identity. Performing rituals, such as the wedding ceremony, is ultimately about remembering the ancestors who initiated them and passed them down to the present. People might not recall exactly how these rituals originated but they perform them as closely as they think - or remember - the ancestors would have. By so doing the people honour the past as they think their ancestors experienced it, thus supporting and sustaining their group identity. As David Loewenthal (1985:197-213) argues, memory is always personal and collective at the same time. Remembering the past is crucial for our sense of identity and while ‘memory validates personal identity...history perpetuates collective self-awareness’.

Remembrance is not a mere activity of the mind, “but describes an activity characteristic of the establishment of biographical identities, by groups as well as by individuals.”(Radley 1989:50). Indeed, the ‘establishment of a biographical’ Lao identity is best expressed in and through the wedding ritual, especially the ceremony of the *soukhouane*, with its collection of ‘mundane objects’ and its ritual gestures. Remembrance of the cultural significance of the performance and the embodiment of the wedding plays a significant part in the community’s attempt to rejuvenate, recreate and reinvent its own identity, as ‘our experience of the present very largely depends on our knowledge of the past. We experience our present world in a context which is causally connected with past events and objects’ (Connerton 1989:3). This image of

\(^9\) Ryoko Nishii, however, criticised that ‘one central weakness of Halbwachs’ discussion is that it is based on the premise that there is an entity called society which preserves memory”, and that ‘this collective, or society, appears to have its own memory’. Nishii goes on to say that with this ‘static’ view of memory, Halbwachs provides no means for envisaging the creative and dynamic processes through which social memory emerges in the course of social interactions among people’. See Ryoko Nishii: “Social Memory as it Emerges: A Consideration of the Death of a Young Convert on the West Coast in Southern Thailand”, in Shigeharu Tanabe and Charles F Keyes (eds): *Cultural Crisis and Social Memory: Modernity and Identity in Thailand and Laos*, Anthropology of Asia Series (Grant Evans: Series Editor), University of Hawai‘i Press, Honolulu, 2002; pp. 231-242.
the past, says Connerton, commonly legitimates the present order. Therefore, it is 'an implicit rule that participants in any social order must presuppose a shared memory' (Connerton 1989:2).

Remembering and transmitting collective memory is one of the ways in which the foundational elements of a diaspora’s identity are retained. This collective memory may be embodied in a text, like the Old Testament for the Jews, or in the ethnic identity and a common language as in the case of the Armenians and the Chinese. For the Lao, their collective memory is embodied in their religion, their customs such as birth and marriage ceremonies and their notion of kinship that developed through their sense of shared history and diasporic experiences.

Representations of the past are to be found also in oral accounts people give of their past events, traditions, customs and social practices. The issue of reliability and verifiability of oral witness testimonies is important. These testimonies can become a resource for revealing the relationship between what people remember and the ideological dilemmas of their past and present socio-economic and political circumstances. This is quite evident from the many interviews I had with my informants. They narrate their life stories, their experiences as mediums for remembering and communicating information. However, people narrate their life stories not only to communicate to others and to remember, but also to make sense of their lives for themselves (Schank 1990). Further, as work by Conway (1990) shows, as they try to make sense of their lives, people’s autobiographical memories of specific events they narrate are composed of their own interpretations of events that are extended in time and may involve multiple actors and locations.

But we also know that memories cannot be literal representations of events because memory cannot recall everything in the exact detail as it happened. Moreover, it is not important whether this recollection be completely accurate, because the important thing is to give more emphasis to the personal meaning the narrator gives to the story of his/her life. Thus autobiographical memories become the fabric of personal myth in
that it forms an integrated view of the reality for the narrator: it is self-defining and contributes to the ultimate identity of the narrator (McAdams 1991:1-8).

I first came to Australia from Laos as a 16-year-old student on a Colombo Plan scholarship. I, along with two other friends, was put in one of the top private boarding schools in Sydney. I quickly developed friendships with other (Australian) boarders. But there was a sense, a feeling, that full communication was not possible: talk of cricket and rugby matches was strange to me. To them, air force jets flying past meant some air shows, or some commemorative functions somewhere in town; but to me, they meant more sorties to bomb the enemy in our undeclared war against the Pathet Lao. Recent films or shows seen with friends were not part of my memory. When they sang 'Get Me to the Church on Time', or 'Singing in the Rain', it did not bring to me the same memory as it did for my new friends. Conversely, jumping into the Mekong River for a swim, or fashioning a spinning top from wood we collected made little sense to my new friends: I was not part of their collective memory, and they were not of mine. In our school uniform, we may be seen as a 'group' with the same identity, that of students of a particular school. But our individual memory – remembrance of our personal experiences that had been inscribed in us – always sets us apart. We are 'one' only when the trajectories of our experience and remembrance intersect such as during school reunions when we sat around and reminisced about our shared school days.

As Somerset Maugham observes, in The Razor's Edge, people are not just individuals; they are 'representatives' of their place of birth, the place where they grew up, the food they eat, the games they play, the stories they love and the religion they believe in (1960:2). For the Lao, one might add the kindong rituals they have been through, participated in or witnessed.

My interest in the Lao traditional wedding ceremony as a subject for investigation is both personal and intellectual. It began in my own diasporic journey. Having settled in Canberra as a refugee from Laos in 1975, I sponsored my siblings from a refugee camp in Thailand in 1978. In 1981, one of my sisters, Thasniya, married her Khmer
husband, Saya Long, in San Isadore, a township in southern New South Wales, where our eldest sister, Thipphaya, and her family had settled after being offered employment by a church group. The transposition of a Lao traditional wedding ceremony into a rural Australian town created both great interest among the locals and great consternation in our family.

When my other sister, Omethip, married in 1989 in Sydney (see Chapter IV), the Australian Broadcasting Corporation requested our family’s permission to film the wedding for a documentary produced by John Pilger. In searching for background materials on the wedding, I found that there was a dearth of resources on Laos and Lao refugees, let alone on Lao wedding ceremony. While the preparation for the wedding was taking place, I was struck by the fact that the older Lao people helping in Omethip’s wedding were not always in full agreement on what would be the ‘traditional’ things to do for a wedding. They remembered details of the wedding ceremony differently. More importantly, they were prepared to compromise on the ‘traditional’ ways, to adapt to the new environment, adopt new ways of doing things, and make do with what was available as substitutes for the ‘traditional’ wedding paraphernalia. Indeed, they were adapting to the exigencies of their diasporic existence and thereby were engaging in the ‘invention of traditions’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger).

The third incident that stirred my interest in the Lao wedding ceremony was when I told my wife, Intong, that the subject of my thesis would be some aspects of the ‘traditional’ Lao wedding. She asked what did I know about the ceremony, especially the part the bride had to go through on the wedding day. I admitted that I was indeed quite ignorant. Subsequently, I found that I was not the only groom who did not know about the happenings at the bride’s house on the wedding day. This ‘questioning’ gave birth to the idea that my interest in the wedding ceremony should result in something of benefit for later generations of Lao born in the diaspora of both genders and for other people interested in the Lao culture.
This combination of personal and intellectual interest drives this thesis. The subject matter of the four pictures in the prologue and the three incidents above is, of course, the *kindong* - the Lao traditional wedding ceremony - as the site of 'Laoness'. It encompasses two issues:

1. The first concerns the remembrance of Lao people of the 'traditional' ceremony and rituals associated with the wedding, and what will be passed on to the next generation of Lao. The focus is on the Lao wedding ritual as a vehicle of transmission and expression of social memory; and how it contributes to the second concern of this thesis.

2. This is the reconstruction of ethnic identity in diasporic Lao communities across the world and in present day Laos as it emerges from the image of 'New Socialist (Lao) man' (Evans, 1990) imposed on the country since 1975.

The social memory of the *kindong* in various Lao communities covered by this study will follow the locating of this Laoness within the discourse of tradition and modernity and will be mediated through three concepts - tradition, social memory and identity - which are the main themes of this thesis.

The thesis investigates how the memory of the performance of a traditional wedding ceremony relates to the identity of the Lao people.

- *Is this identity in the present always dependent on the (remembered) past?*
- *Is Lao identity sustained by the performance of the kindong remembered from experience gained in habitus?*
- *Will the kindong be diluted both in Laos and in Lao diasporic communities should there be a loss of social memory because of the absence of the traditional habitus?*
Further, the way the remembrance and performance of the ‘traditional wedding’ relates to the ethnic identity of the Lao is crucial to the ‘survival’ of Laoness in the face of globalisation, multiculturalism (in Australia and the USA) and communism (in Laos). What part would globalisation, the desire to ‘be modern’ and the invention of new traditions play in the survival of Laoness?

Review of Literature

This thesis is also a study of diasporic communities. There is a large corpus of work dealing with various typologies of ‘diaspora’ – from the archetypal Jewish diaspora, to the Turkish guest-workers in Germany, and the marginalised ‘queer’ population of New York. In this thesis, ‘diaspora’ will be taken to mean ‘a section of a largely homogenous people of a nation-state that has been forcibly exiled and dispersed from their traditional homeland to other lands where they settled as a minority group struggling to maintain their identity and entertaining some aspirations of returning to their homeland’ (Phoumirath 1998:12). Common themes running through these typologies of diaspora are maintenance of identity and culture through the maintenance of language, shared history, culture or some traumatic events.

For the Lao people in diaspora, the wedding ceremony carries with it some ‘cultural baggage’, what Avtar Brah (1996:1) calls ‘diasporic inscriptions’. More importantly, the wedding ceremony carries on the community’s memory of its cultural past that helps shape the future of the community. The Lao wedding embraces the ideals, images, mode of self-presentation that are known as ‘Laoness’, encompassing, as they do, issues of kinship, ideology, power relationship and, of course, ethnic identity. By examining and analysing wedding ceremonies, the thesis will look at the issue of

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10 As a shorthand reference, diasporic Lao settlements and Lao people remaining in Laos will be called Diasporic Lao and Homeland Lao respectively. The equivalent Lao terms for these two words are ลาปะ and ลาภี Laonok and Laonai. These Lao terms were coined, as far as I could ascertain, by the late Khamchong Luangpraseuth in his many writings and commentaries on the relationship between these two groups of Lao people.

11 See Roland Robertson on the effect of globalisation on evolution of culture. Although the term ‘globalisation’ does immediately bring to mind economic effects, ‘globalisation’ is used here in the sense of people across time and space sharing images and ideas of culture and performity of culture, through modern technologies such as Internet, audio/video media, and printed mass media and presents a certain threat to the survival of ‘tradition’ and points the path to a development of the same culture.
remembrance that exists in three Lao communities—Canberra, Vientiane and Greater Washington DC area, USA. It will examine how these three communities, using salient elements of Lao identity through the embodiment of culture in the wedding rituals, reinvent their ethnic identity.

As intimated earlier, it is difficult to find any scholarly treatment of this Lao traditional ritual in relation to the wedding ceremony and rituals. A rather short (six pages), albeit authoritative, account of a ‘traditional’ Lao wedding ceremony, written by Nhouy Abhay (1965) is found in a book edited by René de Berval.12 This book is a collection of short articles on various aspects of Lao history, culture, language and rituals. It is a sort of ‘introduction’ of Laos to the French audience around that time. The article by Abhay is one of those introductory pieces that provide basic information on a particular topic. It begins with the claim that in Laos, one gets married in the even numbered months, and that this marriage must be celebrated in front of witnesses and by following “les anciennes coutumes lao”.13 The article discusses different ‘payments’ kha khun phi and kha dong คำค่า และ คำค่า paid by the family of the groom to that of the girl. While quite long on the groom’s procession on the wedding day itself, the article touches on two very important rituals of the wedding: the souat mon lot nam yen and the soukhouane สมณียา สมณี และ สมณี. The first of these rituals involve inviting some Buddhist monks on the eve of the wedding to come and bless some sacral water and sprinkle the blessed water on the betrotheds. Whereas the soukhouane has become the ritual de rigeur in any Lao traditional wedding, the first of these two rituals has become the one ritual that has, by and large, been ‘discarded’ because of the inconvenience of extra arrangement. There is also a changing belief that Buddhist monks should not be involved in such worldly matters as marriage. Unfortunately, the article does not discuss in any detail the processes and procedures of the Lao ‘traditional’ wedding, nor does it discuss the change in the Lao understanding of the whole wedding tradition.

13 meaning ‘the ancient Lao customs’. Ibid., p. 825
Nguyen Phu Doc (1970), in his article, compares various aspects of Lao and Vietnamese marriages such as the age and conditions of marriage in the Lao and Vietnamese situations. On the *soukhouane*, which the article claims to be the 'proper wedding ceremony', the article says that it is celebrated by two officiants who recite sacred formulae in unison.\(^{14}\) The article finishes off with a rather longer treatment of the Vietnamese wedding rituals.

\[\text{Picture 1-1: The Royal wedding *baci* of Prince Mangkara and Princess Savivanh at the Royal Palace, Luang Prabang, in 1957. There are four *mophones* conducting the *baci*. The *phakhouane* is a low-set Luang Prabang style (obscured in the picture). (Photo courtesy of Mrs Soumonh Sayasith of Luang Prabang who kept this press clipping of the wedding).}\]

In 1982, a small booklet, *Wedding in Laos*, was published in England by Alan Davidson, the last British Ambassador to the Kingdom of Laos. The booklet describes

\(^{14}\) It is an unusual occurrence to have two *mophones* performing the *soukhouane* at a wedding. None of my informants mentioned this fact as being usual. But some of them said that 'royal weddings' always had multiple *mophones* in even number. In an interview with Mrs Soumonh of Luang Prabang, she confirmed that royal weddings always had even number *mophones* performing the ritual of *soukhouane*. Her uncle, Phagna Phoumi Sayasith was one of the Brahmins retained by the Royal Court in Luang Prabang. She also gave me copies of pictures from a newspaper report of a royal wedding where there were four *mophones* at the ceremony. Interview with the author, Luang Prabang, March, 2000. This fact has also been confirmed for me by Tiao Sayasith and Tiao Savay Kindavong in discussion with the author in Canberra. Amphay Dore writes that he had two *mophones* for his wedding *soukhouane* in Luang Prabang in 1976 just before he escaped from Laos. The fact that he was marrying the daughter of the former Prime Minister, Prince Souvanna Phouma, may have something to do with the even number of *mophones*. See Amphay Dore: *Le Partage du Mekong*; Édition Encre, Paris, 1980; pp. 97-99.
what the author calls ‘the Buddhist’ wedding in a village in southern Laos. Though lacking in detail and academic discussion of the subject matter, the booklet nevertheless is a good attempt to publicise and introduce the Lao community to a wider audience. The book follows the fate of two young Lao people, Phoumi, the boy and Chanthala, the girl. It deals with how the two met, how the two families came to agreement about the marriage and then the wedding itself. However, there are aspects of the book that are essentially misleading. On getting advice on the best day for the wedding, the book says that the boy, Phoumi, himself goes to the wat to ask a monk about the most auspicious day. Normally, this duty is carried out by the girl’s family, or at least by the elders from the family. On the wedding ceremony itself, the book is quite misleading:

The wedding and the baci which follows it are really one long ceremony. A monk conducts the wedding. Then a magic man comes for the baci. He wears a red and white robe with a striped sash. He holds flowers in his hands (pp.16-17).

Lao weddings are never conducted by Buddhist monks, although some families do have ‘religious’ rituals as part of the wedding process (see Abhay above). Except for the wedding of Daosadeth in Washington DC and Phonesavath in Maryland, USA (cf. Chapter V), none of the weddings discussed in this thesis have this ‘religious’ content. The monks do not ‘conduct’ the wedding. As in Maryland, the monks were there to perform a religious ceremony so that the bride and groom could make offerings together. It is also interesting that the book calls what appears to be the mophone, ‘a magic man’.

In present day Laos, there have been some research works on the Lao traditional wedding and the social position of Lao women. In a monthly magazine on arts, culture and literature, Vannasin, published by the Ministry of Information and Culture, there are articles on various aspects of Lao wedding ceremony, but these are not

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serious academic research. One exception was a book by Dr Mayoury Ngaosyvathn (1995) in which she analysed the changing role and status of Lao women through the ages, as well as presenting a feminist perspective on the ‘traditional’ Lao marriage custom. In the same vein, there have been some recent works by some French sociologists. Josiane Cauquelin’s work (1998) follows the settlement of a Lao family in France, culminating in the marriage of one of the daughter. The article discusses the changing conception and performance of Lao traditional wedding ceremony in French environs.

Of the earlier works on Lao weddings by Western scholars are works by anthropologists like Marcel Zago and by Barend Terwiel. In this collection of articles on the rituals of the various ethnic groups in South East Asia, Terweil has a short description of the marriage ceremony of the ‘Laotians’ that appears to be largely drawn on works of afore-mentioned authors like Zago, Nguyen Phu Doc and Nhouy Abhay. The value of Terwiel’s work lies rather in the comparison he makes of the ceremonies of the various tribes in the area.

While works by Lao authors on Lao weddings are rare, works on the khouane and the soukhouane ceremony by Lao authors are even scarcer. Apart from authors already mentioned, like Nhouy Abhay, foremost among the researchers before 1975 were Maha Sila Viravong, both under his own name and under the aegis of the Literary Committee and the Department of Literature, Venerable Khamphoun Philavong and the Cultural Research Centre at Wat Phophonphao under the leadership of Venerable Phimpho. Notable among the researchers who came to prominence after 1975 were Douangdeuane Viravong (one of Maha Sila’s daughters) and Douangxay Luangprasy. Some important works on Lao culture and traditions that appeared in recent times have been carried out by Maha Samlith Bouasysavath, with funding from the Toyota Foundation of Japan. Samlith works on the transliteration of Lao ancient customs and tradition from the Pali script into modern Lao script in order to maintain and propagate

these customs and traditions. In one of his works, Samlith has a very clear exposé of the *soukhouane* and the Lao traditional wedding ceremony\(^{17}\).

Most publications on this *soukhouane* ritual available after 1975 are simply a collection of the *mophone*'s invocations for various types of *soukhouane*, with no commentaries on the invocations, nor on the process, procedures and paraphernalia of the ritual. Would-be practitioners of the ritual are left to learn their craft largely by habitus. Of some assistance to my research were the numerous publications in Thai and English by various institutions and researchers in Thailand on the Isan tradition of *soukhouane*.\(^{18}\) Of earlier works on the *soukhouane* are such works by Ruth-Inge Heinze, Stanley Tambiah and Luang Anuman Radjathon. These publications, while strictly speaking not on the Lao *soukhouane*, nevertheless provide insights and comparisons for the understanding of the ritual.

To some extent, the analysis of the Lao ‘traditional’ wedding ritual in this thesis is influenced by works on other peoples’ wedding/marriage rituals. One of these works is by Nancy Tapper who studies Afghan tribal marriage. According to Tapper, marriage is the key to many societies around the world as it is the central mechanism for and the main focus of social production and reproduction (Tapper 1991:xv).

Works by Goldstein-Godini on Japanese weddings, by Laurel Kendall on Korean wedding rituals, as well as Margot Harker on the evolution of ‘modern’ Australian

\(^{17}\) Samlith Bouasysavath: *The Collection of Lao Heritage: Traditions and Customs Project, Vol I*; sponsored by the Toyota Foundation, Vientiane, 2001 (in Lao) (See further discussion in Chapter II).

weddings, provide not only insights into other ‘traditional’ wedding rituals, but how ‘traditional wedding rituals’ adapt to the exigencies of modernity.\textsuperscript{19}

Taken as a complete corpus, these works show how people make use of ‘tradition’, even ‘invented traditions’, in attempts to carry on a community’s memory of its cultural past and shape the future of that community. For, it is also clear from these works that in marriage ceremony and the family, we have the foundation of a society and the feeling of belonging, implying continuity of tradition and the identity of a community. The study of weddings is, then, not only concerned with the process that serves to construct the image of an ‘unmarried person’ through the ‘rites of passage’, but also how this image has shifted through the diasporic journey. In diasporas, as in the homeland, local knowledge and past experiences have been selectively discarded, adapted, transformed and elaborated in the weddings of the Lao people who find themselves living under changed and changing circumstances. In effect, to study the wedding is to study tradition and change, and the consequence of change. It has to do with the notion of ‘tradition’, and the invention of tradition, in the sense of the critical response of a people to the history and politics of their time. Thus, ultimately, to study the Lao wedding becomes a study of the Lao identity as Lao in many different circumstances attempt to define themselves through their own history and against changing perceptions of the Others, be that the Australian, American or Thai others.\textsuperscript{20}

Where do Lao weddings fit as an ethnic identity marker? When compared to the Jews, who have synagogues, sacred texts and feelings of persecution, do the Lao have similar distinctive features? Do Lao in diaspora think that they are preserving a culture that is being destroyed in their homeland by the Communist regime? Do diasporic Lao consider themselves carriers of Lao culture? While the \textit{soukhouane} is not a uniquely


\textsuperscript{20} I owe this line of argument to Laurel Kendall in her \textit{Getting Married in Korea...}, Op.cit., pp. 17-19 passim. My thanks to Dr Grant Evans, of University of Hong Kong, for drawing my attention to this book and other valuable resources.
Lao ritual, can a Lao be Lao without a *soukhouane* at a ‘traditional’ Lao wedding, as many of my informants insist? The study of the Lao ‘traditional’ wedding ritual is a good opportunity to seek answers to the above questions. The performance of the wedding *soukhouane* is the link between the past, the present and the future of the Lao ethnic identity.

The Lao ‘traditional’ wedding is a perfect site for such a study. It is easily observable and participatory. It is timeless and durable, yet changeable, providing an opportunity to observe tradition in transition. The Lao ‘traditional’ wedding shares universal features (such as rites of passage, involvement of family, elements of ethnic identity, culture and tradition, aspects of language in courtship and rituals, moral codes and basic beliefs), with other ‘ethnic’ weddings; yet it is different from other ‘traditions’, such as the Western white wedding in many respects. The Lao ‘traditional’ wedding is not religious, nor a civic ceremony. However, while not a religious ceremony, the Lao traditional wedding incorporates much of the Lao system of cosmology, religion, and the belief in the notion of auspiciousness. And again, while not civic in nature, the wedding in Laos encompasses the traditional notion of kinship, extended family, taboos/restriction on choice of partners. Most of all, the current performance of Lao ‘traditional’ wedding rituals depends, as mentioned earlier, on the social memory of the community: on what and how the ‘older generation’ remembers of what has taken place ‘in the past’ in accordance with ‘tradition’.

**Methodology**

This thesis is an interdisciplinary study. It is in part a history of the modern (post-1975) Lao diaspora. It is also a history from within as well as a history “from the bottom up” of the Lao communities in diaspora and in present day Laos. As an historical study, the thesis looks at rituals and symbols embodied in the traditional Lao wedding not just as ‘historical trivia’, or ‘decorative elements’ but also as vital clues – the real stuff of history (Appadurai 1981:x). It also uses history to analyse changes in social conditions of the Lao people as they go through their traumatic diasporic journey, and cope with the changing political and social circumstances in Laos. The
thesis applies a diachronic analysis to the changes in perception, values, forms and processes of change as much as to ethnic identity as to rituals and 'tradition'.

The thesis is also partly a sociological or anthropological study. As the thesis is an investigation of how the Lao 'traditional' wedding ceremony is being performed, I chose to adopt the participant/observer approach to get a 'feel' for the ceremony and share in the joy and celebration of the occasion. This approach enabled me to have access people most directly involved in the ceremony, the newlyweds and their parents, an access that is useful for the second methodology: the collection of information via a series of in-depth interviews. From these interviews, differences in the generational perspective on the 'traditionality' of the wedding ceremony can be discerned: their perspective on the memory of past rituals, what is being 'remembered' and thus transmitted to the next generation through the performance of the ceremony. Apart from the interviews with the newlyweds and their parents, interviews with the *mophone* and other both old and young people were also undertaken to gain their perspectives.

An additional methodology is the use of videotapes of many weddings from many places and across time, kindly lent or given to me by the people listed in Appendix D. This is an improvement from the use of photographs: the videotapes show movements and contain sounds of the various rituals. The analysis of these videotapes gives an additional perspective to that gained from weddings I observed in person: to compare the changes and variations, to analyse what has been retained through remembrance that could lead towards the construction of 'Laoness'. The analysis of the wedding ceremony through personal participation and watching the videotapes is augmented by the textual analysis of the *mophone*’s invocations and the discussion of the ritual objects. Comparing this analysis to what is available in folktales, epics, Lao traditional law codes, and other written resources, gives further valuable information on how well the remembrance of tradition serves the Lao in their attempt to reconstruct their identity.
It is pertinent to say something here about how the interviewees were selected. In a truly Lao manner, I used personal contacts and family networks, including my in-laws. These contacts later snowballed as further contacts were made by referrals and personal introductions. These interviewees were primarily the brides and grooms, their parents and the mophone. In a sense, they self-selected. In the beginning, I began by talking to the older people in Canberra, the primary site of my fieldwork, because I know that they have been involved in the conduct and performance of the many weddings to which I have been invited. As these discussions grew in number and narrowed in focus (that is, on their remembrance of past weddings), personal recommendations were made for me to talk to more people in Sydney and in the USA. In the meantime, I was invited to many weddings in Canberra and Sydney. They provided further opportunities to interview people and make further contact. To avoid any impression of bias towards friendly and interested subjects, I deliberately countered this by doing unplanned, unstructured impromptu interviews and discussions with people I met at some of these weddings. These were both the older and younger guests at these functions. The interviews obtained were principally autobiographical and observations/comments on aspects of Lao culture, history, weddings and identity.

Because of the nature of contacts with the subjects that I have, it means that most of the subjects belong to the urbanised, educated group of ethnic Lao people. Even many of the older people I interviewed had been living in urban centres for most of their life. As people exposed to modernity and Western ways of life in urban centres, these people can be regarded not as carriers of traditional values and practices, but perpetrators of changes, of invention of new traditions and of adaptation of new practices. Therefore, no attempt is made in this thesis to claim that the reconstruction of the Lao traditional wedding ceremony is representative of the traditional wedding for the whole country of Laos: it is acknowledged that Lao weddings held in rural communities will be different and will be closer to the traditional ways than the ones performed in urban centres, especially those studied in this thesis.
Expected Outcomes

From the point of view of social memory, interviews with a range of people, in age and experience in and knowledge of traditional wedding rituals, is necessary. From people of the ‘older’ generation, it is expected that they could provide remembrance of their own weddings and memory of Lao culture and society and weddings of their times. Their opinions, observation and knowledge of the rituals and where they are heading would be valuable to the thesis. People in this group are those who have lived and experienced life in Laos prior to the 1975 Great Divide and after, whether in the homeland or in diasporas; that is, people born before 1940.

From the ‘younger’ generation, two things are expected to be learnt: their knowledge and experience with wedding rituals and how much they have learned. It is also expected that their observations and expectations about the Lao traditional wedding would be an important indicator as to where this Laoness is heading.

Fieldwork and limitation of study

Having set the above parameters, the fieldwork for the thesis was undertaken early in 2000 in the three primary sites: Canberra, Vientiane and the Greater Washington DC area. Three secondary sites of Sydney, Luang Prabang and San Diego were also selected for comparison purposes. These sites were the most obvious choices for reasons of personal contacts and attendance at weddings and, in the case of Canberra and Washington DC, in the similarities in concentration of Lao diaspora and the influence of multicultural social milieus. Time is also a factor in planning the fieldwork. The ‘marrying season’ for Lao couples is traditionally on either side of the Buddhist Lent period (usually August to October) and on even-numbered months in the Lao calendar. Therefore, the field trip was limited to the months of January to July.

I spent a total of four months in Laos, visiting three locations, Vientiane, Luang Prabang and Savannakhet, where I interviewed a selection of people. I also had many opportunities to participate in many soukhouane ceremonies for occasions other than
weddings, like house warmings, newborn babies and for the Lao New Year. In between Laos and the USA, I took the opportunity to break my journey to visit His Excellency Phanthong Phommahaxay and his wife, the Lao Ambassador to the Federal Republic of Germany. They had earlier helped me with my work while he was the Lao Ambassador to Australia prior to being posted to Germany. While in Germany, I had the opportunity to interview some members of Lao diaspora in Bonn/Cologne and Hamburg areas. I then spent some two months in the USA, in the Greater Washington DC area, and in San Diego, California. My hosts in both locations were both my subjects and my conduits into the local Lao diasporic communities.

As this thesis focuses on the Lao traditional wedding ceremony, I should emphasise that it covers only the tradition of the ethnic Lao. I should say a few words about the use of ‘Lao’ and ‘Laotian’ when talking about the ethnic group that is commonly understood to be ‘Lao’. It will be evident later in the thesis that this differentiation is important. According to the 1995 Census, the population of Laos is about 4.6 million, composed of more than 40 ethno-linguistic groups, such as Hmong, Khmu, Yao, A’Kha, Ikoh, Lu. These groups are divided officially into three broad groupings, based more or less on the altitude of their places of domicile rather than on any ethnolinguistic characteristics: the .OrderByDescending(1), Lao Loum who make up 62.8 per cent of the population, are found mainly along the lowland valleys of the Mekong river and its tributaries, and they are on the whole ethnic Lao; the .OrderByDescending(1), Lao Theung, who comprise 25.8 per cent mainly reside on mountain slopes and hills of up to 1000 meters; and lastly, the .OrderByDescending(1), Lao Soung; about 7.4 per cent of the population, who live

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21 I hereby express my thanks to an old school friend, Vanh Prakosay, who introduced me to many of the members of Lao diaspora in Germany, as well as drove me to the various locations.

22 In Washington DC, I had great help from Daosadeth Chanthapanya and his family, and Somsanith and Kotkham Khamvongsa and their family, in both stimulating conversation about Lao diaspora in USA, Lao culture and their own experiences with Lao weddings. In San Diego, Tho and Toui Tran opened their house and their own life story to me for this study. To all of them, I own much gratitude for their help, their generosity and encouragement for my undertaking.
on higher terrains (State Planning Committee, Lao PDR, 1997:15). The differentiation between ‘Lao’ and ‘Laotian’ was conveyed succinctly in an article by Khamchong Luangpraseuth, a Polish-trained Lao intellectual who recently died in exile in the USA. According to Khamchong, ‘Lao’ denotes an adjective that covers a noun which means firstly “an ethnic entity belonging to the Tai family in Southeast Asia”, and secondly “the language spoken by the Lao ethnic entity”, and thirdly “the person belonging to the Lao ethnic group” (Khamchong, 1988:13). ‘Laotian’ denotes “qualities or disqualities” of the Lao. But, in modern political parlance, ‘Lao’ also means a citizen of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, whether ethnic Lao or not.

Organisation of thesis

In order to frame the study, the thesis is divided into three parts: Part A, the context; Part B, the case studies and Part C the commentaries. Part A (Chapters I, II and III) sets the context for the analysis of the kindong as a vehicle for the transmission of memory in the Lao communities. Chapter I reconstructs and discusses the Lao traditional ‘kindong’ before 1975 based on textual records and interviews, touching upon the fundamental idea of Lao cosmology and the concept of auspiciousness which are crucial and integral parts of the ceremony. Chapter II then explores the most important ritual in the wedding, indeed in the life cycle of the Lao people, the soukhouane. It discusses the symbolism and significance of the ritual as well as its hold on the psyche of the Lao people. Through the performance of this ritual, most Lao people ‘imagine’ themselves to ‘belong’ to the one and the same ‘country’ as collective owner/agent of the same society in the social formation and sharing the same social memory. Chapter III examines the political upheaval of 1975 that caused the current Lao diaspora and the tremendous political and social change in the homeland. This thesis discusses the mechanism of the formation of Lao diasporas in Australia and the USA in order to situate the present diasporic experience of the Lao in the global context.

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23 The balance of the population is made up of other tribes and tribal categories ‘Not Stated’.  
24 See also an interesting and insightful discussion of the notion of ‘Lao’ from cultural and political aspects in Grant Evans (ed): Laos: Culture and Society, Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai, 1999 (Esp. Introduction).
Part B (Chapters IV, V and VI) provides a number of case studies of *kindong* in the research sites Canberra and Sydney in Australia, Washington DC Greater Area and San Diego in the USA and Vientiane in Laos respectively. These case studies form the basis of the analysis of the loss and revival of memory of the rituals and the ‘invention of tradition’ by Lao people in the next part.

Part C (Chapters VII and VIII), argues that the imperatives of diasporic yearnings (of the *Laonok*) and the imperatives of globalisation and international politics (of the *Laonai*) are ‘forcing’ their differing conceptualisation of Laoness to converge. This convergence, it will be contended in this thesis, is most visible in the similarity in the performance of the ‘traditional’ Lao wedding ritual, the *soukhouane*. In Chapter VIII, the *kindong* will be discussed as a site of memory and of contestation: the concept of parental home for holding a wedding, the economics of the marriage and the consequent repercussion on the gender and generational relationship in the Lao household.

The conclusion summarises the main points of the study, noting the effects of diasporic experiences on the reconstruction, the reliving and adaptation of the Lao traditional identity to the new, culturally different landscapes. It also notes that as Laos enters the era of globalisation and asserts its political standing in international forums, the *Laonai* has to adapt accordingly. With the *Laonok* and *Laonai* both changing and adapting to new and different political and social milieux, is there a convergence of the ‘cultural Lao’ that was separated by the 1975 Great Political Divide? The question is asked in the context of the performance of the *kindong* in the age of globalisation.
PART A

CONTEXT

Chapter I
Kindong in pre-1975 Laos

Chapter II
Soukhouane Ritual and Symbolism

Chapter III
The 1975 Lao Diaspora
Chapter I

Kindong in pre-1975 Laos
CHAPTER I
Kindong in Pre-1975 Laos

“When I was small, I dreaded a wedding day in our family. Being a young girl, I was always asked to be one of the girls to carry the groom’s phakhouane to the bride’s parental house where the wedding soukhouane was held. We had to be very careful not to tip it over while walking because it would be inauspicious. We walked what seemed a long distance, sometimes in the mud and water puddles. Fortunately, nobody has to do that now.”

This is how a grand old lady, an 80 year old matriarch of one of the once most politically powerful families of Laos, remembered the ‘traditional way the Lao used to hold their weddings’ (her words). When she was a young girl, she performed her part in the groom’s procession quite a few times for her own brothers and other older male relatives. As she commented, nobody has to do that now. The processes and practices pertaining to Lao weddings had subtly changed.

This chapter will attempt to reconstruct the processes of kindong in pre-1975 Laos. It describes the processes from the choosing of marrying partners to the last day of the wedding celebration so as to build a picture of Lao traditional wedding and social aspects in Lao communities before the Great Political Divide of 1975. The description of kindong in this chapter is reconstructed from interviews undertaken during the course of field research, and from written sources. Although regional variations are evident in these interviews, there are aspects of the wedding ceremony

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1 Interview with Mrs Orady Souvannavong (née Chanthapanya), Sydney, November, 1999.
2 This chapter will discuss only the processes, while the meaning and symbolism of the ritual of the soukhouane and other rituals associated with the kindong, will be discussed in the following chapter.
3 Main sources for this reconstruction are interviews with (among others) Loung Thit Ngai, Acharn Bouonthanh Viravongsa and wife, Loung Singkham Intavong of Louang Prabang, Maha Kykeo and Maha Vilay of Vientiane, Mrs Orady Souvannavong, Mrs Kotamy Thattamanivong of Sydney, Mr and Mrs Soukhane Chanthapanya of Louang Prabang, Maha Kykeo and Maha Vilay of Vientiane, Mrs Orady Souvannavong, Mrs Kotamy Thattamanivong of Sydney, Mr and Mrs Soukhane Chanthapanya of Sydney; Loung Bouapha Khanchanouvong, Mrs Chanhla Khandhanoungsa, Mr Pheng and the late Mrs Thongsy Thammavong, and Mr and Mrs Ano Thammavong, Mr Songyod and Mrs Mayoura Phoumirath of Canberra. Written sources used are Sila Viravong, Samlith Bouaysavath, Venerable Khamphoun Philavong, Marcel Zago, Barend J Terwiel, Nhoy Abhay, Sathienkoseth, Preecha Pinthong (see details in Bibliography).
that could be regarded as ‘universal’ among these Lao of different regions. This
reconstruction is thus built on these ‘universals’ interspersed with personal memories
of regional variations of my informants. Further, it is to be borne in mind that the
marriage described here is the first-time marriage for both the man and woman; and as
traditionally preferred by the ethnic Lao, is an endogamous marriage. As will be seen,
while weddings in pre-1975 Laos were characterized by observance of the ‘traditional
ways’, by 1975 there were already many changes that had become accepted as
‘tradition’ in the Lao wedding ceremony. Examples from the author’s own marriage
will also be discussed to illustrate this point.

From all these sources, the Lao wedding can be divided into four stages. The first
stage deals with the choosing of a marrying partner encompassing the ritual of ‘spying’
and courtship. The second stage, the engagement, includes the preliminary approach
made by the boy’s family, the engagement proper and the ensuing discussion about the
khadong and the timing of the wedding day and the rituals up until the wedding day
proper. The third and most important stage is the wedding ceremony and the wedding
day itself. This stage takes in the individual soukhouane for the bride and groom and
their joint soukhouane, as well as the various associated rituals. The aftermath of the
wedding day, in stage four, is ‘traditionally’ an important day. This is when the
newlyweds would go around to give thanks to the relatives for their help, and perform
their first religious act together as man and wife.

**Choosing marrying partners**
The importance of marrying ‘the right woman’ is best encapsulated in the following
popular sayings:

- **Having a good wife**
  - نيةมั่งกิว
  - *Having a good wife* like *having precious stone for underneath the house*

- **Having a capable wife**
  - นี่มั่งสวัสดิ์
  - *Having a capable wife* like *having precious stones for the house*

- **Having a tricky wife**
  - นี่มั่งอันไกล
  - *Having a tricky wife* like *catching a pig in the sty*
Having a ruinous wife like pulling a tree by its top

Implicit in the above is the instruction for men to find a good wife, because it was believed that

- **Have a wrong haircut**, seven days will be gone;
- **Build a wrong house**, regret till it crumbles;
- **Marry a wrong wife**, think till the day you die.⁴

All of my informants agreed that it was important to choose the right marriage partner, as the last line would dictate. In response to the question of how one chose a marrying partner in pre-1975 Lao society, only two of my informants, Loung Thit Ngai and Maha Kykeo, could quote the twelve traditional ways that a man and a woman could be husband and wife.⁵ Most, especially my female informants, agreed that the most common method was ដែលៗ ស្គីត, that is ‘chosen by parents’, emphasising that in their

⁴ Richard Davis, in an article on Northern Thai Calendar, quotes another version of this: “Cut your hair on the wrong day, and you are wrong for seven days; Marry the wrong woman, and you are wrong till you die”. See Richard Davis: “The Northern Thai Calendar and Its Uses”, in *Anthropos*, Vol. 71, 1976, p. 9. However, the word ‘ផ្លាស់’ (wrong) in the above example and in Davis’ adage, could mean ‘wrong’ as in ‘wrong day’, ‘wrong haircut’ and ‘wrong wife’. It could also mean ‘wrong day for undertaking such action’ – wrong day for having a haircut, for building a house and for getting married. In this latter sense, ‘ផ្លាស់’ means ‘inauspicious’, rather than ‘wrong’. Thus the second half of Davis’s adage should have read “Get married on the wrong day, and you are wrong till you die”. The example he gave seems to support this latter interpretation. In a modern version of this, the last line becomes ព្យាយាមព្យាលោ, that is, “Marry a ‘wrong’ wife, think about divorce and remarry”, reflecting perhaps the dichotomy of modern and traditional thinking on marriage among the Lao.

⁵ In ស៊ីសន្ទិសសីហ ស៊ីស្ក៏, one of the books in a series of volumes on Lao traditional laws, there are twelve ways: parental approval for marriage; given as wife by one’s superior; paying a ransom for the girl (who is either someone’s slave or servant); accepted as wife a girl made pregnant by someone else; elopement after being refused permission to marry; married while escaping from war situation; elopement by girl; elopement by boy; being forced into marriage; given for marriage after being cured of an illness; befriend another man’s wife in order to marry her daughter; and commit adultery and kill the husband to marry the wife. See ស៊ីសន្ទិសសីហ ស៊ីស្ក៏ (Samlith Bouasyvasavath: *Soy Saykham*, Toyota Foundation, Vientiane, 1992).
days young people dared not go against the wish of their parents in such matter. Arranged marriages and courtship were also part of Lao society.

From literature, we learn that arranged marriage was sometime practiced for political and dynastic reasons, and sometimes with tragic consequences. This ‘arranged marriage’ would include the ‘promised marriage’ in which parents made a promise to each other that if their offspring were of the right gender and right age, they would be married. The main reason for this សំបែកសំបែក ៖ seubseua seub takhoun – ‘to continue the kin ties, to carry on the family line’, especially with a family that one approved of.

“Family persuasion” appeared to be quite prevalent in the days of my older subjects. This occurred when a parent, usually the boy’s, decided that their son was ready to settle down but showed no such inclination, so they took it upon themselves to look for suitable partner for their offspring. In the case of a girl, the parents might see an opportunity to ‘marry off’ their daughter to a man with reasonable prospects for the future. The parents would then engage the service of a go-between ពីស្រីស្រី pho seu/mae seu, who could be either male or female, more often than not related through matrilateral or affinal ties, and also well known and popular in the community. The go-between would arrange with the boy’s family in such a way that the girl could be seen and observed by the boy and his parent. This is known as ‘spying’, secretly observing and choosing a marrying partner for one’s offspring.

6 For example, the story of កោហូនឡូននាទ  Khoun Lou-Nang Oua in which the mothers of the two main protagonists had sworn to each other that they would give their offspring to marriage, if of the right age and gender. See សិវ កូននាទ  Khoun Lou-Nang Oua (abridged version), State Book Publishing and Distribution Enterprise, Vientiane, 1995. This love story contains mentions of the courtship and divination rituals as in the other Epic, Thao Houng-Thao Cheuang, see below. This story, further, mentions the calling upon ancestral spirits to do the divination prior to choosing marriage partners. See, p.29-35

7 Interview with Maha Kykeo Boulom, Vientiane, 10 February 2000

8 In Mr Pheng’s note, (Appendix A (n)), the duties of this go-between seems to be somewhat different, with the go-between doing all the liaisons and negotiations right up until the agreement on the wedding day. ពីស្រីស្រី Pho Seu/Mae Seu – the first term means the male and second female go-between.
Mrs Orady’s marriage is one example of this ‘family persuasion’. She married her husband, some twenty-two years her senior and a widower, on the recommendation of her parents and relatives, because they saw a great prospect in the young man. Another couple, now living in Sydney, is also an example of this ‘parental recommendation’. Mr Viliam and Mrs Sakone Phraxayavong were convinced by their respective families that they would have a good future together as a married couple. Viliam, from Savannakhet, was living in the same household as Sakone with his relative who was already married into Sakone’s family in Vientiane. This phenomenon, according to Viliam and others of his generation, seems to have been the trend in ‘that era’. The parents would assess the future prospects of young men and convince their daughter of the benefit of marrying one of them. The girls, on their part, being obedient and properly raised, would obey the parents. This ‘parental persuasion’ occurred on the boy’s side as well, usually if the boy was a ‘playboy’ with no sign of settling down. His parents would try to find a girl who would provide some stability and responsibility and moderating influence on the boy. The author’s own father was one such case.

As in any society, courtship is an important avenue for a young man to acquire a wife. In Lao society, courtship is known as "lensao", meaning ‘play with the girls’.

In his memoir, Ngon Sananikone provides glimpses of how young boys and girls, in

9 Interview with Mrs Orady Souvannavong, Sydney, November 1999, and with my wife, Intong, who is Mrs Orady’s niece. Mrs Orady married her husband in 1944 and has six children. Their marriage lasted until his death in 1996 at the age of 97 in Sydney. As it turned out, the parents were right. The young man Outhong Souvannavong, became the top mandarin of the Kingdom of Laos, having one of the highest royal honorific of Chao Phagna Luang Meuang Chanh. He held many Ministerial positions with successive governments since 1942; became Member of the King’s Council in 1956-60, and again 1966-1973. After serving as Ambassador to Japan 1960-64, he again was Minister for Public Health 1965-66. He retired in 1974, and escaped Laos in 1975 and initially settled in France before moving to Australia.

10 Interview with Viliam and Sakone Phraxayavong, Sydney, September 2000.

11 Sometimes, other older female relatives participate in this ‘persuasion’. According to Mrs Saykham, of Canberra, she was bribed with an amount of gold by her grandmother to marry her first husband. In this case, the marriage did not work. They divorced and remarried with partners of their own choosing.

12 See also Howard K Kaufman: Village Life in Vientiane Province (1956-57), Laos Project No. 12, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, UCLA, 1961; pp. 47-49. He calls it ‘Linsaw’, ไล่เสว้า, a variation in local pronunciation.
the late 1920s in Vientiane, met and formed liaisons that in many cases led to marriage (Mounivongs 1997). Many a young man would go, in the early evening, accompanied by a few friends and perhaps playing some musical instrument towards the house of the young girl he fancied. The young girl, meantime, would be working, under discreet supervision of some elderly female relatives (if not her mother herself), on the weaving loom under the house or working on some chores on the veranda of her house. They would chat away while the elders would pretend not to notice the happenings. All of my informants owned up to being part of this lensao ritual, which they agreed was one of the more popular avenues for young people to get to know one another.

In a village setting, the most common event conducive to courtship was the ritual called longkhouang, normally organised by the young girls of a village. This longkhouang appears to be a remembered version of an even older courtship practice mentioned in some literature of the Lao. On the appointed day and hour, usually after dinner, a group of young girls would gather at the courtyard of the house belonging to one of them. They would bring with them some chores to perform, such as embroidery, spinning cotton and silk, and sit around a fire to keep warm. News of this ‘gathering’ would attract young men from far and wide. They would come with their musical instruments to perform and impress the young girls. They would then

13 Traditionally, there were two courtship rituals mentioned in Lao literature, especially the Epic of Thao Hung. These two rituals were Taokhouang and Haotham, organized by groups of girls and boys respectively. The ritual of Taokhouang was normally ordered by the daughter of the king, and lasted a few days. During the ritual, young men and women would play games as an exercise in match making. The other ritual mentioned in the Epic was the Haotham, organized by young men. This was the time when young men invited young girls to ‘visit the caves’ together. It was speculated that this visit provided these young people with opportunities to pledge their love in front of the guardian spirits of the caves and mountains, and also an opportunity to be intimate. See Douang Deuane Bounyavong and Othong Kham-Inxu: Traditions and Rites in Thao Hung Epic, Vannasinh Publishers, supported by the Toyota Foundation, Vientiane, 1991 (in Lao). The importance of this epic is indicated by a recent international symposium on the topic in Thailand at which contributors came from Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, China and Myanma, as well as USA. See also Thai Study Institute (Thammasad University) and Office of National Culture: The Epic of Thao Hung-Thao Cheuang: Historical and Cultural Dimensions; published on the occasion of the 72nd Birthday of HRH Princess Kanlayanee Vathana, Bangkok, May BE 2538.
conduct their ‘courtship’ until late into the night. This ritual could go on for a few nights.\textsuperscript{14} The courtship is conducted in an exchange of bantering sometimes sung in the local folk style\textsuperscript{15}, or just as spoken poems – an art form that seems to be lost to the new generation of Lao people.\textsuperscript{16} This ritual of \textit{longkhouang}, according to Maha Kykeo, has lost its ‘popularity’ with village youngsters and ceased to be practiced in the late 1950s.

Village festivals at the temples and festivities at someone’s home (where a parent would normally take their daughter to socialise and help the hosts with the chores) provided opportunities for young people to get to know one another. This phenomenon of ‘going to help the host’ at some festivities could be regarded as ‘debutante’s coming out’ for Lao young girls. The important thing was that they would be noticed by the young men and their parents who would be on the look out for prospective spouses for their own children.\textsuperscript{17} Doing daily chores could also provide opportunities for boys and girls to meet: going to work in the rice fields, collecting

\textsuperscript{14} None of my informants can be precise about how long this ritual goes on for. Some villages even build a temporary hut for such purpose. But the original meaning of \textit{longkhouang} is to come down and gather in a courtyard. \textit{qông} means ‘a clear patch of yard’.

\textsuperscript{15} The folk singing style, \textit{ñâm Lam}, is known by the name of the locality where the style prevails or originates. Thus the major styles are \textit{ñâm Khab Thoum} in Luang Prabang, \textit{ñâm Khab Gneum} in Vientiane, \textit{ñâm Khab Mahaxay} in Khammouane, \textit{ñâm songkhone} in Savannakhet, and \textit{ñâm Saravane} in Saravane and the south of Laos. However, it is noted that the wording of these regional \textit{Lam} bear remarkable similarity. For works on Lao folk songs, see Carol J Compton: \textit{Courting Poetry in Laos: A Textual and Linguistic Analysis}; Special Report No. 18, Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, 1979; esp. Introduction and Chapter 3; and Dr Thongkham Onemanisone: \textit{ñâm Lam Sinthdone-ñâm Lam Sinthdone-Lam Some (Heritage of Lam Sinthdone-Lam Some)}; sponsored by the Toyota Foundation of Japan, Vientiane, 1998; esp. pp. 15-78

\textsuperscript{16} Chan Bounsy: “Heetkhong Papheny”, \textit{LaoPaen} (Magazine of the Lao-Australian Society, Melbourne), No. 37, October-December, 2001; pp. 3-4. In this article, the author mentions a hut is purpose-built for the occasion.

\textsuperscript{17} This type of courtship is mentioned briefly in the article by Nguyen Phu Doc cited in \textit{Introduction}. See Nguyen Phu Doc: \textit{Rites du mariage Lao et mariage Vietnam, Op. Cit.}, pp. 55-56
firewood, fetching water from the communal well, doing the washing and taking a bath in the local river.

If during the courtship a love match were struck between a man and a girl, they would symbolise it by the young man giving something of value to the girl to keep as a token of his love. Her acceptance of the gift signified her reciprocal affection. This ‘gift giving’ also indicated to their friends that they were now ‘an item’. The young man then broached the matter with his parents, usually firstly with his mother who then told the father. If the parents concurred, they would engage in the next ritual, the preliminary approach. Loung Thit Ngai, and other informants, asserted that it was always the man’s family that made these preliminary moves. The woman’s family would refrain from taking these steps in accordance with prevailing social etiquettes of modesty and propriety.

However, before embarking on this ritual of preliminary approach, the boy’s family would engage in a process called ‘asking the four corners of town’, basically a character check on the prospective in-law. If the family were satisfied about the girl’s provenance and of their son’s affection for her, they would make a preliminary approach to the girl’s family. Sometimes, members of the man’s family, usually the mother, would socially and casually broach the subject with the girl’s family. The service of a go-between might be used to convey the wish of the boy’s family to that of the girl’s. He (or she) usually

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18 Interviewed in Luang Prabang, March 2000. According to her, the boys and girls would ‘pretend’ to go down to the river via different paths.

19 Samlith in his book refers to this as the gift. Samlith, Op.cit., p. 128. According to Samlith, this is supposed to be a secret between the boy and the girl only. If the girl changes her mind about the relationship, she has to return all the ‘gifts’ to the boy; but if the boy changes his mind and marries some other girl, the girl gets to keep the ‘gift’.

20 Although, none of my informants remembered what ‘token’ was given and accepted as a result of their particular courtship. I am not sure if this ‘forgetting’ is genuine, or whether coyness and modesty prevented them from revisiting their ‘memories’ of that particular episode of their life.

21 Loung Singkham Inthavong; interviewed in Luang Prabang, March 23, 2000. The phrase means: “If you want to get married, ask the four corners of the village; if you want to have an affair, ask the four corners of the town”. The ‘four corners of town’ are that is, the elderly relatives, the monks (to see if she is a good practicing Buddhist), her friends, and her relatives.
undertook this duty free of charge, and would have come with some dates in mind for the next step. The use of a go-between was a precautionary measure against the boy’s family loosing face should the girl’s family refuse or reject this initial approach. This ritual of ‘asking the four corners of town’ was apparently not practiced in the case where ‘family persuasion’ was applied to have one’s offspring agreeing to a marriage, because the family would have been sure about the girl already.

Asking for the girl’s hand in marriage

Should this preliminary approach be agreed to by the girl’s family, on the appointed day the boy’s family then embarks on the next process which is to ask for the girl’s hands in marriage. There appears to be some regional variations as to what this ritual is called. According to Maha Kykeo, who is from Pakse in the south of Laos, it is called ສິ້ງສານ phithi hongha or ສິ້ງມະຫາສາດ phithi manh-may or simply ຮ້າງ pai kho sao, literally meaning ‘to ask for the girl’. Loung Thit Ngai, from Luang Prabang, said that it is called ໃນຄ່າ pai fak ngeun, ສິ້ງສານ phithi om sao or simply ຮ້າງ pai kho sao. Samlith Bouasysavath, from Vientiane and basing his research on many ancient texts, writes that the ritual is called ສິ້ງສານ phithi om sao, ຮ້າງ pai fak ngeun or ສິ້ງມະຫາສາດ phithi may sao (Samlith 2001:127-129). Many other elders, like Mrs Orady, Loung Bouapha and Mrs Bouaphanh used the simple terms of ໃນຄ່າ phithi manh-may or simply ຮ້າງ pai kho sao, literally meaning ‘to ask for the girl’. While in Laos, I sometimes heard all the above mentioned terms used, but in Lao Australian communities, however, it is more common to hear the last two

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22 According to Abhay, this initial approach could take quite some time, with the boy’s mother accompanied by some female friends, visiting the girl’s mother. In the course of general conversation, the subject would be broached discreetly as to the desirability of becoming ‘dong’ – that is united through marriage of their children.

23 While the word in this context ອົງ Om means ‘to ask for a girl in marriage’. In Luang Prabang dialect ອົງ Om also means ‘to bargain’.
terms ທໍາງ thian phithi manh or ທໍາງ pai kho sao used. This ritual is equivalent to the Western notion of an ‘engagement’.

Whatever the ritual is called, there seems to be a consensus on how it is carried out. This is undertaken by a group of ທໍາງ samthao-sike, literally ‘three oldies and four elderlies’, and who are known collectively as ທໍາງ chaokhot-loungta, that is, the ‘elders of the family’\textsuperscript{24}. This group is not limited to the relatives of the man only, the important stipulation being that they must be auspicious and acceptable to the girl’s family. Usually, the village headman and his wife, and some such persons of good social standing, would be invited to be part of this group. For my own engagement, my boss (the Secretary of the Department where I was working then), and his wife and the family with whom I was staying, acted as ‘surrogate ancestors’ for me, because my own family was living in Savannakhet at the time.

My informants remembered that, prior to the engagement negotiation, both families would separately hold a ritual to ‘advise’ their deceased ancestors of the forthcoming marriage in the household. Each would make an offering of a meal, consisting of normal food that the family would have arranged on a ຉາມ phatok\textsuperscript{25}, taken out to the yard by one or two elderly ladies of the house. With a pair of lit candles, they would call the ancestors’ spirits to come and partake in the meal and acknowledge the forthcoming festivities. This was one of the first rituals to render the forthcoming marriage an auspicious occasion, being acknowledged and blessed by the ancestors.

\textsuperscript{24} While the auspicious number of elders to partake in any ritual would be an even number, the expression ທໍາງ samthao-sike – literally ‘three oldies and four elderlies’, appears to be a rhyming play on word ‘three and four’ only.

\textsuperscript{25} A sort of round small table, usually made of woven rattan, and raised on a sort of pedestal about twenty centimetres off the floor. The family would arrange their food on this phatok and sit around it to have their meal. In a diasporic setting, the family would use a round aluminium plateau instead for the same purpose (see picture next page).
Likewise, the girl’s family would undertake similar ritual before the arrival of the boy’s elders.

Picture 1-1: The *phatok* or *phakhao* on a plastic mat. The plastic mat is used as floor covering for guests to sit on during gatherings of friends and families alike. (*Phatok* and photo courtesy of Intong Phoumirath, 2004)

Picture 1-2: The *phatok* laden with food and offerings, an aunt of the bride’s and a relative are preparing to make an offering to the spirit of the ancestors to inform them of the impending marriage of one of the daughter of the house. (Wedding of Thipphaphone Keomoungkhoun, Ban Kokninh, Vientiane, 29 January 2000. Photo by the author).

There was no prescription as to how many couples would take part in this ‘family ancestors’ party taking part in the engagement discussion. One important stipulation
was that there must be an even number of auspicious couples. They must take with them three important things: a acija, *khanhmak* – the areca nut set (Pictures 1-2, 3, 4 and 5) with a pair of bee-wax candles and an even number of acija *dokhak* (or the leaves thereof) symbolizing the love and affection, and a pair of acija *makbeng*.

*Picture 1-3:* A very elaborate silver *khanhmak* in old Lao traditional design. Note a pair of small knives with ivory handle, instead of a *mit sanak*. (*Khanhmak* Courtesy of Intong Phoumirath; photo by Intong Phoumirath; Canberra; 2000)

*Picture 1-4:* A very elaborate silver *khanhmak* in among other wedding paraphernalia. This is a modern day imitation of the traditional design. (*khanhmak* Courtesy of Mr and Mrs Sieng Mathouchanh; at the wedding of their son. Photo by the author; Canberra; 1997)
Picture 1-5: A polished lacquer khanhmak with a set of silver containers. Possibly Khmer style. Note one single-handle knife instead of a mik sanak. (Khanhmak: courtesy of Thanongsack Phoumirath; Photo by the author; Sydney, 2001).

Picture 1-6: A very elaborately carved wooden, albeit, empty khanhmak. Possibly Khmer style. (Khanhmak: courtesy of Thanongsack Phoumirath; Photo by the author; Sydney, 2001)
The *mabheng* is conical in shape, usually made of banana leaves with ‘scales’ of increasing sizes from top to bottom. It can be used either as a decoration or as offering on the altar or as a ritual implement in traditional negotiation such as a marriage proposal. The following four pictures show the many and varied shape and constructions, and uses, of the *mabheng*

![Makbeng](image1)

**Picture 1-7:** *Makbeng*, left over from the Buddhist statues altar, are here used as decoration at an open-air dance floor under a parachute. The dance floor was set up on the ground of the *Wat* as part of the festivities (the consecration of an ordination hall — the *Sim,* (Ban Mai, Vientiane Province; photo by the author; 2000)

![Makbeng](image2)

**Picture 1-8:** *Makbeng* as offering to the spirits, placed in between two ruined stupas in the ground of a *Wat* Prabat Phone Sane, on the road between Vientiane and Paksane. (Photo by the author, 2000).
A collection of makbeng on a trolley being taken around for sale, especially on vanh sinh — that is the eight and fifteenth days of the waxing and waning moon. On these days, many people would go to the wat to observe the sila taking these makbeng as offerings. Many people would use them to make floral offerings to the altar in their own homes or shops. Some of these makbeng are decorated with marigolds, and some with dokhak. (Photo by the author, Vientiane, 2000)

Another style of makbeng, on sale inside the temple ground. Many people buy them to make offerings to sacred stupas or Buddha statues at the wat at festival time. This style is typical of Luang Prabang region: the cone is decorated with three tiers of small bang with flowers as decoration. Some have two joss sticks at the top and some of them appear to have sticks of pennants (thoung – ថៃ) also as decoration. (Photos by the author, 2000)
Picture I-11: Makbeng as offering to the dead – being placed on a coffin. (Photo by the author, Vientiane, 2001).

Picture I-12: Makbeng as decoration on a table in preparation for a prayer in the temple. This one is decorated with the frangipanis. (Photo by the author, Vientiane, 2000).
Then, there are a 侵犯 khanhha, a 翕牌 khanh ngeun a silver bowl (Picture I-13 next page) containing some token pieces of silver in the form of the trough 侵犯 ngeun hang (Picture I-14) and 侵犯 kip houa nam (Picture I-15), the old Indochinese silver coin26, and a 贯牌 khanh khao sane nieo a silver bowl containing some uncooked sticky rice, signifying hospitality and a willingness to share the wealth.27 They would also take some drinks to share with the other party. Traditionally, the latter party would provide some hospitality in the form of a meal.

On the girl’s side, there would be three or four auspicious couples present, plus the girl’s parents. Again, there is no prescription on the number and again they would represent the ancestors of the girl’s family. The family would also prepare a mabheng, khanhha with a pair of bee-wax candles and khanhmak and some alcoholic drink. The visitors would be received on the open area between the veranda and the sleeping quarters of the house. The two sides would sit facing each other, with their own mabheng, khanhha and khanhmak in the middle.

26 侵犯 Kip Houa Nam – the French Indochina silver coin depicting ‘Liberty’ with her spiky crown, hence the Lao term, which literally means ‘thorny head’. This is also called 侵犯 Ngeun Manh by the Luang Prabang people meaning ‘a unit of currency’– is the French Piastre, the Piece de commerce, that is the legal tender throughout the French Indochina. It weighs on average 27 grammes of pure silver. The 贯 Ngeun Hang – silver ingot in the shape of a trough, weighs on average about 350 grammes of pure silver. Most families, after the marriage, would melt these silver pieces down to make the silver bowls – the 侵犯 and 侵犯 O-Ngeun and Khanh Ngeun – the ornamental and ceremonial bowls for females and males respectively. These are the bowls used in the preparation of the phakhouane.

27 贊, Khao Nieo – the sticky rice – has double significance in this case: it is an ‘identity marker’ of the Lao people; and the word Nieo is homophonous with the meaning ‘firm, steady’, thus ‘firm friendship, firm relationship’. Mrs Bounthanh added that the sticky rice also symbolised ‘the sticking together’ of the two families, as the word 粘 means ‘sticky’. The scientific name is Oryza Sativa L. variety glutinosa. The botanical names for Lao fruits, flowers and other vegetables in this thesis are from Jules Vidal: Noms vernaculaires de plantes (Lao, Méo, Kha) en usage au Laos, Extrait du Bulletin de l’École Française d’Extrême-Orient, Tome XLIX, fascicule 2, École Française d’Extrême-Orient, Paris, 1959.
A collection of silverware used as wedding paraphernalia (from left to right): the Ō, normally associated with the ladies; a smaller Ō, which has multiple uses (as a container or water scoop); the Khanh normally carried by the gentlemen; another small Ō, and another Ō in a different style, with four small feet. In the foreground is a ceremonial sword carried by the groom on his procession. (Photo and silverware courtesy of Intong Phoumirath, 2000).

Picture 1-14: Ngeun hang (inherits) – a piece of pure silver in the shape of a trough, hence the Lao name. (Photo and silverware courtesy of Intong Phoumirath, 2000).
A collection of silverware used as wedding paraphernalia (from left to right): the Ō, normally associated with the ladies; a smaller Ō, which has multiple uses (as a container or water scoop); the Khanh normally carried by the gentlemen; another small Ō, and another Ō in a different style, with four small feet. In the foreground is a ceremonial sword carried by the groom on his procession. (Photo and silverware courtesy of Intong Phoumirath, 2000).

Ngeun hang (şuèn) – a piece of pure silver in the shape of a trough, hence the Lao name. (Photo and silverware courtesy of Intong Phoumirath, 2000).
Before the negotiation, a male elder from each side, pre-appointed by the family as their spokesman, would light two candles, which would remain lit for the duration of the discussion. The boy and girl would be presented to the gathering and asked to confirm their intention to marry. After this ritual, the boy's family would then hand over their makbeng and khanhmak to the girl's side. The latter's acceptance of this offering signified their agreement to the proposal that they became "dong"—that is to be united through the marriage of their offspring. This acceptance would be reciprocated by the girl's family offering their own khanhmak and makbeng, and both sides starting to chew the betelnut thus offered. Thus, the deal was confirmed and sealed.

28 The meaning of this lighting of the candles is obscure. Two informants provided differing explanations. Loung Singkham Inthavong says that the candles are lit so that all the discussion takes place "in full light", that is there is no hidden secret intention behind the negotiation. Loung Thit Ngai, however, postulates that the lighting of candles is akin to lighting candle at the altar when praying, thus it is akin to asking the Spirits and the Gods to witness the discussion. As candles are also lit in many other praying situations, both at the soukhouane and at the temple, I am inclined to accept the latter explanation.

29 As it happened, I was not present at this ritual. I was picking up another "auspicious" couple for the function. But the negotiation went ahead nevertheless.
Once the agreement was sealed, the decision about the domicile of the newlyweds is discussed. At this stage, according to Maha Kykeo, the 'marriage' is still referred to as 'marriage' since the families had not yet decided on the residency of the betrothed - the first term meaning 'patrilocality', and the second meaning 'matrilocality'. This discussion sets the scene for where and what form the wedding will take: whether it would be meaning 'patrilocality', or a meaning 'matrilocality'. Once the mode of the wedding was agreed on, the two families would discuss the offering to pay the girl's parents for their effort in raising her. It comes from two words: sin as in the Pali silpa, meaning the art, thus something of beauty; and sod, an indigenous Lao word meaning 'offering', thus 'the offering of something of beauty to compensate for the parents' effort'. This sinsod, according to Maha Kykeo, must comprise the 'thorny-head coin' and the trough-shaped silver ingot. However, some informants maintain that the discussion about the sinsod and the engagement could take place some time later by a group of elders, who were not necessarily the same people who took part in the preliminary approach. All of them adamantly agreed that there was no engagement ring involved in those days.

The important business left to be discussed was thus the negotiation of the price of the kindong, the wedding day and the sharing of the expenses for the wedding feast. While the primary share of these expenses falls to the girl's family, it is expected that both families would contribute to the wedding expenses. There appears to be some discrepancy among my informants as to what

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30 See Chapter VII for more discussion of the concept.
31 Maha Kykeo, 10 Feb, 2000, Vientiane
32 Also confirmed by Mr Houmpheng Sramany, Virginia, USA, in an interview in May 2000.
they call this ‘price of the kindong’. While all agree that khadong is the main purpose, Loung Bounthanh says it is called ռահBUFF khadong as it must include a piece of cloth called ռահBUFF pha tieo, given by the young man to the mother of the girl as a token of his appreciation of her raising the girl. Another informant, Loung Bouapha of Canberra, says this ritual is called ռահBUFF khad kha nang vang kha thao, ‘setting the price of the girl and setting down the value of the boy’ respectively. But, this appears to be a poetic rhyming play on words only, as there was no discussion on the ‘price of the boy’ at all.

Indeed, the price of the kindong comprises of three parts: ռահBUFF khadong – a sort of gift given by the boy to the girl or her parents; ռահBUFF kha namnome mae – ‘payment for the mother’s milk’- a ritual payment as an acknowledgement of the mother’s effort in raising the daughter, paid by the boy’s family to the girl’s mother; and ռահBUFF kha khunphi sacrifice to the ancestral spirits, paid by the boy’s family to that of the girl’s (Nguyen Phu Doc 1970:57; Abhay 1967:825). All three components are paid in a once only transfer on the wedding day itself. The khadong is a symbolic amount consisting of an amount of gold, in the form of pieces of jewellery, an amount of money and anything else the man would like to offer. Mrs Bounthanh, of Luang Prabang, remembered that for her khadong, apart from the jewellery and the money, consisted firstly of three pigs of differing sizes - the smallest is for the ancestral sacrifice, the next one is for the chaokhot-loungta, and the biggest one is reserved for the wedding feast itself. Her khadong also included six buckets of rice, fifty litres of

33 Mr Houmpheng, in the same interview as above, said that this expression referred to the mother’s effort in raising the daughter, as symbolised by the use of the phatieo to carry around the baby daughter while the mother worked around the house.

34 Mrs Bouaphanh Phoumivong, of Vientiane, told me that on top of all the ‘traditional’ things for the khadong, she received a brand new bicycle, “a Peugeot no less”, and one buffalo.
alcoholic drink, one bunch of areca nuts and a one ๒๔๖ Meun bag of salt.\textsuperscript{35} The jewellery part of the khadong was usually given back to the newlyweds after the marriage as an heirloom and inheritance. One important prescription was that, as a sign of respect to the mother, the khadong for the daughter must only be equal to or less than, and never more than, what her mother received for her marriage.\textsuperscript{36} The jural aspect of the khadong was that should one of the parties break the promise to marry, the aggrieved party could impose a penalty/reparation equal to double the amount of the khadong. Divorce or death of a partner had no implication on the khadong.

The duration of the ‘engagement’ was set in accordance to a few imperatives, but usually it could be any time between a few weeks to a few months. The main consideration was to give sufficient time for the families to prepare for the wedding: ‘invitations’ to be sent out to the relatives and friends by words of mouth by the relatives of the betrothed themselves, as there were no commercially printed invitation cards. The extra time would allow the boy’s family to accumulate more wealth to cope with the expenses of the wedding. Preparations would include the acquisition of foodstuff, the making of rice wines, the drying of meat and the pickling of vegetables. The girl usually used this period to weave her own wedding dress and pieces of cloth as gifts to the go-between and the members of chaokhot-loungta party.

One further consideration was that prior to the marriage, the boy’s family might ask the boy to be ordained in the monkhood as a gesture to ‘pay for his mother’s milk’, so that merit accrued in such an ordination would be transferred to the mother (S J Tambiah, Richard Davis, Nicola Tannabaum). Mrs Bouaphanh Phoumivong had to wait for over a year for her betrothed to leave the monkhood before they finally

\textsuperscript{35} One Meun, a traditional weight measure, equals about 12 kilos. According to her, some of the second pig and the salt are distributed after the wedding to the relatives who could not attend the wedding feast: the meat signifying the sharing of hospitality; and the salt symbolises the fact that ‘their relationship will last as long as the salt retains its saltiness’.

\textsuperscript{36} Toy Siri, Tina’s mother (see Chapter VI) emphasised this point in my interview with her. Mrs Kotkham Khamvongsa, of Virginia, USA also confirmed that her khadong was less than what was ‘given’ for her mother’s marriage. Interviewed by the author in May 2000.
If needed, the man along with his kin and friends would spend time repairing the girl’s house so that it would be presentable. One important consideration during this time was to arrange a mophone to conduct the wedding soukhouane. The other consideration was, of course, to choose an auspicious day and time for the wedding ceremony.

Choosing the Auspicious Day

All of my informants agreed that the wedding must be held on an auspicious day. The calculation to find an auspicious day is done by having the horoscopes of both the girl and the boy carefully studied and calculated by someone who had the proper knowledge. Unlike the story of Phoumi and Chantala (Davidson 1989:11), this ritual was the responsibility of the girl’s parents. According to Intong, her mother took it upon herself to consult an appropriate person in the choice of the day of her daughter’s wedding, as she knew the right person to consult. Normally, the family would go either to an astrologer, a ‘wise man’ in the village who could be a mophone, or to a monk. The parents would furnish details of the birth of the betrothed (time, day, month and year according to the Lao calendar) to the person they consult. While it has been claimed that knowledge of the Lao calendar was not widespread (Viravong 1973:vi), it appears from my interviews that most mophones have at least a rudimentary grasp of the basic concepts of calculating the most common horoscope and the auspicious days for various rituals. According to Loung Thit Ngai, the hour, the day and the month of the wedding (as well as the direction the betrotheds faced at the soukhouane) have to be carefully calculated to ensure a happy marriage. The most common ‘formula’ used was the டி இல் இல் மசூ தம்ரா ஹுா ஹிஏன்மோனே the Formula

37 Interview, Vientiane, March 2000. I did not have to be ordained prior to my marriage, as I had earlier ordained as a novice at the request of my mother while she was still living.
38 Unlike the story of Phoumi and Chantala, again, friends and relatives did not begin to build a house for the betrothed so that they could move in three days after their wedding. Traditionally, the groom would stay with his ‘new family’ until he was ready to begin his own family, or until the marriage of the girl’s next female sibling.
for Heads on Adjoining Pillows. 39 Most *mophones*, like Loung Thit Ngai and Loung Bouapha, resort to using published materials in Thai that are readily accessible to interested persons.

There were a few imperatives in choosing the day of the wedding because of taboos. One day considered inauspicious for a wedding is a คำพิสดาร Vansinh – that is a day for observing the Buddhist precepts at the Wat. This was mainly because most of the older people would be at the Wat observing the Sila, and therefore would abstain from consuming alcoholic drinks. 40 One taboo that had long been discarded, according to Maha Kykeo, was that if the wedding day was to fall on a Friday, the newlyweds were not to consummate their marriage that same night on their nuptial bed. 41 One further important consideration in choosing the day for a wedding was that a wedding must not be held in a house where a pregnant woman lives. A pregnant woman in Lao is called แม่มัน mae man. แม่มัน is a Lao word homophonous with the Pali Mara – meaning ‘enemy’, thus obstacles. The wedding would either be postponed until after the birth of the baby; or else the pregnant woman might be asked to move out and live with some other relatives for the duration of the wedding.

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40 At least Maha Kykeo and Loung Thit Gnai agreed on this point, while others accepted that it did not matter much. Mr Houmpheng, of Virginia, USA, while agreeing with this belief, added that the day of the Sila was believed to be a day when malevolent spirits are released from hell; therefore they could cause harm to any ‘celebration’ by humans. Interview, May 2000.

41 And since it was taboo for them to be absent from the house after their wedding, they were supposed to wait another night to consummate their marriage.
The Wedding

The preparation for the marriage sometimes takes a few days, mainly because in the old days many things needed for the festivities were not commercially available, so food had to be prepared by the families. My informants agreed that at least three days were of importance for the festivity. These days were known as '911093, 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1093 that is the eve of the wedding, the wedding day and the clean-up day.

'911093—the eve of wedding day, is the Lao term for the ‘day for warming the wedding’. But, according to Abhay (1967:829), it is one of the more important days in the whole wedding process. On the eve of their wedding, the betrothed come together at the girl’s house for a religious ceremony called sout mone lot name yen, that is to ‘be blessed with sacral water in the evening’. Here again, there are no details on how many monks are invited to perform the ritual and what Mantra is used. Maha Kykeo and Loung Thit Ngai agreed that an even number of monks would be involved42, and the mantra would be the Parita Mangala Sutra, which was the most popular and appropriate Sutra for any auspicious occasion.

Apart from this one important religious ceremony which was part of the kindong process, the eve of the wedding is the day when friends and relatives arrived to assist in the preparation for the wedding proper. Many of them would bring gifts in kind, such as alcoholic drinks, rice, vegetables, fruits and meat. The major preparation takes place at the house of the bride-to-be as it is where the wedding proper takes place. However, at the house of the groom-to-be, there would also be a certain level of activity to prepare for the wedding (see below).

42 The Lao word for ‘even’ is 0 – khou- which also means ‘a pair’ thus an auspicious omen for a prospective couple to undertake together.
The main concern at this time is the hospitality and the final stages of preparations for the wedding. While the major responsibility for decisions about these rest with the girl’s kin, the two families would have agreed on who is the mophone, as well as who are the auspicious people to undertake the various rituals (e.g., making the nuptial bed, leading the groom into the phakhouane, leading the bride into the phakhouane, leading the newlyweds into their nuptial room, and taking the phakhouanes to the nuptial room). One important item is what food was to be provided for guests on the wedding day. The most important dish – a must have – is the ㄹ노 lap, considered to be an ‘auspicious’ dish for these sorts of occasions, as it is homophonous with the word lab meaning ‘wealth’.\(^43\) As some families will not allow animals to be killed for the wedding feast, the animal had to be killed somewhere else and the meat brought to the bride’s house for cooking\(^44\). Rice wine and other alcoholic beverages are being prepared or acquired from other villages. Some relatives and friends also bring some of these with them.

The major activity at the house of the bride-to-be is the preparation of the phakhouane\(^45\) gathering of banana leaves, bamboos for skewers, flowers, bee’s wax candles, and other wedding paraphernalia. Many families would also roll their own bee’s wax candles for the phakhouane. One important duty was to prepare the white cotton strings for the soukhouane (cf. Chapter II).

On the eve of the wedding, at the groom’s house similar preparations, albeit far less complex, would also take place. A 뷆 bang is prepared for the groom to take during the procession. This is a banana leaf cone in which two bee-wax candles are placed

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\(^{43}\) One of the few ‘honest’ and penetrating – albeit short - descriptions of Lao cuisine is by Grant Evans, “Lao Cuisine – The Raw and the Cooked”, published in Dok Champa Magazine, April-June 1994, and also on http://www.mekongexpress.com/laos/articles/dc_0694_laocuisine.htm

\(^{44}\) Mr Pheng discussed in some detail how the meat would be divided up between the two families. However, none of my informants could collaborate on the ‘ritual’ killing of the animal mentioned by Mr Pheng’s note [Appendix A (n)].

\(^{45}\) See detailed discussion of the phakhouane and the soukhouane, plus some illustrations, in the next chapter.
together with some auspicious flowers and leaves. The groom’s *phakhouane* is prepared with similar meticulousness and consideration to auspiciousness. The other consideration at this time is on the procession (the merriment, the *kheui long* the groom’s man, assistants to carry the groom’s possessions – his bedding and some token clothing). Signifying the agrarian nature of the Lao society, the groom, as he moves from his natal household to his affinal one, takes many agricultural implements, such as a rake, shovel and hoe with him, symbolising his willingness and ability to contribute to the economic production of the new household and his support for his new family. His supporters in the procession each take token banana and sugar cane trees with them.

**The wedding day**

In his parental home, the groom would start the day normally with his family. At the same time, the family would prepare an offering to the ancestral spirit and guardians of the house. One or a couple of elderly ladies would take this into a corner of the yard and call upon the guardian spirits to witness and acknowledge the wedding. It is not obligatory for the groom to take part in this ritual. In fact, the young man is helped in putting on his wedding dress. He needs help because the traditional dress, called *pha hang yao* (like a Cambodian *sampot*), is a long piece of silk that is worn like a sarong with the front end rolled up and tucked between the legs and clipped on the back (see Pictures 1-16). Popular colours are blue, purple, and bluish green. My late mother-in-law gave me a purple one as a present to wear for my wedding. Some

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46 These are the *Dok Hak, Bai Khoun, Bai Ngeun Bai Kham* and *Bai Ngo Bai Khoun* means ‘auspicious leave; ‘Ngeun’ is silver or money; *Kham* is gold, thus signifying prosperity; *Gno* means to elevate, to support, to praise- meaning the newly wed will be loved and supported throughout their lives. The scientific names for these plants are *Cassia fistula; Thevetia nerifolia Juss; Morinda Citrifolia*, respectively. These are regarded as auspicious flowers and leaves.

47 Modern usage tends to have this ‘person’ as *kheui pom* which means ‘the stand-in’ or ‘impostor’ son-in-law. Maha Kykeo is adamant that these last two terms are wrong.
families have an embroidered border around the bottom or have patterns woven into the cloth, as a sign of their wealth.

As shown in the pictures above, differences in wedding attire, as with any other society, can be attributed to the social and economic situation of the family concerned as well as regional variations. From Picture P-1 on the cover of this thesis, it is to be noted that by 1939, the groom already had on shoes and socks, and that the belt he had on was a ‘traditional’ ceremonial belt for men. The groom in Picture P-2 instead had on a say eo-nak (a belt made of an alloy of gold, silver and brass, also known as rose gold) usually worn by ladies.

The groom has a somma with his parents and family to ask for forgiveness and their blessings prior to undertaking such an important rite of passage as getting married. He then has a small individual soukhouame before setting off on the procession to the
bride’s residence. This soukhouane is less elaborate: the invocation would emphasise the groom’s gratitude to his parents, especially his mother for raising him. Of necessity, there has to be a different mophone to the one who conducts the wedding soukhouane. After this ritual, young girls from his family take turns to carry the phakhouane towards the bride’s house. They would take care not to spill the phakhouane lest it be regarded as inauspicious. The groom’s procession must observe some taboos, such as not to go past a house where there is a wake, or not to cross paths with a funeral procession.

The groom’s procession is led by two respectable, prosperous and auspicious married couples. One couple carries the receptacle containing the khadong and the other couple carries the khanhmak. These receptacles are covered during the procession by a nice piece of cloth. In the procession, the groom is flanked by two male friends. These two friends carry a sword each, symbolising the warding off of evil spirits and any dangers that might befall the groom on his way to his wedding. The groom is also protected from evil spirits and the bad elements by one of his attendants holding an umbrella over his head. This attendant doubled as the kheuilong ‘the second groom’. The groom himself does not carry much. In his hands, he carries the bang with two lighted candles, a shoulder bag, signifying all the personal belongings he brings to his in-law’s house. The groom carries the bang in a praying position, just about level with the chest. The lighted candles must be kept lit until he uses them to light the candles on top of the phakhouane and inserts them in the phakhouane. It is

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48 See the invocation in Lao with English translation at Appendix A (d).
49 While there was no agreement among my informants as to the order in the procession, Maha Kykeo observed that it would have been logical for the khanhmak and khanh khadong to lead it.
50 According to Maha Kykeo, this practice could have originated from the time when the groom had to travel a long distance to the bride’s village, therefore requiring some ‘real and proper’ protection.
51 Again, according to Maha Kykeo, the practice of having the umbrella must have its origin in something more practical like keeping the mid morning sun or the rain off the groom’s head. But it is interesting to note that, in any procession of traditional or religious nature and significance, an umbrella is used over the head of the guest of honour; to wit, the King’s procession; a procession for a man entering the monkhood.
52 A more commonly used term for this person is kheui pom- the fake groom’. Maha Kykeo said that the term implied a substitution of the groom (thus, an impostor); whereas the term kheuilong had the meaning of ‘assistant to the groom’. 
believed that if the candles in the groom’s bouquet go out some bad luck and misfortune might befall the marriage. The lighted candles in the *bang* signify the continuation of the groom’s life from the natal to the affinal houses.

**Picture 1-17:** Vientiane c.1964: with his *kheuilong* also dressed in the traditional attire, holding an umbrella over his head, the groom waits to start his procession. The groom is holding a *bang* in his hand. On the left of the photo, an auspicious lady (my late mother-in-law) is holding what looks like a *khanh somma*, waits for the start of the procession. (Photo courtesy of Intong Phoumirath).

**Picture 1-18:** The groom, with his *kheuilong* also dressed in the traditional attire, holding an umbrella over his head, walks on his procession towards the bride’s house. Two friends walk along side holding a sword each. The groom is holding a *bang* in his hands. The photo is from the author's own wedding in Vientiane, 1974 (Photo courtesy of Intong Phoumirath).
At the head of the groom’s procession is a group of friends and relatives whose duties were to provide merriment and joyous celebration.

Picture 1-19: The groom’s procession setting off to the bride’s house. In this case, three gentlemen (not auspicious couples) carry the *khanhmak*, *khanh somma* and *khanh khadong* leading the procession. The photo is from the author’s own wedding in Vientiane, 1974 (Photo courtesy of Mrs Intong Phoumirath).

Picture 1-20: The groom’s procession setting off to the bride’s house. The *thevilong* is holding an umbrella over the groom’s head. Heading the procession, a male friend is playing the *khene* while a lady friend is dancing. The photo is from the wedding of a friend of the author’s, Bounta, in Vientiane, 1972. (Photo is from the author’s own album).
The most important task of the group is the bargaining once the procession arrives at the bride’s property. The entrance into the bride’s house is blocked by a ritual gate: a group of her friends are relatives holding nak belt barring the entrance to the house. Both sides are equipped with a few bottles of alcoholic drinks which they share during the bargaining ritual. At this ritual gate the two couples with the khadong and the khanhmak are allowed to go through with little of this friendly harassment. Also, the girls carrying the phakhouane and the person carrying the groom’s bedding are allowed in. The phakhouane is taken in and placed on the mophone’s instruction next to the one arranged by the bride’s family already in place. The bedding is taken up the back stair and given to a designated person who would proceed to make up the nuptial bed.53

Unlike the ‘modern’ Lao wedding, the nuptial bed was not made up on the eve of the wedding. An area in the sleeping quarter in the house of the girl’s parents is set aside as the sleeping area for the newlyweds.54 The girl’s family would provide half of the bedding, while the groom comes with his own half, consisting normally of a pillow and a blanket. When the groom’s procession arrive at the ‘ritual gate’, and while the ‘bargaining process’ is taking place, the person carrying the groom’s bedding sneaks in the back and hand over these items to the appointed person. Then the nuptial bed is made up by the appointed ‘auspicious’ ladies to its final stage. It is traditionally the job of the lady to take charge of this ritual.55 This lady, either a friend or relative of the girl’s family, must be an auspicious one. No single person or infertile couples are allowed into the bridal suite, either before or after it was made up. To make it an ‘auspicious’ bed, some auspicious leaves were put under the mattress.

53 Maha Kykeo, Vientiane, January 2000. There are variations to this making up of the nuptial bed (see below).
55 Loung Bounthanh, however, said that this is done by an auspicious couple, who would ‘bless’ the nuptial bed as they are making it up. See also Sathienkoset for the same observation.
The ritual gate is formed by two female relatives of the bride holding a Nak belt. A gentleman behind the ladies is holding a bottle of whiskey to 'welcome' the groom's party. Sydney 1992, at the wedding of Fongsamout Souvannavong. (Photo by the author).

Some people put actual silver and gold pieces under the mattress also\textsuperscript{56}. A khanh-ha is put on the bed for the newlyweds to perform another ritual: paying homage to the guardian spirit of the bed as 'man and wife' when they first enter the nuptial room.

Traditionally, the bargaining between the two parties was in the form of impromptu questions and answers, asked and answered in a mixture of dialogue and folk song styles, or in riddles and poetry. The question and answers mainly relate to the purpose of the groom's procession and his presence at the bride's house; and what the groom has to offer to his would-be in-laws. Many exchanges of pleasantry and much drinking took place during this 'bargaining' process. The groom's parents do not take part in this ritual; they are already seated in their designated place next to the phakhouane. The groom does not take part in the bargaining and is exempted from drinking. Once it was agreed that the groom was an acceptable person to the bride's family, the procession is allowed through, and the mood perceptively becomes more subdued and serious.

\textsuperscript{56} This is the reason why some people refer to the nuptial bed as 'bed of silver and gold' – Interview with Mr Houmpheng, Virginia, May 2000.
The author and his wife, acting as chaokhot loungha for the groom and carrying the khon khadong and the khanhmak, are trying to negotiate their way into the house at the ritual gate, while much bargaining and drinking is going on. Picture from the wedding of Vathana Luu Khanhavongsa and Le Thi Tham, Canberra, 21/03/1999 (Photo courtesy of the groom's mother, Mrs Chanhla Khanthavongsa).

Before the groom is allowed into the house proper, there is another important ritual to be performed, the washing of the groom’s feet. This ritual is normally performed by a young female relative of the bride, either her own younger sister or a relative. This young girl is at the ready with a bowl of water, with a bunch of flowers (or leaves) to sprinkle water on the groom’s feet as a symbol of washing away all impurities. This ritual is also believed to be a purification rite to rid the groom of any bad omens or evil spirits that might have accompanied him. When the groom reaches the young girl, he stands on a knife-sharpening stone, symbolising a good solid foundation for future married life, which is covered by some green leaves, symbolising the abundance of agricultural produce (Pictures 1-23 and 24). The young girl doing the honour would usually be rewarded by the groom for the privilege of washing his feet with some token payment.\footnote{According to Intong, this is not a ‘payment’ by the groom, but a sort of ‘gift’ as compensation for undertaking such a lowly duty.}
The knife-sharpening stone is covered with a banana leaf and some grass, symbolising a stable married life and the agrarian nature of Lao society. Next to the stone is a silver bowl with some water and a bunch of flowers with which a young girl washes the groom's feet. (Soraya Sirimanotham's wedding, Vientiane, 2000. Photo by the author).

A young girl (in this case, the bride's younger sister) 'washes' the groom feet before he is allowed into the house for the soukhouane. The photo is from the author's own wedding in Vientiane, 1974 (Photo courtesy of Intong Phoumirath).
From there, the groom is led by a woman into the house to the *phakhouane*.

**Picture 1-25.** An auspicious lady is leading the groom (the author) into the *phakhouane* for the wedding *soukhouane*. She is using a *mit sanak* for the ritual. (Photo courtesy of Intong Phoumirath).

Not just any lady; this person must be a person of good social standing, respected and respectable, married (but not re-married) with a good and stable married life, and her own children. It is believed that the presence of such a person, the aura, the example and influence of the person rubs off on to the bride and groom and bestows a good omen on the occasion. The good lady leads the groom with a *mit sanak*. Once the groom arrives at the *phakhouane*, he lights the candles on top of these *phakhouanes* with the lighted candles that he carries with him in his *bang*, and places his candles one each on each of the *phakhouane*. This symbolises the continuity of the presence of the body and spirit for the ceremony. The *mophone* instructs him where to sit in accordance with the auspiciousness previously calculated; traditionally it is on the right hand side of, and facing, the *mophone*, with the *phakhouane* in between them. The *kheuilong* sits on the outside of the groom. The swords, the bag of token clothing

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58 Mr Houmpheng, of Virginia, referred to this lady as *vath* - a master mould – an ‘exemplary’ lady.
and the *bang* would be placed near the *phakhouane*. Then, a lady\(^{59}\) would lead the bride and her *phailong* from the nuptial room to the *phakhouane*. Traditionally, she does not lead the bride using the *mit sanak*.

For her part, the bride is also getting ready quite early in the morning as there are some rituals she has to perform before the arrival of the groom’s party. Traditionally, a Lao bride prepares her own wedding dress by weaving it herself with the help of her family. The bridal costume consists of three distinctive pieces of clothing: ฮ่วย, ฮ่วน and ฮัง - the *sin*, a blouse and *phabieng*, a sort of sash (Picture I-26).

\(^{59}\) It is not necessary that this lady were the same one who led the groom into the room; but she must be as ‘auspicious’.
Depending on the family situation, the *sin* can be a very elaborate piece of clothing made of woven silk and gold threads in distinctive patterns and design. The *phabieng* is always made of the same materials, patterns, design and matching colour as the *sin*. The *phabieng* for a wedding is distinguished from those used for other occasions such as formal evening dress and religious ceremonies, by the frills at both ends. These frills are usually gold threads and beads. The blouse also can be quite elaborate, distinguished from an 'everyday' blouse by an elaborate hand-woven collar that is usually sewn on just for the wedding. Normally this 'sewn on' collar would be borrowed from relatives or some ladies of good social standing in the belief that the auspiciousness would rub off on the bride. The bride wears a lot of jewellery, mostly in the form of a gold bracelet and necklaces. Her hair, done up in chignon fashion, would be decorated with a gold chain wrapped around the hair-do, held together with a gold hair pin called *pak pinkhao* and topped off with a jewellery piece called *dok mai wai*.

It is quite normal for some of the pieces of jewellery to be borrowed from friends and relatives. Long before the arrival of the grooms’ party for the *soukhouane*, there are many important rituals for the bride and her family to perform. After being helped to dress for the occasion, the bride has her individual *soukhouane* with her family and friends, using the *phakhouane* and the *mophone* for the wedding ceremony. She also has a *somma* for her parents and elders of the family.

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61 Further, it is not expected that everybody would have one on hand. The borrowing is perhaps equivalent to the Western belief in ‘something new, something blue and something borrowed’. However, the borrowing of pieces of jewellery is much more common among the Lao. Intong tells me that for her wedding she borrowed the sewn-on collar from her aunt, Mrs Orady Souvanavong, and for the gold tassels some gold chains from the wife of Prince Somsanith, the then President of the King’s Council.

62 There are very nice photos of these hair pins showing great details in Judith Wintemitz: *Australia’s Hidden Heritage*, Office of Multicultural Affairs, AGPS Publications, Canberra, 1990; pp. 51 and 53. The book also has a nice photo of a *khanhmak* (p. 74) and a lady’s formal attire (p.14).
The bride is being helped to put her make-up prior to getting dressed in her full traditional wedding attire. On top of her hair, already done up in a chignon style, one can see the *dok mai wai* (yellowish gold pointing straight up to the ceiling from her hair) and the *pak pinhkha* (whitish round gold with tassel). (Photo: courtesy Mr and Mrs Phoukeo Taysavang, of the wedding of their eldest daughter, Rattana, Canberra, 18/11/1989).

After these rituals, the bride, however, must perform more rituals guided in these rituals by a female elder of the family: pay homage to the house spirit at the top of the main stairs and the guardian spirit of the kitchen. These are comparatively simple rituals: the bride holds a vessel containing the *khanhha*, with two lighted candles which are then placed at each of these sites of homage.

The bride in full wedding dress, pays homage to the guardian spirit of the kitchen. She is led in the ritual by an elder aunt. The aunt is putting the lighted candles at the site of the homage, while the bride has in her hands a *bang*. (Wedding of Thipphaphone Keomoungkhoun, Ban Khokninh, Vientiane, 31/01/2000; Photo by the author).
At both sites, she informs the ancestors and the guardian spirits of the impending change in her marital status, and asks for their blessings to help her to be a good mother and wife.

Upon entering the arena of the *phakhouane*, and before the bride sits down, both families urge their own kin to be the first to ‘bump into’ the other party. It was believed that the one who had the ‘first bump’ would be the dominant partner in the marriage. This is done in a friendly and jovial manner. Again, the bride is instructed by the *mophone* on how and where she sits, usually to the right of the groom, with the *phailong* on her outside. At this juncture, the *mophone* takes over the proceedings and begins the wedding *soukhouane* ceremony. At the beginning of this ceremony, the *mophone* leads the bride and groom in the *somma* to pay homage to the parents and the *chaokhoi loungta*. The families gather around the *phakhouane* facing the bride and groom. In front of the latter, there is a silver Ø containing some small *bang* with a pair of flowers and unlit candles. The *mophone* leads the betrothed through this ritual to
ask for forgiveness for past wrong doings, for blessing, and also for acceptance into the new family, as well as for guidance for the future. In reply, one representative each from the bride and groom’s family gives them the family’s forgiveness, blessing and announce the family’s acceptance of the bride and groom into the family’s circle. Then followed the wedding *soukhouane* proper.

**Picture 1-30:** The newlyweds (the two in the middle), flanked by their *kheuilong* (the author) and *phailong*, prepare for a *somma* of the *chaokhot-loungta*. The *khanh somma* is placed in front of the betrotheds. (Picture of a wedding of friends of the author’s, Kamsouk and Paulette Sundara, Vientiane, 1972, from the author’s own album).

**Picture 1-31:** The newlyweds pay a *somma* to the parents and the *chaokhot loungta*, in this case after the *soukhouane*. The *kheuilong* and *phailong* sat waiting in the background. The *khanh somma* is placed in front of the newlyweds; the bride’s parents extend their hands in a gesture of bestowing their blessings on the newlyweds. (Picture from the author’s own wedding: Vientiane, 6 March 1974).

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64 See Appendix A (f) for Lao wording and English translation of the *somma*.
64 See next chapter for detailed discussion.
After the wedding soukhouane ritual, the mophone would conclude the whole ceremony with the mob phakhouane, that is the ‘handing the phakhouane back to the guests of honour (bride and groom)’ which is the embodiment of their assembled spirits. During this ritual, many elders in the gathering also bestow their blessings on the newlyweds. After this ritual, two auspicious married couples each carry a phakhouane into the bridal room for safe keeping, along with some ritual objects such as the khanhmak.

The newlyweds are led into the nuptial room by an auspicious lady, again using the mit sanak (see picture next page). The groom would take with him his bag of token clothing and a sword, while the bride would take the khanh khadong in with her. Once inside the room, the good lady leads the newlyweds in paying homage to the guardian spirit of the bedroom, using the khanh-ha that was previously prepared and left on the bed (see picture next page). The emphasis here would be to ask for blessings, support and protection in their married life.
Picture 1-33: The newlyweds are being led into their nuptial room by an auspicious lady (the bride’s aunt, in this case). The bride carries her pillow and the silver O containing some of the khadong that was given back to the newlyweds. (Wedding of Thipphaphone Keomoungkhoun, Ban Khokninh, Vientiane, 31/01/2000; Photo by the author).

Picture 1-34: The picture shows details of the newlyweds are being led into their nuptial room by an auspicious lady using a mit sanok. The lady holds to one end of the instrument, and the newlyweds hold on one handle each. (Wedding of Thipphaphone Keomoungkhoun, Ban Khokninh, Vientiane, 31/01/2000; Photo by the author).
The newlyweds pay homage to the guardian spirit of their nuptial bed. Note the khanhmak, the ceremonial sword and the groom’s bag are on the bed. (Wedding of Souliphone Pholsena and Tina Siri, 12 February 2000. Photo by the author).

After a decent interval, the newlyweds would come out and join friends and families in the wedding feast. After the feast, life returned to normal, with cleaning up and socialisation among family members.65

65 Mrs Somros Vorabout told me that her newly married husband returned to his parents’ home for the rest of the day because he was shy and did not know what to do with himself in the new environment. This appears to be ‘authenticated’ by research by Samlith Bouasysavath. According to Samlith, after the somma at the end of the wedding and a shared meal, the groom and his family return to their residence. They return again to the bride’s house at about eight o’clock in the evening to perform another ritual called ‘the handover of the groom’ (chaokhot loungta). At this ritual, the two families would share a meal provided by the girl’s family. At the conclusion of the meal, an auspicious couple would make up the nuptial bed, with the groom on the right and the bride on the left and her pillow slightly lower than that of the groom’s. This couple would ceremonially lie on the bed and then ask the newlyweds to lie on it for a short while. After this, they would all come out to face all the chaokhot loungta. The latter would advise the newlyweds on the expectations and obligations as a married couple, then they are led into the nuptial room. According to Samlith, while this marks the end of the ritual of the wedding day, the process of Lao traditional wedding has many more rituals, involving the married couple providing five feasts for the chaokhot loungta and the dead ancestors at regular intervals:

1: on the ninth day after the wedding proper (Slftu^c!!)); 2: on the arrival of the first offspring (Säffiuiifi); 3: on the arrival of the second offspring (öäffilinia); 4: on the arrival of the third offspring; 5: on the arrival of the fourth offspring (Säffilitnijppjss)). Samlith Bouasisavath The Collection of Lao Heritage Project: Vol. 1; Sponsored by the Toyota Foundation, Vientiane, 2001; pp. 122-135 (in Lao). Samlith admitted in the book that these rituals are not practiced anymore.
After all the rituals, the newlyweds come down to thank the guests and then form, with the *kheuilong* and *phailong*, a welcoming party to welcome more guests. The groom and the *kheuilong* have already changed from the traditional dresses into western suits, while the ladies are still in their traditional dresses. (Picture from the author’s own wedding; Vientiane, 6 March 1974).

An uncle of the bride’s, the late Phagna Home Sundara, representing the two families, gave a speech to the gathering of guests and family members at the wedding feast. The lunch reception was held in the courtyard of the bride’s parental home. Note the parachutes in the background. (Picture from the author’s own wedding; Vientiane, 6 March 1974).

The day after the wedding, Ⴀႉႅ႐, apart from the cleaning up and perhaps farewelling some relatives, the newlyweds undertake yet another ritual. In the
morning, for the first time as man and wife, they give alms to the monks on their morning rounds. The very last ritual associated with the wedding is performed some three days afterward. This is when the newlyweds go around to some relatives to thank them for their help and their blessings, by giving them some pieces of cloth that the bride had previously woven.66

**Conclusion**

As the comments by Mrs Orady at the beginning of the chapter reveal, changes in the traditional Lao wedding were already taking place before 1975. Grant Evans observes that from the early 1960s, throughout the long period of civil war in Laos, “Lao society, especially in larger metropolitan areas like Vientiane, was undergoing rapid social and cultural changes causing concern and anxiety to those who saw them eroding traditional norms” (Evans 2000:153). While weddings in pre-1975 Laos were characterized by adherence to the ‘traditional’ ways, there was already a desire ‘to be modern’. My own wedding in 1974 could serve as example of this ‘transformation’, combining both elements of the traditional and the modern.

Our courtship was anything but traditional. We met in Canberra where I was at university and Intong was studying a secretarial course. We continued our acquaintance when we both returned home to Laos to work. When we informed her parents of our intention to get married they accepted our decision. When I knew that I was being sent on a training course in London for three months, the families decided that we would get engaged before I went. There was no go-between and not much preliminary discussion between the two families, since my family was in Savannakhet. Our engagement was a simple affair, with my boss and the family with whom I was living standing in as my *in loco parentis*.

Unlike the ‘traditional’ Lao bride, Intong did not weave her own wedding dress. In fact, her mother had already assembled the wedding costume in preparation for the marriage of all of her daughters. However, Intong ended up using the material I

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66 A schema showing the ritual processes of the Lao traditional wedding day is at Appendix F.
bought from London for her wedding blouse. The ‘sewn on’ embroidered collar for her wedding blouse was borrowed from a princess. Although I had my individual soukhouane before the procession, the phakhhouane was not taken to the bride’s house. Neither was any one carrying the token banana or sugar cane trees either. Contrary to tradition, our bed was made up on the eve of the wedding day, with a bedspread I bought in London - my ‘contribution’ to the nuptial bedding. Further, contrary to the common practice of the time of holding a wedding on a weekend, our wedding was on a Wednesday, as calculated by a fortuneteller, and there was no evening reception. Our wedding invitation was perhaps typical of the era: with gold lettering in Lao and French and containing the information on the auspicious day of the wedding (Picture 1-38-40).

![Image of wedding invitation card](image)

**Picture I-38:** The picture shows the author’s own wedding invitation card, in gold lettering in both Lao (see next page) and French (above) languages as was the ‘fashion’ at the time (Vientiane, March 1974).

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67 As Intong’s father was a member of the King’s Council, he had to inform the Palace of his daughter’s wedding. The King sent the princess, the wife of the President of the King’s Council, Prince Somsanith, as His personal representative. The sewn on collar and some gold chains were also borrowed from her for reasons of auspiciousness.

68 The invitation says that the soukhouane ceremony was being held at the bride’s house on Wednesday, thirteenth day of the waxing moon of the fourth month corresponding to the sixth of March 1974 at 10.00 am, and inviting all guests to partake in the lunch to celebrate the wedding with the newlyweds.
Picture 1-39: The cover of the author's own wedding invitation card, showing the two phakhouanes in gold colour side by side. (Vientiane, March 6 1974)

Picture 1-40: The author's own wedding invitation card, in Lao language printed in gold lettering. The card announces that the soukhouane ceremony will be held on Wednesday, the 13th day of waxing moon, in the Fourth month (of the Lao calendar), corresponding to March 6 1974, at 10.00am at the bride's residence (Vientiane, March 6 1974)
The reconstruction of the traditional Lao wedding ceremony attempted here will be used as a benchmark to measure the transition of a culture and a transmission of Lao cultural heritage: how and how much of the currently practiced ceremony that is accepted and regarded as the Lao traditional wedding ceremony actually reflects the 'traditional' practice? Yet, this reconstruction is itself only an approximation of pre-1975 weddings.

Chapter II will discuss the *soukhouane* as a ritual and its symbolism as a ceremony and as an integral part of the wedding ceremony. This discussion will set the scene for an analysis in the thesis of changes in the performance of the Lao traditional wedding ceremony in the homeland and in Lao diasporic communities. The analysis will then form the basis of an assessment of the effect of memory on the staging of the *kindong*. 
Chapter II

Soukhouane – Ritual and Symbolism
CHAPTER II

Soukhouane: Ritual and Symbolism

One of the most potent examples of the importance of the *soukhouane* in the Lao psyche was the staging of the *soukhouane* for the King and Queen of Thailand during the opening ceremony of the Australian-built Friendship Bridge across the Mekong River in 1992. It was one of the most impressive endorsements the regime could give to the revival of the tradition of *soukhouane* after being curtailed for some time after the 1975 Great Political Divide. It is now fully accepted by the Communist regime, officially sanctioned, as a re-assertion of Lao identity, being staged as an official ceremony at state occasions. The wedding *soukhouane* is now the norm in Laos as it is in Lao diaspora. Many of my informants, both *Laonok* and *Laonai*, maintain that the *soukhouane* is the marker of identity of the Lao people: to be Lao one has to hold the *soukhouane*. On an individual level, it is a site of commercialism and consumerism where personal and family wealth, power and influence are on display vis-à-vis the surrounding social environs. More importantly, on a political level, it is a marker of ethnic identity of the Lao people vis-à-vis their Others.

This chapter will explore the meaning and symbolism of the *soukhouane* in the life of a Lao particularly in the context of the traditional wedding. This discussion includes other important ritual elements of the *soukhouane*: the *phakhouane*, the *mophone*, the invocation and the sacred white cotton thread for the *phoukkhene*, as well as some paraphernalia and their symbolism in the total scheme of the wedding ritual. This discussion will lay the foundation for an analysis, in later chapters, of the social memory both in Laos and in Lao diasporic communities, and for a discussion of the invention of new tradition with regard to the use of ‘traditional’ paraphernalia and the meaning of ‘traditional’ wedding.

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1 I interviewed the *mophone*, Mr Singkham Viravongsa, who conducted the ceremony on that day. He was selected for the task after a nation-wide competition. My late father-in-law was one of the elders invited to tie the cotton thread on the wrists of the King and Queen of Thailand and on other dignitaries.

2 See Chapter III for further discussion.
The soukhouane and the Lao people

The ritual known to the Lao as the phithi soukhouane or the baci ceremony is a ritual to call back, welcome, propitiate and unite the khouane with the physical body. It is the most ubiquitous of all Lao functions and celebrations, an integral part of Lao family life. The two Lao terms denote the one and the same ceremony, with the first term being more common and colloquial while the latter is more pompous and has connotations of royalty (Zago 1972; Abhay 1968). Mayoury Ngaosyvathn uses the two terms interchangeably in the title of her article (1989:203). In fact, many publications dealing with the subject also conflate these two terms.

The soukhouane can be compared to what Clifford Geertz (1960:11) calls a ‘core ritual’ when describing the Javanese ‘slametan’. This, he suggests, acts as “…a kind of social universal joint, fitting the various aspects of social life and individual experience together in a way which minimizes uncertainty, tension, and conflict – or at least it is supposed to do so”. Like the Javanese slametan, the Lao soukhouane can be held for a farewell, welcome, birth of a baby, house warming, job promotions, harvest, new car, and marriage. Although this ritual is not unique to the Lao (Zago 1972; Buragohain 1987; Shyam 1987; Ngaosyvathn 1989; Terwiel 1972 and 1979), it has been said that it is a Lao ceremony ‘par excellence’ (Abhay 1965:818). Attempts have been made to raise the ceremony to the level of national identity for the Lao (Ngaosyvathn 1989:283), thus

The baci or sou khouan has for centuries been an enduring and a central part of Lao culture. It contains an amalgam of the many religious and cultural traditions that have influenced Lao culture and it continues to adapt itself to political and cultural values. The ceremony celebrates, in essence, important family occasions as well as communal events of significance and is an integral part of the life of the Lao. It expresses traditional Lao values of avoidance of conflict and aims at promoting consensus within the social fabric and strengthening community ties. As a key element of Lao culture, the ritual is a microcosm of Lao values serving to integrate the individual both spiritually and socially. In these terms, the ritual may be seen as the quintessential expression of conceptualizations of Lao identity (Ngaosyvathn 1989:299-300).
Samliith Bouasysavath (2002:152) writes that it was rare to find any other traditions, past and present, that could surpass the *soukhounane* in its beauty and importance. The word *soukhounane* is made up of two words: *sou* and *khouane*. *sou* has strong relationships to the process of a marriage:

- To stay together, to go to, to visit, to share,
- To make a proposal for a marriage
- To live together (as husband and wife)
- To make reciprocal visits, to pay visit
- To share a meal/food
- To welcome someone with the sharing of betel nut. This phrase could also mean the ‘arrival of the groom’s party on the wedding day’.

Thus *sou* has the connotation of ‘togetherness, unity, sharing’.

Over the years the word *khouane*, the second syllable of the word *soukhounane*, has been variously described by many scholars. Samliith (2001:152-153) suggests that the word ‘*khouane*’ is a Lao indigenous word equivalent to the Pali and Sanskrit of *Sri* and *Siri* (meaning ‘glory, splendour, auspiciousness’). Thus, he suggests, every *soukhounane* invocation begins with the word *Siri* “*Si Si*”. Oddly enough, of the eight dictionaries consulted, only Sila Viravong’s listed *Siri* as one on the meanings for *khouane*.

All of them have the following meanings:

- as a noun:
  - spirit, soul, guardian spirit (Kerr), *Vinyan* (Sila and Somchit), heart, *Chit* (Thongkham and Somchit)
  - crown of the head (of human and animals)
  - goodness, prosperity, happiness

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3 They are: Ministry of Education (edited by Sila Viravong) Lao-Lao, 1962; Preecha Phinthong (Isan-Thai-English), 1989; Dr Thongkham Onemanisone, Lao-Lao, 1992; Nit Tongsopit, both Thai-English and English-Thai, no date; Dr Wit Thiengbuntham, Thai-Thai, no date; Somchit Siri, English-Lao, 2003; Sisaveuy Souvanny, English-Lao, 1990; Allen D Kerr, Lao-English, 1972.
• morale
• person

. as an adjective

• gift, gratuity, present (as in ဝါးကျင်)
• beloved, dear, important valuable, precious (as in ပုံၻးကျင် saokhouane, the first pillar and most important pillar of the house, ဝါးကျင် khaikhouane, the ritual egg for the guest of honour in a soukhouane; ဝါးကျင် haeknakhouane, the ritual first ploughing of the land to mark the beginning of the rice planting season). In this group of words, I would also include: ဝါးကျင် khouane-on, to be easily startled/frightened; ဝါးကျင်/ဝါးကျင် phouakhouane/miakhouane, beloved husband/wife; ဝါးကျင် khouaneta, ‘the apple’s of one’s eye’; ဝါးကျင် khouanechai, winner of a beauty contest; ဝါးကျင် ဝါးကျင် khomkhouane khokhouane, to suppress the khouane, to intimidate.

. as a verb

• as in ဝါးကျင် khouanesia, ဝါးကျင် khouanehai, ဝါးကျင် khouaneni – all of them mean to be frightened, shocked or startled⁴. In this group, I would include ဝါးကျင် khomkhouane khokhouane, to suppress the khouane, to intimidate; ဝါးကျင် ဝါးကျင် khaokhouane vaokhouane, to talk about someone else’s khouane, to gossip about someone.

Despite the multiplicity of meanings enumerated above, the word khouane has strong semantic and psychological connection to the person and his/her well-being. The concept of a Lao person consists of both the physical and the spiritual. Like the Isan villagers in Andrea Whittaker’s book, Intimate Knowledge: Women and their health in North-east Thailand, the Lao perceive a ‘person not as an entity separate from the community, but rather a process of embodiment of spirit and flesh’ (Whittaker 2000:49).

⁴ Allen D Kerr: Lao-English Dictionary, 2 Vols., The Catholic University of America Press, Washington DC, 1972; p. 173. It would have been more correct to say that this use of the word khouane is not as a verb, but as a noun because the Lao syntax for the phrase would be ဝါးကျင် khouane-khay-sia (ဝါးကျင် hai, ဝါးကျင် ni), that is my khouane has gone missing (disappeared, or left my body), but with the possessive pronoun ဝါးကျင် khoy dropped from the speech.
Marcel Zago, in *Rites et cérémonies en milieu Bouddhiste Lao* (1972), has perhaps a most comprehensive treatment of the terminology and etymology of the word *khouane* (133-144). In essence, Zago’s notion of the *khouane* accords well with that of the most respected Lao intellectual, Maha Sila Viravong. The latter defines *khouane* as “a reality without body, an insubstantial thing, inherent to the life of human and animal at their birth” (Viravong 1960:6). A much respected Thai intellectual, Phaya Anuman Rajadhon, comments that the meaning of the word *khouane* [which he transcribes as *Khwan*] has become vague, denoting something definite but invisible to man. He goes on to say that the *khouane*

*gives health, prosperity and happiness when it resides in a person, but if, on the contrary, its fickle nature causes it to leave the person and fly away, if it does not return in time, the person will die. Khwan is translated into English as ‘vital spirit’. (quoted in Ngaosyvathn 1989:285).

Further, Ruth-Inge Heinze, in her book *Tham Khwan: How to Contain the Essence of Life*, quoting Kirsch, writes that

*the idea Khwan cuts across Western categories of ‘psychological’ and ‘spiritual’. The Khwan concept does ‘objectify’ certain psychological features, most specifically the ‘psychological balance’ or equilibrium of the individual, but it also ‘spiritualizes’ those characteristics as well. (Heinze 1982:98)*

These aforementioned works suggest that the *khouane* possesses the following characteristics

- its multiplicity – in the invocation, when the *khouane* are called, the word could means a single *khouane* (as in *ma yeu khouane eui* – Oh come you all the *khouane*); and the *khouane* can be enumerated one by one to correspond to a part of the body of the guest of honour);
- its volatile and fickle nature – the *khouane* can be frightened, can be playful and leave the body; it knows the body and the bodily part its belongs to; it can be enticed to return to the body with food and other offerings;
- its interdependence – all the *khouane* need to be called to assemble in the physical body together to ensure that the potency of the ritual;
the rapport between the physical body and the assembly of the *khouane*- hence the importance of the tying of the white cotton thread to keep these *khouane* in place (Zago 1972:138-140; Whittaker 2000:53).

However, it appears that many writers have used the word ‘Soul’ to translate both *khouane* and *vinyan* from the Lao. In Lao, these two terms are very closely linked: they are both the vital essence that animates the physical body and gives it consciousness. One most important distinction, for the Lao, is that *khouane* is used while the body is still living, and *vinyan* refers to ‘the vital essence’ after the death of the physical body. Thus, the Lao has the ritual to call back the ‘*khouane*’, not the *vinyan*, for the living person; and when saying goodbye to the dead, the Lao say *vinyan* may your *vinyan* travel to the realm of peace.

So, in the Law of Karma and re-incarnation, at the death of a person, all the *khouane* become united in the *vinyan*, and it is the *vinyan* that goes forth into the next lives until it is eventually released from suffering and become enlightened. In this sense, the word *khouane* could not be translated as ‘soul’ in English.

The word ‘*vinyan*’ cannot be translated as ‘soul’ either for some fundamental eschatological reasons. The word ‘soul’ in Christian belief is the entity that survives after death and goes to either heaven or hell (except for children who are born before baptism who go to limbo). The soul is judged at the end of this life and assigned to stay for eternity in heaven or hell. Thus, the soul does not exist before this life. It is clear from the above discussion, *vinyan* and soul are not the same thing, and that *vinyan* and *khouane* not the same thing either. For this reason, for the purpose of this thesis, only the word *khouane* will be used and discussed in relation to the ritual of *soukhousanne*, especially in the *kindong*.

While the Lao commonly believe that the human body possesses thirty-two *khouane*, Ngaosyvathn acknowledges that different T’ai tribes have different numbers of *khouane*, ranging from thirty-two to one hundred and twenty

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5 I found, much later in the writing of this thesis, similar arguments on this matter in “Eschatology – Mind, Soul and the Afterlife in Christianity and Buddhism”, on [http://home.btclick.com/scimah/mindandsoul.htm](http://home.btclick.com/scimah/mindandsoul.htm).
An article, _The Spirits, Soul and Ceremonies_, written by Jandee Sonhsath, states that

...the soul is known as the khwan. The khwan comes and goes; there is a total of thirty two separated khwan within the body which associates with different parts of the body. For example, there is one for the eyes, hand, stomach, etc. Every human being consists of a total of thirty two all together and for the thirty two there is one strong khwan which is in the body which is known as the winjan. It is fixed within the body until the person dies; that is when the winjan had slipped out of the body*.7

S J Tambiah, writing about the thirty-two khouane (which he transcribes as khwan) among the Northeastern Thai people, says that

_Villagers say that a human being has thirty-two khwan corresponding to various parts of the body, of which the head is the foremost. No villager can actually name the thirty-two khwan or rather the body parts in which they reside. Collectively they comprise a unity, khwan, which is thought to be a kind of spirit essence. (1970:223)

To the Lao, however, the number of khouane in a person is imprecise. During the invocation, the invitation is issued to implore the thirty-two khouane to come back, and the ninety khouane to come and unite in the physical body*. A work coming out from France lists the whole ‘thirty-two khouanes in our body’, but it bears very little semblance to the bodily parts as enumerated in the invocation.9

From the various descriptions of the khouane discussed, this thesis defines it as an indefinable, invisible and intangible vital essence of a person’s spiritual and psychological make-up that possesses its own volition and fickle nature whose absence from the physical body can cause harm, illness or even death to the

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6 The Lao belief in the existence of the khouane is not limited to the human body. Khouane are attributed to such things, usually useful and beneficial things, as rice, the house, the ox-cart and the racing barge. Thus, the Lao have soukhouane ceremony for the rice, the buffalo, their ox-cart and other ‘useful’ things in their daily life.


8 See Appendix A (g) – the soukhouane invocation for a wedding. But no invocation has actually enumerated more than ten ‘khouane’, thus khouane of the eyebrows, the eyes, the cheek, the chin, the arms, the legs, the stomach, the breast and the head being the more commonly named.

9 “Traditions and Habits: 32 Hearts”, in ...search%3Fq%3Dsoukhouane%26hl%3Den%26lr%3D%26ie This work does not list the eyes, arms legs as in the invocation but things like the hair, nail, skin, bones, heart, intestine, lung and many other internal organs.
person. It is believed that when the *khouane* leaves the physical body, the person falls ill or becomes frightened. This condition can only be cured by the recalling and propitiation of these *khouane* and keeping them united with the body for a time. The ritual to call back, welcome, propitiate and unite the *khouane* with the physical body needs not necessarily be a *soukhouane* ceremony. To the Lao, there is a hierarchy of three rituals dealing with the *khouane* in this situation: the ផ្នេះ* phoukhene, the ស្វែងមើ sonekhouane and the ស្លោធ* soukhoaune.

The ritual of ផ្នេះ* phoukhene is an act of calling the *khouane* to come back and unite with the body and the tying of blessed cotton thread, called េះនេះ* (literally the cotton for tying on the wrist), on someone’s wrist to symbolise the unity of the *khouane* and the body. This simple act can be performed when visiting a sick person, or as a welcome to a visitor, or a simple blessing as in a birthday party.\(^{10}\) This simple ritual would involve the calling of the *khouane*, a welcome and a blessing, and a gift of some sort for the recipient and his/her *khouane*.

The next ritual concerning the *khouane* in ascending importance is the ស្វែងមើ sonekhouane- the scooping up of the *khouane*. This is done mostly for younger persons after accident or mishaps that cause a loss of blood and the *khouane* to escape from the body. The *sonekhouane* is usually done by an elderly person, or the mother of the child. After some mishaps, the lady would take a ស្គារ sawing, a sort of large round fish scoop, in which she would put a boiled egg, called ប្រាប់* khaikhouane, and cooked rice as enticement for the *khouane*, and go to the place where the accident occurred. There, she would walk around scooping up the fleeing *khouane* while saying soothing words to entice the *khouane* of the unfortunate child to return to the body. Upon returning home, she would tie the wrist of the child with the blessed white cotton thread, and the egg would be put on

\(^{10}\) This is quite common for Lao elders to carry some blessed cotton threads with them for such occasion (or they can ask for some from the people they are visiting).
the child’s upturned palm as a gift to the child and the returning \textit{khouanes}. She would say a few words of welcome and blessings for the child while tying the thread on his/her wrist.

The most elaborate of the three rituals to call back, welcome, propitiate and unite the \textit{khouane} with the physical body is the \textit{soukhouane}. The gift for the returning \textit{khouane} is now assembled in and around the \textit{phakhouane} (see more detailed discussion below); the words of welcome and blessing are now said in the form of invocation by a learned male person called the \textit{mophone} and there must be a \textit{phoukkhene}. While the tying of the white cotton thread to keep these \textit{khouane} in place is a crucial ritual element of the \textit{sonekhouane} and the \textit{soukhouane}, one can, however, have a \textit{phoukkhene} without a \textit{sonekhouane} or a soukhouane, but not the reverse: the \textit{sonekhouane} and the \textit{soukhouane} must have a \textit{phoukkhene}.'
Thus, the term *soukhouane* connotes the welcome back the *khouane* to be together with the physical body. Indeed, a new (Thongkham Onemanisone 1992) Lao dictionary defines *soukhouane* as a ‘ritual to call the *khouane* and bless them by making some offerings to the returning *khouane*. In short, the *soukhouane* ceremony is held whenever the totality of the physical, spiritual and psychological person needs to be protected, blessed or restored to the *status quo*. Psychologically, the *soukhouane* re-establishes the psychological equilibrium of the individual and provides him with its therapeutic value. Socially, the ritual is an occasion for social acceptance and respect for the individual, as well as an expression of kinship. Most of all, a *soukhouane* is a must have ceremony at a wedding because it is a joyful occasion that needs to be shared by both the physical body and the spiritual person of the betrotheds. The *khouane* need to recognise and accept the new status of the physical persons.

Thus, this thesis offers the following definition of a *soukhouane*: a ritual of recalling, welcoming, propitiating and biding the *khouane* to the physical body of the guest of honour in order to re-establish the psychological equilibrium and strengthen the spiritual well-being of the person while making a cultural, social and political statement about the person’s position vis-à-vis his/her worldly surrounding.

**Categories of Soukhouane**

The wedding ceremony is, as alluded to earlier, not the only occasion when the Lao hold a *soukhouane*. Indeed, as works by Zago (1972), Terwiel (1972, 1975), Tambiah (1980) and Heinze (1982) show, the ‘calling of the *khouane*’ is held for  

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13 Thongkham Onemanisone: *Lao Dictionary*, Toyota Foundation, Vientiane, 1992; p.253. Interestingly, the older Lao dictionary does not have the word *soukhouane* for the said ritual, but Chia Khouane ไช่คำเน (literally to ‘piggy-back the khouane’), Ministry of Education: *Lao Dictionary*, Vientiane, BE 2502; p. 260.


16 By extension, the *khouane* of such ‘useful things’ as buffalo and ox-carts are recalled to share in the joyful occasion and receive the thanks from their owners and be ‘blessed’ for their own well being.
many occasions. According to Loung Thit Gnaí, there are about ten categories of soukhounane, thus:

- Wedding (Illustrations throughout the thesis)
- Ordination (Picture II-1)
- Lao New Year (Picture II-2)
- House Blessing (Picture II-2)
- Farewell/welcome (Picture II-3)
- New born-baby owment ลำใส่เริ่ม (Picture II-4)
- Recovery from a sickness or accident or inauspicious occurrences;
- Auspicious occurrence (job promotion, receiving honorific title)
- New beginning (เริ่มเรียก reuk mongkhone [Pali: Rg Mangala]. This ritual is held after a funeral in the house to cleanse the house of the death and give the household a new beginning.)
- Auspicious and useful things and animals [rice, buffalo ox-cart, and by extension to modern times, cars\(^\text{17}\), and tractors].\(^\text{18}\)

Picture II-1: A soukhounane for an ordination for a funeral. Note a very simple phakhounane, with one candle. The three ordinands are dressed in white, and are holding the bang in their hands. (Vientiane, 2001. Photo by the author).


\(^{18}\) Interview with the author, Luang Prabang, March 2000.
Picture II-2: A *phakhouane* for a New Year celebration. In the background, a monk is conducting a religious ceremony which also blesses the *phakhouane*. Note a bowl of sacral water, with a single lit candle attached. (Köln, Germany, 2000. Photo by the author).

Picture II-3: A *phakhouane* for a welcome held by the Luang Prabang provincial authority. The *mophone*, Mr Bounthanh Viravongsa, with the blue *phabieng* on his shoulder, waits with the welcoming party. (Luang Prabang, Laos, 2001. Photo by the author).

Tambiah divides the *soukhouane* ceremony into six functional categories: rites of passage (marriage and ordination), pregnancy, threshold ceremonies (undertaking a journey, Lent retreat for monks), re-integration (return from a journey, or being released from jail); *soukhouane* for people suffering prolonged illness, and *soukhoaune* to dispel bad luck (Tambiah 1980:224-226).

Although the *soukhouane* has been called a ‘ceremony for all occasions’, logically speaking it can be divided into two broad categories. The first one is a *soukhouane*

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19 For some ‘US legal requirements’, the ceremony was called ‘an engagement ceremony in the invitation card. I met up with the ‘newlyweds’ later in the ‘groom’s’ parental house in Virginia when I went on my field trip. They are settled in and are legally married by that time. Discussion with Khamsouk and Paulette Sundara, Vientiane February 2000.
for a truly auspicious occasion, such as wedding, farewell, welcome, job promotion and ordination. The second are those held in response to, or as a result of, some inauspicious occurrence in someone’s life, such as sickness, accident, and after a funeral. The first category can be further divided into two sub-groups: one directed at a person as a benefactor of the ritual (for example, wedding, welcome, farewell). The others are directed at things or animals that are ‘useful’ in the service to humans in their daily living, perhaps as a way of thanking and protecting them, such as buffalos, house, barn and carts (and by extension into modern times, cars).  

One problematic soukhouane is however the one held for a new born baby. The Lao term for this soukhouane is soukhouane, which means that the soukhouane is for the mother upon her completion of her confinement – which is regarded as a m kame. The ceremony can be held at any time from the birth of the baby to when the baby is aged six months. Is this soukhouane meant to welcome back the mother from her traumatic ordeal of giving birth, which would put it in the category of ‘in response to an inauspicious occasion’? Or is it to welcome the newborn baby, which would put it in the auspicious category welcoming a new life? It could even be considered as ‘a rite of passage’ for the woman having given birth, having thus changed her status to ‘a mother’ (even not for the first time).  

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20 Both Kirsch and Terwiel differentiate these two ‘categories’ of ceremony as soukhouane for weak or missing khouanes, and soukhouane for a ‘rite of passage’ type of ceremonies. See B J Terwiel; “The Tai of Assam...” Op.cit.; For discussion of soukhouane as prophylactic and therapeutic ritual, see Andrea Whittaker: Intimate Knowledge...Op.cit; pp. 51-53; also Mary Lou Robertson’s article; Op.cit. This work also has words on child birth practices of the Lao studied.  


22 Sometimes this period of confinement is called yul you phai – stay near the fire, that is a confinement near an open fire. The new mother would lie on a bamboo slat bed near a fire while her nourishment is strictly supervised. Archaimbault calls this ‘period of pertinence’ when mother and child can easily fall prey to many malevolent phi. The word while is homophonous with the word khram, thus has negative connotation, means the same as khalam taboo as the new mother is forbidden to do so many things. See Charles Archaimbault: “Les Rites de Naissance”, in PRL; pp.822-824; Zago: Rites and ceremonies...; Op.cit.; pp. 209-219.  

23 According to Dr Gary Lee, the Hmong believe that this ritual is held for both mother and baby: for the mother to help her recover from her traumatic birthing experience; and as a welcome for the khouanes of the baby to its physical body so that it can be complete as a human being. The Hmong believe that a new born baby has no soul before this ritual.
The wording for this *soukhouane* is different from others. It describes in some detail the trauma the mother goes through giving birth. It also calls the *khouanes* of both the baby and the mother at the same time\(^\text{24}\).

According to Loung Thit Gnai, the clue to these different *soukhouane* lies in the wording of the invocation of each *soukhouane*. He was most concerned that many 'modern day' *mophone* mix the wording of the *soukhouane* quite inappropriately. Notwithstanding the fact that many of the collections of invocations have headings to instruct the users as to which one to use for which occasion, the primary rule as to which chant to use is the appropriateness and the auspiciousness of such a chant. For example, if a *soukhouane* is held to restore the psychological equilibrium of a person, following some inauspicious events that cause a person’s *khouane* to escape from the physical body; the emphasis would be the recalling of the disturbed and frightened *khouane* to come back to the body to make the person whole and well again. By the same token, a wedding *soukhouane* is for a very auspicious occasion, and the emphasis in the invocation would be to ask all the *khouane* to assemble in the body to be blessed and to rejoice in the occasion as a totality of the physical, spiritual and psychological person.

With this more commonly used and more importantly a 'stronger' semantic connection with the Lao traditional wedding ceremony, the following definition of the *soukhouane* is offered: a *soukhouane* is a ritual of calling, welcoming and binding the *khouane* to the physical body of the guest of honour in order to strengthen the psychological and spiritual well-being of the person while making a cultural, social and political statement about the person’s position vis-à-vis his/her worldly surrounding.

*Soukhouane and the wedding*

However, two of my informants, Loung Thit Gnai and Tiao Mounivong, while agreeing that the two terms signified the one ceremony, they disagreed on their connection to the *kindong*. Loung Thit Gnai was quite adamant that *baci* should

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\(^{24}\) See the text and translation of this invocation in Appendix A (k).
never be used with kindong, as in baci kindong. To him, baci is used on

two specific occasions: official farewell or welcome of important guests; and baci

for royalty, monks and Buddha statuettes in the wats. To Tiao Mounivong, baci

is only used in conjunction with weddings, whereas soukhouane is used for all

other occasions. To him, baci is of a royal origin reaching back to the time of King

Fa Gnoum (c.1350 A.D). At that time, one of the royal titles conferred by the King

was the rank of na ba. Upon receiving this title, the recipient would hold a ritual to

welcome such honour with a ceremony considered auspicious. The

word for such ritual becomes auspicious ceremony to welcome a royal title. It is possible that with his royal upbringing and his long experience with court

rituals and as a mophone, he automatically associated weddings with royal

weddings, thus using the word baci rather than soukhouane. This would agree

with Loung Thit Gnai’s position that baci is for official or royal occasions. This

thesis will adopt the term soukhouane in relation to the Lao traditional wedding

ceremony, the kindong, as it is also the more common use of the term.

Any witness to a Lao wedding will testify that the soukhouane for the bride and
groom is the one ritual that holds the most importance for the newlyweds and their
family. While it does not have any legal implication or a religious imperative on
the couple, a ‘marriage by soukhouane’ has such a hold on the Lao people that,
traditionally, one is regarded as married only if one has a wedding soukhouane.
Theoretically the soukhouane is only an integral part of the wedding: one can have
a wedding without a soukhouane (eg. in a marriage registry). But in Lao

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26 Interview with Tiao Mounivong, aged 72, Luang Prabang, March 2000. He has been
involved in court rituals since the days of former Kingdom of Laos. After the change of regime, he
retired from public life; but was asked by the town’s administration to advise on cultural
preparations for the Lao New Year and the Visit Laos Year 2000. I interviewed him while he was
working on the construction of the Naga papier-maché for the New Year procession, and he was
also training some dancers to perform for the New Year. He was however reluctant to talk
specifically about kindong, pleading failing memory and lack of recent practical experiences. He
did not mention that he was a mophone. But my contact, Tiao Bounyarith who
introduced me to him, told me that he used to perform as a mophone at weddings.
Australian diaspora, the reverse often occurs: a couple would have ‘wedding soukhouane’ (and be accepted and acknowledged by the families and Lao society as a married couple) and do not have a marriage registration (thus, legally, they are still single persons). A marriage in Lao society, as with many if not all other societies, is regarded as a rite of passage and a very auspicious occasion worthy of a most extravagant celebration in the totality of the body and spiritual of the persons involved. It means a transition from adolescence to adulthood which entails different societal expectations as far as behaviours and participation, about general ideals and ideas about sexual relations between the sexes, and about economic contribution to family life. Arnold van Gennep (1960), in his influential study of rites of passage, writes that

\[ \text{Marriage constitutes the most important of transitions from one social category to another, because for at least one of the spouses it involves a change of family, clan, village, or tribe, and sometimes the newly married couple even establish residence in a new house.} (1960:117) \]

However, marriage is more than a passage from one status to another. Nancy Tapper (1991), in her study of Afghan tribal marriage, writes that

\[ \text{Marriage - its ideology and associated practices - is the key to many societies around the world.... Not merely the central mechanism for social reproduction, marriage is also the main focus of social production. The choice of partners, the political circumstances behind a match, the negotiations between the two sides, the accumulation and exchange of the various customary gifts, the conduct and evaluation of the wedding ceremonies all these matters are the constant concerns of all members of any community.} (1991:xv) \]

A traditional Lao wedding is neither a civil ceremony, nor is it a religious one. There is no civil marriage celebrant performing their duties according to any civil laws. In a Lao wedding, the bride and groom do not exchange vows, nor do they promise to love and obey as in Christian weddings. In fact, they do not utter a

\[ \text{Giving alms to the monks or having the monks bless them prior to the wedding (\textit{änmiiöju}). As seen in Daosadeth’s wedding, and the one in Maryland (Chapter V) monks were invited to participate in the wedding ceremony. But they did not solemnise or sanctify the wedding. The monks were there to bless the \textit{phakhouanes} and the betrothed, thus adding auspiciousness to the occasion. For further discussion of the religious aspects of Lao marriage, see works by Zago and Abhay quoted earlier. As will be obvious in the case studies, these religious aspects have been either forgotten or discarded by the families involved.} \]
single word throughout the ceremony. It consists basically of a *soukhouane* for the bride and groom. As soon as the *soukhouane* is over, the bride and groom are led into the nuptial room by an auspicious lady, and thereafter they are regarded as ‘man and wife’. As a ritual, the *soukhouane* has an enormous symbolic importance for the wedding ceremony. The *soukhouane* signifies that the *khouane* of the bride and groom are invited to take part in the wedding, the most important event in a person’s life. The *khouane* are invited to take part, to accept and recognise the new status of their bodily beings, to enjoy the occasion, and to celebrate with families and friends. More importantly, the *soukhouane* ties the two whole persons together, and thus the *khouane* are also united as a couple symbolically. In the context of a traditional Lao wedding, the *soukhouane* serves to sanctify, to solemnize and to bless, as well as to proclaim and to acclaim, the union of two persons in marriage. It is apt here to paraphrase the words used by Meyer Fortes to describe a marriage: a wedding is an event in the career of an individual and in the development cycle of families and kin-groups. It comes about by individuals making use of economic resources, social relations, law and beliefs, in choosing the most rewarding way – within the limits set by social norms – of fulfilling their private purposes (Fortes 1972:4).

This strong connection between the *soukhouane* ritual and the traditional marriage ceremony as described above is the spirit behind the acceptance by many of my informants of the importance of the *soukhouane* for weddings. They agree that this ritual marks the Lao identity; that it is a truly Lao tradition and ‘a Lao thing to do for weddings’. These are the words of parents of the brides and grooms who have had the *soukhouane* for their own weddings, and want to have one for their children’s wedding: they want their children to have the same experience of being a “Lao person”. To the Lao, the *soukhouane* is the be all and end all of weddings. Many Lao of the younger generation in Australia and the USA live together and are accepted and acknowledged by the families and Lao society as ‘man and wife’ once they have gone through the ritual of wedding *soukhouane*, despite the fact that many of them may or may not be legally married under the law of the land.
The พระภักษา phakhouane

As mentioned earlier, one of the central ritual elements of a soukhouane ceremony is the พระภักษา phakhouane.\textsuperscript{28} As with the description of the soukhouane ritual, there was a dearth of description of the phakhouane. My research suggests that the shape, size and extravagance of the phakhouane is very much dependent on the memory and experience of the family involved and, to a much less extent, on the personal preference of the guest of honour (that is the bride and groom, in case of a wedding). Further, memory and experience may dictate the shape of the phakhouane, but the worldly situation of the family may influence the size and the extravagance of the decoration and the accompanying paraphernalia.

As mentioned earlier, the phakhouane indeed plays a very important role in the ritual: as a symbolic offering to the assembled gods and as a welcome mat and gift for the returning khouanes, just as Lao hospitality usually welcomes a guest with a meal. On a worldly plane, it serves as a site for the family’s wealth, influence, taste and generosity. Heinze writes that the phakhouane represents the Thai concept of the universe (Heinze Op.cit:69), while Tambiah says that it is the place the returning khouane first alights when it arrives (Tambiah Op.cit:230).

While there are regional variations in size and shape of the phakhouane, the centre of the phakhouane is typically a conical ‘shell’ usually made of banana leaves of between fifteen and forty centimetres high, called a makheng (cf. Chapter I). The body of the makheng is not a smooth cone as it is covered with folded banana leaves in the form of pointed scales in increasing sizes from top to bottom. The makheng for a phakhouane should have at least five ugen khene arms, placed around it. These arms are banana leaves rolled up in long tubes attached to the body of the makheng by pieces of white cotton threads. The top of the cone would be cut to

\textsuperscript{28} Most writing on a similar ritual held in Isan, Thailand, refers to this as bai sri. It is close to a word Lao sometimes use to describe the phakhouane, the pha baci ປາປາສິງ. See also Eloise Kate Brown: Calling the Khwan: An Exploration of a Contemporary Isan Ritual, an unpublished Bachelor of Asian Studies (Thai) Honours Degree, ANU, 2000. Brown has extensive references to the soukhouane ceremony as performed in Isan that refer to the phakhouane as bai sri.
make a hole to hold candles and flowers. On top of the wedding *phakhouane* there are two candles (one already put in place during the preparation by the girl’s family, and the other inserted by the groom from his *bang* on his arrival for the *soukhouane*) lit during the ritual, symbolising the union of two persons. These candles must be white (for purity), or yellow or better still made of bee’s wax (for wealth). They should also be sufficiently long to last the whole of the ceremony. The *makbeng* is then decorated with flowers and some white cotton threads.

The majority of the *phakhouane* is in the traditional construction and set-up as depicted in Picture II-9 (below), most prevalent in Vientiane and Savannakhet areas. In Luang Prabang, there appears to be the one shown in Picture II-10 a low-set type. For the most common wedding *phakhouane*, there are four stages: the *phapane*, the silver Ô, the silver *khanh* and the *makbeng*. The *phapane* is in fact a large plate on pedestal, either in brass, aluminium or wood. It is used to raise the construction off the floor and to hold smaller containers with food and fruits as offering.

*Picture II-7:* The brass *phaphane*, which is less common especially in Lao diasporic communities. (The phaphane courtesy of Mrs Douangmala Ungsuprasert, of Canberra; Photo by Intong Phoumirath, Canberra, 2004).
The aluminium phaphane, which is more common in Lao diasporic communities both Australia and the USA as well as in Laos. (The phaphane and photo by courtesy of Intong Phoumirath, Canberra, 2004).

The silver O, a style associated with the female gender, normally contains some uncooked rice grains to aid in the stability of the khanh; but more importantly to symbolize prosperity. Some of my informants told me that the grains should be that of the sticky rice variety, as it further symbolizes 'sticking togetherness' of the bride and groom to be. Set inside this silver O is the silver khanh, which in turn contained the makbeng. This construction is referred to as 'setting the pillar in the hole', both a sexual allegory and a reference to the social and gender relationship between man and woman in Lao society.29

The basic set-up of a phakhouane, with the makbeng, the five arms, set in a silver khanh. The silver khanh is then placed inside the O, with the whole construction being placed on an phaphane. The makbeng was made by Mrs Bouaphanh Phoumivong on her last visit to Canberra, using normal white paper and painted green to represent banana leaves). (The whole construction, and photo, is courtesy of Intong Phoumirath, Canberra, 2001).

29 One of my informants, Maha Kykeo, also claimed that it also referred back to the Indian mythology of the God Shiva's lingum and the Yoni of his consort. Interviewed in Vientiane, 2000.
Another basic set-up of a *phakhouane*, with a low-set arms of the *mabheng* set in a silver Ø, placed on an (aluminium) *phaphane*. This *mabheng* was used in her son’s wedding (Chapter V), and will possibly be used for other weddings. It is also made by using normal white cardboard and painted green to represent banana leaves. The silver *khanh* is NOT used in this construction. The whole construction was by Mrs Khammeuan Sramany, Virginia, USA. (Photo by the author, Virginia, 2000).

The preparation of the *phakhouane* is usually carried out on the eve of day of the ceremony. For a wedding, the preparation would be undertaken by the female friends and relatives of the bride’s family, as well as her mother. However, the final decoration and placing of the *phakhouane* has to be done by auspicious ladies. The siting will be in accordance with the horoscope calculation for the auspiciousness of the day and time of the ritual. At the wedding of Rick Outhensackda (Chapter VI), I assisted in the preparation of the flower for the *phakhouane*. Some of the ladies said that I should not have been there as this ‘was a chore for the women folks’. However, Mrs Bao Outhensackda, Ricky’s grandmother (Picture II-11), said it was alright for me to help at that stage, but not in the final stage of the decoration of the *phakhouane*. During the talk-cum-interview with her, she confirmed for me that most ladies would have learnt and remembered these chores from being in the right habitus, with hands-on practices and guidance from more experienced elders.30 The preparation of the *phakhouane* encompasses

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30 Interviews with Mrs Bao Outhensackda and other ladies at the house of the groom’s parents, on the eve of the wedding, 15 January 2000, in Vientiane.
issues of remembrance by the ladies, and expresses a concept of gender role and power relation in Lao society in regard the conduct of a wedding ceremony.

Picture II-11: Mrs Bao Outhensackda is preparing a phakhouane, in the typical Vientiane style, for the individual soukhouane of her grandson, Rick. (Vientiane, 2000; Photo by the author).

Picture II-12: The mother of the groom and a friend are preparing a phakhouane, for the wedding soukhouane of Mr Phonesavanh Phimmakaysone, Maryland, USA, May 2000. The construction is different to all other previously shown, with many 'spikes' and in that the makbeng is set directly inside the silver ō. (Photo by the author).

For a wedding soukhouane, there are two phakhouane, one each for the bride and groom. They are joined together by the sacred white threads that would be put on them. Traditionally, for the floral decoration of the wedding phakhouane, two flowers are regarded as auspicious, and therefore very popular: marigolds and the
The *dok hak*, as the name suggests, signifies love and the white of the flower signifies purity. The marigolds are used because of its colour of gold signifies prosperity and richness; and also the Lao name of the flower, *dao heuang* means ‘brilliant shining stars’, and ‘to prosper’. It is to be noted that the *dok champa*, frangipani, the national flower of Laos and a beautiful flower in its own right, is not used to decorate the *phakhouane* especially for a wedding. It is not regarded as an auspicious flower, because it does not contain the pollens for propagation, signifying fertility and the continuity of life and family. While most of the flowers would be brought as gifts, it is important that when picking these flowers, one has the permission of the owners. Even if the owners were not present one would ‘mumble’ these requests into thin air, to the effect of ‘asking for these flowers to support and make the wedding of our kin auspicious’. This is so that the wedding would not be tainted by any ‘stolen’ goods, rendering it inauspicious.

*Picture II-13: Wedding *phakhouane*, the low-set Luang Prabang style. (Wedding of Likhasinh Sayasane, Canberra, January 7 1995. Photo courtesy of Mr Rattasinh Sayasane, the bride’s older brother).*

31 Scientific name is Calotropis gigantea Br.
Picture II-14: Wedding phakhouane, Luang Prabang style. The whole construction is placed on wooden phatok, surrounded by ritual paraphernalia. Note the pink candles. (Wedding of Rick Outhensackda, Vientiane, 2000. Photo by the author).


Around the base of the bowl containing the phakhouane, and on the phaphane itself, there is a series of small bowls containing symbolic foods, both savoury and sweet, a boiled chicken on a plate\(^ {\text{32}}\), an even number of boiled eggs in a bowl, a sticky rice container, one complete hand of bananas, some water and alcoholic drinks. The rice container and the drink bottles must be opened just before the soukhouane proper to welcome the khouane. For a wedding soukhouane, the ubiquitous khanhmak and the khanh somma would also be nearby.

\(^{32}\) Many soukhouane I witness do not have the boiled chicken. Many informants told me that a boiled chicken is not an integral part of the food for the phakhouane because some families regard it as inauspicious to take a life of a living being for their own celebration.
From interviews with my informants, there are quite a few taboos governing the siting of the *phakhouane*. One of these is that it must not be placed directly under the ceiling beam (lest a rat or a gecko should fall from there onto the *phakhouane* thus rendering the occasion inauspicious). The other taboo dictates that once the preparation is completed, it must not be moved, lest moving it around would bring instability to the life of the newlyweds. Placing the *phakhouane* on a solid surface is also very important. I remember the wedding of a Lao friend in Sydney some years ago to a non-Lao woman. They decided to have their *soukhouane* ceremony and the celebratory lunch on a boat cruising around the Sydney Harbour. I remember many elderly Lao guests commenting that the marriage would not last because the ceremony was held on a floating, unsteady surface. Their beliefs were confirmed when the marriage broke up after about five years.

*The *akhomv* - the sacred cotton thread to tie around one's wrist*

Apart from the flowers on the *makheng*, there is another important ritual element crucial to the *soukhoaune*, the *akhomv* white cotton threads with which one ties the wrist of the guest of honour to bestow one’s wishes on them. It is a way of binding the *khouane* within the boundary of the physical body. As Whittaker writes

*Tying to reinforce the body's strength is thus a central motif in Isan practices...[ ] an act which restores bodily as well as spiritual and social equilibrium, essential for well-being and happiness. [ ] the body/self is a porous interface subject to dangerous flows between self and non-self. Body boundaries are enforced through the tying and binding of the gates of the body with a knot of multiple relationships. As each person ties the sacred cotton threads they murmur wishes of health, happiness, strength, a long and good life* (Whittaker 2000:53).

How do these threads become ‘sacred’? According to Micea Eliade, the essence of a religious object and experience is ‘radically different from ordinary objects and experiences while at the same time co-existing with them’. Writing on the meaning and status of the Temple Mount, Eliade coins the term ‘hierophany’ to explain how an ordinary object can acquire a status of a ‘sacred’, thus
Among countless stones, one stone becomes sacred – and hence instantly becomes saturated with being – because it constitutes a hierophany, or possesses mana, or again because it commemorates a mythical act, and so on. The object appears as a receptacle of an exterior force that differentiates it from its milieu and gives it meaning and value. This force may reside in the substance of the object or in its form; a rock reveals itself to be sacred because its very existence is a hierophany; incomprehensible, invulnerable, it is that which man is not.  

For the ‘rock’ and the ‘object’, we can read in the cotton threads in the Lao soukhouane ceremony.

There are two sorts of white cotton threads on the phakhouane. The two longer pieces lead from the mophone and wind around the two phakhouane, linking them together and to the bride and groom. They serve as ‘conduits’ to transmit the blessing from the mophone past the phakhouane where the offerings are assembled and to the bride and groom. Prior to the beginning of the wedding ceremony, the mophone would give one each of these long pieces to the bride and groom, with the one on the bride’s side being given to the groom, and vice versa, so that these two pieces criss-cross, with the one held by the groom being on top of the one held by the bride, indicative of the gender and power relations in a marriage. The mophone would hold the other end of both pieces in his hands in a praying position while conducting the ritual.

The other sort of white cotton threads are for tying around a person’s wrists and have double knots in the middle to hold in the blessings. They are arranged on skewers stuck in the hole left by the scales on the body of the phakhouane, interspersed with the flowers as decoration. Traditionally the threads must be white. After the ritual, these strings are tied around the wrists of the bride and groom and any other people to whom one wishes to give blessings. One is supposed to keep these strings on for at least three days, and not to cut them off with a sharp implement. During the tying of these threads friends and family

34 However, I have had my wrists tied by monks using orange and red threads. Sometimes, these threads are made of nylon, not cotton; and sometimes they are plaited with no knots in the middle.
would show unity and support for the person having their wrist tied by holding the arm being tied or other parts of the person’s body. Others can join in this act of support by touching someone else who has the physical contact with the person. This show of support is a crucial element of the soukhouane ritual, and it is one of the few occasions when physical contact between male and female is not regarded as taboo.

The soukhouane - Mophone

The soukhouane is conducted by a person called mophone. The mophone assumes an enormous symbolic importance for the ceremony. In Lao tradition, the mophone has always been male. To my question as to why this appears to be so, I received three kinds of answer: ‘that’s the way it has been since the time of our ancestors’; ‘it is not right for women to do it’, and ‘women have not been given the opportunity to be one.’ The real answer lies somewhere, I contend, in the ‘portrait’ of and the social and ritual position the mophone occupies in Lao society.

The mophone is usually an elderly male person who is neither a monk, nor a civil marriage celebrant. Usually he would be a learned elder of the community who had been ordained as a Buddhist monk some time in his life. He is known to and respected by the community for his knowledge and proficiency in ritual matters. The position of mophone has been variously called the shaman, and the ‘ritual master’ or ‘maître de rituel’. As the following definition of a shaman indicates there are so many fundamental differences between the mophone and the shaman that a mophone should not be called a shaman:

A shaman is a ritual or religious specialist who is believed to be capable of communicating with spirit powers. Man or woman, a shaman is said to be chosen by the spirits. A shaman’s power comes directly from a spirit which takes possession of the shaman during a trance. Derived from a Tungus word, the meaning of shaman is ‘he who knows’. In order to ensure the communities well-being, the shaman regulates relations between the community and the spirits. They become involved in matters such as controlling the weather, expelling harmful spirits, detecting broken taboos.

35 See works by Richard Davis and Charles Archaimbault. In Mimi Souvannavong’s wedding (Chapter IV), the host distributed a leaflet explaining the soukhouane ceremony in which the mophone is referred to as a ‘shaman’.
that bring misfortune, locating game or fish and most of all cure the sick and guiding the souls of the deceased to the spirit world. Because of their unique powers, shamans gain a great amount of political influence in their surrounding communities. During a shamanic practice, a shaman is known to receive a mystical light that enables her or him to discover the places where souls are taken. While in this state of mind the shaman possesses powers of knowing and healing; which will greatly benefit the patient. The major method of shamanic curing is the recovery of the lost or stolen souls that have resulted in misfortune.\textsuperscript{36}

In Lao language, regional variations have the position known as \textsuperscript{37}mo\textsuperscript{38}cham\textsuperscript{39}, \textsuperscript{40}mokhouane and \textsuperscript{41}mophone. The word is made up of two words – \textit{mo} (म) and \textit{phone} (फ). \textit{Mo} means one who is knowledgeable, one with expert knowledge in a particular field, and \textit{phone} means something sacred, a blessing. Thus, a \textit{mophone} is a person who possesses an expert knowledge in the field of ‘calling and blessing the khouane’, and who performs invocation at traditional blessing ceremony.\textsuperscript{42} According to Donald Swearer,

\begin{quote}
the spirit-calling (as he calls the soukhouane) ceremony is conducted by a layman who performs similar roles at weddings, house dedications, and other auspicious or crisis occasions. His earlier life as an ordained monk has prepared him for learning the protocols for these rituals as well as the methods of chanting and preaching. His ritual role differs from that of the
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{36} Asian Shamanism (Emphasizing Laos and Hmong Shamanism), in http://www.csuchico.edu/~cheinz/syllabi/ass0...mainpage.htm

\textsuperscript{37} Kaufman, Howard K: \textit{Village Life in Vientiane Province (1956-1957)}; Laos Project Paper No. 12; Department of Anthropology and Sociology, UCLA, 1961. The villages he visited were in the area bounded by Ban Nam Kadin in the southwest, Ban Phon Soung in the North and Ban Hap Souk in the west. I did not visit this part of Laos during my research trip, but I did have the good fortune to interview some villagers from this area, especially Ban Nam Kadin. Their information contradicted those gathered by Kaufman, especially as far as \textit{phucam} and the differentiation between \textit{baci} and the \textit{soukhouane} are concerned. According to Mrs Thongsy Thammavong, \textit{phucam} means more like ‘a spirit medium’ who has some magical power and can act as links between the human world and the world of spirits. The person usually officiating at a \textit{soukhouane} is known as a \textit{mophone}. Further, according to the good lady, \textit{baci} and \textit{soukhouane} is one and the same thing. Interviews with Mrs Thongsy were conducted in December 1999, and again in August 2000, in Canberra, where she lived with her son and daughter and some other 17 grand children and 15 great-grand children. Her husband used to be a \textit{mophone} for the Lao community in Canberra; but due to his advanced age, failing memory and bad health, he has not been asked to be \textit{mophone} for the last ten years or so.


\textsuperscript{39} Preecha Pinthong: \textit{Dictionary of Isan, Thai and English}; Siritham Publishers, Ubonratjathani, 1986; p. 848. Preecha also uses another word for \textit{mophone}; he calls the person mokhouane.
monk but rivals it in importance. He often functions as a ritual mediator between the sangha and the laity (Swearer 1995:49).

Many mophone fall into this category. This thesis will adopt the more common term of mophone as it most closely relates to the functional description of the duties of the officiating person.

The mophone holds all the power in relation to the soukhouane ceremony. He makes the decision as to where the guests of honour should sit, which way they would face depending to the day of the week; and how the phakhouane should be placed. He does not normally take part in or involve himself with other aspects of the wedding ceremony, although he could be asked by the host family to assist in other associated rituals such as the offering to the ancestors.

All the power and authority the mophone exercises during a soukhouane ceremony presuppose some sort of esoteric knowledge bordering on the magical. But, this is not necessarily the case at all. Strictly speaking, anyone can become a mophone by learning the invocation and the protocols of the rituals. “Become” is the key word, because unlike in some other civilizations, this ‘title’ of mophone is not hereditary, nor is a mophone chosen by any ‘magic’ formula. Neither is the title conferred on a person by a higher authority, religious or civil.40 However, Kaufman41 made an interesting observation on the selection of a mophone. To choose a new mophone, which he calls ūpucham, all the elderly men of the village are assembled and asked to scoop up rice grains from a vessel with their hand; the grains are then counted. Those scooping up an even number of grains then go through to the next round until the last one left with the even number of grains is proclaimed as the new mophone. Only elderly males can take part in this selection process (Kaufman1961:72-74). In 1991-92, the Lao government instituted a selection


41 He asserted that the mophone (which he called ‘phucam’, ūpucham) has some sort of semi-official position in the village organisation and administration, being called upon to officiate at all village ceremonies. The second assertion of Kauffman’s was that this person is ‘chosen’ by a process of elimination that implied some magical power and divination.
process, a national competition in fact, to find a mophone to officiate at the opening of the Australian-built Friendship Bridge. The competition was ‘won’ by Mr Singkham Viravongsa, one of the mophone I interviewed. Later, when I went up to Luang Prabang, I interviewed another prominent mophone, Mr Bounthanh Viravongsa who turned out to be the mentor of the first mophone. Mr Bounthanh told me that Mr Singkham was chosen despite the fact that he had not be practicing for very long, because ‘of his personality and his presentation: his voice carries very well’.42 One also has to have the ability with words and know how to invoke the khouane and to bless the person undergoing the ceremony. The better the words used, the more popular a mophone is. That requires that one is very gifted with words and poetry: a mophone is likened to a poet, able to improvise as appropriate for each occasion, and not just recite from the written texts.

Many mophone I interviewed told me that they had no formal training, in the sense of learning from an established teacher or practitioner of the soukhouane ceremony.43 There is no formal school or instruction course through which a person has to pass to become a mophone. Most ‘become’ one when they realize that they have the gift for the calling, and see the need for it in their area. They might discover that the more established mophone in their village or areas has died, or moves out of the area, and there was a demand for people to conduct the rituals for the villagers.

However, two male informants I interviewed in Laos told me that they did not take up the vocation to become mophone because they knew that they were not ‘suitable’ despite their obvious qualifications as far as knowledge of the chanting and the protocols associated with the conduct of the rituals were concerned. Loung Thit Ngai admitted that he was much too inclined to ‘drink with the boys’, thereby would not command the respect due to a mophone. The other, Maha Kykeo of Vientiane, formerly from Pakse, was not confident of his voice and accent as he

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42 Mr Bounthanh Viravongsa, Ban Viengmai, Luang Prabang; March 2000. I met him and his wife again in Luang Prabang in 2001 on my trip as official guest of the Lao Government. He conducted a welcome soukhouane for our delegation on behalf of the Provincial Governor.

43 This is certainly the case with two ‘new’ mophones I interviewed in Sydney: Mr Lianethong Choulamany, of Rosemeadow, NSW, and Mr Kannara of Bosley Park, NSW. Mr Kannara conducted the soukhouane for the wedding of the author’s nephew, Kriangsack Phoumirath, 30/09/2000 in Sydney (cf. Picture II-25 above).
has a very strong Southern Lao accent. Another person who did not become a mophone despite the urging of his late father was Inthava Phoumivong. His late father was a prominent mophone as well as being proficient in traditional medicine and astrology. Inthava, the son, only learnt from his father an aspect of traditional medicine, curing muscle aches and pains with needles dipped in what he called 'sacred oilmen', which is actually sesame oil that had been blessed with some magical formulas. His reason for not becoming a mophone is that he would not be able to give the vocation the time and attention to do it justice.

Conversely, many people ceased to be mophone when they realise that the change in their personal life would render their position as mophone ‘inauspicious’ and thereby untenable or unacceptable by the community. One person in Canberra, Khamsay Chareun, ceased practicing as mophone when he separated from his wife and remarried. He confided in me recently that he would not mind practicing as mophone again if the Lao community would accept him as ‘an auspicious person’ to do so. Another mophone in Luang Prabang told me that he stopped practicing when his wife died because, as he put it, “it wouldn’t be right for him as a widower to conduct the soukhouane ritual, especially for a wedding”. One can also be ‘out of favour’ as a mophone for their general conduct (or misconduct?) in the community. A once prominent mophone in Canberra became less and less called upon to conduct the ritual because he had a fall out with the abbot of the Lao temple in Canberra. In a Lao community, one can’t expect someone who has fallen out with an Abbot of a Buddhist temple to command the respect of the community.

All mophone I interviewed were male. When pressed about the acceptance of female mophone, most of them conceded that there is nothing to prevent a woman

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44 About the differing accents from different regions of Laos, there is a joke in Laos that was current in the late 1960s to early 1970s, and resurfaced again during recent times, about the dubbing of foreign films into Lao. All the heroes and heroines were dubbed with the softer and sing-song-style accent of the Luang Prabang people, while the baddies were given the voice of the Pakse/Champassack southern Lao accent. It is interesting to note that the honorific title used to refer to both gentlemen, Thit and Maha, indicated that they both have previously been ordained Buddhist monks.

45 Inthava Phoumivong is Mayoura’s younger brother. Interviewed in Vientiane, February 2000. I called him โสสะ #ac3a1 Bao Wa (Younger Uncle Wa), as a term of endearment for a family member.

46 Interview with Loung Khamphouy Chittranonh, ฉิตทนาแล้วดี Luang Prabang, March 2000.
from becoming one as long as she can do the job well.\textsuperscript{47} The lack of female mophone in Lao society generally can be attributed to their position in society:

\textit{A clear division exists between the public and the private spheres for men and women. Men generally speak for the household and are elected or seconded to positions of authority within village social and political organisations. Women by and large are confined to the private, domestic sphere, except for the important economic activity of trading.}\textsuperscript{48}

This gives rise to a tradition of ambivalent treatment of Lao women, and to a tradition in which most symbolism in relation to wedding rituals seemingly centre on the Lao woman folk. In Lao weddings, there is a payment to the bride’s family called ก้านำนม kha nam nom— the price of the mother’s milk, symbolising and acknowledging the mother’s major responsibility in bringing up the bride. It is to be noted that the man getting married is not paid anything by the girl’s family (not even the ก้านำนม kha nam nom) even though in most cases he is the one who goes and lives with his in-laws thereby providing his labour to help the girl’s family which has some implications for the theory that views marriage as an exchange. Further, as if to emphasise the importance of the mother, in paying the kha nam nom, the role of the father in bringing her up is hardly mentioned\textsuperscript{49}.

While Lao women are not ‘allowed’, or do not get the opportunity, to become a mophone, they nevertheless hold very important social and family position vis-à-vis the soukhouane. Many crucial rituals associated with Lao traditional weddings, such as leading the groom into the phakhouane, leading of the bride and groom into their bridal suite after the soukhouane, and the preparation of the phakhouane for the wedding, are carried out by auspicious ladies. Are these tacit acknowledgments

\textsuperscript{47} Indeed, there was a lady, Mrs Chanhla Khanthavongsa, in Canberra who had performed as a mophone, albeit for her niece’s newborn baby. Being a teacher of Lao classical dance, she has the facility with memory and words for the chants, the personality for the protocols of the ritual and the voice to perform the rituals.


\textsuperscript{49} Only at the wedding of Thippaphone (Chapter VI) did an aunt of the bride accepted the khadong on behalf of the girl’s family. She put the bowl containing the khadong in the hands of the bride’s parents as she counted what should be acknowledged as ‘payment’ for the bringing up of the bride; and this included the girl’s father.
of the powerful position Lao women hold in regard to household and family matters? I think so because they are held up to be the example of auspiciousness, of a virtuous and exemplary life in accordance to all things traditional and religious.

On the question of the acquisition of ritual knowledge as possessed by the mophones, Nicola Tannebaum finds that although esoteric knowledge is not explicitly forbidden to women, women are in general not interested in interacting with powerful beings or have much dealings with objects associated with power. Since esoteric knowledge is associated with both power and powerful beings, women are unlikely to acquire much specialist knowledge of any sort” (Tannabaum 1988:19). However, while women may have less dealing with power and powerful beings, guardian spirits of a location (be it a village or a city) are always female (for example, tiao mae simeuang in Vientiane, and nang manh in Luang Prabang)50.

From my interviews, it is clear that being a mophone is a vocation that can be voluntarily taken up by any male person. Most mophone would learn the invocations from books. There are, to be sure, many books of collected ‘invocations’ for soukhouane for various occasions. However, most of these collections do not explain how and why such rituals are performed.51 So most mophone would improvise from memory of what they had seen done, or on what they think is appropriate or convenient for the occasion. A picture of an ideal person who could become a mophone emerges as one who possesses all or most of the following qualities:

- an age that will inspire respect and be well known in the locality;
- an auspicious male person (especially for a wedding soukhouane, that is, not divorced, not widowed, in a good family situation);
- a good memory for remembering of texts/invocations;
- ordained as a monk;

50 Mayoury Ngaosyvath; Lao Women: Yesterday and Today, Bilingual Publication, Vientiane, 1995. This book has a good analysis of the position of women in Lao society from both historical and contemporary perspective.

51 Except in works by Samlith Bouasysavath and Phanh Inthavong, previously cited.
- sociable, extrovert, but not overly fond of alcoholic drink;
- a good voice and good at public speaking.

The Invocation

So, if a person ‘becomes’ a mophone by public and societal acceptance, what is the source of the mophone’s power, legitimacy and authority? Why is he so important in the performance of the soukhouane? I contend that the mophone’s power, authority and legitimacy derive from the performance of and the society’s acknowledgement of, the ritual itself as well as the esoteric knowledge such a person has learnt. 52 Stanley Tambiah writes that

[R]itual as one observes it in primitive communities is a complex of words and action...it is not the case that words are one thing and the rite another. The uttering of the words itself is the ritual (Tambiah 1968:175).

He continues saying that the reason why the ritual is effective is because “of a formally expressed belief that the power is in the ‘words’ even though the words only become effective if uttered in a very special context of other action”. The language used by the mophone is a mixture of Pali (when invoking the Buddhist gods and prayers) and ordinary Lao language. To paraphrase Tambiah’s analysis of the Singhalese ritual, the language stratification in the Lao soukhouane ritual is indicative of the hierarchical positions of gods and mortals; the language is consciously constructed to connote power, and though largely unintelligible is nevertheless based on the theory of language that the gods and spirits can understand. Thus far from being nonsensical and indiscriminately concocted, the ritual shows a sophisticated logic and some sort of supernatural power that links the human world to the worlds of supernatural beings. Thus, by his action during the ritual, by his command of society’s respect and by his own conduct as an auspicious person, the mophone is accorded the power, the authority and legitimacy by the gathering human beings and the invoked supernatural beings.

In a *soukhouane*, the *mophone* is the only one who says anything or utters any word and who performs any action at all. The only time the gathering joins in is when they utter the chorus *Ma Yeu Khouane Eui* (Oh, come all you *khouane*) at the appropriate juncture of the invocation. All actions taken by anyone during the *soukhouane* are in direct response to the *mophone’s* request or instruction.

These are the lines from a *soukhouane* invocation for a wedding *soukhouane*, declaring that the day of the wedding is indeed a most auspicious day. The *soukhouane* invocation is an important cultural text revealing much of the Lao worldview, cosmology and belief. In the context of the wedding, it stands as a unique testimony to the things above, plus the experiences and aspiration of the Lao community. There is a high probability that the text has been transmitted orally for hundreds of years prior to it being written down on palm leaves. There is no certainty about authorship, geographical location of provenance or exact date of composition. But through the long period of oral preservation and transmission the original utterances would inevitably become modified as generations of reciters memorised and performed the chants.

Works of oral tradition and narrative generally agree that the transmission of stories is a process in which both adaptation and preservation occur. Most scholars also agree that the particular features of a story that are preserved or adapted are determined by the complex relationship between the performer, the audience and the ideological context in which it is told. Narrative convention also plays a role as, in order to be remembered and appreciated, the story must conform to traditional patterns of expression. Thus oral narratives are in some ways just as representative of the social context in which they are told, as they are of the personality of the performer and the narrative tradition they express.

Traditionally, the invocation follows a formula, but occasionally, variations occur caused mainly by the mophones themselves. From invocations in Appendix A (f) and (g), the invocation begins with an ‘ancient formula for worship’:

_Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhasa_

*(Homage to the Exalted One, Arahant, Perfectly Enlightened by Himself)*, three times, one each for the Buddha of the past, present and future. This is followed by the Taking of Refuge in the Triple Gems. After this opening with the Buddhist prayer (in Pali), the mophone then invokes the deities and guardian spirits, also in Pali, to come and bear witness and participate in the ceremony. This is usually followed by a short rendition in Lao.

Then comes the invocation of the khouane proper, beginning with the word Si Si. The invocation for wedding soukhouane follows its own pattern: declaration that the day is an auspicious day for the ritual; the phakhouane have been prepared by auspicious person and deities, enumeration of ‘the gifts for the khouanes’ around the phakhouane, the calling and blessing of the khouanes. This invocation ends with Pali formulation of the four blessings of longevity, good health, happiness and strength. In the soukhouane for Thipphaphone’s wedding (Chapter VI), rather than calling the khouanes of the betrothed, the mophone went

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to say how the betrothed were meant for each other since past lives, and how they were fated to be born together in this life ‘under the banner of socialism with the guidance of the civil authority’. He was very short on the calling of the khouanes

Wedding Paraphernalia

The khanhmak, the vessel containing the areca nut and other ingredients for chewing, is an essential and crucial paraphernalia of the Lao traditional wedding. This activity of chewing the areca nut is known as noppa, but is more commonly referred to as ‘betelnut’ chewing. Although this betelnut chewing is popular with peoples from the Indian continent to the many islands in the Pacific, to the Lao, it is more than chewing the nut. It is symbolic of a civilized lifestyle. All Lao households would traditionally have a khanhmak and the lady of the house (and some time, the male head of the household also) would practice this activity. To the Lao, this activity is synonymous with family life, hospitality, sharing of wealth and of good time, conviviality and social etiquette. The activity is part and parcel of any social gathering, and more importantly of any serious discussion and negotiation. There are at least five major ingredients required for the mixture for chewing: the areca nut (Areca catachu L.), the betel pepper (Piper betel L), lime, tobacco, lip wax, and (Tarrietia javanica Br) and (Pentace Burmanica Kurz). Picture I-2 (cf. Chapter I) shows a khanhmak made of silver, with containers for the different ingredients: the open cylinder is for the betel pepper leaves, the tall container is the lime container (usually kept moist and with a small spatula inside), and the other containers are for the other ingredients listed above. A very important item of the khanhmak, both as an implement and a ritual

56 See Appendix A (h).
57 According to common usage, the term betelnut chewing is ‘the accepted term for the combined mixture which includes the areca nut but it is also commonly used to refer to the areca nit itself. This is because reference to the areca nut normally implies the existence of the other two ingredients. See Eric Hirsch: ‘From Bones to Betelnuts: Processes of Ritual Transformation and the Development of ‘National Culture’ in Papua New Guinea’, in Man (N.S.) Vol. 25, 1990, pp.18-34
58 It is essential to called this ‘fruit’ so as to distinguish it from the word which is a generic term for ‘fruit’.


element- is the  mit sanak (see below). A small mortar and pestle is also a familiar item of the khanhmak for the older ladies who use them to pound the mixture so that they could chew it.  

The khanhmak features very prominently in every stage of negotiation of the kindong process. Indeed, the semantic and symbolic links between khanhmak and kindong go beyond the negotiation stage. The Lao expressions  the groom’s procession;  the wedding procession and  the khanhmak procession, means one and the same thing: a wedding procession. In the context of a Lao wedding, the khanhmak is synonymous with the kindong, featuring in all the stages from the negotiation to the soukhouane ritual itself.

 mit sanak

The mit sanak provides another connection between the khanhmak and the wedding ritual. This is an implement to cut the areca nut and the other ingredients for chewing. It has two handles joined at one end by a hinge, with one of the handle having the cutting blade on it.

Picture II-16: A mit sanak – an essential implement for the betel nut set and an important ritual implement in the Lao traditional wedding ceremony. (Mit sanak courtesy of the late Mrs Thongsy Thammavong at the wedding of her grand-son, Lusa Mathouchanh and Miss Chandara Saignasith, Canberra, October 31, 1998; photo by the author).

59 In this picture, instead of the mit sanak, there are two small knives which serve the same purpose for the betelnut chewing, but not the ritual requiring it.
Thus, it is an indispensable implement for the betel nut set, the khanhmak. Apart from its cutting function it is traditionally an important part of the khanhmak in wedding rituals because it is used in the leading of the groom and the bride to the phakhouane and in leading the newlyweds into the nuptial room after the soukhouane. Its symbolic importance is in the fact that both handles have to be pressed together to achieve the cutting action. Thus, to be successfully married the husband and wife have to act in unison for the same purpose. Incidentally, the khanhmak itself is an important ‘technology of ritual’ as it has become the symbol of acceptance and sharing of hospitality especially between two families becoming related by marriage. This mit sanak is used in the ritual to lead the groom, and then the bride into the phakhouane, and at the conclusion of the soukhouane, it is again used to lead the newlyweds into the nuptial room.

Khanhha ວ່ານ ຄານ is a word denoting a ritual offering composed of five pairs of candles (traditionally yellow or white) and five pairs of flowers (usually white or yellow) arranged in a vessel. This vessel could be anything from a dinner plate to the ubiquitous silver Ǿ or silver khanh. This offering can be made to the monks or the Buddha statues at religious ceremonies, or as a ritual offering to the spirits or to the family elders. In the context of the wedding, the khanhha features in many stages: from the preliminary negotiation stage between the two families, to the ritual offerings by the families to their ancestral spirits. The bride, when making offerings to guardian spirits of the kitchen and the main stairs also use the khanhha. The newlyweds also use it for their somma of the nuptial bed. It is also used by the mophone at the beginning of the soukhouane ritual, and by the newlyweds when they make offerings to guardian spirit of their nuptial bed.

The other ritual elements, not usually parts of an ordinary soukhouane but of a wedding soukhouane, are the sword and the umbrella carried by the groom’s friends as symbolic protection for the groom during his procession.

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60 A less common khanh is the ວ່ານ ຄານ ຂານ ອາດ, that is with eight pairs of candles and flowers each
Conclusion

'Soukhouane' is a ritual that essentialises Laoness. To many of my informants, it is the true marker of Lao identity: to be Lao, one has to have a soukhouane. Every Lao person, regardless of gender, must and will have a soukhouane at one stage or another of his or her life. While not exclusive to the Lao, the ritual of soukhouane is regarded by the Lao as a very important part of their social fabric. The word soukhouane, according to Anna Wierzbicka, is the key cultural word that connotes and denotes the attitudes, the thinking and the worldview of the Lao people, as "there is a close link between the life of a society and the lexicon of the language spoken by it" (Wierzbicka 1997:1). This chapter has clearly demonstrated this link.

In her socio-psychological approach to the analysis the soukhouane, Heinze finds that the ritual serves to harmonize the 'individual and his psyche, his society, the supernatural and the universe' (Heinze 1982:94). It makes a person feels good, loved and wanted after hearing the ritual invocation, receiving lots of cotton threads around one's wrists and getting attention from all ceremony participants. This psychological feel-good helps to induce physical well-being as well. This is the main reason why many Lao attach so much importance to the soukhouane ritual, especially for one of the most crucial rites of passage of their life, the marriage. The soukhouane for a Lao traditional wedding holds the key to Lao identity: while the wedding soukhouane itself has no legal, civil or religious import, it serves to solemnise, sanctify and bless the occasion for the newlyweds and their families. It also serves to proclaim and announce the rite of passage for the betrothed.

The soukhouane ritual is not seasonal and does not follow any 'official' calendar of ceremonies and rites in Laos (Heinze 1982:94). The efficacy and potency of the ritual comes with it being performed amidst the combination of the auspicious occasion, the mophone, the invocation and the sacred threads. To the Lao, the performance of the soukhouane has been transformed to an official myth – a lieu de mémoire (Nora 1968). It evokes the history, the mythology and cosmology that has existed since the halcyon days of their ancestors. The soukhouane helps to bring about spontaneous memory of long-held tradition, of happy times and of good omens for the future. Furthermore, it speaks of the joys of the present and
mundane occurrence like feasting and celebrating the auspicious occasions or to strengthen oneself in time of crisis. The *soukhouane* has become for the Lao a mechanism through which the Lao maintain links with and represent the past: maintaining and continuing their identity and tradition.
Chapter III

The 1975 Lao Diaspora

The front gate to the Napho Refugee Camp, Nakhon Phanom, where many Laonok began their diasporic journey.
CHAPTER III

The 1975 Lao Diaspora

"We have lost our voice in public, that is to say we are afraid to say or act in our natural ways with our natural reactions, gestures and spontaneous expressions of our feelings. We could not say anything for fear of being interpreted as being against the new regime. Now we have lost our country also. But, we have to continue to live for the sake of our children."

Mrs Chanhla Khanthavongsa, Canberra, August 2001

This is the voice of loss, pain and hopelessness so typically and widely felt by Lao people around the time of the 1975 Proclamation of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic. It was a time of great turmoil. Momentous changes overtook the lives of the ordinary people when the 600 year-old monarchy was replaced by a communist regime. People’s daily life was turned upside down. Long years of civil war had ceased and a peace treaty and national reconciliation were in place. But war weariness had not been replaced by a euphoric feeling of peace and prosperity; rather it was replaced by uncertainty, insecurity and a feeling of being displaced from the familiar. The Lao revolution (Stuart-Fox 1982:165) was as bloodless as it was psychologically damaging to the psyche of the whole nation.

The first half of this chapter discusses how this political upheaval in 1975 impacted on every aspect of the life of the people; how it changed the political landscape, upturned the cultural habitus and rewrote the social order of the nation. It also created a Lao dispersal when almost ten per cent of the country’s population went into exile, creating the Lao diaspora, and divided Lao people into what has been termed أخر

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1 Interview with Chanhla Khanthavongsa, Canberra, 22 August 2001. Translation from Lao by the author.
Laonok and Laonai- Diasporic Lao and Homeland Lao.²

The second half of the chapter discusses the exodus of the Lao people, their sojourn in refugee camps in Thailand and their subsequent resettlement in a third country like Australia and the USA. From the first day the Lao organised themselves as a displaced community in refugee camps, they endeavoured to keep alive and express their identity by holding many cultural activities, including wedding ceremony soukhouane and many religious activities. This section also analyses the resettlement of Lao people in a third country, focussing on Canberra and Sydney in Australia and Washington DC and San Diego in the USA, exploring how they built up their community, expressed their identity through the performance of the traditional wedding ceremony, and the establishment of Buddhist temples.³

The chapter in particular examines how this political divide affects the Lao ‘traditional’ wedding ceremony. It will demonstrate that the kindong ceremony, especially the soukhouane ritual, is still embraced as the core of Lao culture, the epitome and expression of Laoness by both Laonok and Laonai. However, while there are competing claims by both groups of Lao about the authenticity of their ceremony, the ceremony itself is becoming more and more similar in its form and performance despite being staged in different social and political milieux. It will be argued later in this thesis that this convergence of the form and performance of the kindong is a result of social memory that resides in the two milieux after the 1975 Great Divide.

² To the best of my knowledge, the first reference to these terms was in the writing of the late Khamchong Luangpraseuth, especially in his articles published in The Laotian American, official publication of the Laovangmai (Lao New Hope) Organisation, based in Alexandria, Virginia, USA. In this thesis, these two terms will be used as a shorthand reference to diasporic Lao and the Lao who remained in their country after the 1975 Great Divide.
The struggle for Laos ended quietly, albeit in confusion, in late April 1975 as a direct result of the collapse of the regimes in the neighbouring states of South Vietnam and Cambodia, and the withdrawal of support from the Western Allies.

International events leading up to that date hastened developments in Laos. On 27 January 1973 the Paris Peace Treaty was signed between the US, North and South Vietnam and the South Vietnamese Provisional Revolutionary Government bringing a ceasefire to South Vietnam, and signaling the US intention to withdraw from the region (Sagar 1991:110-1). Less than a month later, a cease-fire agreement was finally reached between the two Lao protagonists, Prince Souvanna Phouma, the Prime Minister, and his half-brother leader of the Pathet Lao, Prince Souphanouvong, on 22 February 1973, and a Provisional Government of National Union was proposed. A protocol activating this Peace Agreement was signed on September 14 1973 (Sagar 1991:112-4).

Grant Evans suggests that the majority of Lao people welcomed the signing of the Vientiane Treaty for Peace and National Reconciliation and its Protocols, seeing it as a re-unification of members of a family (Evans 2002:170). However, the next few months proved to be anything but peaceful and happy. To implement the terms of the Treaty and its Protocols, the National Political Consultative Council passed the 18
Point Political Program. This document, together with the February Peace Treaty and its Protocol, became compulsory reading for everyone, especially civil servants and the armed forces and police personnel. Together, they heralded the beginning of the political, social and cultural change in the life of the Lao people that was to culminate with the Great Political Divide.

By April 1975, with the collapse of the regimes in both South Vietnam and Cambodia, demonstrations against the Americans and the Vientiane side in Laos intensified to the point that their leadership finally fled the country (Evans 2002:173-4; Sagar 1991:123; Stuart-Fox 1989:160-3). This flight created enormous fear and uncertainty among the people, reinforced by a show trial that condemned to death in absentia some members of the Rightist leadership who had fled the country (Evans 2002:174). Many high ranking officials and armed force personnel were being taken away either by being arrested or by volunteering for ‘re-education’, known by the euphemism ไปสัมมนา, ‘going to the seminars’. Many volunteered to attend these seminars believing that this re-education would be of short duration and they could return to their former positions and family life (Stuart-Fox 1989:162). The number of people being sent to the re-education camps increased, with greater numbers of people of more junior ranks being victims. By August, the administration in both Vientiane and

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6 In Lao it is ตามแผนการสถาปัตย์การเมือง. The version I have is published by Mr Sanom Sackpraseuth, สมบุญสัมพันธ์ of Albury, in a collection of various treaties on peace in Laos, แผนการสถาปัตย์การเมือง และการสัมมนา Various Conditions of Peace and Relations between Lao, Albury 1994; pp. 196-208. He was an active Member of the National Assembly of the Right (Vientiane) side until his escape from Laos in 1975.

7 In his book, Phagna Ngon Sananikone described how he and some other Rightists leaders escaped from Laos in May 1975. See Phagna Ngon Sananikone: Mémoire politique, edited by Khamlay Mounivongs, Edition politiques and culturelles laotiennnes, Chicoutimi, Quebec, 1997; pp. 65-66 (in French and Lao)

8 Evans, Ibid., p.174. According to Thongsa et al, History of Laos, Op,cit., p. 408, the sentence was passed by the People’s Supreme Court on September 4 1975 on 31 of the top leaders of the Rightist faction: 6 to be executed, 5 to life imprisonment, and the remaining 20 were sentenced to twenty years in prison.

9 While the above was written about Lao people who decided to stay, it was very much the sentiment expressed by many of my informants who had survived incarceration in the ‘re-education’ camps. Interviews with Tanh-avong Vorabout and Viliam Phraxayavong who both survived their internment in these camps.
Luang Prabang was taken over by a People’s Revolutionary Committee (Stuart-Fox 1989:163; Sagar 1991:125) and political control of the country was effectively in the hands of the Pathet Lao by October (Stuart-Fox 1989:163). The final act of seizing power came on December 1, when the Crown Prince read the King’s letter of abdication to the secretly convened Congress of People’s Representatives in Vientiane. On the following day, December 2 1975, the Pathet Lao proclaimed the formation of the new Lao People’s Democratic Republic replacing the constitutional monarchy and the Souvanna Phouma-led coalition government. Prince Souphanouvong was named President and Kaysone Phomvihane as Prime Minister; and all other members of the government were from the ranks of the Pathet Lao. This was what Stuart-Fox called ‘the final act in the communist’s seizure of power in Laos’; and according to Evans, it ushered in the arrival of the one-party communist regime in Laos (Evans 2002:174-5; Stuart-Fox 1989:164-5). This final act of seizing power created an impact on the Lao political landscape that was felt in every corner of life of the Lao people.

**Political Impact**

Politically, the target of the new regime was the elimination of all political opposition, through the abolition of the monarchy and the indoctrination of the people through the internment in what were euphemistically called ‘seminar camps’. The new regime claimed legitimacy for their actions from the February Peace Treaty and its Protocol and the 18 Point Political Program. For many Lao people these three documents were the first political and quasi-legal documents to directly affect their lives. Together they spelt out the conditions for peace, the democratic rights of the Lao people and supported the Lao people’s struggle to force the Vientiane side to accept national reconciliation (Thongsa et al, 1989:395). This created an anticipation of change and reform that would eliminate the corruption and bring on a cessation of wartime conditions (Brown and Zasloff 1986:114-5). Prior to the re-education camps, political classes were organized in various workplaces, especially in government departments,

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10 See also Prince Mangkra Souvannaphouma: *L’agonie du Laos*, Op.cit., for an insider’s view of the events of the few months leading up to December 2 1975 (especially pp. 139-192). The Prince was the son of Prince Souvanna Phouma and was a colonel in the Royal Lao Air Force. He worked closely with his father from 1972 until his escape in late 1975.
initially for discussions of the terms and conditions of the three documents. Staff meetings were called at frequent intervals to discuss working conditions. Later, these sessions became forums for popular denunciation of senior officials, some of whom were forced to face 'people’s courts' on charges of corruption, oppression and harassment (Stuart-Fox 1989:162). These sessions were replicated throughout the civil service and was magnified through the country.\footnote{I was an eyewitness to these happenings. After graduating from an Australian university, I was appointed as a journalist, by a Royal Decree, in the Lao National Radio Service, Ministry of Information and Propaganda, in late 1972. After a training period of three months with the BBC in London, I came back to Laos and was appointed Private Secretary to the Vice Minister of Information, Phagna Ouday Souvannavong in the newly formed Coalition Government.}

The Lao population might have welcomed the unification of the country under the Peace Treaty, but political sabotage by the Pathet Lao continued to undermine the administration and the stability of the country. Moreover, ceasefire violations were continually being committed by both sides (Evans 2002:171-2). Demonstrations by students and workers - even by the tricycle drivers and armed forces troops were now aimed squarely at the American activities, and the excesses of the Right. From early in 1975 there was a quantum leap in the number of anti-government demonstrations by workers and students when many organizations formed one umbrella group called the 21 Organisations for Peace gin^iai9fu) (Brown and Zasloff 1986:162).\footnote{Interview with Tanh-avong Vorabout, in Canberra, November 2002. He is married to Intong’s eldest sister. In 1974, he was the deputy-governor of the Vientiane Municipality. He led a demonstration of civil servants from the municipal office against one of the strong leaders of the Vientiane side, Ngon Sannanikone. Tanh-avong was later taken to the ‘seminar’ in November 1975 in Samneua where he was incarcerated until his release in 1981. In 1984, he escaped with his family and after spending about two years in Napho refugees camp in Thailand, he was sponsored by his relative to settle in New Zealand. He has now re-settled with his family in Canberra since June 2002.}

In one of the first books by a Lao on the political upheaval of this period, Vongprachanh Souvannavong described the chaos and consternation, fear and devastation, when a group of Pathet Lao cadres and some ‘revolutionary’ students came to arrest her uncle, Mr Bong Souvannavong, herself and some of her colleagues in Vientiane in September 1975.\footnote{Vongprachanh Souvannavong: \textit{La jeune captive du Pathet Lao}, Collection ‘Les Enfants du Fleuve’, Edition Fayard, Paris, 1993 (in French); pp. 31-46.} Mr Bong Souvannavong, the scion of the rich and
politically powerful Vientiane based family, had been a strong opponent of the Pathet Lao from the beginning. He had been at various intervals a member of the National Assembly, a Minister in various Lao governments and leader of the political party, Lao Houam Samphan. They were charged with the crime of opposing the new spirit of peace and national reconciliation and taken to a prison near Vientiane. This episode created further instability and consternation in the minds of many Lao. Bong was the father of a member of the Pathet Lao leadership, Bousbong Souvannavong. With Bong’s arrest and incarceration people started to doubt the Pathet Lao’s claim of a ‘Lao style revolution and socialism’: if a son who was in a position of power was not willing or able to help his own father, what hope did the ordinary people have in the face of this wave of demonstration and political upheaval? Family values and family ties counted for nothing.

The Pathet Lao’s seizure of power was peaceful in comparison to the events in the other two Indochinese states, Vietnam and Cambodia. Nevertheless, this Lao revolution did bring great upheavals and divisions that affected the life of the Lao people in many ways. The most obvious, immediate and dramatic was the political impact. The abolition of the monarchy was inevitable with the waves of popular movements against the old regime. In his letter of abdication, the King bequeathed his kingdom to the people of Laos and pledged to continue to serve the country and its people. In fact, he was appointed ‘Special Advisor’ to the President of the new republic, as was Prince Souvanna Phouma. The real political and administrative power was, however, wielded by the Party and the State, led by Kaysone Phomvihane

14 The King, the Queen, the Crown Prince and some members of the Royal family were later taken as prisoners initially to Viengxay in 1976. They were transferred in November 1977 to the No.1 Prison in Ban Nakeua vam where they all died in 1980. See details in Colonel Khamphan Thammakhanti: Remedy for the Living Dead (Episode 1) 1975-1981 – Memories of a Survivor Prisoner of War, published in Lao in 2001 by the author in Portland, Oregon, USA; pp. 59-79. Khamphanh was arrested and sent to the camp in 1975, and released in June 1989. In 1990 he was sponsored to resettle in the USA by one of his daughters who had earlier escaped and settled there. This book is one of the more detailed accounts of the life in the re-education camps – it tells how the ‘prisoners’ were treated and were left to fend for themselves, and eventually left to die due to a lack of food and medical supplies.
the General Secretary of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party แลกฏรัฐบาล, who
was also Prime Minister.

The map of the country also changed with the formation of the new republic. The two
provinces of Samneua and Phongsaly, the Pathet Lao's strongholds known as
'liberated zones', were re-incorporated in the national boundary. Two special zones
were created - Xaysomboun – Complete Victory- and Oudomxay – Victory Plentiful\textsuperscript{15},
and provincial boundaries were redrawn to better reflect the power bases of the new
leadership.

Politically and administratively, the country was now a whole; Laos was once again
one 'nation' under one rule, with the Lao people masters of their own destiny. But the
real masters of the Lao people were, in fact, the Party and the State แป้ และ ปัน.

However, the leaders of the Party and State were not, as the populace expected, the
public faces of the Pathet Lao, like Prince Souphanouvong, Phagna Phoumi
Vongvichit and Tiao Souk Vongsak, but the more shadowy figures like Kaysone
Phomvihan, Nouhak Phoumsavanh and Khamtay Sithandone (Stuart-Fox 1989:170-
1).\textsuperscript{16} Upon the inaugural of the new socialist republic, the political structures formed
under the terms of the 1973 Peace Treaty - the Provisional Government of National
Union and the National Political Consultative Council - were quickly replaced by the
Supreme People’s Assembly and a Council of Ministers, both answerable to the
Political Bureau of the Party, headed by Kaysone (Stuart-Fox 1989:170; Brown and
Zasloff 1986:89). The structures of the Party and the State were replicated down to the
village level, and again the membership was drawn from the ranks of the Pathet Lao.

\textsuperscript{15} It is hypothesized here that these were the regions where either the Hmong fighters of the old regime
were still active and/or there were Vietnamese troops still stationed there. The designation of a 'special
region' status meant that they were outside the scrutiny of the Lao population and international
community alike.

\textsuperscript{16} See also Brown and Zasloff, *Apprentice Revolutionaries...*, Op.cit., Chapter 10, for a discussion of the
party and its leadership. It is interesting to note that the 'public' faces of the Pathet Lao all kept their
traditional hereditary and royal honorific titles of 'Prince' and 'Phagna', while the others were known as
'comrades' – ภักษ.
Mass organizations were formed and the hierarchy set up from the village level upwards, all were put under the umbrella of the Neo Lao Sang Xat [NLSX]-
แปลว่าผู้รู้จาก the Front for National Construction (Evans 2002:189). The Front is certainly an important organization, being regarded as one of the Four Pillars of Lao society alongside the Party, the Government and the National Assembly. At least one representative of every household had to attend local committee meetings organised by the NLSX, which could be weekly or monthly depending on the business of the Party and the State.

With the apparatus of power in place, the impact of the new regime on the people’s daily life was immediate and more than symbolic of the break with the old regime. When the national flag, the national emblem and the national anthem were replaced, in one swift political move, the people’s connection to their King and their religion ceased. These emblems were replaced by one displaying the hammer and sickle and a red star with idealistic depiction of industrial factories and natural riches (in the ears of rice). The replacement of the national anthem came as a softer shock to the people: the new regime kept the same tune but gave it a new lyric.

A more fundamental impact on the people was to be found in the introduction of the Doctrine of the Three Revolutions มหาศรัทธาสามประวัติการณ์, in the areas of industrial production, science/technology and culture/ideology announced by Kaysone and based on the Vietnamese model developed by Le Duan. This Doctrine was to be the economic, technical and ideological platform for the socialist transformation of Lao society and the Lao economy (Stuart-Fox 1989:169). Mass meetings that were instituted during the last few months of the Coalition Government to study the terms and conditions of the Peace Treaty were now replaced by compulsory meetings to study the party lines and new party decrees. The spirit and letter of the Three

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Revolutions were inculcated into the consciousness and the psyche of the Lao people through these political indoctrination sessions.

Social Impact

Socially, the aim of the new regime was to replace the former feudal, decadent Westernised Lao society with a socialist, egalitarian and classless society of ‘comrades’.

The case of Mrs Visoune\textsuperscript{18} typified the sort of social change and treatment that people of the old regime experienced. In the beginning of the new regime, she worked in a government department, where the following incident she related took place. Over the course of a month to six weeks, she was called in three times, each time by a higher authority than the previous, to be asked if there was any marital problem at home. She denied there was any. Not long after that, the Minister, who knew her father well, called her in and again asked the same question. She again told the Minister that there were no problems. The Minister then asked why her eyes were black and blue all the time as if she was being beaten by her husband. It dawned on her that she was wearing make-up to work as she used to under the old regime. Of course, women were forbidden to use make-up and nail polish under the third of the revolutions (Doré, 1989:107).

\textsuperscript{18} Interviews and chats over drinks during January-February 2000 in Vientiane. She is one of the daughters of Leum Insixieummay, one of the more prominent members of the Right faction from Savannakhet, who stayed on to serve in the new regime. Visoune was married to a medical doctor from one of the prominent families in Vientiane, the Souvannavong, which had members on both sides of the struggle for independence. She is also a good friend of Kotkham Khamvongsa, Intong’s sister with whom I stayed during my research trip to Virginia/Washington DC area in 2000.
Still to this day, it is nearly impossible to find any published account of daily life under
the new regime. Mrs Chanhla was one exception. She was one of my informants who were prepared to talk about her experiences. She and her ex-husband (who did not take part in this particular interview) were civil
servants in the classical dance section of the Ministry of Information and Culture. They both performed and taught classical dance and music at the national institute of
classical dance in Vientiane. Their performances included various receptions for
foreign dignitaries and nationally important occasions, and they went on many cultural
exchange trips overseas. They also performed for, and accompanied, the king and
queen on their tours throughout the country, especially in the last few years of the old
regime. In the old days, she supplemented her salary with private tuition in classical
dances for well-to-do families, some from the diplomatic corps.

According to Chanhla, the change around and just after December 1975 was felt more
or less straight away: the performing troupes were broken up, and the personnel re-
assigned other duties away from performing or teaching. In fact, the new regime came
in with their own performers, complete with singers, musicians, folk performers, props
and stage sets. Most of them, certainly the singers, trained in China (“You can tell by
their high pitched voice that make Lao words unintelligible”), had been performing in
the ‘liberated zones’. The graceful dance moves of the old school were replaced by the
more up beat, stern ‘revolutionary’ moves with flag waving and running moves. Many
of the performances and stories that Chanhla and her fellow performers of the old

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19 One of the most recent writings of this genre was by Retired Colonel Bounyong Vorasane: *Man of
Three Regimes*, Lao United Freedom Organization, New York, 1999 (ความรู้ ของ граждан: งาน กับ องค์;
ความรู้จาก รัฐบาลรัฐบาล; ความรู้จาก รัฐบาลอื่นๆ, นิทรรศ, อดีต). Colonel Bounyong was the Head of Foreign News Service at the
Lao National Radio at the time when I first joined the Lao public service in late 1972. It is interesting to
note by the ‘three regimes’ he meant the Royal Lao Government, his times with the Pathet Lao and the
months immediately before the proclamation of the new Lao republic. The three flags shown on the
cover of his book were those of the Kingdom of Laos, the Lao People’s Socialist Republic and the
USSR.

20 A small book was published in 1997 in Sydney, in Lao, by the STARTT, a NSW Government service
to counsel victims of war traumas, by a group of ex-participants in Lao re-education camps. “My
Memories of ‘05’ is a collection of reminiscences by these participants of their times in one of the more
notorious camps, Camp 05 in the remote (and Pathet Lao controlled) province of Samneua.
school were associated with were changed from the ones based on the Ramayana stories to the revolutionary struggles against the 'imperialists'. Guns and military uniforms were now commonly seen on performance stages.

Her daily life outside work was also disrupted. When the regime banned old style classical dances, she could not continue giving private tuition. As with many Lao ladies, she was multi-skilled, and was a good cook. So she supplemented her salary by making fresh rice noodles to sell in the market. Her time after work was spent trying to earn an extra living, attending ‘political lessons’ 捐助工作, communal working bees 亞密利, and more importantly the dreaded 8 * - the session when one was called up by the authorities to face charges of committing sins against the regime. One of the serious sins was having ‘connections’ with ‘foreigners’. One of her classical dance students was a daughter of the then Australian Ambassador to Laos. Chanhla and her family became close with this Australian family. During the months leading up to Chanhla’s decision to flee Laos with her family, the wife of this former Ambassador paid her a few visits, which resulted in Chanhla being called up to face one of the dreaded 8 * sessions. In her department there were rumours that the personnel of the old regime would be sent to Samneua for re-education. As with many other people in similar situations, Chanhla and her family found life intolerable, uncertain and threatening. The only solution was to flee their homeland and become refugees in Thailand’s many refugee camps. Chanhla and her family left Laos in May 1979 and arrived in Australia some three months later, having been sponsored by the late Alex Borthwick, the former Australian Ambassador to Laos, and his family.

To capture the feelings of being exiled from one’s homeland, let me quote from Chanhla’s own words:

21 Interviews with Chanhla Khanthavongsa took place in Canberra at various times from 1999 to 2001. She and her ex-husband, Lanoi, and their family became good friends with my family. We cooperated in working for the Lao Association (ACT) Inc., for some years. My wife and I, as will be seen later, were closely involved in the wedding of one of their sons, Vatthana.
We have lost our life. We could carry on living but it is not the same; we have lost the familiarity of our daily existence. We were being watched by our neighbours at home and by our colleagues at work, especially after a few visits from Mae Tou Borthwick. We could not trust anyone anymore. We have lost our jobs – our profession, that is the assurance of being of some service to our country, and the comfortable feeling of having regular salary to live on. We have lost our voice in public, that is to say we are afraid to say or act in our natural ways with our natural reactions, gestures and spontaneous expressions of our feelings. We could not say anything for fear of being interpreted as being against the new regime. But now we have lost our country also. And we have to continue to live for the sake of our children.

(Chanhla, interview, Canberra, 21 August 2001)

The new regime had a word for the old society – $991,999 - the decaying society.

The mission of the new regime, in accordance with the Cultural Revolution, was to eliminate all vestiges of Western (ie. American) decadence from Lao society. Various measures were taken including ‘persuading people to destroy all novels, books, journals, erotic and sexy photos, and photos of cow-boys... and entirely wiping out social plagues such as games of chance, hippies, prostitutes, bars…” (Doré 1989:107).

The incidents with Visoune and Chanhla were indicative of how the new regime operated. There was a strong and active union representation in every workplace, and individualism and individual freedom was not to be tolerated. The regime was intent on zealously stamping out the vestiges of western decadence. Make-up for women was discouraged, if not explicitly banned; dress code, especially for women, was strictly enforced. Girls and women had to dress in a ‘traditional skirt’ $\text{sin}$ in public and especially when dealing with the public service and casting a vote in elections. Long hair for men was forbidden. Flares, bell-bottom trousers and jeans were outlawed for both women and men. Western dances and songs were prohibited; nightclubs and bars were closed down. Many prostitutes and other ‘enemies of the

\[22\text{ Mae Tou is a term of endearment used to call an elderly lady. It means ‘Grandma’. Chanhla’s family and the Borthwicks became very close. When Mr Alex Borthwick was posted as Ambassador to Sri Lanka, the Borthwicks still paid many visits to Chanhla during their holidays.}\]
society’ were taken away for re-education at ˌsəˈsiːti ˌrɛˌdʒʊˈɛtɪs – the Island for Males and Island for Females - in the middle of the Nam Gneum dam reservoir some 70 km north of Vientiane (Doré 1989:170).

Adult education was officially encouraged and organised. Whatever the benefit of this education campaign, it could be argued that it was a tool used by the government to politically indoctrinate the people. Political confession sessions ˌsaʊŋ ˈsɛŋ were instituted and became commonplace at the village level and in workplaces. This was where people were encouraged to confess their sins against the state and party and to denounce others for similar sins. Greater bureaucratic controls of what people do were imposed, such as registration for one-man band for hire23; and restrictions on travel outside one’s province of domicile. The control of mass media was in the hands of the government who, apart from operating radio and television stations, banned privately owned stations and printed media outlets. The programs of government-controlled stations now carried more propaganda material. After party congresses, or for more important government decisions, radio and (later on television) programs would be written to disseminate the resolutions of the congress, with the same intensity as the dissemination within the party machines, the mass organizations, and the public service departments and instrumentalities. The use of loud speakers strategically positioned near gathering places of the people, such as markets and busy intersections, was perfected to an art form. Love songs and commercial advertising were eliminated and replaced by ‘revolutionary’ music, government and party messages. They were played loudly nearly all day and well into the night. Nobody could avoid this omnipresent, all pervasive indoctrination by the airwaves campaign.

With the abolition of the monarchy, the old sakdina system was ridiculed as ‘imperialist’ and old fashioned. Sakdina was a system whereby the King dispenses favours to members of his own family and to public servants and armed forces personnel for services to the Crown. Formerly, sakdina came with an allotment of

23 These are musicians with an electronic synthesizer who performs at private parties for a fee.
land and a number of slaves commiserated with the ranking within the system.\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Sakdina} under the new regime carried the connotation of ‘reactionary’, corruption, despotism, nepotism, and family-oriented. A corollary of the abolition of the monarchy was the change in Lao language. While the ‘royal’ language, where deferential treatment of a person depends on the rank and respect they command, was outlawed, a new word entered the Lao lexicon. The word \textit{kamə} ‘comrade’ became \textit{de rigeur} in normal and official usage connoting socialist egalitarianism, the idea of the classless society that the new regime was propagating.

The enduring change in the language was the dropping of the consonant s ‘R’ sound and from the script and the modification in spelling of ‘ia’ sound. It created confusion in the use of some words. This change was based in part on a book on Lao grammar by Phoumi Vongvichit, written in 1968, for the practical reason of simplifying the Lao language to facilitate political indoctrination of the hill tribe people during the struggle. In doing so, the practice made a mockery of the pronunciation of many foreign words, such as Paris and Rome. The authority also faced revolt from the tribal minorities whose dialects must have the ‘R’ sound to make any sense at all.\textsuperscript{25} The

\textsuperscript{24} The system of \textit{sakdina} is found to be similar in both Thailand and Laos, though more elaborate and developed in the former. Few books in Lao give a clear explanation of the system, even though some of them list the rankings within the system. Some of the Lao books include \textit{Nithan Khou Bourom, Customs of Kingdom of Lanxang White Parasol}, and many books edited by Samlith Bouasysavath - all are listed in the bibliography. Some of the books on Lao and Thai histories that make mention of ‘Sakdina’ system are those by B J Terwiel’s \textit{A History of Modern Thailand 1767-1942}, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, London and New York, 1983; and Martin Stuart-Fox’s \textit{The Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang: Rise and Decline}, White Lotus Press, Bangkok, 1998.

irony and inconsistency in dropping the 'R' sound was that the people in the new regime still use 'ns (Dr) as honorific in front of their names.²⁶

Mention was made earlier of the 'communal working bee' sessions that everybody had to attend. The most ambitious, politically motivated and widespread was the collectivisation of agriculture, which was put into effect as part of the Government’s First Five-Year Plan in 1978. It caused much hardship for the people who were forced to work other people’s lands and contribute to the co-operatives. It also caused much resentment among the farmers, as they were used to working their own land at their own pace and at the level of self-sufficiency as small-scale capitalists. Most saw the collectivisation as coercion, compulsion and imposition of bureaucratic requirements that rendered their life, in Chanhla’s words, ‘intolerable, uncertain and threatened’. This was the time when the world witnessed the second wave of refugees from Laos that included a large number of people from the countryside.²⁷

*Cultural Impact*

A not-so-subtle cultural impact on the Lao landscape and on people’s consciousness was the presence (omnipresence?) of banners and posters. In the early days they replaced advertising signage around town. These posters and banners almost uniformly extolled the merit and the triumph of the December 2 Revolution คำว่า ด้วยที่ ด้วย

In many cases, the banners and posters took pride of place where names of a building or a government department used to be, and were almost always flanked by many bright-coloured pennants. The posters always depicted the ‘three pillars of the revolution’, peasants, workers and soldiers, again with a message praising

²⁶ Just as they persisted in using the Royal title and honorific for their leaders throughout the revolution. To wit, Prince Souphanouvong, Phagna Phoumi Vongvichit and Tiao (Prince) Souk Vongsack, were but some examples of the regime’s playing on the Lao people’s sense of respect for royalty and the Phou Gnai - men with merit and power.

the December 2 Revolution. With the display of posters and banners, a strange new phenomenon also occurred: the display of portraits of Karl Marx and Lenin alongside that of Kaysone Phomvihane. In the old days, never was such adulation of either the King or the Prime Minister so prominently and ostensibly displayed and worshipped in public.

Another subversive change in the cultural landscape of the Lao people was stage performance. Traditionally, this sort of performance is a story told in a combination of song and action called ลำเลียง – *Lam Leuang*, that is, to sing (in folk song style) a story. The basic repertoire was based on the many epic stories that most people, especially the village folks less exposed to Western style movies would be very familiar with. The actors would be dressed in brightly coloured ‘period costumes’, and their singing would be accompanied by a traditional band, most definitely by a คำบ khene, an instrument rather like a pan pipe.28 One of the first acts of the new regime in the area of performing arts was the re-interpretation of the performance of epic stories. Performance of epics such as *Sin Xay* สมัย was re-interpreted as struggles against the ‘imperialists (forces of evil) in which the older brother always arrived to rescue the younger brother.29

The classical dances were also modified with more running and banners waving on stage. The subjects of the plays were more revolutionary in nature with anti-neo-

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29 The re-interpretation of epics and legends for political ends would be a fertile field for further works on Lao society and culture under socialism. The only study of this kind I have found so far was by Jean-François Papet: “A propos du Sinxay légende nationale Lao et de son traitement oral en period révolutionnaire”, *ASEMI*, X, Nos 2-3-4-, 1979; pp. 247-269.
colonialism and anti-imperialism and the heroics of the revolution as the main themes. One real ‘revolution’ in the performing art of Laos after the Pathet Lao’s seizure of power was the introduction to the populace of the gymnastic/acrobatic troupe ສັ້ນເທື່ອຄ່ວ່າ. According to Bouaban Volakhoun, this troupe was created in 1966 with twelve performers, and with aid from Vietnam, grew to eighty-two, with many of them trained in Vietnam, the Soviet Union and Mongolia (Volakhoun 1998:118-120).

Many traditional festivals and celebrations suffered from the new regime’s attempt to curtail Westernised extravagance. The wedding ceremony did not escape their crackdown. Various ministries were ordered to issue directions to stamp out extravagance in wedding ceremonies for their employees. Weddings for government employees were to be held at their work place, with a minimum number of guests (some family members and work colleagues only) and had to be sanctioned by an administrative authority. The traditional soukhouane was abbreviated. Wherever possible, ‘mass’ weddings were to be held to save cost. The abolition of the monarchy also meant the wedding dress style of the royals could now be used by anyone. The headband, called ຜັກເຊັກ leungkheung that was a distinctive ‘royal’ marker for a bride was now anyone’s property and a fashion item. According to Tiao Saya Rangsi, the royal bridal headband was distinctive and exclusive to each family indicated by the intricate decorative motif in the same way that the Scottish tartans belong to a particular clan. The width of the band is a further indication of the royal rank of the bride’s family. The two following pictures show that the Royal headband is used by ‘commoners’, one by a New Year pageant participant and one by a bride in Sydney, 1992.

30 Interview with the Lao Ambassador to Australia, His Excellency Soutsakhone Patthamavong, in Canberra, December 2000.
31 Discussions with Mr Thongsay Sayavongkhamdy, Director of Museum and Archaeology Department, Ministry of Culture, Vientiane, January 2001. Thongsay and his wife, Taykeo, were one of the 12 couples who took part in the first and, to his knowledge, only mass wedding in Laos, in 1987.
32 Discussion with Tiao Saya Rangsy in Canberra, August 2003. One other interesting piece of information was about the procession in a royal wedding. The party of a lower royal rank (whether bride or groom) is the one taking the procession to the house of the one of a higher rank.
Further, the wedding ceremony was now called ‘ยุ่งห่วง’ องค์เป็น a ceremony of building a family instead of ดี ไชยชัยภูมิ an ‘auspicious wedding’. The bride and groom who were traditionally referred to as ตี๋หัว ตี๋ศอก tiaobao tiaosao young prince and young princess were now just plain ตี๋หัว ตี๋ศอก phoubao phousao the young boy and young
girl, even though they were dressed in the ‘royal’ headband. ‘Tiao’, a revered category of being, was now removed from the language. More importantly, a wedding had to be sanctioned by the local administrative authority or the boss at one’s workplace before it could take place. This authorisation would have to be read out before the *soukhouane* took place.

To the Lao, one of the biggest shocks after the change of regime was the treatment of their religion, Buddhism. Prior to 1975, Buddhism was the official religion of the Kingdom of Laos and it had a deep influence on the daily life of ordinary Lao. There was a strong symbiotic existence between the monks, collectively called the *sangha* – and the laity. The former provided Buddhist teaching and exemplary lives of learning and virtue, and a vehicle for the lay people to make merit. The lay people, in return, provided the monks with material support in the form of food, temple buildings, clothes and medicine. The temple performed many and varied functions such as religious, educative, medical, meeting forum and provided a place for communal activities like village festivals. According to Lafont, the Pathet Lao saw “no contradiction between the Buddha Gautama’s teachings and the purpose of the revolution” (Lafont 1982:150). In fact, they made good use of the monks’ educative role and position in the community to further their revolutionary causes.

But, in their zeal to impose the revolution on the people, many of their actions were perceived to be anti-Buddhist: ordinations were discouraged; monks and novices, once respected by all, were now accused of being ‘parasites on society’. Their teachings were now more politicised and they were ‘required’ to participate in worldly affairs, such as political meetings, particularly those of the Neo Lao Sang Xad. Monks were put under stricter codes governing their travel, dress and residence.³³ To the people, this was another threat to their life and living: to take away their religious belief (at least to denigrate it) confirmed in their mind that the atheist communist Pathet Lao would eventually eliminate Buddhism from the country.

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³³ Interviews with Acharn Bouakham Boubphavong of Wat That Foun, Vientiane, and Achrn Vanna Souriyavong of Wat Mixay, Vientiane, in February 2000. Acharn Bouakham was in fact a member of the Neo Lao Sang Xad.
For Lao people, December 2 1975 marked the end of a system of government and a way of life they used to know: the constitutional monarchy was replaced by a communist regime. It marked the end of one cultural and political era and the beginning of another. For the 400,000 or so Lao refugees who fled the homeland, it marked the beginning of life in a diaspora, and for the Lao people still remaining in Laos, it was a drastic change from the good old days under the Kingdom of the Million Elephants and White Parasol to the austere conditions under the doctrinaire rule of the Party and the State in what is now called the Lao People’s Democratic Republic. This is discussed in the following section of this chapter.

The Exodus

Khamleck’s case symbolises the exodus of so many Lao fleeing their homeland as a result of the seizure of power by the Pathet Lao in 1975. Between the fall of the Vientiane side in late April 1975 and the proclamation of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic on December 2 1975, some nine thousand Lao people crossed the Mekong River and sought asylum in Thailand (Harris 1994:216).

Khamleck’s Story

Khamleck was a middle ranking civil servant in Savannakhet, central Laos. He was married with five young children, and some of his wife’s siblings were still of high school age. At first he welcomed the political change that took place in December 1975. The situation soon became intolerable – with the ‘kangaroo court’ presided over by the Pathet Lao cadres sentencing some town people to re-education camps in remote parts of the country. Sensing his own family threatened and seeing no future for them, he secretly planned their escape. Over a period of some four weeks, members of his family crossed the Mekong River into Thailand under various pretexts. He was the last one to leave. Having arranged a paid boatman to take him and some other people across the Mekong River, he escaped under complete secrecy in the middle of the night. There was no farewell party; no saying good bye to friends and other family members. Tragically, the boat capsized in the middle of the river. Khamleck was one of the few survivors. He later joined the rest of his family, spending
some months in the Ubon Refugee camp, before being sponsored to resettle in Australia.34

While this story is comparatively less dramatic and horrendous than those of the Vietnamese ‘Boat people’, or the survivors of the Cambodian ‘Killing Fields’, the case of Khamleck is but one of thousands of stories of the same desperate search for survival and a better future by some Lao people. It is replicated many times over across Laos, each with its own tale of adventure and survival as well as drama and trauma. Grant Evans commented that this Lao exodus was unprecedented in scale and that ten per cent of the total population would join this exodus by 1980 (Evans 2002:178). The number of Lao refugees in refugee camps operated by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in Thailand increased from 9,086 in 1975 to a peak of 69,050 in 1978 (Harris 1994:216).

The UNHCR, which began its operations in Thailand in 1972 at the invitation of the Thai Government, began its involvement with Indochinese refugees from mid-1975.35 The UNHCR was mainly responsible for the provision of financial assistance for the operations of these camps, as well as being directly involved in the provision of shelter, food and other services. Other voluntary organisations were involved in the provision of English language training, skills formation, health and medical services, tracing and mailing services. Many of these voluntary organisations were church groups. Some of these groups took the opportunity to convert many of the refugees to Christianity desperate for a better future with the promise of assistance for a quick resettlement in a third country. As the inflow of refugees increased, the Thai Government was forced to open a series of refugee camps. There were three camps

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34 ระหว่ำะ ช่ว่ำ่ Khamleck Phraphone is my brother-in-law. This story is one that he likes to tell friends and family members, a composite of many talks and discussions I had with him and his family over a period of time.
for Kampuchean refugees, six for Laotians, and one for Vietnamese, as well as four processing and transit centres, and about twenty ‘border encampments’ for some 300,000 Kampuchean along the Thai-Kampuchean border (CCSDPT 1982:37). The following table gives some idea of the magnitude of Lao exodus after 1975:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Arrivals</th>
<th>Resettled</th>
<th>Repatriated</th>
<th>Camp Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>10,195</td>
<td>1,109</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9,086</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>19,499</td>
<td>11,221</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>17,364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>18,070</td>
<td>4,739</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>30,695</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>48,781</td>
<td>10,426</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>69,050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>22,045</td>
<td>26,032</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>65,063</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>28,967</td>
<td>46,286</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>50,730</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>16,377</td>
<td>21,822</td>
<td>279</td>
<td>33,337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>3,203</td>
<td>6,285</td>
<td>791</td>
<td>23,137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>4,571</td>
<td>5,712</td>
<td>515</td>
<td>20,697</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>14,616</td>
<td>6,677</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>27,346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>13,344</td>
<td>4,797</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>37,019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>2,911</td>
<td>11,602</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>26,342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>2,672</td>
<td>9,643</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>20,889</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>1,776</td>
<td>4,879</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>18,198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>876</td>
<td>3,310</td>
<td>1,424</td>
<td>15,112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3,912</td>
<td>529</td>
<td>11,802</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3,760</td>
<td>539</td>
<td>6,699</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>672</td>
<td>1,773</td>
<td>4,886</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>207,974</td>
<td>182,884</td>
<td>6,671</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By all estimates, roughly ten per cent of the Lao population of three million left their homeland between 1975 and 1980.\(^{37}\) Many of them left even before the formation of the new republic in Laos and reasons for their departure were many and varied. The common denominator, however, appeared to be fear of persecution and the uncertainty

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\(^{36}\) Derived from Harris’s thesis, quoted above.

of future prospects, which accords well with the UNHCR definition of a refugee, which was also adopted by the Australian Government.38

The three major camps for the Lao refugees were located at Nong Khai, Nakhon Phanom (Ban Na Pho Camp) and Ubon, where my own siblings were located during 1978-79, prior to them being accepted for resettlement in Australia.39 The refugees were accommodated in wooden and bamboo longhouses, each containing about thirty living units. The partitions were paper-thin bamboo thatches, pasted over with newspapers and cardboard. The residents of the camps set up a hierarchical administrative structure to assist the Thai camp authorities with security and law and order.40 According to Tanh-Avong, who was detained in Ban Na Pho Camp, there were attempts to normalise the daily lives of the refugees: school classes were organised for young people; religious activities organised for the elderly in makeshift temples that housed monks who had escaped; sports were arranged for young adults. One cultural activity that took place frequently was the *soukhouane* – for newborn babies, for welcoming new arrivals and farewelling to those lucky enough to be selected for resettlement in a third country and, of course, for weddings. Some operated general stores and noodle shops, and some local villagers also set up a market just outside the perimeter fence.

According to both Tanh-Avong and Khamleck, weddings took place quite often in the camps in which they lived. Many people got married for ‘protection’. Unattached girls and women were easy targets for harassment and outright intimidation (mostly by Thai camp personnel) which often ended up in unsavoury situations for the family.

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38 This definition states that a refugee is a person who “owing to well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”

39 Although I did not have a first hand experience of being detained in a refugee camp, in 1985, my wife and I spent one night visiting my sister-in-law and her family (Tanh-avong and Somros Vorabout) at Ban Na Pho camp, about 20 kilometres from Nakhon Phanom itself. The camp was opened in 1977 to accommodate some 500 refugees from Laos. By the early 1980s it was expanded to house 15,000 refugees.

40 Tanh-avong himself served as deputy administrator of the camp (on the Lao side) for most of his time in that camp.
For this reason, many people ended up having to marry another person, especially when the person of their first choice had been taken away to a re-education camp, remained in Laos or had already resettled in a third country.

It appeared that for these weddings, while consideration of auspiciousness was still important to many people of the older generation, expediency was also paramount according to the exigencies of camp life. Many procedures and processes discussed in Chapter I were curtailed and circumscribed. There was no luxury of the traditional courtship or the preliminary approach. Many of the ritual paraphernalia were not available – people did not escape with their heirlooms, or if they did, they would not want to display their wealth in public in a camp situation. So, aluminium utensils substituted for the traditional silver Ǿ and khanh. The phakhouane and the khamhmak were present in the most simple of presentation and the soukhouane was performed by any elderly male who might not be a proficient mophone.

For the Lao refugees, the important thing was not to perform the wedding ritual to the letter of traditional procedures, but to keep alive the spirit of Lao tradition and culture. For them, this served two purposes. They kept alive memories of the homeland, creating their ‘traditional’ habitus in an adverse situation. More importantly, they were making a political statement directed at the new regime in Vientiane. It should be borne in mind that during the early days of the new regime the Pathet Lao cracked down on the excesses of the old regime and on the superstitions of the traditional ways. From the first days of their exile, Lao refugees demonstrated that they were the real keepers and carriers of the tradition. However, in their effort to keep their tradition alive, this ‘tradition’ was already compromised by the changed conditions under which they found their lives: the lack of collective expertise in ritual matters and the lack of ritual paraphernalia, not to mention the financial situation of the family and the oppressive conditions of camp life. Expediency took precedence over considerations of traditional appropriateness and ritual requirements.
The main thing that occupied the mind and time of most refugees in the camp was waiting to be resettled in a third country.\textsuperscript{41} In the early days, people self-selected: some knowledge of English, and some connections with a country (such as Australia) would guarantee selection for settlement. This was the case with the first influx of Lao refugees into Australia and the USA, which then increased through sponsorship programs, both by individuals and groups such as church groups, and family reunion cases.

\textit{Characteristics of Lao Settlement in Australia}

The history of Indochinese refugee resettlement in Australia has been told and researched by many academics and Government reports.\textsuperscript{42} According to the latest available Census figures, there are 9,890 Laos-born persons in Australia, with 4,941 males (50.0 per cent) and 4,949 females (50.0 per cent). The four largest settlements are New South Wales (with 5,570 persons), Victoria (2,196), Queensland (798) and the Australian Capital Territory (739).\textsuperscript{43} The majority of them reported that they spoke mainly Lao language at home (71.8 per cent), and about 68 per cent reported that they were followers of Buddhism.\textsuperscript{44}

Of the three Indochinese communities, the Laos-born people have the highest rate of Australian citizenship with 97.6 per cent, as compared to 91.5 per cent and 93.4 per cent for the Cambodian and the Vietnamese communities respectively. The rate for all

\textsuperscript{41} For a good study of this phenomenon see Lynellyn Dunstan Long: \textit{The Floating World: Laotian Refugee Camp Life in Thailand}, UMI Dissertation Services, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1988.


\textsuperscript{43} Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA): Multicultural Australia – the Laos-born Community, http://www.immi.gov.au/statistics/infosummary/source.htm, accessed March 2003. This section of the thesis is based nearly exclusively on the above source. In New South Wales, the largest settlements are found in areas surrounding Sydney (including Liverpool and Campbelltown); in Wollongong, Tamworth and Albury. In Victoria, the Lao concentrations are in and around Melbourne, Geelong and in Wodonga; while in Queensland, they are in Brisbane (including Ipswich) and Innisfail. The Lao population in the Australian Capital Territory mostly live in the capital city of Canberra.

\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Ibid.}, This compared to 92 per cent estimated by Mayoury Ngaosyvathn (see below).
overseas-born is 73.2 per cent. This phenomenon is indicative of the Lao's desire to 'belong' because refugees are regarded as a stateless person. Bill Cope et al argues that 'becoming a citizen is seen as a sign of a commitment to the nation.' (Cope, 1991, quoted in Ngaosyvathn 1993:11-12). From my own research and observation, there are also other practical reasons why the Lao took up Australian citizenship: the prospect of employment in the public service, ease of travel overseas, and more importantly, the belief that it would assist them in sponsoring relatives from Laos either to visit them or to migrate to Australia.

While the unemployment rate among the Laos-born people is higher than the average for the total Australian population (20.8 per cent compared to 9.2 per cent), materially, the majority of Lao met their basic needs after three to five years of resettlement: 'their great dream of home ownership is reflected in the finding that 52.5 per cent of respondents in the selection said that they owned, or were buying their own houses within three to five years, and 85 per cent bought cars within one year to three years of arrival'. To many Lao refugees, this material prosperity represents a standard of living that would have been impossible for them to achieve in their native land. Of the employed Laos-born, 36.1 per cent are employed in occupations requiring intermediate skills, 32.2 per cent in low skills such as a clerk and labourer and 12.5 per cent as managers, administrators and professionals (DIMA 2003).

From the author's study of Lao settlement, published in 1993, there were some thirty Lao organizations established in Lao communities: twelve in Sydney, seven in Melbourne, two in Brisbane, two in Albury/Wodonga, two in Canberra, and one each in other places. Most were 'self-help' and mutual assistance organizations, with activities in the social, cultural, welfare, educational and religious functions.

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Membership could be as wide as ‘all Lao refugees’, to being based on ‘regional’ areas, that is, being expatriates from certain geographical areas in Laos. There were a number of these organizations established for political reasons, that is to say, for the purpose of opposing the current ruling regime in Laos, and for the liberation of the homeland.

Lao Settlement in Canberra

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, Canberra’s reputation as a quiet place for family life attracted many more Lao families to settle in the nation’s capital, aided by family reunions and refugees sponsored by the Lao Association (ACT). Demographically, the Lao community in Canberra is quite homogenous. There has only been one major influx of Lao refugees into the region from 1976 to 1989. After this date, the arrivals became a trickle, compared to the intake of Vietnamese refugees. As mentioned above, the 1996 Census showed that there were some 739 Lao people in Canberra, with the largest concentrations being in the Southern suburbs (that is the Woden and Tuggeranong areas) and the rest in the North.\(^\text{47}\) Reflecting the trend shown in the Census figures, about half of the Lao population is made up of females, and about fifteen per cent are aged 45 and over, an age considered ‘old’ in the sense of being guardians of traditional values and ways of life. The Lao people who settled in Canberra were largely followers of Buddhism, with about four families who were Christian.\(^\text{48}\) Because of Canberra’s lack of industry as a source of employment, members of Lao community diversified into other fields; many engaging in small businesses like Asian groceries, restaurants and cleaning services. Others found jobs in the public service, having qualified for, and acquired, Australian citizenship. In Canberra, the two organizations are the Lao Association (ACT) Inc., and the

\(^\text{47}\) This figure appears to be slightly less than the estimation of the Association; but the discrepancy could be explained by some people, like the ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese from Laos, who might not have classified themselves in the Census as Lao.

\(^\text{48}\) Two of these families were converted during their time in refugee camps for a promise of speedy resettlement; and two were of the Christian faith from at least one generation previously, having been converted during the French colonial time. It is interesting to note that one of these Lao Christian families still came to the temple to take part in the religious activities of the temple and of the Association; while the other newly converted one did not come near the temple at all, but took part in the other cultural and social activities of the Association.
Wat Lao Buddhianimit Association Inc., whose membership and leadership are basically the same, with the latter organisation concentrating on the religious affairs of the community.

The Lao community in Sydney is the largest of Lao concentration in Australia with about 5,500 persons. Demographically, it bore similar characteristics to that of the Lao community in Canberra, albeit larger and more complex. In 2000, there were four Lao Buddhist temples in Sydney and the surrounding areas, the major one being the Wat Phra Yodkeo in Smithfield, western Sydney. Organisationally, there were many associations formed to serve the interest of the community. Some were political in nature (liberation of the homeland), but most were for mutual assistance and welfare purposes (based on a region in Laos, eg. Savan Samphanh for people originating from Savannakhet; or an association of ex-police officers). Sydney also offered a wide and varied opportunity in employment for Lao people; a large proportion of the first arrivals worked in factories, while the second generation saw a marked improvement in their socio-economic situation.

**Characteristics of Lao Settlement in the United States of America**

Lao refugees began to arrive in the USA in 1975, with 1979-80 and 1981 the years with the highest intake (30,200; 55,500 and 19,777 respectively). As a comparison, the total number of Indochinese refugee intakes from the three countries were: 145,149 from Cambodia, 241,956 from Laos and 753,518 from Vietnam. The latest available US 2000 Census figures indicate that there are 168,707 Lao persons in the USA.

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50 The figures for this section are derived from the Lao Census 2000 compiled by Mark E Pfeifer, PhD, from US Census sources. The figures showed 'the Lao ethnic origin population'. They were downloaded from http://www71aopta.org/LAQ_CENSUS_INFO/Lao_Census_Information.htm on 03/09/2003. The compiler provided the following disclaimer: The numbers provided in this section of the website are the official 2000 numbers for Lao released by the U.S Census Bureau. It should be noted that it is widely believed by Lao leaders that the Lao community was substantially undercounted in the 2000 Census. On the ecological, cultural and language implications on undercounting in census,
While the four states with the largest Lao settlements are California (55,456 persons), Texas (10,114), Minnesota (9,940) and Washington State (7,974), most of the metropolitan areas with the largest Lao population are located in California: San Francisco-Oakland-San Jose (11,545); Sacramento-Yolo (9,814), Los Angeles-Riverside-Orange County (7,626), San Diego (7,002), with Washington DC-Baltimore having some 2,801 Lao persons. For this thesis, the Greater Washington DC area (incorporating the District of Columbia, parts of Virginia and Maryland) is studied. The number of Lao persons is about 3,350 as most Lao people in the area lived in close proximity to the DC area where most of them worked.

Four important socio-economic indicators from the Census pointed to the fact that Lao communities in the US had materially improved significantly since their early days of settlement. The family median income increased from US$23,000 in the 1990 Census to US$42,445 in 2000; the percentage of Lao with public assistance income decreased from twenty per cent in 1990 to fourteen point two per cent in 2000; the percentage of Lao families below the poverty line also decreased from 22% to 17.1% in 2000, and the percentage of Lao population in owner-occupied housing increased from 23% in 1990 to 53.5% in 2000. From the Southeast Asia Resource Action Centre (SEARAC) statistics, by 2001 there were some 84,180 Lao persons who were naturalised as US citizens, about thirty five per cent. Of the employed Lao population, thirty-four point two per cent were employed in occupations requiring intermediate skill such as service occupations and sales and office occupations; fifty-two point two are in low skill


51 SEARAC: People from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam Naturalized as US Citizens, Fiscal Years 1987-2001; from http://www.searac.org/refugee_stats_2000.html. In comparing the percentage of Lao persons being naturalised in Australia and in the US, Ngaosyvathn observed that “no other country, to my knowledge, grants citizenship to refugees or immigrants as quickly as Australia. In the United States, for example, five years of residence is required before one can apply for citizenship. While in Australia, residents can apply to become a citizen after two years”. Mayoury Ngaosyvathn: The Lao in Australia; Op. cit. pp. 10-11.
groups such as farming, construction, production and transportation; and thirteen point six per cent are employed in management, professional and related occupations.52

Lao Settlements in Washington DC Area

Capital cities act as a magnet for Lao people seeking employment and advancement in life. Washington DC, like Vientiane and Canberra, attracted many Lao refugees. However, as statistics show, most Lao living in the Greater Washington DC area actually lived in the surrounding states of Virginia and Maryland, while the majority found employment in the District of Columbia itself.53

From the initial stage of their settlement, most Lao refugees were encouraged to be economically self-sufficient as soon as possible. This resulted in many of them being employed in low-paid unskilled jobs.54 However, by 2000, most Lao people in the Greater Washington DC area, much like the Lao community in Canberra, found work in the management, professional and related occupations, with the private sector and self-employment being the main sources.

Further, much like the Lao people in Australia, the Lao in the US are largely followers of the Buddhist faith, although many of them feel obliged to participate in activities of the Christian churches of their sponsors.55 There are three Buddhist temples in the Greater Washington DC Area; the most imposing and important is Wat

53 These statistics were confirmed for me by interviews with Mr Vilay Chaleunrath, Executive Director, Newcomer Community Service Center, DC Office, on 12 May 2000; and with Narin Sihavong, Project Manager, SEARAC (Southeast Asia Resources Action Center), Washington DC, 12 May 2000.
Lao Buddhavong in Manassas, Virginia. For my research at the secondary site in the USA, San Diego, I was based in Escondido where my hosts, Tho and Toui Tran live. I found that the political, and socio-economic situation of the Lao community here bore a lot of resemblance to that of Sydney in Australia. There were about six Lao Buddhist temples in the San Diego–Escondido area around which Lao people tended to congregate.

Conclusion

When the Pathet Lao symbolically ‘liberated’ Savannakhet in May 1975, my sister was among the town people who lined the streets and enthusiastically welcomed them. She felt a sense of relief from the state of war that the country had endured for so long; there was national reconciliation and peace in the air. Little thought was given to the portentous changes for the country – and their own lives - that lay ahead. She and her fellow town folk were swept up in the euphoria of peace and national reconciliation. But fear, foreboding and apprehension was in the mind of many, and yet they dared not speak their mind.

Some six months later came the proclamation of the new democratic republic. Their world had been overturned: social harmony that used to exist within their highly hierarchical society where everybody knew their place in the social ranking, had cracked. Ancient and traditional values that had been inculcated, reinforced and theorised by the belief in the Buddhist notion of Karma were overturned by the arrival of the Pathet Lao. This was the dividing line between the old and the new; between the old motto of Nation, Religion, the King and Constitution and the bold new world of Marxism-Leninism and of the supremacy of the Party and State where the motto was the Party.
leads, the State protects and the People are the owners. This was the Great Divide that was the root cause of the current diaspora of the Lao people.

Diaspora involves uprooting: a separation from the place of one’s birth, of original social, historical and cultural linkage – one’s roots. One is cut off from one’s ‘habitus’, the familiarity of filial and social ties, of modes of expressions, verbal and non-verbal, that define one’s cultural life-experiences – one’s identity. How can people like Chanhlæ and Visoune or Khamleck and Tanh-Avong live on a day-to-day basis in any new space and time following such uprooting? When John Docker wrote in “1492: The Poetics of Diaspora”, that ‘a fragmented identity is a strange thing’, he was commenting on his own multiple ancestral identities and cultural upbringing, unsure which one he could claim (Docker, 2001:viii-x). Is a diasporic identity necessarily ‘fragmented’? Or is it continually being negotiated? If, yes, between what? ‘Home’ and ‘Host’? Where does a diaspora’s loyalty lie? In this age of globalisation and post-capitalism, post-communism, the politics of a trans-national entity like a diaspora (Lao diaspora in this case) needs to be re-assessed.

Maurice Halbwachs’s monumental study of social memory attempts to provide some answers to this question. He recognizes that a subject’s identity is closely linked to a person’s broader framework of social (and I would add cultural) experiences. He recognizes also that one does not evolve in a vacuum, but rather, one is inscribed in a family and genealogical filiations as well as in the history of one’s country, however ‘imagined’, and in world history, in a larger social environment with its changing representations of social, political and cultural categorizations of human life-experiences.

Halbwachs’ work on collective memory then has an important bearing on Lao diaspora: private experiences and recollections need to be voiced within a collective narrative so that one’s personal pain and loss can find legitimacy in making sense and

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one's identity can be re-constructed. The implication for diaspora of this need to find legitimacy for one's uprootedness and diasporic inscription is that the collective remembrance means also a genealogical continuity that is important for identity formation for the second (and later) generations of diasporic Lao. The degree of estrangement experienced by the second (and later) generations will depend on the narrative of social remembrance and the presentation and interpretation of events surrounding this uprootedness.

As suggested by Liam C Kelly, in his work on Chinese diaspora,

...if the concept of diaspora is to prove valuable as an explanatory model, either the categorization of dispersed peoples under the single heading of “diaspora” must somehow be demonstrated in the historical records..., or the concept should be taken to include the present and should be used to describe the dual phenomena of population dispersal as well as the later attempts to remember that dispersal as a unified event or experience. (Kelly:2000;72).

The above suggestion will be taken up in later chapters of the thesis, together with the notion that diasporic identity is 'fragmented' and needs to be continually re-negotiated. The discussion, premised on the conception of the kindong, will investigate how the re-negotiation and social memory in Lao diaspora and in Laos are played out in the performance of the Lao traditional wedding ceremony. In particular, this investigation will concentrate on the soukhouane, the centrepiece of a Lao traditional wedding ceremony.
PART B

CASE STUDIES

Chapter IV
Kindong Down Under

Chapter V
Kindong Under the Stars and Stripes

Chapter VI
Kindong Under a Parachute
Chapter IV

Kindong Down Under
From the earliest days of their resettlement in Australia in 1975, the Lao have endeavoured to maintain their distinct cultural heritage especially through the staging of the Lao traditional dances at social functions and wedding ceremonies. Lao weddings in Australia, however, underwent changes over the years – adoption of new practices, invention of new traditions, and adaptation to new exigencies of modernity, as well as to the changing social, cultural and political environment in which the Lao found themselves.

The theme of this chapter is wedding ceremonies held by the Lao communities in Sydney and Canberra, which while purported to be ‘traditional’, were in fact evolving and adapting to the requirements and exigencies of the new and alien land. The communities had to make use of whatever cultural tools were at their disposal: ritual paraphernalia and the expert knowledge of ‘the traditional way’. For the former, there was much sharing with and borrowing from each other, and for the latter, the community depended on their collective memory and the remembrance of some individuals, particularly the mophones.

As circumstances changed, Lao weddings underwent further changes. These environmental changes included: increased prosperity by members of the community; traditional utensils and materials became more readily commercially available; and relations with the homeland became better, allowing freer contacts between it and Lao diasporic communities. But, by the same token, these same environmental circumstances brought yet new adaptation, adoption of new ways and invention of new traditions which raises other questions. Is the diasporic community’s collective memory of the wedding ceremony reinforced or revived by the material changes and renewed contacts with the homeland again? Did newfound wealth and freedom in the

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1 I am using here the word ‘down under’ as a colloquial term to refer to Australia as a country, a place to live, and as a social milieu.
‘new land’ play any part in how the diasporic community held their ‘traditional’ wedding ceremony?

This chapter will discuss the evolution of Lao weddings in Australia in which my wife and I have been involved from the earliest days of Lao settlement in this country, specifically in Canberra and Sydney. The major part of the discussion will centre around Mayoura – her second marriage and the weddings she organised for her brother, son, daughter and niece as there is a strong thread of remembrance running through the performance of these weddings.

In Chapter I, mention was made of the mother of Mayoura, Mrs Bouaphanh Phoumivong and her wedding in the late 1930s in Laos. The weddings described in this chapter centre around Mayoura’s second wedding, those of her son Toh, her brother Tinh and her niece Chanh and that of Mayoura’s own daughter Vanh. These weddings represent a three-generation case study of Lao weddings that transcend temporal and spatial as well as cultural barriers. They exemplify the effects of memory on the performance of the Lao wedding, as well as the effects of the diasporic existence of the Lao people that brought on further changes to the wedding ceremony. Mayoura’s second marriage, to my brother, was a marriage between a widow and a divorced widower. Toh’s and Tinh’s weddings were between Lao persons who arrived in Australia as minors, while Chanh’s wedding was between a Lao person and an Englishman, and Vanh’s was between a Lao girl and a Lebanese Muslim man. They all had a ‘Lao traditional wedding ceremony’, hosted and organised by Mayoura. Some other weddings, in Sydney and Canberra, will also be described for comparison.

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2 Her eldest daughter, Vanh, married in a Lao ceremony on October 12 2002 in Canberra. She married a Lebanese man under a Muslim wedding ceremony, at the house of the groom’s parents in Sydney a month earlier. As the priest was also a registered marriage celebrant, a civil ceremony was also held at the same time. Her mother, Mayoura convinced her and her husband to have a ‘traditional’ Lao wedding ceremony as well. So it was held at Vanh’s parental home, in Canberra.
Early days

One of the weddings that I had been involved in in those early days of settlement in Australia was that of one of my own sisters, Thasniya (Nina). The wedding took place, in 1980, in San Isadore, near Wagga Wagga, where my eldest sister, Thipphaya, and her family were living. They had been sponsored by a church group to work on a farm on the misconception, albeit well meaning, that most Indochinese refugees were from a farming background.3

Nina was getting married to Saya Long, a Cambodian refugee who arrived in Australia by himself.4 They met during the many social functions in the Indochinese communities in Sydney. When they decided to get married, they came down from Sydney to ask my wife’s and my permission. There were none of the ‘traditional’ processes and rituals of using the go-between or the chaokhot loungta having the preliminary discussion. The decision to hold Nina’s wedding at our sister’s home even though she was not the eldest of the siblings was a desire to make the occasion as auspicious as possible. It was considered that our eldest brother, Songyod, being a widower and having remarried, was not as ‘auspicious’ a person as our sister who was a complete person – stable, happily married with offspring of her own.

The invitation card was a simple design and typed out on our electric typewriter. It was all in English, as we had no access to a Lao or a Cambodian typewriter, let alone a computer with Lao or Cambodian fonts. It was also a compromise as English was the common language for the two families. A small number of friends and family were invited.

3 Their stay in the area did not last long. Khamleck, her husband, was in fact a middle ranking public servant in Laos before they escaped. They later moved to Albury where he found a job in a factory manufacturing automotive gear, supplying car manufacturers. They still live in Albury to this day. For comments on the professional background of the early Indochinese refugees, see works by Nancy Viviani and by James Coughlan in the Bibliography.

4 Saya Long was undergoing training to be a fighter aircraft mechanic in a Thai air force base when Phnom Penh fell in 1975. Without being able to return home to his family, he sought refugee status and was accepted for settlement in Australia in 1976. Much later, he was able to re-establish contact with his family and has taken his own family back to Cambodia for visits.
On his side, Saya had invited some elders from the Cambodian community that he had befriended though his involvement in the Cambodian community. As I remember, and as confirmed by Nina and Saya, it was a simple wedding ceremony at the home of our sister who was our *in loco parentis*, as well as our *chaokhot loungta* in the Lao ritual sense. In the early days of diaspora the holding of an important ceremony at the houses of one’s older sibling, or relative, was common in the Lao community. For many Lao refugees, not only were they uprooted from their homeland, they were also torn away from their family home, the parental house where all family rituals and occasions were held. This parental home was their *habitus*, their comfort and familiar zone where guidance, assistance and advice from the older generation were always available.

The choice of day for the wedding was a compromise between the most auspicious day available and the convenience of a free weekend for the bride and groom as they were then working, as well as for the guests who had to travel from Sydney and Canberra. Most who came stayed in caravan parks as there were serious limitations to the usual Lao hospitality we could provide. But, more importantly, many older members of the communities did not make the trip. This deprived our wedding preparation of much of the knowledge and experience in ritual matters. So out of necessity the *soukhouane* was a simple one. The *phakhouane* was a conical shape *makbeng*, made of green cardboard paper and decorated with seasonal flowers. Porcelain dinner plates were substituted for silver bowls as containers for food and other paraphernalia around the *phakhouane*. There were certainly not many of these paraphernalia available then, and the silver Ô and *khanh* and the *mit sanak* were conspicuous by their absence.

The bride and groom dressed in the traditional wedding dresses, like those described earlier, albeit much less elaborate. My wife and I were able to lend them our own traditional costumes that were brought from Laos for us by an Australian friend at a later date than our own escape from Laos. In actual fact, our wedding costumes were for a long time much borrowed items within the Lao communities in Sydney and Canberra, being passed on from one wedding to another.
The proceeding began with the groom's procession that started from the house of a friend of my sister's sponsor. Upon arrival at the bride's parental house the groom was led by hand by a Lao female friend of the family to the *phakhouane*. The *soukhouane* was conducted by another male friend of the family who had been a *mophone* in Laos with a much shorter invocation than I heard at later weddings. Upon reflection, I suppose that was a case of all the old man could remember of the invocation as he did it from memory without any aid from any book, or else it was his 'usual' performance. There was a *somma* for the *chaokhot-loungta* comprised of the bride's older siblings and the Cambodian elders. The wedding was completed with lunch for all the guests. Nina and Saya later had a civil ceremony at the registry office in Canberra, and the date they regard as their 'wedding anniversary'.

A few years later, in October 1986, my youngest sister, Omethip's marriage was in a sense an 'improvement' on that of Nina's. Once again, the wedding ceremony took place not in the parental home but the house of a sibling. By this time, Nina, the sibling, and Saya her husband had established themselves as well known members of both Lao and Cambodian communities in Sydney. Their social circle had widened while at the same time the Lao community had grown with more refugees being resettled here. The pool of ritual knowledge and expertise had increased with the influx of older Lao refugees through family reunion.

Omethip was getting married to Khampane Phommachanh who arrived in Australia as a member of one of his aunt's family, with whom he was then staying. Most of his own family had resettled in Canada, with one brother left in Laos. Omethip and Khampane met through the many social and religious functions in the Lao community in Sydney. Again, as with the case of Nina, there was no go-between; but the two families did get together and had a preliminary discussion about the wedding.

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5 Unfortunately, all of the photos taken at Nina's wedding were either lost or damaged by the film processing company. All they had were the photos of the civil ceremony in Canberra.
The invitation card, see below, was designed by the betrothed themselves, using Lao traditional art as cover. The inside was printed in gold lettering in English. This invitation showed that the celebration would be held at the local civic hall in the evening. There was an insert in Lao language inviting some guests to participate in the *soukhouane* at the house of the bride’s sister in the morning of the same day. As was the social trend in those days among the Lao refugees, marriage was celebrated twice – with the Lao traditional *soukhouane* ceremony at the bride’s parental home and an evening reception in a hired function centre where one important ‘new’ feature - the signing of the marriage certificate – might also take place.

![Image](image_url)

**Picture IV-1:** The cover (bottom) of Omethip and Khampane’s wedding invitation card, using Lao tradition motif, and the text inside (top), in English. The card was printed with gold ink for auspiciousness. (Courtesy: Omethip Phommachanh)

On the eve of the wedding day, there was much of the usual activity at the bride’s home: the younger people busy preparing for the feast and the elders occupying...
themselves with the making of the *phakhouanes*. A room in Nina’s house, regarded as the ‘parental’ home of the bride, was set aside as the nuptial room for the betrothed. The nuptial bed was made up by a pair of auspicious ladies that evening, with the bedding bought by Omethip and Khampane themselves.

On the wedding day, the *phakhouanes* were already placed on a white crocheted tablecloth at a place chosen by the *mphone* so that the bride and groom would be facing the ‘auspicious’ direction for the *soukhouane*. There was no special decoration in the room, it was quite bare as the lounge and tables were removed to the outside yard to make room for the guests. The floor was covered with many large plastic mats for guests to sit on. The *phakhouanes* looked magnificent, albeit unusual.

![Picture IV-2: The *phakhouane* at Omethip’s wedding, with Omethip herself on the left of the *phakhouane*. Some elders are already sitting around, with Mrs Orady Souvannavong in the foreground. (Photo: Courtesy of Omethip Phommachanh).](image)

Each had three tiers: the flat large plateau forming the base, a silver-coloured aluminium bowl with uncooked sticky rice in which sat a tall silver *khanh* containing the *makbeng*. The *makbeng* was made of gold cardboard paper, rather than green that signified the ‘traditional’ banana leave. They were decorated not with *dok daoheuang* and *dok hak*, but with red and pink roses and carnations. On top of the *phakhouanes* there were posies of flowers with two long candles each. The *phakhouanes* were surrounded by traditional paraphernalia, with white cotton threads, a large gold-
coloured *khanh* containing numerous *bang* for the *somma* and bowls of assorted food and some boiled eggs.

Before the arrival of the groom our aunt, who was married to a Lao-Chinese, led the bride in the offering to the ancestors in the Chinese way. Instead of the Lao way of a miniature plateau of food, rice and drink being taken out to the courtyard for the guardian spirits of the household and the ancestors, this offering was laid out inside the house where the family altar was supposed to be, near the kitchen and facing the front door. There were plates of fruits, one whole small roast pig, food and rice and some drinks ("the favourite drinks of some of the ancestors"). During the offering, our aunt called upon the spirit of the ancestors to bear witness to the marriage, and to bestow blessings on the new couple. More importantly, she implored them ‘to welcome and accept’ the new in-law into the family.

Soon after, the groom’s procession, which started from the house of another sibling nearby, arrived at the front lawn where some relatives and friends of our family set up a ritual gate with two lady friends standing across the entrance holding the *Nak* belt (see Chapter I). The groom wore a white high collar jacket with gold buttons. Two long gold chains hung on each shoulder and criss-crossed at the front and back. He wore a deep purple *pha-hang-yao*, secured with a *Nak* belt. He carried a ceremonial sword in silver scabbard and a bag of his token belongings. He carried a *bang* of banana leaves containing some flowers and two lighted candles. A young friend was holding an umbrella over the groom’s head. The bride wore a white blouse with gold brocades with an embroidered collar; and a green woven silk *sin* with a woven

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6 She was my father’s half-sister. She grew up in a household headed by a Chinese father (my step grand father) and later married a half-Chinese. Her up-bringing and adult family life was therefore imbued with more Chinese than Lao ways. When I sponsored her and her family to resettle in Australia, she was the most senior and closest relative we have in Australia – thus she became the ‘head of our family’ by proxy and by respect and acceptance. As such, we deferred to her for most family occasions.

7 This seems somewhat contradictory and incongruent. Normally, in a Chinese marriage, the bride goes to live with the husband’s family. But, in the supposedly ‘Chinese’ sacrifice, the ancestors’ spirits were asked to welcome and accept the groom into the bride’s family, as was the Lao way.

8 This is the same belt as the one being used as the ‘ritual gate’. This belt is worn by a male only during these formal occasions. So, it would most likely be borrowed from a female relative.
border at the bottom that match the pattern of her sash. Her hair was done up in a chignon, decorated with strands of gold chains. The chignon was topped off with a pak-pin-klao and wore a few gold bracelets. There was the usual negotiation and bargaining at the ritual gate which were jovial and good-humoured, with the customary song and dance, drinking and bantering.

![Picture IV-3: The bargaining at the ritual gate at Omethip’s wedding. The two ladies in the middle were holding the Nak belt, as a barrier stopping the groom’s procession from entering the house. (Photo: Courtesy of Omethip Phommachanh).](image)

The process of the wedding followed the formula of the ‘traditional’ wedding described earlier, from the groom’s procession to the somma for the chaokhot loungta of both families. Following this ritual, the bride performed one more ritual. Being the youngest of the siblings who married before some older ones, Omethip had to perform a sort of somma for her older unmarried siblings. It was believed that if a younger sibling married before an older one, the former had to ‘somma’ the latter, so that it would not be a bad omen for the older sibling. The Lao called this ritual the phithi kheng, usually led by the mophone. The Lao word ‘kheng’ means ‘hard’ or ‘to strengthen’; it was believed that this ritual would help strengthen the fate of the older sibling so that they would not remain single for the rest of their
life. The *phakhouanes* and some paraphernalia were taken into the nuptial room. The wife of the *mophone* then led the newlyweds into their nuptial room where she helped them perform the *somma* to the guardian spirit of the nuptial room as man and wife. After another photo session, the newlyweds came out to share their hospitality with family and guests.

The evening reception for Omethip's wedding was held in the Cabramatta Civic Hall, then one of the most popular venues for social functions among the Indochinese communities. Guests were seated in tables of twelve around a large dance floor. Up on the stage was a Lao Western pop band. The feast for the night consisted of Lao dishes prepared by the families from home. As a concession for Australian guests, there were some Western dishes: beef ragout, bread and salad. The bridal table was set to the right of the stage. Upon arrival, guests were greeted by the bridal party - the bride and groom, and their *chaokhot-loungta*. After the welcome, guests deposited their envelopes of cash gift in a silver bowl and went directly to find their seat.9

*Picture IV-4: Typical hall decoration for a Lao wedding where the *soukhouane* is also held at the hall. This one is from the wedding of Mr Hounvailith Rattanong and Miss Chanthasone Vorabout, in Wellington, New Zealand. (Photo: Courtesy of Chanthasone Rattanong).*

9 It was, by that time, a common practice for guests to give cash gifts. It was believed that the cash would help the hosts pay for the celebration. Unlike Australian weddings, no ‘wedding registry’ was set up. Further, it was believed, among the Lao people, that since the newlyweds would live with the bride’s family for a time, they would need the cash more than any gift in kind, such as household utensils.
The reception got under way with the MC welcoming the guests, and asking the bridal party to ‘present’ themselves to the guests. Then the signing of the marriage certificate took place with a female Australian marriage celebrant conducting the ceremony. The emphasis was on the legal aspect of being married to conform with Australian laws. Later, I represented the family to address the gathering. The speech was both a thank you to the guests and advice for the newlyweds. Although I was not the eldest of the siblings, I was given this responsibility mainly because of my social standing in the Lao community and also my facility with both Lao and English. Thus, while respect for the aged is one of the characteristics of Lao social hierarchy, social standing and the perceived ability to represent the family (therefore to save the family’s ‘face’) is also an important consideration. The representative of the Lao association in Sydney was then invited to give a speech in which he emphasised the importance of keeping alive the cultural heritage of the community. The merriment proper started with the bride and groom dancing the Lao traditional lamvong\(^\text{10}\), to the sound of the Lao band. In the earlier days of Lao settlement, most Lao songs were from the pre-1975 era, partly because that was what the band members could remember, and partly because most songs under the new regime were so revolutionary that they were not accepted by Lao diasporic people.\(^\text{11}\)

Another trend in Lao weddings in Sydney and Canberra at that time, circa 1980s to early 1990s, was that the ‘whole’ wedding ceremony was held in the bride’s ‘parental’ home (including homes of older siblings or relatives). This ‘whole’ wedding ceremony included the Lao traditional soukhouane (where the bride and groom would have been in traditional wedding dresses), then the signing of the marriage certificate.

\(^{10}\) A popular and traditional dance where male and female dance in pairs in the same direction around the dance floor- thus the term lamvong – to dance in a circle.

\(^{11}\) At that time, there were a few Lao bands earning a living by performing at weddings and community fund raising functions. Most, if not all, band members had daytime jobs, and got together at weekends to perform or to practice. Many people, including Mayoura and Chanhla, were members of what the new regime called Kong Vannakhady – the performing troupe that performed revolutionary songs at village gatherings and political education sessions. Even at ‘re-education’ camps, these troupes were set up, trained and then performed for the inmates. Mayoura was a member of one of these troupes.
with an Australian marriage celebrant (where the bride remained in the traditional
deress, and the groom sometimes changed to the Western suit), followed by lunch and
merriment with a band playing a mixture of Lao and western pop songs in the open air
of the backyard. This trend is a commentary on the socio-economic situation of the
families involved, rather than anything pertaining to the ‘cultural’ or ‘traditional’ way
of holding a wedding. Many refugees found that, in following the demands of rituals
such as the wedding ceremony, the exigencies of diasporic existence meant that they
had to ‘make do’ with whatever was at hand. They invented solutions, expedient and
contingent, to demands of old traditions as they remembered them. They also readily
accepted the conditions and situations in which they found themselves, and the
resulting inadequacy of ritual paraphernalia, or the shortcomings in ritual performance.
Are these inadequacies and shortcomings being ‘remembered’ by the next generation,
and accepted by them as the benchmarks of the ‘traditional practices’? Who is going
to ‘correct’ these shortcomings and inadequacies, and on what basis? These issues will
become more apparent in the following discussion and description of weddings that
had strong connections to one family, that of Mayoura’s.

Picture IV-5: The newlyweds in the backyard of the parental home after their
soukhouna. The groom is dressed in western suit while the bride is in full Lao
traditional wedding attire. The band is being set up in the background. (Photo:
Courtesy of Thasniya and Saya Long).
Mayoura's Wedding

Mayoura comes from one of the prominent families of the Vientiane region. When she was nineteen, she married, on the recommendation of her family, a then rising police officer. They had five children. Her world came crashing down in 1975 when her husband, by then a Colonel in the Royal Police Force, was arrested and taken away to the re-education camp. She, and her children, escaped from Laos in 1979 after an unsuccessful attempt to search for and free her husband who was subsequently confirmed dead at the camp. In a refugee camp in Thailand she was joined by her younger brother, Tinh and two nieces, Chanh and Yod. They were all sponsored by a relative of her former husband to resettle in Australia and arrived in Canberra in early 1981. This was where she met her second husband.

Her second husband, Songyod, settled in Wollongong in 1979 where he found work after being sponsored by myself. He was a widower with two young daughters of his own. He had re-married just before being accepted for resettlement in Australia. But, things did not work out, and they separated a few years later. It was from his frequent visits to the author in Canberra that he met Mayoura during social functions in the Lao community.

As mentioned earlier, Mayoura was from an old established Vientiane family. By the time of her second wedding there was a large number of her relatives already settled in Sydney. She asked Song to ‘ask for her hand’ from her aunt and uncle in Sydney, whom she regarded as her chaokhot-loungta. The process became smoother when the aunt found out that Songyod was my older brother.

12 Interviews and discussion over a period of time. I thank her for her assistance and the loan of many photos and videos of weddings described in this chapter. But, while she was willing to talk about her second marriage, she declined to talk about her first, claiming that ‘it was like any other traditional wedding’ that the author had seen.
14 I have, as it were, established the family credentials – being married to Intong, one of whose aunts, Mrs Orady, is married to the older brother of Mayoura’s uncle. Further, my work in the Lao communities was well known, and somewhat highly regarded.
The wedding, in December 1984, was a simple family affair. No invitation cards were sent, only a few family members and close friends were invited by telephone and in person by Mayoura and Songyod themselves. It was held in the house of Mayoura's aunt in Sydney who stood in as her chaokhot-loungta. For Songyod, our aunt and uncle acted as his chaokhot-loungta. It is to be noted that even for a wedding of two previously widowed persons, the presence of the chaokhot-loungta is still mandatory. This is the 'traditional' respect for the elders and family ancestors. Both the bride and groom were dressed in simple everyday dress, with no special make-up or jewellery for the bride. The only addition to this dress was a phabieng for each of them, worn over the left shoulder.

![Picture IV-6: Bride and groom in very simple everyday dress, with the phabieng on their shoulder being the distinguishing feature. (Photo Courtesy of Mayoura)](image)

Although there was a single phakhouane, there were, however, no khanhmak nor the khanh kadong, as it was agreed that there would be no khadong, because the two of them were of equal social and cultural status, that is, both had previously been married and widowed. Other related rituals were also 'omitted'- there was no groom's procession, cleansing of the groom's feet, leading the groom and the bride to the soukhouane. The soukhouane was a simple 'traditional' ceremony to acknowledge the marriage of the two persons by friends and relatives. Another ritual omitted on this occasion was the tab hang-tab mai – the repairment of a widowed person, as the betrothed were regarded as of equal marital status. There was no reception, and therefore no speech. The only 'public' announcement of the marriage was when the

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15 Although on this occasion, there was no offering to the dead ancestors outside the house.
bride’s aunt gave her blessing and acknowledgement in a sort of public speaking voice.

The civil marriage ceremony took place in Canberra a week later. Again, this was a simple ceremony with only a few members of both families present. On Mayoura’s side, her uncle and aunt (who sponsored her) acted as witnesses and my wife and I acted as witnesses for my brother. During this civil ceremony Mayoura and Songyod exchanged wedding rings. There was a celebration with drinks, food and merriment with friends and other members of both families at Mayoura’s house afterwards. After the marriage, Songyod moved in to live with Mayoura and her family in Canberra.

The next wedding that Mayoura organised was for her youngest brother, Kittisack Phoumivong (Tinh) and Onchanh Khamsao, in Canberra on 6 May 1995. Tinh is the only one of her siblings to settle in Australia. When he decided to get married Mayoura took the responsibility to organise and host her brother’s wedding. Tinh had earlier met his future wife during the many festivities within the Lao community in Canberra. She was also a minor when she arrived in Canberra with her sister’s family as refugees, sponsored by the Lao Association of the ACT. Tinh’s mother, Mrs Bouaphanh, travelled from Laos and his eldest brother, Soukhanh, came from Cyprus to be with him. His mother took it upon herself to construct and decorate the *phakhouanes* for her son’s wedding. The shell of the *phakhouane* was a cone with five arms and five ‘tubes’ on top. These ‘tubes’ are actually long holes for flowers and candles. Making do with what was available at her disposal, Mrs Bouaphanh used green cardboard as a substitute for banana leaves. Some of the ‘auspicious’ leaves like *bai khoune* were not available, but *bai ngeun bai kham* were used. The young shoot of the sugar cane was used; but young banana shoots were not available. Flowers for decoration were subject to seasonal availability. Certainly, there were no *dok hak*. Marigolds, *dok daoheuang*, were however plentiful, as many Lao households began then to plant them.

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16 Soukhanh Phoumivong studied in France where he met and married a Cypriot girl long before the 1975 Great Political Divide. They have two daughters and are settled in Nicosia.
The wedding was held at the house of the bride’s sister who acted as her chaokhot-loungta. The bride and groom were dressed in traditional costumes. Acting on the wishes, advice and guidance from Tinh’s mother the wedding followed the ‘traditional’ format. The soukhouane was conducted by Mr Phouvong Phommaseisy, one of the few Lao in Canberra who were proficient as a mophone. I was asked to be the Master of Ceremony and the family representative. I gave the speech in my capacities as a family representative and as president of the Lao association. The reception buffet lunch was organised in the backyard with a parachute borrowed from a friend in Sydney providing much needed shade. There was a small band to provide entertainment and merriment for the occasion.

Mouksamouth Phengsi-aroun (Toh) is Mayoura’s eldest son, and the first of her offspring to be married. He married Sisouk Rajbandhit (Souk) in Canberra on 12 March 1994. As a proud mother Mayoura organised her son’s wedding. Like Tinh and Onchanh, Toh and Souk met during the many festivities and functions in the Lao community in Canberra. Souk was a minor who arrived in Canberra with her brother and sister as refugees. Her older sister, Naly, had the previous year married a Vietnamese man, also in Canberra, in a Christian white wedding ceremony.

As befitting the wedding of her firstborn son, Mayoura consulted the mophone about the most auspicious day. Once the day had been set, invitations were sent out for both the soukhouane ceremony and the evening reception in one of the more popular Chinese restaurants in Canberra. As the bride-to-be was then living with her sister, she would move in to live with her husband’s family after the wedding and the soukhouane would be held at the groom’s parental home. The decision was taken mainly because there were no elders in Souk’s family. Although this decision was not usual, I had witnessed another wedding where the same thing took place.
The wedding took place in Vientiane in April 2001.\textsuperscript{17} The \textit{soukhouane} ceremony was held at the home of the groom’s parents because the bride’s parents’ house was in a very hard to get to area of town. For the ceremony, the groom had to move out of the house and begin his procession from a road junction two blocks away. It was interesting to also observe another incident before the procession began. It was originally planned to move down the road to the north of the house, but when it was discovered that the groom’s procession would have to pass a house where there was a death in the family, the whole procession then moved to another location to the south of the house where the wedding was to take place in order to preserve the auspiciousness of the occasion. Having thus moved, the groom’s procession then proceeded without further hitch.\textsuperscript{18} At this wedding, the bride also moved in to live with her husband’s family.

A week before Toh’s wedding there was an intimate ‘engagement’ ceremony. At this function, Souk had asked her bachelor brother and her aunt and uncle from Sydney to be her \textit{chaokhot-loungta}. On Toh’s side, his mother and step-father and my wife and I were his \textit{chaokhot-loungta}. Apart from a discussion over details of the forthcoming wedding, the two families confirmed with the betrothed their firm intention to be married. While there was a semblance of a traditional ‘engagement’ ritual (see Chapter I), the proceedings did not replicate the whole process. While there were a \textit{khanhmak} and a \textit{kanh khadong}, no candles were lit while the discussion took place. There was only one silver bowl containing the rings. Once the ‘negotiation’ was done, the two young persons exchanged engagement rings. As usual, the proceedings were followed by the sharing of meals between the two families and friends.

For Toh’s wedding, Mayoura again used the basic construction of the \textit{phakhouane} that her mother, Mrs Bouaphanh, had made during her last visit. These were similar to

\textsuperscript{17} I travelled to Vientiane in April 2001 as guest of the Lao Government to attend the 7th National Congress of the Lao Front for National Construction. The wedding was held at the house opposite my brother-in-law’s house; and being good neighbours, we were invited to the wedding.

\textsuperscript{18} This ‘taboo’ of the groom’s procession passing a house where mourning was taking place, or even if the groom’s procession crossed path with a funeral procession, was confirmed for me by both the mother of the groom and the \textit{mophone}, to whom I spoke after the \textit{soukhouane} ceremony.
those used at Tinh’s and later at Chanh’s weddings, but in green and white. None of
the traditionally auspicious leaves were available, so the phakhounanes were decorated
mostly with the other auspicious flower, dok daoheuang, marigolds brought as gifts by
some friends. Interspersed among these marigolds were plastic dok hak on skewers.
At the top of the phakhounanes, were bang containing some rose and white carnations
and two long candles. The use of plastic flowers, especially dok hak, was a novel idea
that was beginning to catch on. A Lao lady, Mrs Lab Khantavongsa who settled in
Minnesota, USA, suggested the idea when she visited her brother, Lanoi (Chanhla’s
ex-husband) in Canberra. She explained that in winter in Minnesota, when flowers
were scarce, the Lao people there had to adapt. To decorate the phakhouane they
found that plastic flowers and even popcorn on skewers looked acceptable for the
occasion. The look and the auspiciousness associated with dok hak was sufficient
reason for Mayoura to overcome the plastic, therefore fake, nature of the decoration.
Thus, there is a continuation of memory across three generations – from grandmother
to grandson embodied in the construction of the phakhouane and the performance of
the wedding, although there was a compromise in the acceptance of plastic flowers.

Next to the phakhounanes, apart from the usual wedding ritual paraphernalia, was a
silver khanh with the bang for the somma. Instead of the marigold or the dok hak,
these bang had in them two short yellow candles and เวน สวนีนิต dok Sam Phanh Pi
(which means ‘the flowers that lasted three thousand years’), which are synonymous
with longevity. As the soukhouane was to be at the house of the groom’s parents both
the bride and groom were helped to dress in their nuptial room by ‘auspicious’ ladies,
among them were my wife, Chanhla and Souk’s aunt. The bride and groom were
dressed in traditional costumes. Some of these costumes were borrowed from
relatives, not only because these items were hard to get, but for reasons of
auspiciousness. To borrow items for one’s wedding costume from an auspicious
person, it is believed that the auspiciousness would ‘rub off on oneself’.  

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19 I am pleased to say that for Toh’s wedding, my wife and I had lent them my purple Pha Hang Yao,
and some gold jewellery for the bride’s hairdo, as well as the sword and some silverware. For our own
Before the *soukhouane*, an offering made to the guardian spirit of the kitchen led by the bride’s aunt, with a variation: the bride and groom performed this offering together. There were no lit candles, the bride and groom just put their hands on the gas stove while the aunt called upon the guardian spirit to bless the betrothed. There was no individual *soukhouane* for either the bride or the groom. Neither were there a groom’s procession and the associated rituals at the ‘ritual gate’ and the washing of the groom’s feet. The bride and groom were instead led out from their nuptial room together by one of Toh’s aunts. The groom had a *bang* with a lit candle in his hand and a sword on his shoulder, but not the token bag of possessions. Upon their arrival at the *phakhouanes* Toh lit the candles on top of the *phakhouanes* assisted by his aunt. Without the groom’s procession, Mayoura had the *khanh khadong* with her all the while that she was near the *phakhouanes*. Once the bride and groom were seated, Toh’s parents handed over the *khadong* to Souk’s chaokhot-loungta. The bride’s family accepted this *khadong* with Souk’s uncle acting on behalf of the family, announcing that this was part of the *kha-nam-nom*.

The next procedure was something I had not witnessed before in a wedding. Chanhla, representing the families, ‘handed over’ the *phakhouanes* to the *mophone*, Mr Phouvong Phommaseisy, and asked him to perform the wedding, *soukhouane*, wished for his performance to be blessed with potency and auspiciousness. She did this by tying a white cotton thread around the *mophone*’s wrist. At other weddings I had seen an elder tying the wrist of the *mophone* while saying their blessings, prior to him performing the *soukhouane* ceremony. At yet another wedding a failed attempt was made to tie the *mophone*’s wrist, but this attempt was stopped by someone commenting that it was not appropriate because the *mophone* was the most pure and most knowledgeable and experienced, more than anyone present, to perform the *soukhouane*. The *mophone* accepted the task and proceeded with the ceremony.

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wedding. Intong borrowed the brocaded collar for her wedding blouse from a princess known to her parents; and I was given the very same purple *Pha Hang Yao* by her mother as gift.
I have since discussed this incident with Chanhl. According to her, the *phakhouane* should be ‘handed over’ to the *mophone* before he could perform the ritual of *soukhouane*. Whilst the *mophone* had been asked (invited or paid) by the host to conduct the *soukhouane*, he could not assume control and ‘ownership’ of the *phakhouane* without being specifically invited to do so, and this handing over was such an invitation. According to her, it is a similar process to the construction of a *Wat*, a Buddhist temple, by a group of villagers. Until, and unless, there was a proper ceremony to ‘hand it over’ to a body of monks, no monk could be appointed ‘abbot’ of the *Wat*. Chanhl told me that the practice of ‘handing over’ the *phakhouane* to the *mophone* was ‘the tradition’ in her village, in Ban Paklay, Sayaboury. She agreed that not all the *soukhouanes* she had attended had this ritual. It could be a result of either failing collective memory or the convenience of the hosts, regional variations of the practice, or all of the above.

The *soukhouane* ceremony followed the same formula as other weddings. At its conclusion Khamleck, my brother-in-law, acting as an elder of the family, was the first to tie a white cotton thread on the *mophone*. The *mophone* was the first to tie the blessed thread on the bride and groom with more blessings. After this, the bride and
groom exchanged wedding rings. The mophone reminded the groom should be the first to put the ring on the bride. This mophone seemed to have adapted to the Western way of having the bride and groom exchanging wedding rings, even at a soukhouane ritual. After this exchange, the bride and groom turned to face the gathering, with their back to the phakhouane, to have their wrists tied by guests. The first to do so was Mayoura. She tied a gold bracelet on the daughter-in-law, instead of the white thread from the phakhouane. Even though this bracelet was not ‘blessed’ by the ritual, it was what Mayoura wanted to do to show her love and affection for her new daughter-in-law and also to welcome her into the family.

After a long session of wrist tying and without turning back to face the phakhouanes, the mophone moved around to lead the two in the ritual of sharing of the ritual egg. He peeled one egg, cut it lengthwise, and kneaded some of the yoke together with some cooked sticky rice into two small balls. As instructed by the mophone, Toh had his arm under that of Souk while they fed each other a mouthful of rice and egg. This symbolised the support the husband was to provide to the wife. At other weddings, the bride was instructed to have her arm underneath, in a gesture of support for the groom. Then more tying of the white cotton threads on the newlyweds by friends followed which was interrupted by the ritual of phaiLao — the bride and groom had their palms upturned resting on the khanh somma — they shared a drink of what was left of the whiskey from the phai lao.

After the phakhouanes were given back to the newlyweds with more blessings by the mophone, Souk then performed the phithi kheng-ai for her older brother because she got married before he did. Afterwards, the newlyweds performed the somma for their chaokhot-loungta. Before the somma, however, the mophone gave his advice to the newlyweds, stressing the duties of wife and husband towards each other.

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20 Refer to Omethip’s wedding for discussion of this ritual.

21 This is in accordance with the traditional the Heet Phoua Khong Mia (Traditional Duties of Husband and Wife).
The *mophone* led the newlyweds through ritual. While Toh was holding the *khanh somma*, Souk handed the *bang* to the *chaokhot-loungta*, beginning with her new parents-in-law followed by other elders. There was a long photo session with family and friends. Finally, the *phakhouanes* were taken into the nuptial room; the first was taken by Souk’s aunt and uncle from Sydney; the second one by Mayoura’s relatives from Brisbane. The newlyweds were led into the nuptial room by Toh’s great aunt. She held the bride’s hand with the groom walking behind them. There was a long photo session inside the room while outside the guests were invited to have lunch.

While the guests were having lunch, the bride and groom changed from the traditional Lao wedding costumes into white western wedding dress complete with veil and bouquet and had a long photo session in the nuptial room. After this session, they were driven by Toh’s brother in a car nicely decorated with ribbon in Western wedding style to have their photos taken at some of Canberra’s tourist spots. This was the bride and groom’s decision. According to Souk, she saw her sister’s white wedding and it looked good. So she also wanted to have a white wedding, or at least some photos dressed in western white wedding dress. It was her personal whim with no regard to the implications for the ‘traditional’ Lao wedding, nor with any concern about the meaning of the whole episode. The acquiescence on the part of the families is indicative of both the acceptance of the inevitability of the change of tradition and the shift in power relations in family dynamics.

The evening reception for Toh’s wedding was at a Chinese restaurant. Guests were welcomed by the bridal party. After this greeting, they proceeded to a table where they signed a red tablecloth (provided by the restaurant as a souvenir) and deposited their envelops of cash gifts in a silver *khanh*. The evening celebration proceeded in a ‘traditional’ format: presentation of the bridal party, speeches, a toast to the newlyweds, dinner, the newlyweds opened the dance floor with a *lamvong*, and then merriment for all.

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22 Discussion with Souk and Toh in Canberra, December 2000.
The next wedding organised by Mayoura was that of her niece, Chanh Phoumivong (Jane) and Simon Hewlett on 3 March 1996 in Canberra. Jane and her sister came to Australia as refugee minors in the care of her aunt, Mayoura. Jane met Simon, her future husband, through social and sporting activities at the Australian National University, Canberra, where she was working in an administrative position, and Simon, an Englishman, had a post doctoral position at the University. They were first married in a Christian ceremony in January 1996 in Kent, England where Simon’s family still lives. None of Jane’s family was at this wedding.

Jane decided to organise a Lao wedding with her friends and family in Canberra. She contacted her aunt, Mayoura, to prepare for the wedding. It was her decision, and fully supported by Simon, to have a Lao wedding. According to Jane she had always envisaged that she would have a Lao ‘traditional’ wedding because “she is a Lao person, and wants to keep the Lao culture and do things Lao”. The decision to have it in Canberra, and not in Portland, USA where her mother lives, was also hers, because Canberra was where she grew up and where most of her friends and colleagues lived. She informed her mother and other family members in Portland. She had sometime earlier visited her mother when she was given a Lao ‘traditional wedding dress’ that her mother had previously acquired for all her daughters. Her mother and an aunt and her husband came for Jane’s Lao wedding in Canberra.

While Jane wanted a Lao traditional wedding the ceremony became a compromise between tradition and expediency. As Jane and Simon were already married, it was decided that there was no need for a ‘full-scale’ wedding ceremony. The main purpose for the function was, as mentioned before, for Jane’s friends and family to share in and acknowledge her new marital status and for Jane to fulfil her wish of having ‘a Lao traditional wedding’ for herself. Therefore, many rituals associated with weddings

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2 Interview with Chanh Phoumivong, Canberra 4 September 2002. My thanks to Chanh and Simon for the opportunity to use their story for this thesis, and for the loan of the photos and video of their wedding. Unfortunately, although invited, my wife and I were not at the wedding, as we were in Laos for the funeral of my father-in-law.
were not performed: no groom’s procession, no cleansing of the groom’s feet, no somma of the kitchen or the main staircase, nor were there individual soukhouane for the bride and groom. While there was a soukhouane, the bride and groom were led to the phakhouanes together by an auspicious lady (in this case Thiphaya, my sister). The phakhouanes were in fact those made by Mrs Bouaphanh Toh’s wedding earlier. The decoration was very similar with marigolds the predominant flowers. The paraphernalia around the phakhouanes indicated improvement in the socio-economic situations of the family.

The soukhouane was conducted by Loung Sitha Sikhounlabout, the father of Mayoura’s daughter-in-law who had been a mophone in his village in Pakse, Southern Laos. After this ritual he was the first to tie the white cotton threads on the bride and groom, then family and friends followed. After a while, the mophone ‘returned’ the phakhouanes to the newlyweds with his blessings, as an elder relative and as a mophone. He then led them in the sharing of the ritual egg. An egg was peeled, not by the mophone, but by a lady friend who proceeded to ‘organise’ this sharing under the mophone’s instruction. Afterwards the mophone led the newlyweds in the ritual of somma when he again bestowed his blessings on the new couple. As there was no nuptial room, the phakhouanes were simply moved to the far corner of the room. The newlyweds were led from the room into the ‘nuptial room’. This was in fact a ‘mock ritual’ because, as shown in the video, as soon as they were outside the room where the soukhouane had been, they returned immediately to mingle with guests. There were no marquees or parachutes. Food and drink tables were set up under the covered pergola and in the carport. Many of the older guests remained in the lounge room to have their lunch.

24 According to Intong, and many other Lao ladies, this is quite a usual practice for a Lao mother: that she accumulates things in preparation for the daughters’ wedding day. Wedding dresses, especially the sin, is normally the first thing accumulated.

25 I had met him and his wife earlier when he conducted a soukhouane for his newborn grand daughter. He and his wife were on a visit to their son and daughters in Canberra. He brought with him an old printed copy of a collection of Lao customs, and incantations for various soukhouanes. He generously and readily shared his knowledge of Lao traditions with whoever was interested. I am grateful to him for a copy of his ‘treasured’ collection of invocations.
The kindong for Vanh, Mayoura’s eldest daughter, was an even simpler affair than Jane’s wedding. As mentioned, Vanh was already married in a Muslim and Australian civil ceremony in Sydney, it was Mayoura’s decision to hold the kindong for her daughter in Canberra for family and friends to share in and acknowledge the new marital status. While, there was no individual soukhouane for the bride and groom, nor were there somma of the kitchen or the main staircase, there were a groom’s procession and the cleansing of the groom’s feet. The phakhouanes were similar to those of Jane’s wedding, having used the same makbeng as basic construction. The soukhouane was conducted by Loung Bouapha Khanhanouvong, another mophone in Canberra. After the soukhouane, there was no leading the newlyweds into the nuptial room, the phakhouanes were moved to the corner of the lounge room, and the newlyweds just went out to the yard and mingle with guests having lunch. This kindong epitomises the new shift in the balance of power within the diasporic Lao family: the younger generation wanted to ‘do their own things’ while the older generation wanted to have the ‘traditional’ ceremony for their offspring.

**New Boundaries for Old Traditions**

While the Lao weddings in Australia discussed in this chapter were low key and most were home based, the next two weddings, those of Fongsamouth (Mout) and of Mimi, show signs of the Australian Lao community coming of age as a community, setting new boundaries for Lao wedding ‘traditions’. Mimi’s marriage was what society gossip would call a good match; the connection of two politically prominent families, two young and beautiful betrothed and a ceremony that was as close as possible to the ‘tradition’. Furthermore, this being held at the Sydney Town Hall, was the first Lao wedding held outside the ‘ethnic boundary’ of the Indochinese enclaves of the Cabramatta/Fairfield area. The same could be said about Mout’s wedding; a love match of two young and beautiful betrothed, a ceremony that was as close as possible to the ‘tradition’, and a reception held at the Grand Ball Room of the Sydney Sheraton.
Wentworth Hotel. Further, this was a match between a Lao Buddhist and a Lao Catholic family – with no Christian church wedding.\textsuperscript{26}

The wedding of Nanthanary (Mimi) Souvannavong and Phinithsay Oudomvilay on December 30 1989, while retaining many of the ‘traditional’ features, also pioneered new ground. This was the wedding, at least in Australia, in which I witnessed the \textit{phakhouane} used for the groom’s individual \textit{soukhouane} at his house being carried in the groom’s procession to the bride’s house, albeit by two young men. Most of its journey was by car and was restarted on foot only two blocks away from the bride’s house. The \textit{phakhouane} was also of a different design from those described elsewhere in this thesis. While the banana leaves were used in the construction of the \textit{makbeng} and the arms, the \textit{phakhouane} consisted of three tiers on top of the plateau itself; thus, a silver \(\mathcal{O}\) and two silver \textit{khanh} with the \textit{makbeng} inside the topmost smaller \textit{khanh}. The floral decoration was predominantly roses of various colours interspersed with baby-breaths and the white cotton threads on skewers. The two candles were already in place, being tied to skewers and then tied to the top of the \textit{makbeng} with more roses. Around the base of the \textit{phakhouanes}, apart from the obvious signs of family wealth in the form of many paraphernalia in silver, there were two \textit{khanh somma} and two boiled chickens on dinner plates.

As mentioned above, the reception for Mimi’s wedding was held at the Sydney Town Hall. This was also a first: a Lao wedding reception being held as far socially and spatially as possible from the ethnic enclaves of the Cabramatta and Fairfield areas. Further, while there had been classical dances performed in honour of the betrothed, at her wedding, Mimi, an accomplished dancer herself, also took part in the performance. Mimi’s wedding was the beginning of the trend of having a paid MC to conduct the proceedings at the reception.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{26} It was interesting to note that when Yo’s older brother married a Christian Chinese girl a year later, he had both the Lao traditional wedding ceremony and the Christian church wedding, with an evening reception in a Chinese restaurant in Sydney’s China Town.

\textsuperscript{27} There was some critical gossip from the community later about this. Not only that the MC – a singer of some repute from the old regime, did not have English competence commensurate with the prestige of the occasion, but also the fact that he was paid went against the Lao way of helping each other out.
The wedding between Fongsamouth (Mout) Souvannavong and Thepradith (Yo) Sylaprany in Sydney in December 21 1991 was, if anything, exemplary of the Lao ‘traditional’ wedding ceremony. We met Mout’s mother, Mrs Orady Souvannavong in Chapter I. Since her adolescence when her first experience with a Lao traditional wedding was carrying the groom’s phakhouane to the bridal house, Mrs Orady has become the pillar of Lao society, both in the old regime and in the diasporic Lao community in Sydney. Thus, the wedding of her youngest daughter was expected to be the benchmark for Lao society.

Certainly, from the point of view of processes and procedures of the wedding ceremony, they were all ‘correct’. Her family wealth ensured that the paraphernalia of the wedding ceremony were all proper. As many Lao mothers would do, Mrs Orady prepared for her daughter’s wedding day by acquiring many of the traditional wedding costumes and other items of jewellery.28 The wedding was held at the bride’s parental home in Eastwood, NSW, where the bride lives with her parents and two older single brothers. As discussed in Chapter I, one important undertaking before the wedding day was that the groom and his family would assist in repairing the bride’s parental house to ensure that it was safe and presentable on the big day. In the case of Mout’s wedding, a whole new storey was added. The groom, being an architect, had a big influence in the design and the construction of the additional storey.

The phakhouanes for Mout’s wedding were in the style of cut-off tops and up-turned bangs inserted at the top, where flowers and two long candles were set in place. But, the floral decoration was hardly ‘traditional’, a pragmatic compromise between the non availability of the dok hak and the bride’s personal choice. The flowers used were predominantly roses, carnations, and baby breaths – the bride’s favourite. Another feature of this wedding that was different from other weddings was that the bride sat in

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28 She began collecting long before the 1975 Great Divide, at about the same time when she prepared for the proposed coronation of the King of Laos (which never took place). When the family escaped from Laos, she left behind many of the costumes she prepared for the coronation, but she managed to bring out the ones for Mout’s eventual wedding.
wait for the arrival of the groom and was not led in after the arrival of the groom. After this, other rituals proceeded smoothly.

After a quite lengthy session of *phoukkhene*, the newlyweds moved outside to a marquee in the front yard to sign the marriage certificate. The Australian marriage celebrant conducted a simple, albeit long, ceremony complete with the reading of some lessons, the exchange of wedding rings and vows. At the completion of this ceremony the newlyweds moved back inside the house for the *somma* and the ‘return of the *phakhouanes*’. It was not clear why the *somma* was held after the signing of the certificate. One consideration was that they were now regarded as man and wife in both Lao custom and Australian law.

After the *somma*, the newlyweds were led into the nuptial room. They waited on the bed while the *phakhouanes* and other paraphernalia were brought into the room by auspicious couples. While the bride and groom had a photo session with friends and family inside the house, guests were invited to a lunch inside two marquees. The evening reception was held outside the ethnic enclaves of the Cabramatta/Fairfield areas, at the Sydney Sheraton Wentworth Hotel. It followed the pattern of other receptions already described, with the inclusion of a performance of Lao classical dances in honour of the newlywed by some of the bride’s friends.

From local civic halls and restaurants to the Sydney Town Hall and Sheraton Hotel, the Lao people began to venture outside their ‘comfort’ zone when holding their wedding receptions. Function halls, operated by Italian or Lebanese entrepreneurs in Liverpool, Marrickville or Guildford, or even Chinese restaurants in China Town, were used as venues for Lao wedding receptions in Sydney. There were some drawbacks for the hosts in using some of these venues, namely the distance to travel and the catering. Most venues could only cater with Chinese banquets or western cuisine. Therefore, these weddings did not have one ‘traditional’ feature, Lao food, especially the auspicious dish of *larp*, although most weddings still have a lunch feast for guests at the bride’s house where they would have the *larp*. 
Another trend, apart from the use of paid professional Master of Ceremony, was the emergence of professional make-up artists who also hired out wedding costumes for the bride and groom. They came with a complete package of costumes, imitation jewellery, and make-up for the bride and groom. Many of them operated by word of mouth only, and did not have full-scale advertising. What these people could not provide was the various cultural items and paraphernalia for the rituals, and the expert advise on the procedures and processes of the wedding ceremony. These were still left in the domain of the elder relatives of the betrotheds and of the mophones.

But, as the community expanded and prospered, and as contacts with the homeland became easier, the nature of the Lao ‘traditional’ wedding ceremony took on new adaptations. Mout’s and Mimi’s weddings set the standard and pattern for many a wedding that followed. So much so that the next progression was wedding receptions organised by Chinese restaurants as a package. Food, band, and more importantly invitation cards and wedding cakes were all provided as a package by the restaurants. These cards were in the Chinese style of red card with gold lettering, with hardly a Lao word on them. The convenience of packages provided by restaurants and function venues supplanted much of the Lao traditional communal spirit of helping each other.

Picture IV-8: Example of a new style Lao wedding invitation, supplied by a restaurant. Note the predominant red colour and the Chinese characters. (Photo from the author’s own collection).
Concluding remarks
The weddings discussed in this chapter are examples of different aspects of Lao society and different aspects of the social memory of Lao people in Sydney and Canberra, and how they perform their wedding ceremonies. They also illustrate that as the communities progressed and settled into their land of refuge, differentiations in social and economic status began to be encoded in the staging of the wedding ceremony and celebrations. Social levelling embedded in the ‘refugee status’ has over the years of settlement been replaced by differentiations between Lao refugees based now on educational level, social class, employment status and the size of one’s residence.

Since the early days of resettlement in Australia the Lao people tried, and largely succeeded, in maintaining their cultural heritage while trying to fit in with the requirements and exigencies of their new land. The most obvious sign of this success was, and has been, the holding of their ‘traditional’ wedding ceremony. The Lao realised theirs was a unique ceremony, especially when held in the Australian environment and against the background of ‘communist suppression’ in their homeland.

The success of the Australian Lao diaspora in preserving their traditional wedding ceremony has been premised on two factors: the collective memory of the older generation of Lao refugees and the acquiescence of the younger generation to please the former and play their part in this preservation of their tradition. The traditional Lao sense of hospitality and helping each other means that in many cases the staging of the traditional wedding was a success. But, as discussed in this chapter, the exigencies of new life in new land mean also that this particular Lao tradition has to adapt and re-invent itself. The theme of the ‘inventions of new traditions’ will be revisited in more detail in Chapter VII.
Chapter V

Kindong Under the Stars and Stripes
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Kindong under the Stars and Stripes

In Chapter IV, this thesis discussed Lao weddings held in Lao diasporic communities in Australia, Sydney and Canberra, where the community’s desire to preserve the cultural heritage had to be delicately balanced against the demands and exigencies imposed by the new and alien land of their refuge. This balance forced the community to compromise the remembrance of things Lao cultural with the need to invent new traditions by borrowing features from other ethnic communities the Lao now live with. It is expected that Lao weddings in the USA, another large Lao diasporic settlement, will display similar features.

The weddings discussed in this chapter were researched through interviews, viewing of videos and the author’s own participation in one of the weddings. They were held by Lao people living in the Greater Washington DC area, and in the San Diego area. In the Washington area, my hosts Daosadeth and Phousacksith Chanthapanya, and Kotkham and Somsanith Khamvongsa\(^1\) were also my sources of information, valuable contacts and inspiration. Indeed, Kotkham and Somsanith provide the link in the memory of most of the weddings discussed in this chapter. They were the organisers and hosts of Daosadeth’s wedding, the source of information that put Toui and Tho back together, involved in the Sramany’s wedding, and of course organised and hosted the wedding for their own daughter, Vagnola. Their observations and remembrance of the development of Lao weddings in the USA were invaluable to this chapter.

\(^1\) Daosadeth is my wife’s younger brother, and Kotkham her older sister. I have known them since I married Intong and moved in to live with her family in Vientiane before 1975. Both Kotkham and Somsanith had strong connections with the Americans in Vientiane prior to the 1975 Great Political Divide. Somsanith had worked with the Lao American Association in Vientiane after his studies in the US; and Kotkham worked with the Thai Embassy in Vientiane for a long time. When they left Laos in 1975, they settled in the Washington area where Somsanith was employed in the Lao section of the US radio station Voice of America. In San Diego, my hosts, Toui and Tho Tran, were more than willing to put up with me and my interviews. They introduced me to, and drove me to talk to, other people who also shared their experiences and knowledge of Lao weddings with me. I thank them all sincerely for their assistance and contributions.
On the surface, there were similarities between the diasporic Lao communities in Australia and in the USA in the ways the Lao wedding ceremonies were staged from the early days of their settlement to the present. In the early days, although the community's intention was to hold a wedding ceremony as a political statement against the regime from which they fled, as well as to preserve their tradition, they also had to be satisfied with meeting the basic cultural requirements of Lao traditional weddings as they remembered them when they left Laos. This meeting of the basic requirements was largely due to the unavailability of ritual paraphernalia of the traditional wedding, and the lack of expertise and knowledge in the community's collective memory concerning some of the procedures and processes of the ceremony.

As time passed the Lao weddings in the USA became more 'traditional' as they did in Australia. Many factors contributed to this change: increasing prosperity of the community (thus the size and extravagance of the wedding celebration); more and more traditional ingredients and artefacts became commercially available; the communities settled in better in their adopted milieu, and the improved relationships with the homeland, facilitating the acquisition of ritual paraphernalia from 'traditional' sources. Further, as more Lao refugees settled in the area it meant a proportionate increase of members of the older generation, thus the pool of ritual knowledge and experiences also grew. But, as will be seen, there are inventions of new traditions that took place in the Lao American weddings that make them stand out as uniquely Lao-American.

*Early Days in a New Land*

One of the earliest weddings in the USA that I can trace was that of Daosadeth himself. Daosadeth married his wife, Phousacksith, not long after he migrated from France to live near his sister, Kotkham who was then in Alexandria, Virginia.²

² From interviews and discussions with Daosadeth and Phousacksith at their residence at Stirling, Virginia during my stay with them in May-June 2000. They now have three teen-aged offsprings. Before settling into this current residence, they had in fact moved around with Daosadeth’s employment (he was with the Four Seasons Hotels Chains for a while) quite a bit: Los Angeles, Philadelphia and Baltimore. He is now the Executive Housekeeper at the Metropolitan Club of the City of Washington, Washington DC.
Daosadeth had escaped from Laos in 1975 not long after Intong and I. He went first to settle in France hoping that his legal and administration studies in Laos would assist him in his settlement. But, after long deliberation and discussion, he took up Kotkham’s suggestion that a life in the USA promised far more than the one in France. He moved to the USA in 1977 and stayed with Kotkham’s family in the initial stage. He met his wife through family connections and common community activities. Somsanith and one of Phousacksith’s aunts were then working together at the Lao language section of the Voice of America Radio. Both families were also supporting a Thai Buddhist temple, while working towards establishing a Lao temple of their own. At this initial stage of the Lao community’s settlement, young Lao people still met each other through the ‘old Lao channels’, that is family connections and community activities. This is another characteristic of the Lao community in the early days of settlement that was also evident in Lao communities in Australia. The community seemed to be close knit, with circles of friends formed by people who previously knew each other, or people who shared similar employment. In later years, it was different with birthday parties, dance parties and disco outings replacing these ‘traditional channels’.

Daosadeth’s wedding was a simple ceremony endeavouring to retain as many of the ‘traditional’ elements as possible. He was dressed in the ‘traditional’ pha hang yao with an open-necked long sleeve white shirt. Allowance was made for a woollen cardigan as the wedding was in winter. He had a chequered phabieng on his left shoulder. After the usual rituals of cleansing the groom’s feet and leading the groom to the phakhouane (these scenes were not shown on the video, but confirmed by Daosadeth), there were three Thai monks chanting the blessing of the phakhouane.³ The monks did not stay long however. They were there early in the day for the alms offering ceremony. Part of this offering was a morning meal and a collection of items of personal use in a plastic bucket with a hang of candles, joss sticks, flowers and a cash donation – Dana from the family. The monks blessed the phakhouanes and the

³ It is very possible that the chant was the Parittamangala Suttra – the blessing of supreme auspiciousness.
gathering crowd after their meal and left soon afterward. According to Somsanith, the monks were invited to bless the *phakhouanes*, and the ceremony as a whole, because at that time the Lao community did not have a proficient *mophone* to conduct the ceremony. The family regarded the wedding ceremony as an important step in the life of a young man—a rite of passage—that should not be done without being blessed in some traditional way. The monks' blessing bestowed auspiciousness and other wishes on the occasion, and on the newlyweds; a more than adequate substitution, in the mind of the participants, for the *mophone*'s blessings at a *soukhouane* ritual[^4].

However, after the monks' departure, the wedding ceremony resumed with one of the elderly guests acting as *mophone*. According to Daosadeth, the whole ceremony, while following all the procedures and processes of the wedding rituals as much as possible, lasted a bit less than an hour. This was mainly because the number of guests, and friends and family, was not great; so, the most time consuming process, the *phoukkhene*, did not take much time at all. There was a buffet lunch for the guests, prepared in-house, and served in the dining and lounge rooms. There was a sort of evening reception also in the house. Daosadeth, and his friends, who had formed a band, provided entertainment for friends and family members[^5].

Another wedding that had a direct involvement of Buddhist monks I witnessed was one between Phonesavath and Veunekham, held at the groom's parental house in Maryland on 13 May 2000. Somsanith and Kotkham had been asked to be one of the groom's *chaokhot-loungta*. They got to know the family through their involvement in the resettlement of Lao people in the area.[^6]

[^4]: Discussion with Somsanith and Kotkham; Reston, Virginia, May 2000.
[^6]: Somsanith had by now left the Voice of America, and had been working as social worker with the Refugee and Immigrant Services, Newcomers Community Services Centre of the Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area. This service has offices in both Washington DC and in Falls Church, Virginia. He had also been a member of the management committee of the Southeast Asia Resource Action Centre in Washington DC.
On the eve of the wedding, Somsanith, Kotkham and I went to the house where the *soukhouane* was to take place. As one of the *chaokhot-loungta*, they felt they should be there to help in the preparation, to ensure things ran smoothly and to provide any advice should it be needed. When we arrived at the house, many lady friends of the family were busy preparing food for the next day. The groom’s mother, Kotkham and some other ladies began to prepare the *phakhounanes*, the shells of which had been made earlier in the day from banana leaves. Many men sat around chatting about politics and other things, while others were gathered in a room around the karaoke machine. There was a distinct absence of young people and the older people. The oldest groups would be people not much older than Kotkham herself (who was then in her late fifties). The groom, I was told, went out drinking with his friends (although the ‘buck’s night’ was not mentioned). The groom’s mother told me that the *phakhounanes* were being finished and placed on a piece of square white tablecloth on that evening because the next day would be too busy.

There were some signs indicating that a religious ceremony was to take place. Square cushions were placed along one wall of the lounge room for the monks, along with drinking glasses, bottles of water and spittoons. I was told that these were for the monks who were invited to bless the wedding. It was a symbolic gesture that monks were regarded as being culturally and spiritually higher than laypeople; therefore, they should be treated differently and deferentially by being physically higher than the laity.

Contrary to the traditional practice of holding the wedding *soukhouane* at the parental home of the bride, this wedding, particularly the *soukhouane*, was held at the groom’s parental home because the betrothed were already ‘living together’ at the house. The *soukhouane* was, for the families, the traditional way of acknowledging this fact, as well as telling the community that the two young people were now accepted by the families as man and wife. So on the wedding day, there was no groom’s procession and associated rituals. At the appointed time the bride and groom were led, by an elderly aunt of the groom, down from their ‘nuptial room’ (which was in fact the bedroom they occupied). They were dressed in the ‘traditional’ wedding attire, as
previously described. The groom had in his hand a *bang* with some flowers and a lit candle. On arrival at the *phakhouanes*, there was a divergence from normal practice in that the bride and groom jointly held a lighted candle to light the candles on the *phakhouanes*.

![Picture V-1: The bride supports the groom while he lights the candles on the phakhouane, before sitting down for the wedding ceremony. (Wedding of Phonesavath and Veunekham, Maryland, USA, 13 May 2000. Photo by the author).](image)

They proceeded to prostrate in front of the monks, and the *mophone* began the religious ceremony. This was the ritual of asking for and receiving the Five Precepts – *kho sin ha*. This ritual is a common occurrence for anyone taking part in a religious ceremony, whether in a private house or at a temple. During a religious festival, this ritual could take place a few times a day.7

After the ‘receiving of the Five Precepts’ the bride and groom led the congregation in the *takbat*.8 This is the ritual where food and any other offerings (fruits, drinks, money usually in a *bang* with flowers and candles) were given to the monks by depositing them in the monks’ alms bowls which were placed in front of them.9 After

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8 Some people call this ritual *saibat-* that is ‘putting things inside the Bat (alms bowl). The differentiation appears to be a pedantic one: the ritual is called *takbat*, but the actual action of doing it is *saibat*.

9 Normally, this is the juncture when a meal is offered to the monks. But, for reasons of time, a meal had earlier been offered and the ceremony moved to the next stage.
this ritual, the bride, groom and the entire gathering, sat facing the monks and listened to the sermon. The chapter of monks chanted a blessing for the occasion. While doing so the monks held the long white cotton threads that led from the phakhouanes, as if to ensure that their blessings went to reside in the phakhouanes. The chant they used on that day was the गृहिष्ठीमृत - Sayyanto - the Great Victory. After the chanting, the monks tied the blessed cotton threads on the bride and groom.

The monks are tying the blessed cotton threads on the bride and groom after their chanting. This is an unusual occurrence as Buddhist monks are forbidden to touch a female. Most Lao monks when requested to tie on a thread (or to receive from or give an item to a female) would use the end of his sash (or his handkerchief) as a conduit to put the item on and the lady could pick it from there when the ritual is completed. (Wedding of Phonesavath and Veunekham, Maryland, USA, 13 May 2000. Photo by the author).

Then the head monk sprinkled the blessed water on the gathering, beginning with the bride and groom. Soon afterwards the monks left having been offered a meal earlier.

The mophone, the same elder who had earlier led the laity in the religious ceremony, then took over and conducted the soukhouane ceremony. This followed the same formulae as other weddings already discussed, all the rituals taking place in their proper sequence. Then the bride and groom came down to join the families and guests for lunch. The evening reception, in one of the Chinese restaurants, was only unusual in the fact that the bride and groom, along with the bridal party welcomed the guests then just walked in and took their places at the bridal table without any introduction by the MC. The formalities- introductions and speeches- took place well into dinner.
Daosadeth’s wedding and the one discussed above were two weddings that had Buddhist aspects in them. Other weddings discussed in this thesis (Chapters IV and VI) did not include Buddhist elements, either by deliberate omission or by non-remembrance. There are many possible explanations for this occurring. Many Lao people see a distinct separation between Buddhism and the wedding ceremony: one being of the spiritual nature, and the other more worldly, procreative (thus, a connotation of sex). For them, a blessing by the mophone is sufficient. For many other families, however, the separation is temporal: they would perform the religious elements of the wedding (the sermon, the soud mon yen and the joint merit-making by the newlyweds) on a separate occasion from that of the wedding itself. This is another reason why the guests do not normally see the religious aspects of the wedding. Thus, the separation and the non-performance of the religious aspect are perpetuated by imitation. Other reasons for not performing the religious elements were convenience for the family and the non-availability of monks.

Although strictly speaking Buddhism, as a world religion, has no part to play in the traditional Lao wedding ceremony, its influence can still be felt throughout and in many places. Three rituals reflecting this influence warrant special mention: the blessing of and merit-making by the bride and groom; the ordination of the young man prior to being married; and the incantation of the mophone at the soukhouane ceremony.

The following picture appears to indicate that Buddhism has had a strong influence on wedding ceremony from earliest days.\(^\text{10}\)

\(^{10}\) I am indebted to Acharn Khongmy Khouangvichit, of the Lao Buddhist Temple of Brisbane, for drawing my attention to this and for supplying a copy of the picture. Apart from some telephone conversations I had with Acharn, I also talked to him in person at various community and family functions in Sydney and in Canberra.
According to Abhay (1967:825-830), in the halcyon days, monks would be invited to bless the young couple prior to their marriage in a ritual called  מָכַס soud mon yen. It is possible that this ritual is left over from the day when Buddhism was adopted as the State religion of the Kingdom of Lane Xang in the 14th Century, and the syncretism between Buddhism and the folk belief meant the two systems lived side by side for some time. But for reasons enumerated above, the practice of soud mon yen has been discarded by the Lao people, even more so in the Lao diaspora and westernised urban Laos.

The other way is for the young couple to jointly make merit by making offering of food and materials to the monks – dana- on their alms rounds. This is usually done on the morning after the wedding day. Ordination into the monkhood also has important implications for the Lao traditional wedding. Although not compulsory, it is customary for a Lao young male to be ordained as monk at least once in his lifetime.
It is believed that ordination is one of the best ways a Lao male can accumulate much merit. More importantly, this merit can be shared with, or transferred to, those who made the sacrifice by ‘donating’ the young man to serve Buddhism. The person could be the young man’s parents if he is still young and not ‘officially’ engaged to be married; or his betrothed. Thus, the traditional practice is for parents to arrange the ordination of their young son prior to making any plans for his marriage. By being thus ordained, the young man would earn, and be able to transfer, much merit to his parents especially to his mother who has less opportunity to earn merit by herself than the father who, theoretically could be ordained or had been ordained, at some stage in his life.\(^{12}\) This transference of merit to the mother is the young man’s way of repayment for her care and upbringing.\(^{13}\) In Laos, this is called \textit{khan thod thene kha nam nom mae}, that is repayment for mother’s milk. The equivalence of this ‘repayment for mother’s milk’ for the young girl’s family is of course included in the \textit{khadong} brought to the wedding by the young man’s parents. In Lao society and culture, ordination is regarded as a rite of passage for Lao males. One is not considered fully mature, and therefore not ready for marriage, until one has been ordained. Further, in the days when the \textit{Wat} was still a place of education, many a young man acquired their education, trades and skills during their monkhood. A person who had been ordained can be regarded as \textit{vibhajakaram}, that is ‘educated’. So, it was customary when looking to marry off one’s daughter, for the girl’s parents to be looking for a young man who has been ordained as a monk - it shows that he has done the right thing by his family (i.e., repay his mother’s milk) and is now educated and fully mature.

\(^{11}\) Interview with Maha Kykeo Boulom, Vientiane, January 2000; and Loung Thit Nhay, Luang Prabang, March, 2000. These two highly learned gentlemen agreed on most points, and both ‘regretted’ the changes in the modern Lao weddings taking place in Laos now.

\(^{12}\) Discussion of the non-ordination of women in Buddhism can be found in most feminist literature on Buddhism. But some of the best arguments are found in works by S J Tambiah and Thomas Kirsch, listed in the bibliography.

\(^{13}\) For the concept of merit transference, please see works by Tambiah, Keyes, and Tannabaum.
There is no prescription on the length of time one has to remain ordained. It could be one day or a whole lifetime. But most young men spend at least one lent period, that is three months, in the monkhood. In an interview with Mrs Bouaphanh (Mayoura’s mother), she said that her betrothed, soon after their engagement, entered the monkhood. Initially, he was going to stay for one lent period, but ended up staying just over a year. In the meantime, she just had to wait because ‘I am already engaged’.

The presence of Buddhism in the Lao traditional wedding ceremony is also felt in the invocation recited by the mophone during the soukhouane ritual. The mophone would begin his incantation with a Buddhist prayer, invoking the power and sacredness of the Triple Gems, and end his chant with a calling of the Triple Gems to bless the ceremony and the married couple.

So while Buddhism, as a world religion has very little part to play in a Lao traditional wedding ceremony, Buddhism as a folk practice by a Lao has had a long association with the ceremony. The use of Buddhist prayer, the invoking of Buddhist Triple Gems, the presence of monks and the opportunity to make merit all contribute to Buddhism being an important part of the Lao belief in religion bestowing good omen, good aura and auspiciousness, Mangala, on the occasion. The fact that most mophones were ex-monks, and thus ‘educated persons’, also lend extra auspiciousness.

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14 If one becomes a monk (or a novice) for a funeral of some loved ones, one could be ordained in the morning and leave the monkhood in the afternoon at the conclusion of the funeral. This is known as ordained to lead the funeral cortège. Many famous monks remained in the monkhood for their whole life.
15 Interview with Mrs Bouaphanh, Vientiane, March 2000.
16 I am using the distinction between ‘world’ and ‘folk’ religion posited by Stevan Harrell in his article “The Concept of Soul in Chinese Folk Religion”, Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 38, No. 3, May 1979. He writes: “By ‘folk religion’ I mean the religious beliefs and practices of the peasantry and other non-elite classes in late tradition China and in modern Chinese society outside the People’s Republic. This term specifically excludes the textual religions (the State Cult, Buddhism, and Taoism) and also the beliefs and practices of religious specialists”.
With so much emphasis being placed nowadays on weddings as a social and political statement, as well as providing entertainment for the guests, my informants said that the families have much less time to include religious elements in the planning for a wedding. The fact that in the Lao diaspora, in particular, monks were not readily available (either for reasons of distance or numbers), make it easier for families to omit religious ceremonies from the wedding plan\(^\text{17}\). Many people also ‘comforted’ themselves with the thought that they could make merit any time, and that Buddhist teachings and merriment do not mix in any case.\(^\text{18}\)

The wedding, on 20 September 1996, of their only daughter, Vagnola (Lala), gave Kotkham and Somsanith great satisfaction as Lao parents. This was a marriage in which families of the betrotheds could feel satisfied with the ‘cultural’ demand of their heritage. There was a Lao traditional wedding, followed by a church wedding and an evening reception\(^\text{19}\).

For Lala’s wedding it was decided immediately that there would be a Lao ‘traditional’ wedding ceremony as well as a church wedding to satisfy the wishes of the groom’s family. Somsanith and Kotkham made good use of the Sramany’s expert knowledge in matters of Lao culture, especially the *kindong*.\(^\text{20}\) Michael came from a Catholic family, and was serving his National Service in the US Air Force at the time. For logistic reasons, the Lao wedding was held on a Friday at the bride’s parental home in Reston, Virginia. The preparation for the groom was done at the Sramany’s house nearby. For the Lao wedding, the betrotheds dressed in traditional wedding attire. The

\(^{17}\) Interview with Somsanith, Reston, Virginia, May 2000.

\(^{18}\) One of the basic Five Precepts urges laypeople to ‘refrain from excessive consumption of intoxicants’.

\(^{19}\) Intong and I were, along with other family members from Australia, all invited to Lala’s wedding; but we could not go. We received a copy of the wedding afterwards, and I am using this video to supplement my interviews with Somsanith, Kotkham, Mrs Sramany and Mr Houmpheng Sramany.

\(^{20}\) When they moved from Alexandria and settled in Reston, Somsanith and Kotkham befriended Mr Chanpheng Sramany and Mrs Khammeuane Sramany (nee Rodsphon), through community and temple activities. The late Mr Chanpheng had been a *mophone* in Luang Prabang for a long time, and had established a good reputation as a *mophone* in the local Lao community around the Greater Washington DC area. They were treated by Kotkham and her family as *in loco parentis* since the time the two families settled in the Reston area of Virginia. Mr Chanpheng unfortunately passed away about sixteen months before I arrived to do the research. However, I interviewed Mrs Khammeuane, and Mr Chanpheng’s brother, Mr Houmpheng Sramany, who carried on the work as *mophone* for the area.
groom’s procession started as a motorcade from the Sramany’s residence and continued on foot from the car park in the compound of Kotkham’s residence. There were no elderly couples with the khanhmak and the khanh khadong leading the procession. There was no kheui long, the umbrella over the groom’s head was held by a friend of the bride’s parent, therefore an ‘older’ person than the groom.²¹ There was a distinct lack of elderly people in the procession. The ‘head negotiators’ were cousins of the bride and her husband, both in their forties.

The cleansing of the groom’s feet was performed by Jennifer, Daodsadeth’s youngest daughter. The groom was led into the soukhouane by the hand by a female friend of the family, where the groom used the lit candles in his bang to light the candles on the phakhouanes before sitting down. After a while, Mrs Khammeuane led the bride to the phakhouane, also by her hand. There was general applause on the bride’s arrival. There seemed to be no particular seating arrangement for the bride and groom as in other weddings. In Chanh’s wedding (Chapter IV), the mophone instructed that the groom must sit on the right hand side of and facing the mophone, separated by the phakhouanes. For Lala’s wedding, the phakhouanes looked beautiful, without all the ‘traditional’ flowers. There was only one candle on top of the phakhouanes. The mophone led the bride and groom in a somma for the parents prior to the soukhouane. During the soukhouane, neither the mophone nor the bride and groom held the long white cotton thread that led from the phakhouanes as they should have traditionally. In a later conversation with the author, Kotkham said that nobody noticed this fact at the time.

After the soukhouane, which followed the traditional formulae, the mophone was the first to tie the white cotton thread on the bride and groom, followed by their parents. After quite a long session of this when other friends and relatives joined in, the ritual of the feeding of the bride and groom with the boiled egg was conducted by one of the ladies, not by the mophone. The egg was peeled and cut with a knife into small pieces

²¹ This was Kayasith who organised for my benefit a session with four elders in the Lao community so that I could interview them.
on a plate, and the bride and groom fed each other using a spoon along with a small mouthful of sticky rice. This is more for show and hygiene. The traditional way was to cut the egg with the cotton thread from the phakhouane; knead some of the yoke with sticky rice into small balls before giving them to the betrotheds to feed to each other. There was again some applause from the gathering. Then, the mophone 'returned' the phakhouanes to the newlyweds.

The video cut to the church wedding ceremony, held at Chapel No. 3 at the Andrews Air Force Base where Michael was based. Guests were seen being escorted by the bride’s relatives to their seat. The groom was dressed in his Air Force uniform, and the bride was in a white western wedding gown. There were three pairs of bridesmaids and groomsmen, in their evening dresses. Most of the Lao female guests were dressed in their traditional formal dresses, while the men were in western lounge suits.

This is where some of the differences between the Lao traditional wedding and the western church wedding could be clearly seen. In a Lao wedding, the bride and groom did not utter a word: they followed instructions during the rituals; even during the somma when they were supposed to ask for forgiveness for any wrong doing and ask for blessing for their marriage. The words were said by others, either the mophone in wedding invocation, or some older relatives in bestowing wishes and blessings on the betrotheds. They had no say in what invocation the mophone would use, as there was only one that a mophone was ‘supposed’ to use. In a Christian church wedding, the bride and groom rehearsed what to say and what to do for the actual wedding. They chose the lessons to be read, and the people to read them. They could even choose or compose their own vows. In Lao weddings, while the bride and groom followed the ‘traditional’ rituals, obedience is the main key. In Christian weddings, rituals were followed, but individualism of the bride and groom could be expressed through the

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22 Kotkham indeed assured me that the bride and groom were led into the nuptial room by Mrs Khammeuane. They did not however stay with her, as they moved directly into the married quarters at the Air Force Base.

23 I use ‘supposed to’ here because, as Lounge Thit Ngai complained, many mophones seemed to confuse the invocations for other types of soukhouanes for a wedding. I will return to this discussion in more detail in Chapter VII.
choice of the readings and the vows they made, not to mention the rings they chose for each other.

For the evening reception, held at one of the halls at the Air Force Base, the groom was in his Air Force uniform, and the bride wore a predominantly blue Lao formal dress with a full set of jewellery on her hair do. But the bride changed to a western white wedding dress later in the evening for the cutting of the wedding cake. The reception was different from other evening receptions for other ‘Lao’ weddings. The emphasis here appeared to be on the newlyweds: the speeches were by the best man; there were games that the bride and groom were asked to play (like the tossing of the garter into a group of young men after it was removed by the groom from the bride’s leg); and then the bride throwing the flower bouquet to a group of young girls. There were no speeches of advice from the ‘representative of the families’, nor from the representative of the community.

After viewing the videotape of Lala’s wedding and interviewing the main subjects involved in that wedding, it was not hard to detect the influence of the late Mr Chanhpheng Sramany in the conduct of the wedding. This is not to assume that Kotkham and her family would not have done the right things in following the ‘tradition’ of the Lao wedding; they would have. However, having a fountain of wisdom, knowledge and experience at her disposal, it would have been hard for Kotkham not to defer to such person. Indeed, she did tell me that it would have been foolish not to call upon such experience and knowledge of the Sramany’s, not to mention the aura and auspiciousness of having such couple involved in the wedding of her daughter. Indeed, it would have been a gross disrespect to the aged and learned gentleman.24

24 Interviews with Kotkham and Somsanith, at their home in Reston, 12 May 2000.
The Sramany's knowledge and experience in matters of Lao rituals were again evident in the wedding of their own son, Monireth Sramany to Kongchanh Sourivong. This took place at the bride's parental home in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1997.

The video opens with a scene in the bride's parental home where a group of elder people are gathered in what looks like the lounge room. In front of them are some silver bowls, the $O$ and the $khanh$, all covered with white cloth. On the girl's side, the family also has two similar bowls also covered. These are later seen to be empty so that the contents from the bowls of the boy's family could be transferred to them, signifying the acceptance and acknowledgement of the engagement. There are other bowls with floral decorations, noticeably one or two with $bai$ $ngeun$ $bai$ $kham$. One of the elders opens the proceedings announcing that this day is an auspicious day for an important undertaking such as an engagement and wedding. Then the late Mr Chanpheng explains that the silver bowls contain $money, gold, gems, rings and numerous things for the engagement$; while the $O$ contained cash, rice, rice cake, and the already prepared betel nuts, and the $khanh$ contained the gold bracelet and necklace. Candles are lit during this exchange.

An elder in the crowd asks to see the boy and the girl so that they can be asked of their intentions. Monireth comes in first by himself, and sits himself down on his side of the elders. Then, a female relative leads the girl in by the hand, and sits her down next to Monireth. One of the girl's elders enquires about the $khadong$. Mrs Khammeuane explains that they bring the $khanhmak$ and cash and jewellery as negotiated, and that these things will be given back to the betrothed as an inheritance. After ascertaining the intention of the two young people, Monireth is asked to produce an engagement ring which he takes out from his coat pocket, and puts on the girl's finger. Then he takes the gold bracelet from the $khanh$ and puts it on the girl's wrist (someone in the crowd was heard to tell him to put it on the right wrist). Then he puts the necklace on

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25 I am indebted to Mrs Khammeuane Sramany, mother of the groom, for a copy of the video of her son's wedding, and her permission to use this wedding in this study.

26 Mr Chanpheng, as shown in the video of wedding
her. There is a general proclamation with an applause. As with all weddings I had been to or seen on videotapes, it is noticeable than the gentlemen are dressed in western suits, while the ladies are all in formal Lao dresses.

After the applause, Chanhpheng addresses the betrothed as he would in a *soukhouane*, saying *being engaged was like being married.* Monireth’s parents hand over the two bowls to the girl’s family. Then, Monireth and Kongchanh are told to hold up the *O* and the *Khanh* and bow their heads in a praying position, while the two parents also put their hands on the *O* and *Khanh* and ask the betrothed to promise to love and be faithful to each other. Apparently, according to Mrs Khammeuan, this was a ‘new invention’ that was actually an extension of the old tradition of confirming the intention of the betrothed in front of the families. The parents then give their blessings to the betrothed, with the girl’s mother being first. The engagement finishes with Chanhpheng giving a speech in which, apart from giving advice and blessing to the betrothed, he urges them to ‘do good for the country of our refuge as we would for our native country of Laos”. This is followed by a photo session (and no doubt a meal for the families and guests, which was not shown on the video).

The video cuts to a civil ceremony with a marriage celebrant in what appeared to be a registry office. It looks like a simple ceremony with a few friends present, in which Monireth and Kongchanh exchange vows and wedding rings. The next scene is the groom’s procession, later on in the afternoon of the same day. The groom is dressed in the usual jacket and *pha hang yao*. But he does not have a *phabieng*, nor does he carry any bag of token possessions or a sword. He has in his hands a *bang* with some flowers and two lighted candles. There is an older man who carries the sword and walks ahead of the procession. A young man, dressed in a western style suit, holds an umbrella over the groom’s head during the procession. There are no ‘auspicious couples’ carrying the *khanhmak* or the *khanh khadong* ahead of the procession. There is a short bargaining at the door and the cleansing of the groom’s feet before he is led
into the *phakhounes*. At the *phakhounes*, Khammeuane instructs him to light the candles on top of the *phakhounes* with the one in the *bang* he is carrying. It is not clear whether she is acting as the groom’s mother or as an assistant to the *mophone*. At other weddings, parents of the betrothed sat at the *phakhounes* beside their offspring without having to perform any other duties at all. But, with Chanhpheng dressed in a white high-collared jacket and a crimson *pha hang yao*, with a creamy white *phabieng* on his left shoulder and performing the duty of the *mophone*, and Khammeuane assisting the groom, the parents’ involvement appears to be above and beyond that of the normal call of a parent’s duty during a wedding ceremony. Indeed, Chanhpheng refers to himself during the ritual as ‘father’ throughout, and his actions seem to overlap and vacillate between those of a father of the groom and those of the *mophone*.

From the video, the *phakhounes* are different from others that I have seen in three aspects. Firstly, there are the three tiers, but the *O* (the ‘female’ silver bowl) now sits inside the *khanh* (the ‘male’ silver bowl), thus the reverse of all other forms of *phakhouane*. There is no *makbeng* nor the gourd shape, only a two-tier arrangement with five ‘fingers’ each on top of one another. The third feature is the floral decoration: there are none of the ‘traditional auspicious’ flowers (like the *dok daoheuang*), but many skewers of fake *dok hak* and some seasonal flowers. Chanhpheng, the *mophone* and father of the groom, begins the proceedings by giving advice to the betrothed, based on the traditional advice to the betrothed of the *heet phoua khong mia* – Customs for Husbands and Wives.

Then he lights the two candles in his *khanhha*, raises the *khanhha* to his forehead in a praying motion and puts it down again. Prior to beginning, he asks everybody in the room to assume a praying position; then he begins the *soukhouane* ritual. It is the opening stanza that attracts my attention. It is a formulae to invite the gods and guardian spirits and the Buddhist Triple Gems to come, participate, bear witness and
bless the ritual, in accordance with the Twelve Traditions and 14 Customs. In his calling, however, Chanhpheng calls upon the Goddess Khuan Inh (the Chinese Goddess of Mercy); the ‘wiu.ii§sisj&nü Ktgi9iiiiad9n the Lady Liberty (Statue) of New York City, the Guardian Spirit of Pak Kading, and the late former Buddhist Patriarch of the Kingdom of Laos.

During this opening stanza, the bride and groom are not holding the long thread from the phakhouane. Only when he finishes this does Chanhpheng instruct them to hold the thread, which is given to them by Khammeuane who, incidentally, is sitting behind the groom. Beginning with the Buddhist formula of Nama Tassa, Chanhpheng begins the soukhouane invocation proper. He ends with another Buddhist formulae for the bestowing of blessing on the occasion.

Chanhpheng is the first to tie the thread on the bride and groom, using pieces that he breaks off from the long thread on the phakhouane. Before tying the thread, he puts one boiled egg in the palm of the person he ties on the thread. The receiver is

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27 Pak Kading is the name of a tributary of the Mekong River, about 250 km south of Vientiane, between Paksane and Khammouane. 'Pak Kading' refers to the mouth of the Nam Kading where it meets the Mekong River. It is believed that the Guardian Spirit of the Pak Kading was one of the most feared guardian spirits in Laos. Many cargo boats that ply the Mekong between Vientiane and Savannakhet had to give some sort of sacrifice (mostly in the form of a bang with flowers and cigarettes) by throwing this sacrifice into the water.

28 Somdet Phra Yodkeo Buddha Sinorod (original name Bounthanh Boupharath) was the last Buddhist Patriarch of the Kingdom of Laos. Born in 1892, he became a novice at the age of 12, and was ordained a monk when he was 20 years old. He remained a monk for all his life, culminating in his appointment as the Supreme Patriarch in 1953. He escaped from Laos, seeking refuge in Thailand in March 1979 where he was supported by the Thai Government. He died in the Monk’s Hospital in Bangkok on 24 June 1984. Many Lao wats in diaspora, including the one in Canberra, still commemorate his death. The Lao Buddhist temple in Sydney was named after him. See lamanso - the Heritage of the Ai Lao People - a funeral volume in honour of the Supreme Patriarch of Laos, Bangkok, 12 March 1984.

29 Compare this ending with the other - May my action be potent and sacred, in Appendix A.
supposed to keep this egg, called ไก่หก  khaikhouane for oneself. The bride and groom then turn around to face the crowd, and other people file past to tie the threads on their wrists. After this and a photo session, Chanpheng announces that it is the time for the bride and groom to share the egg เที่ยงไข่. He explains that this is the กินข้าวจากกัน “to eat rice from the same plate and eat fish from the same bowl”, that is to say, the symbolic sharing of the first meal together as man and wife. The bride and groom use spoons to feed each other the egg and sticky rice from separate plates, and wash it down with a sip of whiskey that they also feed to each other from their own glass.

Before the next ritual, the somma, the candles on top of the phkhouanes are extinguished. After appropriate words of asking for forgiveness and blessing, spoken by the mophone, the newlyweds proceed to hand out the bang. Someone in the crowd tells them to begin with the groom’s parents, followed by the bride’s parents. Throughout this ritual, the groom holds the khanh and the bride distributes the bangs. Once they finish with the elders, a group of aunts and uncles gather together to hold the khanh proffered by the bride and groom. While also holding the khanh, the groom thanks everybody for helping to prepare the celebration. Then the bride and groom again proceed to hand out the remaining bang. Someone calls out to the bride to give one to a น้องชาย a younger brother-in-law. Another voice interjects that ‘it is not appropriate to give a bang to a younger in-law”. To which, Chanpheng’s voice is heard to say that ‘it was OK, to show solidarity and love between members of the family’. While it is not customary to give a bang to a younger person, Chanpheng intervenes quickly to stamp his authority as a mophone and as the father of the groom to sanction the action so as to avoid any possible discord and thus any inauspiciousness from occurring.
While the video cut to the beginning of the evening reception, it is safe to assume that the ritual of leading the newlyweds into the nuptial room would have been performed.\textsuperscript{30} The reception, while appearing to be the same as for other weddings, was noteworthy for many things. The receptacle into which the guests deposited their gifts of cash was a box decorated with a silver paper with a heart on the front panel. The MC invited the guests to have their buffet meals before the bridal party was introduced to the gathering and the formalities started. When all the chaokhot-loungta were invited to present themselves to the audience there were some twelve couples altogether. So none of the ‘close’ relatives were left out of this important family occasion. The late Mr Chanhpheng again represented the families in addressing the reception. He did not give any advice to the newlyweds. But in his thank you to the gathering, he emphasised the solidarity of relatives in coming to the wedding. He urged all diasporic Lao to become ‘good citizens’ in their land of refuge, and to gain the respect of their ‘new compatriots’ while upholding the honours of ‘our’ ancestors.

This was not the end of this wedding however. About a month later, on 20 December, the senior Sramany held a reception for the newlyweds in Virginia for friends who could not be at the wedding in Tennessee. It is not clear whether a soukhouane was held to ‘welcome’ the bride into the family of the groom.\textsuperscript{31} At this reception ‘to welcome the newlyweds’, there were two MCs – one female who spoke in Lao, and the other, male, who spoke in English. This was an attempt by the family to cater for the many American friends who came to the reception. Indeed, an American friend of the Sramany, a guest of honour of the family and their sponsor, was invited to give a speech. On his part, Mr Sramany emphasised in his speech the unity of the diasporic Lao people ‘residing in a third country of asylum’, as he did at the wedding reception.

\textsuperscript{30} I later confirmed this with many elderly ladies from Luang Prabang in Canberra, who insisted that this ritual would have to be performed.

\textsuperscript{31} Traditionally, when a wedding soukhouane took place at the bride’s place, and when the newlyweds went to visit the groom’s hometown, his family would hold a soukhouane to welcome the new daughter-in-law into the house. After my wedding, Intong and I went back to my hometown of Savannakhet. My family held a soukhouane to welcome Intong into the family, even though some of my relatives were at our wedding in Vientiane earlier.
in Tennessee. As usual, the reception proceeded until the end with much dancing and merriment, including a lot of line dancing.

*When is a wedding not a wedding?*

So this chapter has discussed weddings from the beginning to the end, all the rituals of a ‘traditional’ wedding and the modern adoption of the evening reception with speeches and dancing. But, there are other situations, not necessarily created by the political upheaval of 1975 that forced modifications and alterations to the ‘accepted’ norms of a Lao ‘traditional’ wedding ceremony.

The following story of Toui and Tho is one such situation. Their story defies time, space, the trauma of diaspora and differences in social status. Their wedding defies so many ‘accepted’ practices that it is questionable whether it could be called a Lao ‘traditional wedding ceremony’.  

Both Toui and Tho grew up in the same neighbourhood, Chao Anou, in pre-1975 Vientiane. Toui is one of the 12 children of the Vilay family, one of the more prominent political families from Luang Prabang that settled in Vientiane because of her father’s job. Tho is the eldest of six children of a Lao Vietnamese family. His father was a Vietnamese ‘refugee’ who settled in Vientiane after the 1954 French defeat at the hands of the Vietminh in Dien Bien Phu.

Tho went to school in Vientiane and was a good friend of Daosadeth, my brother in law. When the Great Political Divide occurred in 1975, Tho ended his studies and became the local tough boy in the neighbourhood. This is where he and Toui met and fell in love. In the aftermath of 1975, Toui’s family escaped to Thailand and became dispersed as with many other families at that time. Some of her sisters ended up in Sydney, Australia, having been sponsored by their own in-laws. Some of her brothers went to France where they had prior connections through their education. Toui and her

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32 From series of interviews with Mr Dalachanh (Tho) Tran and Mrs Southakone (Toui nee Vilay) Tran, at the their residence 9725 Running Creek Lane, Escondido, CA 92026; on 4-22/6/2000.
parents ended up in Seattle, USA, where some of her relatives had already settled. Toui was aged about sixteen when she arrived in Seattle. She continued her studies until graduation from high school, and studied accounting afterwards. In the meantime, Tho, having spent some time in the refugee camp, managed to get himself accepted for resettlement, through some Christian church group, in Los Angeles. He later ended up living with his two sisters in the San Diego area. Prior to their escape, Tho asked Toui to elope with him; but for the sake of her family's reputation she refused.

It should be remembered that Tho was a good friend of Daosadeth. It happened that Somsanith, Daosadeth’s brother-in-law, who had also resettled in the USA, was working with Radio Free Asia at that time. Tho contacted Somsanith with the hope of tracking down his beloved Toui. He succeeded in the end to re-establish contact with Toui, and the pair resumed their courtship. After about six weeks of long distance courtship, Toui relented and said that if he came to ask for her hand with her parents in Seattle, she would agree to marry him. Tho flew to Seattle prepared. It just happened that one of Toui’s older brothers was visiting his family from France. So Tho asked him to act as his surrogate ‘elder of the family’ in asking for Toui’s hand from her parents. Fortunately, Toui’s parents agreed and a ‘wedding ceremony’ was arranged for the weekend as Tho had to be back at work by the following Monday.

The wedding ceremony was a simple one. The soukhouane was held, albeit greatly simplified. A small group of family members, friends, and Toui’s English language teacher were present. There was a phakhouane, with Toui’s father acting as the mophone. From Toui’s words, the ceremony was like a ‘normal’ soukhouane, a somma and blessing all in one. The khadong, a wedding ring, a gold bracelet and a sum of money was presented to the family in a silver bowl at the soukhouane ceremony. All these were given back to the newlyweds at the ceremony.
There was no groom’s procession, no washing of the groom’s feet and associated rituals. It was a *soukhouane* to acknowledge the change of status of their daughter, and a farewell for them as they were returning to Tho’s place in San Diego. This, according to Toui, was hard for her parents as they did not have a ‘proper traditional’ wedding for their daughter. But they accepted the change in their circumstances, fortune and social status and were glad that they at least had a *soukhouane* to bless her.

Upon their return to San Diego, Tho’s American sponsors organised a wedding ceremony, at which a marriage certificate was signed in front of a Catholic priest friend of the sponsors. Toui wore a Lao hairdo with jewellery but not the full wedding dress. There was a wedding cake that the couple cut and shared with the guests and also a bridal bouquet that the bride threw into the crowd later on. Their wedding anniversary was regarded as 12 July 1988, the day of the signing of their marriage certificate.

While the upheaval of 1975 was a Great Political Divide and a change for Laos, it was in fact a unifying factor in the love life of Tho and Toui. According to Toui, it was very doubtful that her family would have agreed to the marriage had they still been in Laos. However, the political upheaval in Laos caused a levelling social status and the uncertain future. Further, the persistence of the true love Tho had for Toui all conspired to convince Toui’s family that they did have a good future together. They indeed proved the family right. They are settled in their own home just outside San Diego with very good jobs. Their daughter just graduated from high school while I was with the family, and their young son is doing well at school.

This ‘simple wedding ceremony’ as described for Toui and Tho was by no means an isolated incident. There is another ‘ceremony’ that is accepted by the families as a ‘marriage’ for the offspring. In this ceremony, the *soukhouane* is held even if only one half of the betrothed is present and the absent party being represented at the ritual by some items of their clothing.
Vichit had an interesting story to tell. He had a girlfriend before he received a scholarship to study in France in early 1975. While he was in France, the families back in Laos decided that it would be more prudent for the two of them to be together because the political situation in Laos was becoming more and more uncertain. They decided to hold a wedding ceremony by proxy for the two of them. For the *soukhouane*, the bride was in full wedding dress and the groom (who was physically in France) being represented at the ceremony by some items of his clothing. There was a proper normal *phakhouane* and the *mophone* recited the proper wedding invocation. Of course, it goes without saying that the *soukhouane* was the only ritual held; the others (groom’s procession etc...) were all dispensed with.34

The twist of fate was such that, under the pretext of a trip across to Thailand to send the newly married daughter to her husband in France, the family escaped Laos and became refugees in the Nongkhai camp before finally resettling in the USA. Once in the USA, the ‘bride’ wrote to Vichit that he should join her in the US. Vichit at the time was concerned for his family in Laos, his father having been arrested and taken away to ‘re-education camp’. So he decided to stay back in France and wait for further news from home. They drifted apart. Vichit then met his present wife, a Lao Chinese Catholic. They had a simple wedding *soukhouane* with a few of their relatives present and a fine dinner reception at a Chinese restaurant.

There were reports of many of such ‘weddings’ especially during the turbulent times around 1975. Many families, fearing for the safety and wellbeing of their offspring, married them off and then sent them into exile in refugee camps. These weddings were by necessity simple ceremonies to provide the families an opportunity to acknowledge the changed status of their offspring. This changed status gave the

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33 My thanks to Vichit Phetsiriseng, of Sydney, for sharing this story, and allowing me to use it in this thesis.

34 A similar ceremony was held for one of Intong’s sisters, who had married in Melbourne. She was a Colombo Plan student in Melbourne, and after the 1975 Great Political Divide in Laos, she decided not to return home. The ceremony took place some years after her marriage when her husband returned to Laos for a visit. It was a simple *soukhouane* for her husband and some of her clothing items. It was a way for the family to acknowledge the marriage and to welcome the son-in-law into the family in a ‘traditional’ way.
people in refugee camps added security measures against maltreatment by unscrupulous Thai immigration and police officers who took advantage of unattached minors, especially young girls. This added security prompted a rash of marriages inside the refugee camps as well. Khamleck, my brother-in-law, told me that while in the camp in Ubol, Thailand, he was asked to be chaokhot loungeta for many weddings between young people from Savannakhet who had escaped to the camps.

There are downsides to these exile-enforced marriages also. As with the story of Vichit above, there were many stories of broken hearts if the families escaped from Laos at different times, finished up in different refugee camps and, worse still, ended up in different countries of settlement. There was a story of a certain Mrs D in Canberra. After enduring her time in the forced community working bees, NotEmpty, where she opted for cooking duties, she escaped from Laos with some of her friends and landed in a Thai refugee camp. There she met a boy whom she knew previously. For reasons of added security, she decided to marry him, although she had a boy-friend in Laos with whom she had lost contact. Mrs D and her husband later settled in Canberra where she tried to make the best of her disappointing marriage. After a few years and some children of her own, her former boy-friend from Laos contacted her from the USA where he had quite successfully settled. After much deliberation, soul searching and heart wrenching decision, she decided to leave her family in Australia and went off to the US to marry her former boy-friend. By all accounts, it appears that she was doing rather well with her new husband.

This forced situation did not only apply to people escaping from their homeland. There were other people who were ‘enticed’ to stay behind with a marriage match that came with gifts in the form of houses and real estate. Mr T of Vientiane was one such case. He was a young man who had studied in France, and not long returned to work in the Lao public service when the 1975 Great Political Divide took place. He was discussing his future prospects with his family when one of his uncles convinced him to stay and marry one of the latter’s nieces. The ‘inducement package’ came with a
house and a block of land. He is now a successful middle-ranking public servant in Laos and his wife runs a successful business supplying sand and gravel for the construction industry.\footnote{My thanks to Mr Te and his wife for being candid with their life story. Interviews in Vientiane, February-March, 2000. I am indebted to Pakasith and Kaysone, my brother-in-law and his wife, for introducing me to them.}

Concluding remarks

I remember a comment I heard when I first arrived in Laos to research for this thesis: "Why do you want to research Lao weddings? Everyone knows about Lao weddings, they are all the same." On a superficial level, Lao weddings may look the same in their processes and procedures. But, as this chapter, the previous chapter as well as the next chapter, shows Lao weddings are not the same (and I don’t suppose they could ever be the same, just like any other western weddings or big commemorations or celebrations). The added ingredient here is the situations imposed on the Lao people in the diaspora: how they had to adapt to new and alien cultural and social milieux while trying to be as faithful as possible to their memory of the ‘tradition’.

Daosadeth’s wedding and the one of Phonesavath and Veunekham in Maryland both tried to emulate the ‘traditional’ Lao wedding, combining elements of secular rituals and merriment with Buddhist elements. But, due to impediments imposed by geography and legal requirements, compromises had to be made and some aspects of the ceremony had to be omitted and others improvised. Daosadeth, while having monks to bless the \textit{phakhouanes}, did not have the \textit{soud mon yen} the Blessing of the Marriage on the eve of the wedding day. Phonesavath and Veunekham also did not have the \textit{soud mon yen}, but they had the \textit{takbat} on the morning of the wedding day.

Many, like the late Mr Chanhpheng, tried hard to keep the tradition and the memory of the olden days of the homeland alive, and yet he too had adapted to new situations. Mr Chanhpheng created ‘new gods and goddesses’ to bless the \textit{soukhounane}, while compromising on the lack of auspicious flowers and paraphernalia for weddings.
According to Mr Chanhpheng, the fact that guests came to participate in the wedding celebration has been re-interpreted as 'solidarity and togetherness in being refugees in the new land of refuge', and not just 'the traditional helping out families and friends'.

So, by necessity, Lao weddings, in particular those in the US discussed in this chapter, have been something other than family affairs. They encompass the whole community in its meaning (although obviously not the whole community could participate in any one wedding) as it represented itself to the American Others. But the enduring, even endearing, features of the Lao traditional wedding ceremony, the soukhouane, shine through even in its most simplified form. In its most modified form, the Lao still believe that the soukhouane combines auspiciousness, blessing and acknowledgement by elders, and asking of permission and forgiveness by the betrothed – all aspects at the very core of being Lao.

In Monireth’s wedding, there were a few things that had an element of ‘invention of traditions’. These were the parental blessing at the engagement, the ‘creation of new Gods, thus combining new knowledge and situations with old beliefs, and parental involvement in the ritual. It remains to be seen if these ‘new aspects’ would be taken up as ‘new traditions’. It raises the question of what can be regarded as ‘tradition’. Is a tradition a function of time? How old is a practice before it can be regarded as ‘tradition’? If a ‘tradition’ is a function of time, does it then depend on remembrance – both individual and collective memory - and the frequency of performance? If it takes place often enough within living memory of subjects, can it then be regarded as ‘tradition’, even if this ‘new’ tradition does not follow the ‘old tradition’ patterns?

36 Pakasith; Vientiane, January, 2000
Chapter VI

Kindong Under a Parachute
CHAPTER VI

KINDONG UNDER A PARACHUTE

The title of this chapter is a romantic remembrance of time long gone. It refers to the ‘traditional’ celebration of weddings in the courtyard of the bride’s house under a parachute in the old style dome canopy in camouflage colours. This was the scene that greeted me on my arrival in Vientiane to research this thesis in early January 2000. As will be seen, the chapter is also a nostalgic tracing of the transition of the Lao wedding ceremony from the notion of a classless egalitarian socialist society decreed by the Pathet Lao to a time of excess and decadence associated with the much maligned westernised and reactionary society of the halcyon days of the old Kingdom of Laos. This transition can be symbolically seen by the parachute that came to symbolise a new social division between the haves and the have-nots. The ‘haves’ hold the wedding reception for their children in five-star hotels, while the have-nots hold theirs ‘under a parachute’ in their own yard.

Intong and my own social contacts provide many of the links between the weddings in this chapter. With the exception of Anothay’s wedding, the hosts of the weddings I attended are acquaintances of ours in Australia, and my wife and I were invited to their weddings. With Anothay’s wedding, I was in a sense representing the family, as his mother was a first cousin of my brother-in-law, Khamleck. While these weddings share some similarity in the social backgrounds of the families and a connection to Australia, they provide quite a contrast and some common features give clues to the changes that have taken place in present day Lao society.

Early Days

In the days immediately following the 1975 Great Political Divide, the staging of the ‘traditional’ Lao wedding ceremony underwent tremendous pressure for changes from the new political masters: official measures were instigated to eradicate the archaic superstitions and blind followings of the ways of the elders, as well as the extravagance and excesses of the ‘reactionary society’. Some of the changes were glimpsed through an interview with the former Lao Ambassador to Australia who had lived through both regimes.

In the interview, Mr Soutsakhone used his second marriage as a case study. Before getting married, the bride and groom had to obtain permission from many quarters: their parents, their union, workplaces and the local administrative authority Khana Khammaban. This contrasted starkly with the pre-1975 society where the only ‘official sanction and permission’ appeared to be an invitation for the village head so that he could be an eyewitness to the nuptial. Soutsakhone’s wedding was organised by his work colleagues at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. No invitations were issued; all guests were invited personally by either the bride or groom themselves. On the wedding day, the conference room at the Ministry was set up for the celebration. There was one phakhouane on a conference table, simply decorated with seasonal flowers and some white cotton threads. Some twenty or so work colleagues were invited to the wedding and about five or six close relatives, all of whom including the betrothed sat on chairs arranged around this table. It was not clear if there was a mophone officiating at the wedding, but the ‘blessing’ was ‘read’ by the groom’s boss. It was not clear whether the

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2 Refer to Chapter III for discussion of these changes.
3 Interview with Ambassador Soutsakone Patthammavong at the Embassy of the Lao PDR in Canberra on Friday 5 November 1999. He is from one of the well-known and influential families in Vientiane, the Patthammavong. After studying in France, he joined the Foreign Service in the old regime, and married well into another big family. He separated from his first wife when he decided to stay behind after the 1975 change, and his wife decided to escape to France. He remarried in 1978 to a young lady from a family from the old Pathet Lao side of politics. He is currently the Lao Ambassador to France. I thank him for his candid observation of Lao wedding ceremony with me.
4 This was the case with the author’s own wedding in 1974. The marriage was not ‘officially notified’ to the office of the village head until three or four months after the event. Nor did I have to request my boss’ permission to get married.
*phoukhene* took place. Chinese tea, instead of alcoholic drinks, were shared after the ceremony. Soutsakhone did not have a family wedding celebration at all.

According to Soutsakhone, the new government attempted to redefine the ‘traditional’ wedding ceremony by imposing restrictions on the excesses of the old days. During 1978-1982, the Government directed some departments to work on new regulations governing the marriage for state employees. Soutsakhone took on this task for his ministry. It was proposed that the level of extravaganza of a wedding would be made commensurate with the rank in the service of the intending couple. This would cover the number of guests, location and hospitality. However, the proposal did not progress as there was some opposition on the grounds that marriage was a family affair: people still maintained that they had the right to hold a wedding of their choosing. This is borne out in later weddings held in the early 1980’s (see below). Mr Sisoumang, the second secretary at the Embassy, added in a later conversation with this author that for his own wedding in Samneua, where he was then teaching, the process was similar to that of Soutsakhone’s experience. He added that instead of the *soukhouane*, however, the presiding official read his and his wife’s biographies and exhorted them to work harder for the state and the party.5

By the early 1980s, wedding ceremonies in Laos had returned to the extravagance of the old regime with apparent acquiescence of the ruling regime, but not quite the excessive extravagance of the old regime’s later years. As Pakasith6 commented this reversal to the extravagance of the old days began when most of the party apparatchiks held large weddings for members of their families. The general public followed; his own wedding on 13 November 1983 was an example. From the video of his wedding, it was clear that

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5 Conversation with Sisoumang at the Lao embassy on the same day as the interview with the Ambassador.  
6 Pakasith is the youngest brother of my wife, Intong. He decided to stay behind with his parents. I thank him and his wife, Kaysone Vongsaly, for a copy of their wedding video, and for their hospitality during my research trip to Laos in 2000, and for their candid discussion of their experiences of Lao weddings in Vientiane society.
the ‘pre 1975 traditional’ ways were accepted and in vogue again: from large gatherings at the *soukhouane*, to the evening reception at which western guests were seen dancing to a live band.

*Soraya and Yang’s Wedding*

The first wedding I attended in Vientiane as part of my research that epitomised the new level of extravagance was that of Soraya Sirimanotham and Yang Chaleunthong in January 9 2000. The bride is from a union of two old well-established families in the old regime.\(^7\) I have known Soraya’s parents for some time through community activities of the Lao Association (ACT) and of the Lao Buddhist temple in Canberra. Further, my wife had known them for longer period, being natives of Vientiane and circulating in the same social circle. Soraya’s grand-mother was my wife’s kindergarten teacher for some time. The groom, Yang, was from a Lao Chinese family who had established a prosperous jewellery business in Vientiane prior to 1975. While the family remained in Laos, Yang and his two brothers were refugees who settled in Canberra, and I got to know them quite well. Soraya and Yang met while they both were students at a tertiary institution in Canberra. Soraya and Yang, and their families, are now Australian citizens and consider Canberra their home. Yang’s parents, who remained in Laos, had re-established their jewellery business. The decision to hold the wedding in Vientiane was made by the bride’s mother, and agreed to by all in both families.\(^8\) The fact that both the bride and groom still had family in Vientiane was a big factor. Many of Soraya’s relatives on her mother’s side came from France for her wedding.

The invitation card to Soraya’s wedding was of modern design printed in gold lettering in Lao and English. On the card, the Lao wording invited the guests to participate in the *soukhouane* ‘at the bride’s house’, whereas the English wording just gave the address for the ceremony. However, the house now belonged to one of the bride’s maternal uncles.

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\(^7\) On her mother’s side, the Inthavong is an old, rich and politically well connected family that has combined business and politics to build up the family fortunes since the independence. Her father is from a more modest family of predominantly career public servants in the old regime, the Sirimanotham. Her parents left Laos in the late 1970s and initially settled in France, then migrated to Australia where the majority of her father’s family settled.
It can hardly be regarded in any sense as the bride’s ‘parental’ home, since her parents, whenever they were in Vientiane, stayed at her aunt’s house. When I arrived, the activities had already begun. Under a large rented marquee in front of the house, there were rows of chairs three or four deep and long tables laden with food of many descriptions, especially the **lap**. A Lao classical band was playing traditional tunes from the porch next to the front door.9

Inside the house, many elders were seated around the *phakhouanes*, which are in the style of three tiers and the *makbeng* decorated with marigolds and *dok hak*. The bee-wax candles on top of the *phakhouane* were home-made by the bride’s female relatives. Being an old well-to-do family, other wedding paraphernalia were from the family heirloom. Around the base of the *phakhouanes*, there were small bowls containing a variety of biscuits and fruits, two silver glutinous rice containers, a silver water pitcher and two goblets, a silver bowl of some boiled eggs, and a larger silver bowl containing numerous *bang* for the *somma*. There was a *khanh-ha* with a *bang*10 in which the pre-arranged ‘payment’ for the *mophone* was inserted. This *khanh-ha* was for the *mophone*’s use during the ritual11.

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8 Interview with Soraya’s father, Sisophone, August 2000, in Canberra, after we returned from our respective trips.

9 According to the father of the bride, there are bands like these in many localities. They originated from the time when the new regime ‘encouraged’ each village to have their own performing troops. These groups now earn extra money by playing at such functions as weddings. Some of them perform as ‘cultural shows’ in restaurants and hotels.

10 **Bang** – ဗု is used for most occasions where the ritual involved paying homage to something – either the parents, the ancestors’ spirits, or the Buddha statues (as in the ordination ceremony). The *bang* is usually in a cone shaped banana leave. In the southern part of Laos, Savannakhet and Pakse, the *bang* is called ‘Xouay’  그것은 which could mean ‘misfortune’ or bad luck. This is perhaps a case of the Lao’s sense of inverted psychology – calling something auspicious by a term having opposite meaning, as in the case of calling a household where there is a wake as a ‘Heuan Dii’ ဟုန်း a ‘Good House’ or ‘an auspicious house’.

11 This has become the ‘traditional’ way of paying for the service of a *mophone*. The host would ask around for a going rate for a certain *mophone* for certain *soukhouane* and put that amount in the bang. The *mophone* would pocket the bang at the end of the ceremony. It is rare to see a direct payment in person outside the *soukhouane* situation, as it is rare to see a negotiation between the host and the *mophone* about the fee.
Soon after 9.30am, the groom's procession arrived in a convoy of some five or six luxury cars. The convoy stopped just some twenty or so metres past the gate, where the procession proper began. The negotiation and the bargaining at the gate were jovial and good-humoured, with the customary song and dance, drinking, bantering and handing out of 'bribery money' (Picture VI-1). But, this 'bribery money' was handed out in Chinese style red envelope that continued until the time when the groom was sitting down at the **phakhouane**. Practically, everybody around the **phakhouane** was given one of these red envelopes.

![Picture VI-1: The two styles of red envelopes handed out by the groom’s party as ‘bribe’ to have the ritual gate open, but continued to be handed out to many guests sitting around the phakhouane. These red envelopes are normally associated with gifts given to children at Chinese New Year. (From the author's own collection).](image)

The groom was in traditional Lao wedding dress completed with the sword and jewellery. Noteworthy was the **bang** he was carrying: it was secured with a red ribbon at the bottom, a concession to the Chinese belief in red being a lucky colour. After the ritual of the cleansing of the groom's feet, the groom was led into the **phakhouane** by a lady using a **mit saak**. He lit the candles on the **phakhouane**, deposited the sword next to the **phakhouane** and sat down to await the entrance of the bride. After a while, the bride, dressed in full traditional wedding attire as described in Chapter I, was led into the **phakhouane** by an elderly female relative of the bride.
The *soukhouane* itself was nothing special. It followed the ‘traditional’ format, if somewhat abbreviated for want of time. He told me later in an interview during lunch that he was asked by the hosts to make the ceremony short, because there would be some ‘Chinese’ ceremony later. After the *phoukkhene* and a photo session, the *mophone* led the newlyweds in a *somma* to the parents and the elders. The *bang* for the *somma* were wrapped in a small piece of cloth (like a face washer) instead of banana leaves, containing two small white candles and *dokhak*. Apart from members of the two families, many of the dignitaries sitting nearby (which are regarded as honoured places – indicating power relations, honour and social/political positions of the persons) were also given these *bang*. Then followed a long period of *phoukkhene* by other friends.

The guests in the meantime were invited to have the lunch by an uncle of the bride’s. It was only about 11.00am but the whole bridal party, with the *phakhouanes*, minus the bride’s parents as dictated by Chinese customs, were leaving for the groom’s parental home where the newlyweds had their nuptial room. The *phakhouanes* were unceremoniously loaded on the back of a utility truck. I helped with the loading, and taking care of the *phakhouane* on the way to the groom’s place. On arrival, they were taken up to the nuptial room on the fourth floor of the building by going up steep, narrow flights of stairs. They were taken up not by auspicious ladies or couples, but by strong young persons (friends and relatives of the groom) to ensure safe negotiation of the stairs. The *phakhouane* were arranged on the bedside tables on each side of the bed. The newlyweds were then led into the nuptial room by the bride’s step-grand-mother, who also guided them in a simple ritual of *somma* of the bed.

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12 I interviewed the *mophone* directly after the ceremony. Mr Chanhsy Inthavong, in his late 50’s, and a relative of the bride’s, has been practicing as a *mophone* since the old regime. He was an ex monk who taught himself from books all the invocations for the *soukhouanes*, and learnt the procedures and performance of the ritual by observing other more experienced *mophones*.

13 I talked to the step-grandmother, Mrs Thongphoune Sirimanotham at the reception that same night. She was not particularly ‘happy’ about the arrangement of the transport of the *phakhouane* into the bedroom (not being by auspicious people) and that she led the newlyweds into the room herself. She was not, in her mind, an auspicious person as she is a widow. But, as she said, “that’s the best they could do under the circumstance and that’s what they wanted”.

The groom’s family, being Chinese merchants, were keen to observe some Chinese traditions. More gifts in red envelopes were handed out by the groom’s relatives to any guest sitting in the room, which was in fact the shop floor with the display cabinets pushed up against the walls and seats arranged around the room. Each gift envelope contained a sum of 8000 kips (then equivalent to about A$1.20). I ended up having three envelopes. The groom’s family hosted a lunch for the guests – a combination of western and Chinese dishes. After some time, the bride and groom, still in their Lao wedding costumes, came down to mingle with the guests. The latter departed soon after lunch.

The ‘wedding’ resumes with the evening reception, which was held at the Lao Plaza Hotel. This is the newest and most expensive hotel in town and one of the two ‘posh’ venues for a reception. The hall, called Vientiane Grand Hall, sits 450 people. However, the hosts had taken over the mezzanine level to accommodate about 650 guests for the reception. Guests seated upstairs could follow the proceedings in the hall via two video screens. Upon arrival, the guests were greeted by the bridal party consisting of the newlyweds and their parents. After the greeting, guests deposited their envelope of a cash gift in a double heart-shaped receptacle, signed the red silk table cloth and were then ushered to their seat. The receptacle and the red silk tablecloth for signing were organised by the hotel as part of the wedding package. Activities at the entrance were all recorded on video and still cameras, organised by the host. Inside the Grand Hall, guests were seated on round tables of twelve people, arranged around a large dance floor. Up on the stage, decorated with pot plants, was a western band. The feast organised for the night was a ten-course Chinese meal.

The evening followed the usual pattern described previously, with the bride’s uncle representing the family in addressing the gathering. However, many guests on the second floor left the reception soon after the last dish. I was told that this is quite normal: people

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14 According to Meuang Lao.Com – a website on things Lao, room rates in the Lao Plaza Hotel start from $US90 to $US250 a night.
15 From my later investigation, the feast would have cost the host a pretty sum. The banquets available from the hotel ranged in price from $US25 to $US45 per head, with the Kin To Chin a Chinese food banquet averaging around $US32 per head.
were there to be seen and ‘to eat their money’s worth’. But, the guests in the main hall, mainly close friends and relatives of the two families, stayed till the end. I ended up being one of the last guests to leave, as I also ran into old friends in Laos and those who came from France.

Anothay and Southida’s wedding

The next wedding I attended, on Sunday 16 January 2000, was between local Vientiane people, Mr Anothay (Rick) Outhensackda and Southida (Nok) Boupha, with connections to the Lao diaspora in Australia and the USA. The mother of the groom, Mrs Calong Outhensackda is a first cousin of my brother-in-law, Khamleck who has been living in Albury, NSW, since 1979. When a marriage was planned for Rick, invitation cards were sent to relatives scattered in the Lao diaspora in Australia, France and the USA. In fact, as I found out on arrival in Vientiane, there were three versions of the invitation. The one I received in Canberra was all in English. The invitation was only for the evening reception at the Lao Plaza Hotel, Vientiane, with an insert in Lao, inviting the guest to participate in a soukhouane and lunch to be held at the bride’s parental home. My brother-in-law, Pakasit who lives in Vientiane, received an invitation in Lao of a completely different design, inviting him and his wife to a soukhouane and lunch, with an insert for the evening reception (Pictures VI-2, 3 and 4).

![Picture VI-2]

16 I stayed with Kalong’s family when I first started my public service career in Laos, in late 1972, before I found a place to stay closer to work. Rick is her only child.
INVITATION

Anothay Outhensackda (Rick) + Southida Boupha (Nok)

Together with our parents

Mr. & Mrs. Manorom Outhensackda & Mr. & Mrs. Kham Ouane Boupha

Cordially invite you to attend our Wedding Reception

to be held at the MeKong Restaurant
Km4 Thadeua Road on Sunday, January 16, 2000

at seven o’clock in the evening.

Picture VI-3

Picture VI-4: The three styles of invitation card issued for the wedding of Anothay Outhensackda and Southida Boupha. The bottom one appears to be for Lao guests to attend the soukhoun ceremony only, while the one in the middle was for friends and relatives in Australia and the USA, as well as for ‘western’ friends in Vientiane. (From the author’s own collection).

According to Kalong, the English version was for the benefit of the relatives in Australia and the USA, and some of Rick’s friends in England17. There appears to be no official ‘control’ or censorship in the design and languages used in invitation cards at all.

Rick and Nok, like many of the modern Lao young people, met through social activities around town. When the parents knew that Rick and Nok were ‘an item’, and that Rick

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17 A year prior to his marriage, Rick was sent to England to ‘polish’ his English language skills in preparation for him taking over the family business of managing a petrol station.
was going to England to study, Nok’s parents wanted to have an engagement for their daughter. However, Rick’s parents said that the sojourn in England would be a year long and that it would not be auspicious nor traditional to have a long engagement.18 In the end, the engagement took place one week before the wedding proper.

The engagement was a simple family affair. Kalong told me that this date was not chosen in accordance with any astrological calculations. It was merely a convenient date before the more important auspicious day of the wedding proper. Around mid-morning, Rick’s family set off to the girl’s parental home in a fleet of cars. The party consisted of elderly relatives of the family and some of Rick’s friends. Two ladies carried a silver bowl each. The bowls were covered with red satin cloth. These bowls contained a khanhmak and the jewellery for the engagement. Rick and Nok, both dressed simply in everyday clothes, were present at the engagement. The proceeding began when one of Rick’s uncles uncovered the bowls and attached two lit candles on the rim of one bowl. He proclaimed that the day was an auspicious day for young people to begin their lives together and that the intention of the visit was to propose a union between the two families. In response to this gesture, an elderly gentleman, with his own silver bowl with two lit candles, accepted the proposal on behalf of Nok’s family. With the bowls and lit candles in front of them, Rick and Nok exchanged engagement rings, and Rick also gave Nok a gold necklace. The ritual finished with a blessing from Nok’s family representative. The guests were then invited to have lunch with the families to celebrate the engagement.

On the eve of the wedding, there was much preparation and merriment at Rick’s place. Rick’s (paternal) grand-mother led a group of ladies, young and old, in the preparation of the phakhouane for Rick’s individual soukhouane19. Outside under a marquee, a hired band entertained guests, some of whom were having their evening meals. As usual with Lao hospitality, food and drinks never stopped being served during such celebration.

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18 Interview with Kalong, Vientiane, 15 January 2000.
19 Refer to Chapter II, pp. 15 for discussion and pictures of this episode.
On the morning of the wedding day, at Rick’s place, his phakhouane stood ready in the middle of the ‘family’ room on a white square tablecloth. It was decorated with marigolds on skewers, some bai khoune leaves, and some white cotton threads. On top, there was one candle. Around the base of the phakhouane, there were plates of fruits, food, some boiled eggs, sticky rice containers, bottles of drinks, a glass and a spittoon, and a silver set of khanhmak. Also found around the base of the phakhouane were things that Rick would carry with him on his procession: a ceremonial sword, a bag of token possessions and a bang (resting on another silver bowl). In the meantime, Rick was getting dressed with the help of two gentlemen sent over by Nok’s father. He was dressed in a high-collared jacket in patterned off-white silk and navy blue phahang yao with a woven border at the bottom.

The soukhouane was conducted by Rick’s paternal grand-father. For his advanced age (he was 92 years old), he was allowed to sit on a small stool, instead of on the floor. The invocation emphasised the role of the mother in raising the son, and the gratitude the son should have for her (Picture VI-5). At the end there was some tying of wrists by the elders and the parents. After the soukhouane, some more jewellery was added on to Ricky’s dress: a large gold belt, four gold chains (two from each shoulder) and a necklace with a pendant (Picture VI-6).

A friend of Rick’s parents used his mobile phone to check whether the bride’s party was ready to receive the groom’s procession. The whole procession set off in a convoy of cars. The groom’s party parked in a neighbour’s yard opposite the bride’s house and proceeded on foot. The house where the wedding took place was Nok’s parental home. A new wing, where the nuptial room was situated, was recently added in preparation for Nok’s marriage.
The negotiation and bargaining at the gate were jovial and good humoured, with the customary song and dance, drinking and bantering. On the short walk from the front gate to the house, the procession was led by two couples bearing silver khanhmak and khanh khadong. The procession was greeted by the sound of Lao classical music from a band playing on the porch. Next to the band, on a table watched by two young girls was a heart shape receptacle in which guests could deposit their 'gifts' before entering the house or taking up their places under the marquee in the front yard. After the ritual of the cleansing of the groom's feet, the groom was led into the phakhouane by a lady using a mit sanak. After lighting the candle on the phakhouane, and depositing the sword next to the phakhouane, the groom waited for the entrance of the bride.

The phakhouane for Rick's wedding looked strikingly different to all others that I had seen both in shape and colour (see Chapter II- Picture II-13). The other unusual feature were the two pink sculptured candles (commercially available) placed on each side of the bang. There were a khanh-ha for the mophone's use during the ritual, a red and gold lacquered khanhmak with silver betel nut set, and two large silver bowls containing a number of bang for the somma.

The bride, when she was led into the phakhouane, was resplendent in all her bridal finery. The most striking however was the headband Nok wore: floral embroidered gold threads patterns on red silk with small silver flowers on the edges. I was told by Kalong the
bridal dresses for the bride and groom, as well as the *phakhouanes*, were of the Luang Prabang style, especially the bridal headband which was the style associated with the Royal court of Laos.\(^{20}\)

![Picture IV-6: The author with the bride and groom, Rick Outhensackda and Nok Boupha, after their *soukhouane* and just before the lunch feast. The bride wears the ‘royal’ bridal headdress and the groom has on the traditional gold belt for gentlemen. (Vientiane, 16 January 2000. Photo courtesy of Rick and Nok).]

The *soukhouane* itself was nothing special, following the ‘traditional’ format. After the *phoukkhene* and a photo session, the *mophone* led the newlyweds in a *somma* to the parents and the elders, followed by more wrist-tying by some friends and other guests. After that, the *mophone* led the gathering in the *mob phakhouane* – the handing over the *phakhouane* to the newlyweds. Two pairs of auspicious ladies then took the *phakhouanse* and the *khanhmak* and *khanh khadong* to the nuptial room where they were arranged on the bedside tables. On the bed was a *khanh-ha* ready for the newlyweds to pay homage to the guardian spirit of the bedroom. The bride and groom were then led into the room by the same lady who led the groom into the *soukhouane* in the first place, the groom carrying his bag of token possessions on one shoulder with the sword and the bride carrying the silver bowl containing the gifts received during the *phoukkhene*. She walked slightly behind the groom hanging on to his hand. Inside the room, the *mophone* led the newlyweds in the *somma*. After a session of photographs in the room, the newlyweds came down to invite the guests to lunch. Many of the female elders had their

\(^{20}\) Cf. Chapter III, p. 18 and Pictures III-1 and 2 for the discussion of this ‘royal’ headband.
meals set out in the room where the *soukhouane* had been; and many male elders were invited into the separate dining room where food was laid on the table.

As indicated in the invitation card, the next part of the wedding was the evening reception. It was held in the Mekong Restaurant, a popular restaurant-function hall some distance south of the city centre. The stage, rather small and low, was decorated with a lot of white and yellow balloons. As the guests arrived, they were greeted with the sound of a Lao classical band (the same one that had played at the *soukhouane* earlier in the day). Equipment for the rock band was for the moment pushed to the background. Behind the band was a poster in Lao and English proclaiming the happy occasion, with the date and names of the bride and groom. After being greeted by the bridal party, the guests were first directed to a table where there was a heart-shaped receptacle into which the guests would deposit the envelopes of cash gifts. Thereafter, some (honoured) guests were ushered to tables inside a separate room, while others were left to find their own seats, on rectangular tables that seated twelve persons arranged around the dance floor. A MC started the proceedings by inviting the bride and groom to present themselves in front of the stage. The groom was now dressed in a dark evening suit, while the bride was a Lao silk *sin* and a *seua sa-ngiap*. The bride’s father representing the two families gave a speech which was followed by a toast to the newlyweds. The dinner was a mixture of Chinese and western dishes, followed by the customary *lamvong* by the newlyweds and their parents. The occasion was made somewhat special by the newlyweds singing a duet in English.

*Khampheng and Sirivone’s wedding*

In contrast to the first two weddings, the next one was a comparatively low key family affair that proved to be one of the more interesting weddings I have witnessed. The bride and groom were not known to me personally prior to the marriage; I was invited to the
wedding by the groom’s sister\textsuperscript{21}. The morning of the wedding day began rather quietly at the groom’s place. There were some elders preparing a single *phakhouane* for the individual *soukhouane* for the groom, all the ingredients having been gathered the day before. The groom was dressed in a simple white high collared jacket with a gold necklace. The *pha hang-yao* was a simple piece of deep crimson with no border and a *phabieng* of chequered crimson and white on his left shoulder and clipped together at about his right hip. He carried a ceremonial sword on his left shoulder. His *bang* was made of banana leaves. It contained two long bee wax candles made by one of his aunts the night before. The groom’s mother took time to explain the content of the *bang* to me.

*The bang must be made of banana leaves in a conical shape and must have a shoot from a banana tree to symbolise the strong bond of love; some leaves from the dokhak tree to signify their love for each other; bai khoune, for auspiciousness in their married lives, bai ngeun and bai kham, for prosperity and wealth and a young shoot of the sugar cane to symbolise good manners.*\textsuperscript{22}

The *soukhouane* for the groom was conducted by one of the uncles, who was himself a *mophone*. It was a short family affair. The parents left soon after the *soukhouane* to go to the bride’s house with the *khanhmak* and *khanh khadong*. Thus, the groom’s parents did not take part in the procession at all.\textsuperscript{23} With two other auspicious couples, the groom’s parents presented the *khanhmak* and *khanh khadong* to the bride’s family. The silver bowls were covered with white cloth tied very tightly around the rim. An uncle, representing the groom’s family, after an opening speech, handed over the two silver bowls. A lady representing the bride’s family accepted them and untied the cover. Inside the first bowl were a match, a lighter and a packet of cigarettes. Then, she opened the cover of the *khanh khadong* which contained wads of cash as the *khadong*. The lady accepted the cash on behalf of the parents with words of praise for the groom’s parents.

\textsuperscript{21} Mrs Phansouk Vongpraseuth. She and her husband, Khamsay, were our good friends in Canberra. My wife and I got to know the groom’s parents quite well when they visited their daughter in Canberra the previous year. We were both invited to the wedding. I was well supported by the whole family in my research, both by allowing me to observe the wedding and by providing me with valuable information. I spent most of my time with the groom’s family.

\textsuperscript{22} The Lao word for this symbolic content was ສາພາດ ‘to be soft and sweet’, meaning to have good manners and to be well spoken. ສາດ can mean either ‘young’, or ‘soft’; and ສາວ means ‘sweet’.
and good wishes for the coming marriage. She then handed the entire contents to the bride’s parents by emptying it onto the phabieng of the bride’s mother. The latter gathered up the end of the sash and covered the cash, no doubt she would put it away later. Then the sacrificial roasted pig was brought out on a plateau covered with banana leaves. The whole animal was there - the tail, the head, the trotters and the entrails. The elders from both families shared some mouthfuls from this offering before it was taken into the kitchen to be cut up to serve at lunch later.\(^\text{24}\)

In the meantime, some lady friends were putting make-up on the bride who was dressed in the traditional wedding attire. The bride was led into the phakhouane by an aunt using the Nak belt. The bride had in her hand a bang similar to the one carried by the groom, but made with a white sheet of paper and with a single lit candle. The bang was taken off the bride by the mophone who promptly put out the light. At the agreed time, the groom’s party arrived in a convoy of cars. Before he started off on his procession on foot, he lit the two candles in his bang. For a bag of token possession, the kheui long was carrying an attaché case. This person was ‘recruited’ on the spot just before the procession started. Someone in the group of relatives provided the phabieng and a silver belt for him. He also carried a colourful umbrella over the groom. There was no phai long. There was a customary singing, dancing and lots of drinking as they walked straight through the front gate right up to where the rock for the cleansing of the groom’s feet was located. There was no ‘rock’, but a large banana leave for the groom to stand on to have his feet cleansed. After the cleansing of the feet, the groom was led into the phakhouane by the same auspicious lady who led the bride using a Nak belt, instead of the ‘traditional’ mit sanak.

The phakhouane were a radical departure from the more common conical shape. They were a series of ‘pointed fingers’ made of banana leaves spiralling around the central cone structure. These structures sat in a round bowl which in turn was placed on top of a plateau. The bowl and plateau were not silver, but were made of aluminium and painted

\(23\) I left with the groom’s parents so that I could observe this ritual prior to the arrival of the groom’s party.
in a gold colour. Marigolds and short white cotton threads were hanging off many of these fingers. On top, was a single bee’s wax candle tied to a skewer with some marigolds on it. On the floor, around the plateau were hands of bananas, bamboo sticky rice containers, plastic bottles of purified water, two water glasses and two wine goblets. There was a khanh-ha for the mophone. From the father of the bride, I learnt that the phakhouanes were made by a male friend of the bride’s who had studied Thai floral arrangement.

Before the soukhouane began, a male relative of the bride made an announcement that this marriage had been sanctioned by the local civil authority. He then tied a white cotton thread on the mophone, asking him to perform the soukhouane ritual. The mophone began by saying:

Now is the auspicious moment, and a good time (to begin the ritual); (I) invite all the fathers and mothers and all the elders to bestow good wishes – asking from them the ten most auspicious wishes. [Then he told the betrotheds to receive the phakhouane as he spoke on behalf of the elders]: Today is a good day, now is an auspicious time, all the parents and relatives from near and far had prepared a phakhouane to give [you] a soukhouane to wish you two to be husband and wife; these are the elders who now bear witness (to this marriage).25

Then the mophone began the invocation for the soukhouane. He did this in a sing-song tone that sounded more melodious than many other mophones I had heard before. During the incantation, the bride and groom held in their hands a posy of bai khoune. When the mophone called the khouanes to come into the bodies (‘Ma Yeu Khouanes Eui’), some elders in the gathering, including the mother of the groom, threw uncooked rice grains into the air and onto the gathering while also repeating the chorus calling the khouanes. The mother of the groom explained to me that the rice grains were to welcome the khouanes of the guests of honour; it was the practice of her native village.26 After the end of the invocation, the mophone peeled one boiled egg from the bowl and cut it with one

24 Refer to Chapter I, p. 21 for the tradition of giving three pigs of differing sizes for different purposes in the scheme of the wedding as told to the author by Mrs Bounthanh in Luang Prabang.
25 From a transcription of the proceeding recorded by the author. Translation into English is by the author.
26 It is linked to the Buddhist story of Vetsanatara as believed by the Lao: when the prince returned to assume the throne, there was supposed to be ‘rain of precious gems and flowers’ to welcome him.
of the long threads from the *phakhouane*. He put bits of egg yolk in the up-turned palms of the bride and groom. While doing this, the *mophone* tied their wrists together with a single strand of cotton thread, all the while reciting the wishes for the couple. He then instructed them to feed the egg in their hand to the other person, with the bride’s arm underneath that of the groom, a gesture of support and subordination. After they washed the egg down with some water, the couple was instructed to pull on the thread that bound them together. This was a ritual to test which one of the married partners ‘loved the other more': the one who ended up with more of the thread on their wrist was the one with the ‘stronger love’. To much applause, the groom ended up with most of the threads.

Then the couple turned around to face the gathering to have their wrists tied by other people, starting with their own parents. In front of them was a silver *khanh* to receive cash gifts from well-wishers. Many of these people also tied cash on the cotton thread and then tied it on the wrists of the bride or groom. So, by the end of this wrist-tying session, the couple had a lot of rolled up cash tied to their wrists. After this ritual, the *mophone* led the newlyweds in a *somma*. Pillows from the bedroom were brought out so that the bride and groom could prostrate on them. The *khanh somma* was also placed on the pillow. While the *mophone* led them in the *somma*, the newlyweds bowed their heads low in a gesture of gratitude and asking for forgiveness. Then they jointly lifted the *khanh somma* to their bowed foreheads and offered it to their parents who accepted the *khanh* by holding on to it at the same time. Once this acceptance was completed, the newlyweds distributed the *bang somma* to the elders, beginning with their parents. The bride would hold the *khanh* while the groom did the distribution. This is symbolic of the sharing of family chores and the support given to each other by the husband and wife. The receivers of the *bang* would thank them by bestowing wishes on the newlyweds for a long and happy married life. At the end of this ritual, an elderly uncle of the bride, representing the two families, gave advice to the newlyweds, who sat opposite him in a praying position.

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27 See Appendix A (f) for Lao wording and English translation of the ‘traditional’ ways of making and accepting a *somma*. 
Another aunt of the bride, an auspicious lady, then led the newlyweds into the nuptial room, again using a Nak belt. The groom had in his left hand the bang that he arrived with, while in his right hand was the attaché case of his token possessions. The bride had in one hand the cash gifts received during the phoukkhene gathered up by the end of her phabieng, while the other hand was hanging on to the end of the groom’s phabieng, a display of the traditional propriety of no physical touching in public. In the room, after a somma of the guardian spirit of the nuptial room, there was a long session of photograph and video taking. During this session, the bride and groom were asked to pose for a kiss and the sharing of a single biscuit, which was quite ‘un-traditional’. Afterward, they came down to share lunch with the guests. The afternoon was a rest time for the family in preparation for the evening reception. Activities in the kitchen, however, did not cease as the cooks continued to cook for the evening feast.

The evening celebration began with the bridal party lining up near the front gate to welcome guests, with the bride and groom at the head of the line. The groom had now changed into a blue western suit while the bride was in an evening Lao dress. Next to them was a nicely decorated table for guests to deposit their gifts with a pink twin-heart shaped receptacle for envelopes of cash gifts. Next to the receptacle was a floral arrangement that was a smaller replica of the phakhouane. Next in line were two young girls with a bottle of Johnny Walker Red Label and two goblets ready to welcome guests with a stiff drink. After that, the guests were greeted by the parents and the chaokhot loungta and then were left to find their own seats. Dinner would be served inside the house for the elders and outside in the courtyard for the other guests. A series of very colourful marquees were arranged along the fence on the front lawn. In the middle of the lawn was the telltale parachute propped up by a long wooden pole, around which was a small table of fruits and sweets. A banner proclaiming the happy occasion, with names of the bride and groom, hung from the second storey veranda. The marquees were decorated with balloons and party lights all around. A rock band was set near the house. The hosts had also arranged for a paid armed guard to patrol the parking area.
The ‘official’ welcome was performed by the same gentleman who had given advice to the newlyweds earlier in the day. In his speech, he introduced the newlyweds as “the couple who have started a new family by having a wedding in accordance with Lao customs and tradition, the law of the land and the direction and policy of the party and State.” A buffet dinner of a mixture of Lao, Chinese and western dishes followed. Merriment, on the grass lawn under the parachute, began when the bride and groom were invited to open the floor with a lamvong and continued until late into the night.

Thipphaphone and Ouday’s wedding

The next wedding I attended was a coincidence which turned out to be the most ‘traditional’ of the five case studies, held in a traditional Lao house in a village setting. The wedding took place at the bride’s parental home in Ban Khokninh, a village about seven kilometres south of Vientiane city centre. The house is of old Lao style built of hard wood on stilts, with two sets of steps leading up to the house. The ‘front’ or main stairs lead to a veranda from which there are two doors into a open living area. Off to the right of this area are a series of bedrooms, one of which was turned into the nuptial room for the coming marriage. The main house is connected to the service area by a veranda. In the service area is a very large kitchen with open fire cooking, a washing area, and a ‘modern’ bathroom/toilet to one side. From the connecting veranda is a set of steps down to the side of the house where there is a barn for seasonal produce. Underneath the house, farmyard animals live among the house posts. To the front of the house, there are fruits trees, among them banana trees, jackfruits and mango trees. There is a path winding through the trees leading to houses belonging to close relatives of the family.

28 I did not know about the wedding and the couple concerned at all. It was ‘by accident’ that I was invited. On the plane to Laos for my research, I ran into an old friend Champadeng Keomoungkhoun who used to live in Canberra and collaborated with me some time ago in community and association work. Our families became good friends, and after he moved to Sydney, we remained in touch through our work with our respective associations and some mutual friends. He was on his way to Laos on a business trip and also to attend a wedding of one of his nieces. So, he invited me to the wedding there and then. True to his word, an invitation card was delivered a few days later, and I was later introduced to the family of the bride as ‘a good friend and an uncle from Australia’. My thanks to Champadeng and the Keomoungkhoun family of Ban Khokninh for taking me in as a ‘relative’ and giving me every assistance during my research.

29 See Footnote 54 in Chapter I, p. 32, for a discussion of the traditional Lao house, its use and its significance.
I was invited to stay the night with the family so that I could ‘be part of the family’ wedding from early morning. As is tradition, the eve of the wedding was the beginning of the festivities. Many friends and relatives of the family arrived to help prepare for the wedding. Some came with ingredients for cooking, some with flowers and banana leaves. Older ladies were gathered in the middle of the open room, working on the phakhousane. Male elders, as usual in these sorts of social gathering, sat in groups reminiscing or arguing politics. The nuptial bed was also made up during the evening, and contrary to tradition, with assistance from the bride’s single female friends. Many auspicious leaves and piece of coins (including Australian coins) were put under the mattress. But, something new took place: many rose petals and some currency notes were scattered on top of the bed. By late evening, between talking, joking and drinking, most of the preparation was done.

By early morning the next day, the wedding day, the bride was already dressed in her fineries, as she had to perform a few rituals prior to the wedding soukhouane. Before any other ritual took place, Aunt Xoumkham and another relative went down the back stair with a plateau for the offering to the spirits of the ancestors. Back upstairs, Aunt Xoumkham then guided the bride through other rituals: the offering to the guardian spirit of the kitchen and the main house stairs.

The groom’s party arrived soon after. There were three or four couples of auspicious people, including the groom’s parents, bearing two silver khanh covered by pieces of white cloth. One was a khanhmak with sets of fully prepared betel nut for chewing, and the other contained wads of money and a piece of gold jewellery. Aunt Xoumkham accepted on behalf of the family, transferred the contents into the khanh of the bride’s

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30 Refer to Chapter I, pp. 32-33 for discussion of the nuptial bed.
31 See Pictures I-1 and 2, Chapter I, pp. 10-11 for the performance of this ritual by Aunt Xoumkham.
32 See Pictures I-28 and 29, Chapter I, pp. 39-40 for the performance of these rituals by Aunt Xoumkham. According to her, it does not matter in which order the rituals take place, as long as they are performed. Perhaps, it is how she remembers them: the performance of the rituals, their importance in the overall scheme of the wedding; but she does not remember the sequence in which they should take place.
party, and with a flourish of extravagant gestures and words of blessing, handed them to the mother and grand mother of the bride (Picture VI-7).  

Not long after this ritual finished, the commotion from the front of the house announced the arrival of the groom’s procession. The usual singing and merry making preceded the groom’s coming down the pathway in front of the house. Aunt Xoumkham got up to lead the groom into the house. The groom was dressed in simple traditional wedding attire. He carried a bag of token possessions and a sword on his right shoulder. In his hand he was holding a bang, made of banana leaves and containing young banana shoot, young sugar cane shoot and a pair of lighted candles. Aunt Kham was standing at the bottom rung of the front stair, while the groom was having his feet cleansed, standing on a knife-sharpening rock covered with a banana leave. She then led the groom up the steps, using a mit sanak, into where the phakhouane were placed.

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33 Apparently, the grand-mother had a big part in raising the bride, while the mother was working to help support the family. This is a sign of gratitude not just to the mother, but to the person who had an important part in raising the bride. See Appendix A (b) and (c) for Lao wording and English translation of the ‘traditional’ way of presenting and accepting the khanhmak and khanh khadong. This wedding was one the ones where this part of the ritual was performed by the chaokhot loungta themselves, and not by the mophone.
Once inside the room, the aunt took the bag and the sword from the groom and placed them in front of the *phakhouane*. She instructed the groom to light the candles on top of the *phakhouane* using the lighted candle in his *bang*. He then sat down and wait for the entrance of the bride, while Aunt Xoumkham went to lead the bride in from the nuptial room where she had been waiting. Again she used the *mit sanak* to lead her in. The bride carried nothing in her hands or her person. Before she sat down, she was playfully pushed against the groom, a ritual that foretold who would have the ‘upper hand’ in the married life. The bride and groom were flanked by the respective parents at the *phakhouane*.

Before the *soukhouane* began, a male relative of the bride tied a cotton thread on the *mophone*, wishing that his undertaking be sacred and potent. The incantation for the *soukhouane* used by this *mophone* warrants some comment as it is quite different from others that I have heard. It follows the same formulae but has an additional stanza of Buddhist prayer inserted before the ‘*Si Si*’ part. Further, there is much less emphasis on the calling of the *khouanes*, but more on the effects of Karma from their previous life that
cause them to be born “under the glorious socialism and in the same party leadership” that gives them the opportunity to grow up and meet. The soukhouane was followed by the phoukkhene and the sharing of the first meal. Then the couple turned around to face the gathering to have the wrists tied by other people, starting with their own parents. In front of them was a male silver bowl to receive cash gifts from well-wishers. This ritual was followed by the somma (Picture VI-9), which was very similar to the one I witnessed at other weddings.

**Picture VI-9:** The newlyweds, Ouday and Thipphaphone, perform a somma to their chaokhot louniga. In the picture is the bride's grand-mother bestowing her wishes on them by putting the end of her phabieng on their foreheads. (Ban Khokninh, January 2000. Photo by the author).

At the end of this ritual, an elderly uncle of the bride, representing the two families, gave advice to the newlyweds who sat opposite him in a praying position. At the conclusion of this ‘advice’, Aunt Xoumkham got up led the newlyweds into the nuptial room, again using mit sanak. The groom carried his bag of possessions, his sword and his pillow, and the bride had in her arm the silver bowl in which she had put the cash gift received during the phoukkhene, and the pillow on which they prostrated during the somma. Upon entering the room, the newlyweds were told to ‘fight’ for the few pieces of silver and cash on the bed. This ritual was supposed to find out who of the couple would be the

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34 See Appendix A (g) for the transcript and translation of the invocation for this wedding.
35 Refer to Pictures 1-33 and 34, Chapter I, pp. 42-44 for discussion of the leading the newlyweds into the nuptials room.
better ‘bread winner’ for the family. Then they were instructed to sit, in a praying position, on the bed while Aunt Kham led them in a *somma* of the guardian spirit of the nuptial room.

The evening reception was held in the Mekong Restaurant, where Rick and Nok’s reception was. The same band (apparently supplied by the restaurant as a package) was already playing on the small stage. Behind the band was a poster in Lao and English proclaiming the happy occasion for the bride and groom. The groom was now dressed in a light grey evening suit, while the bride wore a blue Lao silk *sin* and a *seua sa-ngiap*

![Picture VI-10: The newlyweds, Ouday and Thipphaphone, posed in front of the heart-shape receptacle at the evening reception for their wedding. (Ban Khokninh, January 2000. Photo by the author).](image)

I had earlier been asked by the bride’s uncle to act as the Master of ceremony for the evening. After an opening remark and a Lao poem specially written as a gift to the newlyweds, I invited one of the groom’s uncles, who was the Deputy Minister of Education, to give a speech on behalf of the two families. The speech was followed by a toast to the newlyweds. And then, dinner was served. Again, it was a mixture of Chinese
and western dishes. Then followed the customary lamvong by the newlyweds and their parents.

Tina and Souliphone’s wedding
My wife and I have known Tina Siri’s family for a long time. Her father, Somchit was also a Colombo Plan scholarship holder some three years my senior. Her mother, Nouannipha (or Toy) was a friend of my wife. Their two families were close acquaintances because their fathers shared some political and administrative highlights for a long time. While Tina is an Australian citizen, Souliphone was a student from Laos. They met through some mutual friends in Canberra. The decision to get married in Laos was in part to satisfy the wish of Tina’s grand-father, and of course that of Souliphone’s family. As with Soraya’s family, Tina’s family was very supportive of and encouraged, my request to use their daughter’s wedding as a case study for my research. Indeed, I received the invitation to the wedding before I left on the research trip.

On the wedding day, when I arrived at the bride’s (grand)parental house I found the bride and her sister, who was acting as the bridesmaid, relaxing on the front porch. The bride had just completed the ritual of somma of the kitchen. I was, in fact assured by Toy herself, that all the ‘traditional’ rituals of paying homage were undertaken by the bride. In the front yard, there were no parachutes, but three large marquees where chairs were arranged in rows around long tables for food.

Inside the house, in the lounge room, there were already some elders sitting around. One of them, Mrs Bouaphanh (Mayoura’s mother), who had a good reputation for making nice phakhouane, was putting the finishing touches to the phakhouane. She was paid by the bride’s family to make the phakhouane.37

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36 Both Intong’s father and Toy’s father were members of the National Assembly, and then were both appointed to the King’s Council. After the 1975 Great Political Divide, they both stayed in Laos while some of their offspring left to settle in other countries. In the early 1980s, they were both appointed as representatives of the Vientiane Municipality to the Lao Front for National Reconstruction.
37 As I know her well, I talked to her while she was working on the phakhouane.
This was quite a departure from the tradition of having auspicious ladies work on the phakhouanes. Mrs Bouaphanh was paid to prepare them and she was a widow. It appears that having a nice phakhouane was more important than following tradition. These phakhouane were three tiers of silver bowls in which the main part of the phakhouane sat. The bodies of the phakhouane, which were not a markbeng shape, were covered with dok daoheuang. In the middle of each phakhouane was a ‘Nam tao’ (a gourd), or a flower vase, filled with dok hak, and long candles (see Diagram A in the Appendix). White cotton threads on skewers were interspersed among the flowers. As with the phakhouane for Soraya’s wedding, the phakhouane were surrounded by similar traditional paraphernalia.

As I had met the mophone at other weddings, I took the opportunity to have a talk to him about the ceremony. I mentioned that I had learnt that at some wedding ceremonies, the mophone would begin with a somma before the soukhouane, not after as was being done now. He concurred, saying that traditionally, the somma should be before the wedding soukhouane as it signified that the bride and groom were asking forgiveness from the parents, and at the same time asking their permission to enter into a marriage. He said that it was only in the ‘modern’ time for expediency and convenience for photographing and video taping that the somma was done after the soukhouane.

From an interview with the groom, and a photo supplied by him (Picture VI-19), the groom had a small individual soukhouane at his house prior to setting off on his procession. The phakhouane was less elaborate, but still decorated with the auspicious flowers. The phakhouane had one candle only. From the photo, it could be seen that two important pieces of paraphernalia were present: the khanhmak and the khanh somma. A different mophone was used to conduct this ritual for the groom.

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38 Maha Kykeo, and Loung Thit Gnaí told me that this was the way a Lao phakhouane must be as it was the ethnic identity marker for the Lao people. The old Lao word for Nam Tao was Lavu, from which derived the word Lao as in ‘the Lao people’.
39 Mr Singkham Wiravongsa, Vientiane 12/02/2000
40 Interview with Tina and Souliphone, Canberra, March 2002. After his individual soukhouane he had a photo taken with his chaokhot loungta (Picture VI-20).
After the ritual at the groom’s residence, his chaokhot loungta, the two auspicious couples with the khanhmak and khanh khadong in the photo, arrived at the bride’s home, with the ladies leading the way down the drive toward the house. The auspicious couples were in fact the groom’s parents and his uncle and aunt. The ladies were each carrying a silver bowl which were covered with a piece of white cloth. They were welcomed into the house by the bride’s father (which is un-traditional as the father of the bride should stay at the phakhouane at this time). Inside the room, next to the phakhouane, the bride’s family were waiting, with the mophone next to them. In front of the mophone was a silver bowl with two candles in it and a khanhmak. Once seated, the groom’s father lit two candles attached to the rim of one of the silver bowls he had brought in. This was a signal that the ritual was about to begin. After lighting the two candles in his bowl, the mophone opened the proceedings by asking the visitors as to their intentions of coming today. The groom’s uncle, representing his family, replied that as today was a most auspicious day to begin a new life with a new family for their son, they had come to ask for the hand of the daughter of the house in marriage so that the two families could be united. During this ritual, the boy and girl were not present at all (Picture VI-12).

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41 This one was one of the few times when the ladies were walking ahead of the gentlemen. Nobody, however, could explain why; only to say that the Khanhmak and Khan Khadong must be in the front.
Then, the groom’s uncle handed over the khanhmak and the khanh kha namnom mea to the mophone who accepted them on behalf of the girl’s family. The khanhmak was passed to the ladies to start chewing the betel nut from the khanh as a sign of acceptance of the khadong. Meanwhile the mophone pretended to check the contents of the second bowl, and showed the contents off to the gathering. It consisted of two gold bracelets and some thirty pieces of old colonial silver coins in three plastic bags. It was then transferred from one family to the other. This was then handed over to the bride’s parents by the mophone, who completed this part of the ritual with the tying of white string from the phakhouane on both parents of the bride. In this blessing of the parents, the mophone emphasised the effort of raising their daughter to be a good girl within the traditional frame of Heuane Sam Nam St. After spending appropriate time for social chit-chat, the groom’s party withdrew to prepare for the groom’s procession.

42 The bride’s mother insisted that according to tradition, the khadong for the daughter must only be equal to or less than what the mother received for her marriage.
43 This is the traditional teaching given out to young girls to follow the rules of “The three houses and the ‘four waters”. The ‘three houses’ are ‘the hair grooming’ (thus comportment and presentation, known in Lao as ອິຄາເສັດ), the kitchen (thus be a good provider for the family, known in Lao as ອິຄາແນ້), the bedroom (thus look after the welfare of the family) known in Lao as ອິຄາເຊົມ) The ‘four waters’ are the water for drinking and receiving guests, the water for cooking, the water for bathing (thus general use) and water as offering to the household altar.
The groom’s procession drove from his house and stopped at a road junction near the front gate of the bride’s house. From there, the procession proceeded on foot. The kheui long, dressed in a dark modern Western suit, held an umbrella over the groom’s head. The procession was headed by a young male person with a bottle of Johnny Walker Red Label – part of the bribe to have the ritual gate opened. Along side the groom, a lady was acting as his chaperon telling him and the best man what to do. She had in her hands some envelopes which she later gave to the best man to ‘pay’ the young people who cleansed the groom’s feet. At the gate, the young man with the bottle of whiskey was met by the bride’s party who began by plying him with alcoholic drinks of his own. This exchange of drinks continued, involving more and more people from both parties. At the gate, the entrance was ‘barricaded’ by a Nak belt, held by two young cousins (male and female) of the bride, dressed in traditional dresses. Some other people joined in the bargaining ritual. The same two young cousins later performed the cleansing of the groom’s feet. They took turns to sprinkle water on the groom’s feet using a bunch of red flowers. The groom did not take off his shoes when putting his feet, one at a time, on the ritual block. He then handed the envelope of ‘payment’ to the young cousins.

After this ritual, he was led into the soukhouane by a lady using a mit sanak. Half way towards the phakhouane, another lady stopped the groom to divest him of the sword. He then was led to the phakhouane where he used the still lit candles in his bang to light the candles on top of the phakhouane. The lady then took the bang from the groom and inserted the candles from the bang into the top of each phakhouane. Now the phakhouane had a pair of lit candles. The groom was then directed to sit next to the phakhouanes. After a while, the same lady who led the groom into the phakhouane led out the bride. The bride was resplendent in full traditional bridal attire. By now, the parents of the bride and the groom were sitting in their proper places, that is, on the sides where their respective offspring was sitting in relation to the phakhouanes. The kheuilong and the phailong were sitting some distance away.

Before the soukhouane proper took place, the bride’s grand-father addressed the gathering by first reading the official permission from the local civil authority for the
marriage. He continued to give advice to the newlyweds and thanked the gathering for being present. He finished off by introducing the mophone, Mr Singkham Voravongs. The mophone then led the bride and groom in the somma, instructing them what to do and when. It was quite clear that the bride and groom did not know what to do.

Once the bride and groom had returned to their sitting position, they were instructed to pick up and hold another bang of flowers in their hands in a praying position. The long threads of white cotton were passed from the phakhouane to their hands, with the threads cris-crossing and the thread for the male on top. The invocation followed the set format. At the conclusion of the invocation, the mophone used the long threads to tie the wrists of the bride and groom together. First he instructed the two of them to extend their hands on top of one of the silver bowls, with the bride’s arm supporting that of the groom. The symbolism of the superior social position of the male partner is evident in this action and in the crossing of the two long white threads above. He tied the thread first on the groom and then with the same thread he tied the bride’s wrist, all the while chanting wishes for their new married status and giving them advice on being a good husband and wife. More wishes and advice were given by the mophone while he peeled a boiled egg and cut it in half with one of the long threads. He then took a small ball of rice from the container and combined it with the egg. The bride and groom were instructed to extend their hands out to receive a mouthful of combined egg and rice. Again, with the bride’s arm was underneath that of the groom in a gesture of support, they then fed each other amidst much cheering and approval from the gathering.

The bride and groom then changed places with the mophone. Now they sat with their back to the phakhouane and faced the larger part of the gathering to receive wish by having their wrists tied with white threads. In front of them was a silver bowl in which the threads were kept at the ready for those who needed them, and also to deposit the gifts received during the wrist tying ritual. This ritual did not begin with the parents of the newlyweds, but the elders. Many people placed their gifts of cash in an envelope directly in the hands of either the bride or groom. This session went on for quite a long while, as most people inside the room took part. Meantime, the classical band, which had a rest
during the *soukhouane*, started up again. After a while, the bride and groom moved again so that some older ladies who had problems moving around could tie white threads on them.

After that, the *mophone* led the gathering in the *mob phakhouane*. Two pairs of auspicious ladies then took the *phakhouanes*, along with other wedding paraphernalia into the nuptial room where they were arranged on the bedside tables. On the bed was a *khanhha* ready for the bride and groom to pay homage to the guardian spirit of the bedroom. The bride and groom were then led into the room by the same lady who led the groom into the *soukhouane* in the first place. On this trip, the groom carried his bag of token possessions on one shoulder with the sword, and the bride carried the silver bowl containing the gifts received during the *phoukkhene*. The *mophone* instructed the parents of the newlyweds to follow them into the room. Inside the room, the *mophone* led the newlyweds in the *somma* of the guardian spirit of the bedroom.44 Then followed a long session of photograph-taking in the room, and another session outside in the yard with the other guests. Without any further ‘ritual’, guests were invited to partake in lunch.

The evening reception, at the Vientiane Grand Room of the Lao Plaza Hotel, started promptly on time. One could not mistake the occasion at all. At the entrance to the hall, the bridal party lined up to welcome the guests, and next to them was a portrait of the bride and groom (to ensure that the guests came to the right wedding reception). There was the ubiquitous heart-shape receptacle and guest books to be signed (Picture VI-13). Inside in the hall, the setting is similar to Soraya’s wedding, though there was one noticeable difference. On the right hand side of the stage, stood a five-tiered wedding cake and in front of the stage, there was an ice-carving of a swan on each side. The groom was now dressed in a dark evening suit, while the bride was a Lao silk *sin*, a *seua sa-ngiap* (Picture VI-14).

44 See Picture I-35, Chapter I, p.44 for detail.
One of the bride’s cousin was invited onto the stage to welcome the guests and wish the newlyweds all the happiness, in Lao and English. The bride and groom were joined by the whole bridal party. Then an uncle of the groom, who was named on the invitation card as one of the chaokhot loungta, was invited up to give a speech on behalf of the two families. The speech was followed by a toast to the newlyweds, proposed by the MC himself. And then, dinner, again a Chinese banquet, was served. While the guests were having dinner, another cousin of the bride’s, who lives in from Thailand, performed a Thai classical dance in honour of the newlyweds. This was followed by the customary lamvong by the newlyweds and the best man and bridesmaid, and general merriment. The occasion was made somewhat special by the bridal party dancing the Western dances of tango, rumba and cha cha cha.45

45 According to the bride, the whole party of the bridesmaids and groomsmen had dancing lessons in Vientiane just for the wedding.
One other adoption of the Western tradition by the bride and groom was the cutting of the wedding cake, which looked by all accounts, very elaborate. It was not clear whether this dance exhibition and the cake cutting was to show that the bridal party was ‘modern’ (being from Australia) or just trying to follow the then trend in Vientiane where dance lessons were the craze in town. ⁴⁶

⁴⁶ As attested to by the proliferation of commercially available VCDs of dance lessons, that had also found their way into Lao-Australians homes in Canberra (and no doubt elsewhere in the Lao diaspora).
Concluding remarks

The five weddings described here immediately bring to mind the precarious link between remembrance and diasporic existence and individual and group memory.

The groom's procession is one ritual where tradition has given way to modernity. Of the five weddings studied in this thesis, four began in a convoy of cars and then proceeded on foot. Only Ouday's wedding began on foot from his parental home. Admittedly, his home and that of the bride were in the same village only a short distance away. Indeed, some cars in the bridal convoy appeared to be very well decorated as Pictures VI-15 and 16 show.

Picture VI-15: Tina and Souliphone’s performed the cake cutting at their wedding. (Vientiane, January 2000. Photo by the author).

From Tina’s wedding, we can observe that during the groom’s procession, while the groom was in traditional dress, the ‘best man’ was however in a western suit of dark colour. This gives a nice contrast to the weddings in pre-1975-Laos when the grooms and the kheuilong were all dressed in their traditional attire. Given the degree of preparation and the wherewithal at the disposal of the families, this seems to be catering to the whim and desire of the young people themselves. The ‘barricade’ at the front gate was ‘manned’ by two children. As this ritual involves much drinking and bantering (sometimes rowdy and bawdy), this is an adult affair. The use of young children seems to be for novelty value only. At the cleansing of the groom’s feet, there were two people doing the honour – a young boy and young girl. Again there seems to be novelty value before tradition, which dictates that only a young girl can do the honour.

One of the more important observations from this wedding was that the somma was done before the soukhouane. As the mophone confined in me prior to the soukhouane, ‘traditionally’ the somma was done before the soukhouane as it was a ritual whereby the bride and groom asked for forgiveness and permission from their parents to get married. But, to cater for two things, photo sessions and the allowance for more than the six auspicious couples to do the tying of the wrists, the somma was done after the
Soukhouane for reason of expediency and convenience. At the reception, the wedding cake and the ice carvings were clearly an adaptation of western wedding practices.

From Soraya’s wedding, we also observe a few ‘departures’ from the norm of holding a ‘traditional’ Lao wedding ceremony. The first departure from ‘tradition’ that occurred in this wedding was that the wedding soukhouane ceremony did not take place in the bride’s parental home, which was in Canberra in any case. As mentioned earlier, the house belonged to one of the bride’s uncles. The second was the handing out of red envelopes of gifts to the guests. This is an adoption of a Chinese tradition of sharing the largesse and wishes of happiness that is more especially reserved for the Chinese New Year. Another was that the bang for the somma were not of banana leaves but a face washer of some sort. The next departure from tradition was that, after the soukhouane, the phakhouane were not taken into the nuptial room at the house of the bride’s parent; but transported back to the groom’s parents’ place. That leads to another departure – there was no leading of the newlyweds into the nuptial room after the ceremony.

The variety in the shape of the phakhouanes in the five case studies raises questions about memory and diasporic trauma. Is it because Laos still has a larger pool of ‘memory’ to draw on, or is a diaspora’s memory fixed with the image at the time they left the homeland? Or is it because the people in Laos try to keep up with changes (globalisation), and therefore ‘invent new traditions’ or ‘adopt other’s tradition’ to show their individuality and independence? Or do the Lao diaspora, by adopting to use the one shape of phakhouane show that they are ‘keepers of tradition’?
PART C

COMMENTARIES

Chapter VII
Kindong - Loss, Revival and Adaptation

Chapter VIII
Kindong – Site of Contestation
CHAPTER VII

Kindong – Loss, Revival and Adaptation

As a result of the 1975 Great Political Divide, much knowledge of traditional wedding practices was lost, both within Laos itself and the Lao diasporic communities in Australia and the USA. Across the Lao diaspora, there was a lack of older people with the knowledge, expertise and experience of wedding traditions and also a lack of proper paraphernalia (see Chapters IV and V). With the diasporic desire to proclaim themselves as guardians of tradition, Lao people in diasporic communities staged a ‘traditional wedding ceremony’ that was in fact a poor representation of the ‘ideal’. In the homeland (discussed in Chapter VI), the suppression of traditional ways by the new regime, especially in the first few years of their rule, meant that a whole new generation of Lao people suffered a cultural dislocation because of this denial of traditional ways. However, as the experience and knowledge of the Lao traditional wedding ceremony did not disappear altogether, the advantage that Laos had over the diasporic Lao communities was a larger pool of people with knowledge and experience, albeit diminishing with age, and moreover, the traditional paraphernalia re-emerged sooner. The greater number of older people tended to strengthen the remembrance of the ‘traditional’ way in Laos.

What we have then, in both environments, is a situation where Lao people have tried to revive tradition without understanding the deeper meaning of the very thing they were reviving. In so doing they either consciously or unwittingly incorporated outside influences and practices that became the ‘new traditions’. The reality of kindong, however, is different from the ‘traditional’ ceremony. This is evident in the following aspects of Lao weddings: courtship, the concept of auspiciousness, the changing understanding of khadong, the choice of partner and the ideals and ideas of being husband and wife. While these aspects and processes of Lao weddings are now practiced, they are done with new understanding and have been adapted to new social, cultural and political circumstances. This chapter explores those aspects of the Lao wedding ceremony that underwent this process of revival.
Courtship

Courtship for modern Lao young people now is a far cry from the traditional ways. Such as ‘spying’ and using the go-between, discussed in Chapter I. Among the older generation (for example, that of Mrs Orady), tradition and living conditions and style dictated that daily family and community activities shaped the opportunities for young people to meet. Many did not even meet and form a relationship prior to being married: they went along with the family decision of what was best for them, as in the cases of Mrs Orady and Mrs Sakone.

Most young people discussed in the case studies met their prospective partners at work, or at social occasions such as birthday parties and dance parties. To be sure, there are still festivals at local temples – even in Lao diasporic communities - and festivities at the homes of relatives that could provide opportunities for young people to meet in the old way. But, there is a growing trend of young people adapting to the western social practice of meeting outside the home, even in present day Laos. This current trend towards young people meeting outside the home environment without adult supervision is causing alarm in government circles. In a recent article in the government-run newspaper, the author lamented the lost tradition of the time:

..(w)hen he and his wife were young, they met each other at the temple festival. Phou Bao and Phou Sao in the former [sic] were shy, or more so than the present boys and girls. It was so much more different than the present. “It was very hard to go and talk to a girl. But now boys and girls approach each other all the time,” he added.¹

The article lamented the loss of the ‘old way’ and the futility of the attempt to stem the onslaught of modernity:

¹ Lamphoun Assanani “Where do the Phou Bao and Phou Sao meet?”. Vientiane Times; from Internet http://www.vientianetimes.gov.la/...Bao%20and%20Phou%20Phou%20Sao%20meet.htm. The quote above was from a father of a young boy and girl who have adopted the modern way of courtship. Phou Bao ວ້າວ່ой.WRITE and Phou Sao ແ້ວ່ой.WRITE means young boy and young girl respectively.
But things have changed and in only a few years the Lao tradition of the Phou Bao and Phou Sao is not seen around the city, even in my village, which is quite far from the city. My village still cannot exist without the influence of the city. It may be the only tradition left in the countryside. You won't see it in Vientiane.

Beer shops, karaoke, discotheques and special parties including birthday parties are the things city boys and girls like to do. These places seem to be the most popular places for boys and girls to go.²

This article, although written about the youth of present day Laos, nevertheless expresses and encapsulates the concern and lament of many Lao parents in diasporic communities, who can remember and sympathise with these sentiments. The social milieus in which young people live appear to be the prominent determinant of how they meet and form a relationship. As social milieus have widened to include school and work environments beyond the immediate control and supervision of the family, they have opened up new horizons and created new opportunities to meet people. It appears to have begun in the 1960s when young women began to participate in the workforce and many people from rural areas migrated to the urban centres for employment opportunities.

This trend was taken up by later generations of Lao until it was supplanted by a newer 'invention' of social situations both in the Lao diaspora and in the homeland. These situations include social parties, beer shops and karaoke bars which are now part of the 'courtship' scenarios for young Lao people in the Lao diaspora and in the homeland.

When I mentioned the tradition of लोङ्घौ लङ्घौ long khouang and खोथाम haotham (cf. Chapter I, p. 7-8), it drew a blank among the younger generation, and only some of the older people, including some mophones, showed any evidence of understanding. Incidentally, in the homeland and diasporic Lao communities, there appears to be a parallel in the arena of courtship and the place where the wedding is celebrated away from the confines of the parental home. The phenomenon of not understanding the 'traditional' meaning of rituals associated with the Lao wedding is even more evident

² Lamphoun Assanani; Op. Cit.,
when one of the most important ‘traditional’ considerations in planning a wedding is discussed: the concept of auspiciousness.

Auspiciousness

My brother-in-law Pakasith and his wife, Kaysone, like many of their compatriots, believe in the concept of auspiciousness. Every year, they have obtained tape recordings of the horoscope by one of Thailand’s most popular fortune-tellers. His predictions, based on the birthday of the week for each person, covers the entire calendar year, on a month by month basis. He advises ‘auspicious’ things to do to enhance one’s fortune as well as actions to take to ‘lessen’ the impact of predicted bad luck or calamities in one’s life. In order to avert some misfortunes in 2000, advice was that Kaysone should release some snails on an auspicious day and time and that she must refrain from consuming snails for three months of the predicted period of ‘bad luck’. She checked with Maha Lay, a ‘ritual master’ who is known to the family, about the appropriate day and time to perform the release.3

On the appointed day, calculated to be in the late afternoon before sunset on a Tuesday, she bought a bucket of snails, prepared a khanhha and then we drove to the Wat of a monk of high repute for such rituals. After going around to three Wats, and finding that the monks were busy performing similar rituals for other people, we ended up at the Wat that her family regularly supported. The monk who performed the ritual understood the purpose of the visit straight away as he had just completed the same ritual for another couple. He lit a candle that he attached to the bucket full of snails and ran a white string from the bucket to his hands. He recited some mantras, largely unintelligible to us, and when he finished, tied bits of the white string on the wrists of my two hosts. We then drove down to the bank of the Mekong to release the snails.

3 I call Maha Lay แซ่ลัย of Ban Mixay (whose proper name is Sivilay Soukhaseum ศิลลัย สรทธาศุภสุนทร) a ‘ritual master’ because he is more than a mophene. He was the one who conducted the soukhouane for me and other brothers-in-law when we were ordained as monks for my father-in-law’s funeral in 1996. He also conducted other rituals connected with the funeral. Richard Davis also alluded to a different ‘type of ritual specialist’ who is able to deal with non-human powers in Muang cosmology. See Richard Davis: Muang Metaphysics: A Study of Northern Thai Myth and Ritual, Studies in Thai Anthropology No. 1, Pandora, Bangkok, 1984; p. 78.
Kaysone was much happier for having undertaken the ritual as she had been worried that the predicted bad luck would adversely impact on her personal and business life.

This is not an isolated incident. The point is that it begins with a Thai fortune-teller who predicted the future and advised on the ritual to ward off any misfortunes. The ritual was performed by a Buddhist monk on the day and time calculated by a ritual specialist and concluded with a Brahmanist ritual of tying white cotton threads around the wrists of the hosts by a monk. As discussed in Chapter I, the belief in auspiciousness is one of the most fundamental considerations in planning and staging a wedding. In Lao diasporic communities, as well as in present day Laos, as it was in the Laos of pre-1975, one would consult either a monk, a soothsayer, a mophone or a fortune-teller to choose the most auspicious time and day for such occasions. One associates ‘auspicious’ persons with the conduct of and assistance in various rituals pertaining to the wedding ceremony.

The Lao’s notion of auspiciousness in undertaking any ritual action, let alone such an important ‘rite of passage’ as one’s marriage, is perhaps summed up by the following pronouncement by one of my informants, Loung Thit Ngai of Luang Prabang,

\[
\text{สิ่งที่ดีๆ} \text{ ทำให้ดีๆ} \text{ ให้ได้ใจ} \text{ ให้ใจถึง} \\
\text{Whatever we do, we must pacify the spirits and satisfy the humans.}^4
\]

To be ‘auspicious’, an action must pacify the exigencies of the ‘spirits’ and at the same time must satisfy the worldly imperatives of the humans, social, economic, political and psychological. By ‘spirits’, the Lao meaning does not limit itself to ‘spirits of the dead people’. It encompasses นิ้วสว่าง, นิ้วม่วง, นิ้วฟ้า, นิ้วมุ้น นิ้วต่างๆ นิ้วไหน ๆ, spirit of the house, นิ้วต่างๆ นิ้วไหน ๆ, spirit of the house,

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4 Interview with Mr Singkham Sirivathana (known around town also as Loung Thit Ngai, even his business card has ‘Loung Thit Gnai’ on it), Luang Prabang, March 2000. He worked in the Luang Prabang Tourism Bureau, conducting tours for foreign tourists to important cultural sites. He sometimes conducted a soukhouane ceremony for official visiting parties, but not wedding soukhouanes. Loung Thit Ngai means Uncle Ex-Monk Big’. ‘Thit’ ถิ่น signifies an ex-ordained monk who had achieved a certain rank in the monkhood.
the village, of the sky, of the God *Thene*, and of the trees and forest.\(^5\) *Phi* \(^*\) is a Lao indigenous term for Spirit, signifying a ‘powerful force’ in the After World that could be kind, benevolent and helpful, or punitive and malevolent as they please and pacified by the propitiation by their believers.

While there has not been any systematic study of the belief in the *phi* in Lao diaspora, a study of ritual practices among Cambodians in the diaspora, by Chean Rithy Men (2002), sheds some light on the Lao conceptualisation of the *phi*. Chean found that a Khmer healing ritual, *lieng arak*, is disappearing among the Cambodian diaspora in the USA caused by the changing conceptualisation of spirit categories. He found that guardian spirits ‘are attached to the homeland and, unlike people, did not have to take refuge in other countries due to the consequences of war’ (Chean, 2002: 229), while ‘ancestral spirits are the main spirits that are able to make the trip to America’ with the refugees because they are ‘more closely related’ to the refugees themselves, *(Chean, 2002: 230).* Likewise, to the Lao, then, guardian spirits of their former villages or homes remained in the homeland. In their place, however, the Lao ‘inaugurated’ new guardian spirits of the new land of refuge.

The case of Mrs K., of Sydney is an interesting one. She was a member of a local group of ladies who performed at annual devotional sacrificial rituals to one of the guardian spirits of the city of Savannakhet. When she escaped from Laos, she asked for protection from the guardian as well as leave from her participation in the ritual. She still believes that the guardian spirit remained in Savannakhet, and that she had been excused from her part of the ritual.\(^6\) When most *mophones* in the Lao diaspora

\(^5\) In this respect, the Lao belief is very similar to the Muang cosmology as studied by Richard Davis: *Op.cit.*;  
\(^6\) Interview with Mrs Kottamy Thattamanivong of Sydney, November 2000. The ‘residence’ of this Guardian Spirit – called *Ho Tha* - The House on the Bank of the River - was situated on the bank of the Mekong River across the road from the main Wat of Savannakhet, *Wat Xayaphoum*. It was left deserted for a while on order of the new regime. As recently as my visit to Savannakhet in 2000, the Ho now looked quite splendid and well looked after as sacrificial rituals are again allowed to be held. Also from interviews with Mr and Mrs Anouvong Luangkhot and Mrs Thepdara, of Savannakhet, in March 2000.
began their *soukhouane* by a calling together the Gods and guardian spirits to attend and witness the ritual, they had in mind the ‘old’ Gods and the guardian spirits of the new locality. They ‘assumed’ that every locality where the Lao live and hold their *soukhouane* ritual ‘must have a guardian spirit’\(^7\).

The late Mr Chanhpheng, of Washington DC, was an interesting case of one who ‘inaugurated’ new guardian spirits in response to new environments and situations. In his invocation before the *soukhouane* for Monireth’s wedding (Chapter VI), he ‘inaugurated’ one new guardian spirit and a new ancestral spirit by calling on the Statue of Liberty and the Pilgrim Fathers respectively. In the same invocation, Mr Chanhpheng also called on the spirit of the late Supreme Patriarch of the former Kingdom of Laos, and the Spirit of Pak Kading. Except, perhaps, for the Spirit of Pak Kading, three guardian spirits were ‘new’ spirits. In effect, he mixed his personal remembrance of spirits belonging to his homeland with his new diasporic experience as a refugee in the USA.

The notion of auspiciousness is so internalised by the elderly Lao that the original reason for this belief has been lost to most people. From the point of view of Buddhist teaching, the Lao word *mongkhon* or *moungkhoun*, derives from the Sanskrit *Mangala*, meaning ‘that which is good, conducive to goodness’. The main source of this *Mangala* is the *Vayuveha Sutra* which lists the 38 ‘auspicious things’ that would bring *Mangala* into one’s life. These ‘things’ range from ‘befriending a learned person’, ‘living in a peaceful and prosperous country’, to ‘providing for one’s parents’.\(^8\) Indeed, all things in one’s life that would lead to harmony, peacefulness, prosperity and well-being are considered ‘auspicious’. This, of course, includes the obedient following of traditional teachings as laid down in the various rites and rituals.

For the *kindong*, auspicious ‘things’ cover nearly everything from beginning to end:

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\(^7\) Interview with Loung Bouapha Khanhanouvong, Canberra, February 2001. This calling is also performed at the *Wat* by the lay congregation at the beginning of any religious ceremony.

\(^8\) Interviews with Acham Bouakham Boupphavong, of Wat Thepnimit (That Foun), Vientiane, March 2000; and with Acham Vanna Souryavong, Wat Mixayaram, Vientiane, February 2000. This is also the meaning of the word given by all the *mophones* interviewed.
the choice of partners (the right characteristics and the complementary astrological signs), the right day for the wedding ceremony, the right people to help in the various rituals and the right flowers for decoration.

The opposite of ‘auspicious’ is of course, taboo, things to avoid. For the Lao there are as many taboos for various situations as there are auspiciousnesses. From a very early age, Lao children were told not to do certain things because it is ziw-khalam, taboo, and it would bring w - demerit, without being given any explanation at all. These taboos are prohibitions, rules governing everyday behaviour, the breaking of which would bring retribution or adverse results. Lao people learn about taboos, as they learn about life in general, through habitus – by socialization. There are taboos for all sorts of occasions from the cradle to the grave. There are taboos for sick persons, for pregnant women, and for people undertaking a journey. There are taboos about house building, planting trees and rice crops, about what food could be consumed by people of certain age. I remember that I was told to not eat chicken feet because when I grow up I would seek to marry another man’s wife; while another version of this taboo is that one’s handwriting would be as untidy as the chicken scratches on dirt. Many mophones and ritual masters consider it taboo to have a meal at a house where there is a wake, or to eat somebody else’s left over food.9

For young people, it is traditionally taboo for them to physically be touching while courting. It is not causing w demerit - to them, but it is phit phi, that is, it is against the spirits (presumably of the guardian spirit and the ancestral ones). For husband and wife, it is taboo for the wife to touch the husband on the head. However, this taboo is more general in application as the Lao regard the head as the most sacred part of the body; it is where the khouane of the person resides. These last two examples of taboos are in fact indicative of the social norms and values of the Lao: the
respect for the elder (as husbands are invariably considered as ‘elder’ to the wives),
and the value placed on social decorum and a girl’s reputation about her promiscuity
and ultimately her virginity before marriage.

The concept of ‘auspiciousness’ is losing its hold and potency on the new generation
both in the Lao diaspora and in the homeland. The intricacy of calculating the right
time and day for a ritual is an arcane knowledge that has been lost to the present
generation of Lao. Most mophones and ritual masters, and even some monks, now
consult Thai publications dealing with such matters. Loung Thit Gnai confessed to
such ‘short cuts’, and Loung Bouapha of Canberra also consulted a Thai publication
for his calculations. However, the simplest formula most people follow are the phases
of the moon, the waxing moon being regarded as more auspicious than the waning
moon. This is for the simple reason that the ‘waxing moon’ in Lao language is the
same word Քա –kheun - meaning ‘to go up, to rise, to increase, to augment’; thus the
connotation of ‘increasing, augmenting auspiciousness (or wealth, prosperity...) when
a ritual is performed on days of the waxing moon. The waning moon, incidentally, is
called in Lao կհեա Hem which means ‘departing’ or ‘temporary rest’.

This new understanding of auspiciousness is perhaps best summed up in a quote by
one of my informants, Maha Kykeo, who said

Any day, any time is an auspicious time if we do good deeds;
Any day, any time is not an auspicious time if we do not do good deeds.10

9 While there has not been any systematic study of Lao taboos, a study of Isan taboos holds true for this
Lao belief as well. See, Sanutra Itthithamvichit: “108 Taboos of Isan People”, in Journal of Language
10 Maha Kykeo Boulom, interviewed in Vientiane, February 2000
This is a statement of pragmatism and expediency *par excellence*, and it is most applicable to Lao of the new generation. Convenience and expediency now equals auspiciousness. The weekend, thus, has been auspicious *de rigeur* for most diasporic Lao where the exigencies, commitments to and demands of modern living in a culturally and socially different environment make it necessary for Lao people to compromise. So, a weekend that falls on a waxing moon phase of the lunar calendar is a most auspicious time for rituals such as weddings. Another exigency of modern living also conspires to make the weekend a necessary auspicious time. Traditionally, in a village setting, any household planning to hold a ritual or a festivity could depend on relatives and friends to lend a hand throughout the activity. But, in the Lao diaspora, the weekend is the only time when one can depend on help from friends and relatives.\(^1\)

For Lao people in present day Laos, it is easier to adhere to auspiciousness because of the pool of ritual experts one can call on to perform any ritual. Further, it is quite evident that there is tacit official acceptance and acknowledgement of the need to perform the rituals previously branded as ‘feudal and reactionary’. During the funerals of my parents-in-law in 1993 and 1996 respectively, many religious rituals (like the morning chanting and alms giving to the monks) occurred in the morning. Many people, including high ranking public servants, came to participate in the activities before they went to work. By the time the activities finished, it was mid morning.

*Khadong*

The theme of loss of memory and new understanding of old traditions is not limited to the concept of auspiciousness and the belief in *phi*. One of the basic concepts pertaining to the traditional wedding is also undergoing fundamental change: the notion of *khadong*. So far, the thesis has used the word *khadong* for what could be regarded as the bridewealth or bride price. Studies of tribal marriage appear to

\(^{11}\) One saving grace in modern times to help ameliorate the plight of having to hold a ritual without much assistance from friends and relatives is the refrigerator and the freezer. People can now plan and cook many dishes ahead of the day of the festivity.
differentiate the three terms - bridewealth, bride price and dowry (Yos Santasombat 2001; Jack Goody and Stanley J Tambiah 1975; Thomas Hakansson 1988; John L Comaroff 1980; Meyer Fortes 1972). As Jack Goody wrote, ‘marriage prestations made by the groom or his kin, are consequently often classified as bridewealth or bride price’ and that this ‘classification’ seems to be linked to a loose application of so-called exchange theory in marriage’ (Goody and Tambiah 1972:2). Further, the jural discussion of marriage about the transfer of rights and inheritance is a view grounded firmly in the concept of Western jurisprudence’.

These understandings of marriage appear not to be applicable to the Lao kindong. In fact, neither the law of the Kingdom of Laos nor that of the new regime, treat kindong in terms of a transfer of rights or jural ownership of a person at all. Further, inheritance appears, in pre and post 1975 Laos, to be independent of the marital status of the offspring. In many of the case studies in the thesis, not all weddings had ‘auspicious couples’ leading the groom’s procession with the khanhmak and the khanh khadong. To be sure, in some weddings, the khadong had been agreed upon by the two families beforehand. But the treatment of the khadong seems presumptuous and as a token gesture towards keeping ‘the tradition’.

The Lao term khadong, as used here, covers more than the exchange of goods, money, gifts and services given by the boy’s kin for the jural and conjugal ownership of the girl. Indeed, if anything, it would be the reverse. As a groom usually moved in to live with the bride’s family and economically contributed to her family, ownership seems to belong to the girl’s, not the man’s, family.12

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12 Bayard and Uthaiwee asserted that “in an uxorilocal society (such as Isan and Lao), the son-in-law was traditionally expected to reside – as least [sic] for an initial period – with the bride’s family and work for her father in partial payment for the bride price.” [My italics]. Bayard and Uthaiwee, Op.cit; p. 24. They made an interesting point about the residence of son-in-law in that, quoting Keyes, the residence should ‘more precisely [be] uxori-parentilocal, since the house to which the son-in-law moves belongs to both parents, not to the maternal one alone.
But, upon marriage, a Lao man or woman does not cross the boundary between their natal and conjugal households and lose all rights in the former. A Lao in fact expands his/her boundaries, acting as a bridge between the natal and the conjugal. The *khadong* thus has a specific function in the process of marriage, that of establishing an affinal relationship between two families. It is not presented as an ‘exchange’. In this thesis, *khadong* is taken to mean the ‘cost of establishing an affinal relationship between two families’. In the traditional sense, *khadong* normally incorporates two other ‘payments’ made by the boy’s kin to the girl’s family: *kha khounphi* the sacrificial offering to the spirits of the girl’s ancestors; and *kha nam nom mae* the payment for the milk of the girl’s mother.

The closest definition of *khadong* would be what Thomas Hakansson uses in his analysis of the marriage of the Gunsii tribe in Kenya; thus

> The primary function of the bridewealth payment is the legitimation of marriage. In legitimation of marriage, bridewealth elevates the man to the status of husband and the woman to the status of wife. As a husband and a wife they incur reciprocal rights and obligations for which they are held accountable. These reciprocal rights are supported by public authority. (p. 14)

This ‘public authority’ would include the moral authority of the family elders and Meyer Fortes’ limits set by law and beliefs and social norms. For the Lao, these limits are expressed in the many customary laws, which according to one compiler, are based on the ancient Indian legal concepts as found in the *Codes of Manu*.13

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13 *Phrathammavhâ*: *Khamphi Phra Thammavhâ* (Department of Literature: *Khamphi Phra Thammavhâ Bouhan (Ancient Lao Laws)*; Vientiane, BE 2499); p. (a). A comprehensive discussion of this Indian legal concept can be found in Stanley Tambiah’s article: “Dowry and Bridewealth, and the property Rights of women in South Asia”, in Goody and Tambiah’s book, cited above.
None of the components of the *khadong* are fixed; they are subject to ‘human vanity’ (Abhay 1967:826) and goodwill between the two families. If the boy’s family is from outside the village, and in the case of an exogamous marriage, this *khadong* would be more than an endogamous one but there is no prescribed amount. When the proposed marriage is between a widowed/divorced person and one who has never been married, the former, if male, would have to increase the *khadong*. However, if the divorced/widowed person is female, her family would return part of the *khadong* to the man’s family. This ritual is called �回补*n kan tab hang tab mai* to patch up the divorced/widowed person. Should the two persons both be divorced/widowed, it is considered that their previous marital status would cancel each other out. If the girl’s family did not agree to a proposal for marriage, and they tell the go-between that the *khadong* is too high hoping to discourage the boy’s family from taking the next step.

Another term that has been conflated with *khadong* is *sinsod*. We will recall that the word *sinsod* means the ‘beautiful act of acknowledging the parents’ effort in raising their children to the stage when they are ready to be married’. However, Maha Kykeo suggested that during the early days after the Great Political Divide when the new regime was trying to erase traces of the old decadent, westernised, feudal, reactionary society, the word *sinsod* was given a new meaning. In those heady days, it meant a payment for the girl for the marriage, as well as a financial impost on the boy to find this ‘payment’ in exchange for the girl. Moreover, the criticism by the new regime of the *sakdina* system included the *khadong*. As well, if the word *sinsod* was to be taken to mean ‘a payment for the girl in exchange for her agreeing to a marriage’, the word ‘Sin’ would then mean ‘wealth’ or ‘riches’, not ‘a beautiful practice’ as asserted by Maha Kykeo.

Among the case studies, Tina Siri’s wedding (Vientiane, 2000, Chapter VI) adheres most closely to the ‘traditional’ concept of *khadong*. Toy, Tina’s mother, told me that the *khadong* for Tina was agreed by the families to be ‘equal to and not more than
what was set for her mother’s wedding (in 1974). So, Tina’s khadong comprised of two กนี กนี กะเน่น นกี กนี กะเน่น นกี กะเน่น and ten กะเน่น นกี กนี กะเน่น in gold jewellery. In Thipphaphone’s (Chapter VI) and Monireth’s weddings (Chapter V), the khadong were mostly in form of cash and jewellery ‘as agreed to by the families’. In modern times, the talk of khadong centres mainly on the ‘gift’ the boy brings for the girl (in the form of gold jewellery and a diamond ring) and the size of the wedding feast. Few families discuss the ‘sacrifice to the ancestors’ or the ‘payment for the mother’s milk’ anymore. In the modern Lao conception, both in the Lao diaspora and in the homeland, then, the khadong is a sum of money, some jewellery, a necklace, a bracelet, and most importantly a wedding ring that the groom and the bride exchange at the wedding soukhouane. This exchange is a departure from ‘tradition’, as traditionally, the only time during the wedding ceremony the bride and groom ‘exchanged’ anything was when they were instructed to feed each other with a mouthful of sticky rice, egg and drink.

The discussion of the khadong with my informants, especially with Intong and Toy Siri, brings to another early Lao incorporation of things European (French) into their ‘traditional’ practice and ritual pertaining to the kindong. The fact that the กนี กนี กะเน่น was used and accepted as part of the ‘traditional’ khadong indicates an early invention of tradition by the Lao. These coins did not come into use as currency in Laos until the French colonised the country in 1893, and remained in circulation right up to the Second World War. They are valuable,

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14 Toy Siri, Vientiane, February 2000. There were other items of jewellery that were given by the groom to Tina, but these were regarded as ‘gifts’, not part of the khadong.

15 In Lao weddings in the Lao diaspora where there is a civil ceremony to sign a marriage registration, the exchange of rings might take place here instead.

16 Refer Chapter I, Picture I-15, pp. 17-19 for illustration and discussion of the กนี กนี กะเน่น in the total scheme of the Lao traditional wedding ceremony.
acceptable currency and easily transformable into other uses, such as making the silver 
O and khanh that have become important technologies of ritual for the Lao. The use of 
these coins as part of the khadong has become less and less prevalent, especially in the 
Lao diaspora, because they have become very rare. The fate of these coins as 
paraphernalia of kindong is perhaps indicative of an invented tradition that has been 
discarded: tradition has lost out to modernity. Cash and other commercially available 
 jewellery have replaced these coins as an important part of the khadong.

The Groom's Procession

While the Lao understanding of some fundamental concepts have undergone changes, 
one can also discern changes as a result of individual remembrance of the performance 
of various wedding rituals. The groom's procession is one ritual where memory of the 
'traditional' practices and the actual current ones are at odds. In Chapter I Mrs Orady 
was quoted as saying that nowadays nobody had to 'carry' the groom's phakhouane 
during his procession to the bride's house. In her interview, she still remembered the 
time when she herself did the duty of carrying the phakhouane for her relatives' 
 wedding. When her youngest daughter, Fongsamouth, got married in Sydney in 1992 
(Chapter IV), while she wanted to have a 'traditional' wedding, Mrs Orady did not 
insist on the groom's phakhouane being carried. The groom's procession, in fact, 
started from a few doors down the road with the two phakhouanes already in place at 
the bride's house.

The groom's procession in Lao diasporic communities has also had some other 
divergences from tradition. Apart from the non-use of a kheuilong, the participation of 
the groom's parents and the chaokhot-loungta has also changed. In many weddings, 
the groom's parents take part in the procession, walking behind the groom. In one 
Canberra wedding (Nana Sysourath, Canberra, 31/10/1998), the chaokhot-loungta – the in loco parentis for the groom, carried the khanhmak and the khanh khadong right 
up to the ritual barricade where the two ladies handed the khanhmak and khanh 
khadong to someone else to take into the house and then participated in the bargaining 
and drinking.
As descriptions of weddings in the case studies detailed earlier make clear (Chapters IV, V and VI), the groom’s procession has changed in one major aspect: the various objects brought by the groom and his entourage to the bride’s house. As mentioned in Chapter I, the most important things the groom ‘traditionally’ brought with him were his contribution to the bedding, farming implements, a sugar cane and a banana tree. In all weddings observed by the author, in the Lao diaspora and in Laos, none of these ‘traditional’ objects were brought with the groom’s party. Nowadays, the nuptial bed is made up on the eve of the wedding day. Most of the bedding is chosen and/or bought by the newlyweds to their own taste. Many people can take part in the making of the bed, not just the auspicious people. Furthermore, in Thipphaphone’s wedding (Chapter VI), the nuptial bed was strewn with bank notes of different denominations, and the newlyweds were instructed, after being led into the room, to ‘fight for the notes’. It was explained to me that this ‘fight’ would indicate which of the new partners would be the one more active in supporting the family.17

As for the farming implements, the groom or his entourage do not bring them at all, especially in Lao diasporic communities. It is indicative of the changing nature of the employment of grooms in this study, most of whom are professionals in desk-bound jobs.18 The sugar cane and the banana tree are now represented as token leaves in the bang carried by the groom during his procession. Even then, many of the grooms did not have these leaves in their bang at all because it is impossible now to find sugar cane and banana leaves in Western cities. These two changes are symptomatic of the changing attitudes and understanding of the Lao over the traditional meaning of the rituals of groom procession, as well as of the adaptation to the exigencies and requirements of modern living conditions in diaspora. It would be very difficult for Lao-Australian or Lao-American grooms to find sugar cane and banana tree, let alone to carry them in their procession.

17 Interview with ҳатор – Aunt Xoumkham (an aunt of the bride), Vientiane, 31/1/2000.
18 For example, Tina’s husband is a PhD student in Australia when they met and married; Rick was running a petrol station with his father in Vientiane; Vatthana was an electrician; and Yang was an airline steward, and Khampheng was a public servant in Vientiane.
Technologies of Ritual

The difficulty of finding the ‘technologies of ritual’ for the Lao traditional wedding is not limited to the sugar cane and banana tree. One of the most symbolic ritual implements was not available in the diaspora for a long time. The mit sanak is an implement, hinged at one end, with two handles that when pressed together cut through fruits and nuts, especially areca nuts for the Lao ladies’ chewing pleasure. In the early days of the diaspora the khanhmak and the mit sanak were very hard to come by. The reasons were then that the majority of refugees were of younger age groups with few betel nut chewers among them. When the family reunion program was implemented in Australia and the USA as part of the immigration intake the number of older people increased. By then, however, the talk about betel nut chewing being anti-social and the fact that spitting in public was illegal stopped many people from bringing the mit sanak with them. The other important ‘technologies of ritual’ that were not available in the earlier days of the Lao diaspora were the silverware, especially the Ō and the khanh. These silverware were used at various stages of the wedding ceremony: the construction of the phakhouanes, the containers for the somma, and more importantly the containers of the khadong and the khanhmak in the groom’s procession as well as in the receiving of the khadong by the girl’s family. The lack of these important ritual paraphernalia meant that improvisation was called for in many weddings in Lao diasporic communities. Many leading-ins were done by hand only (as in Jane’s wedding, Canberra 1996); and many people substituted the ‘traditional’ silverware with cheaper aluminium receptacles.

Role of Mophone

Improvisation also occurs as a result of the experience, knowledge and memory of the mophones. In all weddings in the case studies, the somma by the newlyweds took place after the soukhouane and the phoukkhene, just before the newlyweds were led into their nuptial room. However, when I talked to Mr Singkham Viravongsa, the

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19 Refer Picture II-15, Chapter II, pp. 35-36 for an illustration of a mit sanak, and a discussion of its importance as a ritual element, and an implement for the betel chewing.
mophone for Tina's wedding in Vientiane, about the 'traditional' way where the somma occurred before all other rituals at the phakhouane, he agreed with me that the somma should be before the soukhouane. He concurred that the somma is in effect the opportunity for the boy and girl to ask their parents' forgiveness for past sins and transgressions, as well as for them to request their permission to enter into their own rite of passage – to change their marital status from single to married. Thus, it should properly be undertaken prior to the wedding soukhouane itself. But at many weddings the somma took place after all other rituals for the convenience of the hosts and the newlyweds.

At Jane's (1996) and Vanh's (2002) Canberra weddings, an elder 'handed over' the phakhouane to the mophone prior to him beginning the soukhouane. Mrs Chanhla, who conducted this handing over, said that 'this was the practice in her village: if you didn't hand over the phakhouane, the mophone could not do anything with it'. But, in his invocation, the mophone would announce that 'this phakhouane was prepared by the chaokhot-loungta, and that the families invited him to conduct the ritual'; thus in effect asking for approval and permission to conduct the soukhouane. This handing over of the phakhouane did not take place at all soukhouanes witnessed by the author. It is surmised here that there are regional variations are important thus, in a diaspora, a blend of ideas/tradition takes place as people from all regions make up small communities. The role of memory of the mophones and elders play a large part in the variations witnessed.

The phenomenon of regional variations and individual memory also apply to another ritual. During the soukhouane at Khampheng's wedding (Vientiane 29/1/2000), when the mophone called the khouanes of the betrothed to return to their bodies, the elders threw some rice grains and some popcorn into the gathering as welcome gifts to the khouanes20.

20 According to Intong, she remembered that during the soukhouane for our wedding, when the mophone called our khouanes, one of her aunt immediately tied some cotton threads on her wrist. The aunt later explained to Intong that 'one has to tie in on straight away to make sure one keeps the khouanes in the body'.
This, as the *mophone* explained to me later, relates to the story of *Vetsantara*. Upon his return to his father’s kingdom to assume the throne, as he approached the city gate, there was a sprinkle of *fone ha keo* Rain of flowers and precious gems – a sure sign of great auspiciousness.

Not only were there variances in the performance of the ritual of *soukhouane*, the presentation of the centrepiece of the *soukhouane* itself, the *phakhouane* underwent some drastic transformation. The research for this thesis opened my eyes to the great variety within Lao cultural heritage – a result of personal memory of the elder generation, as well as the regional variations of this presentation. My original understanding of the *phakhouane* was that it was a construction based on the *makbeng*, appropriately decorated with flowers and white strings. There were different shapes acceptable as constructions and presentations of the *phakhouane*. From the Thai-inspired ‘spiral floral arrangement’ of Khampheng’s wedding to Rick’s *phatok* style, to Monireth’s ‘spiky’ and Tina’s ‘Vase on top’ and the low set Luang Prabang Royal style, these constructions all had their own justification and history. Regional variations and personal preferences of the newlyweds appear to be the driving force in the choice of the styles of the *phakhouane*.

*Ideals and Ideas of ‘husband and wife’*

Most young Lao of the present day display a singular lack of understanding of the ‘traditional’ types of wives and the ideals of husband and wife. To them, to have a marriage partner is to start a family, to have someone to love and to share a life. Forgotten are the traditional cultural expectations with the extended kin group, and social and family pressures, that make a marriage. The plethora of traditional advice on ideal qualities of a prospective husband and wife are mostly unknown to the new generation of Lao people, both in the Lao diaspora and in the homeland. The most basic ideal of a ‘traditional’ Lao woman as encapsulated in the phrase *mophone*.
Three Houses and Four Waters – is but a phrase in some popular songs only\(^{21}\). For a husband, an ideal man would be the one who has 選對 伴侶的 dai boad hian khian ane – has been ordained as a monk\(^{22}\).

For many Lao men in Lao diasporic communities, the desire to marry a ‘typical’ Lao girl means ‘going home’ to find one in Laos. This phenomenon is not limited to the Lao. Italians, Indians and Filipinos are some of the diasporic communities whose members journey ‘home’ to find marriage partners.\(^{23}\) When I was working in the Australian public service, I had two colleagues of Non English Speaking Background (NESB) origins– one a Sikh and one a Pakistani. Both of them travelled back to their native villages to arrange a marriage partner for their respective sons.\(^{24}\) The sons ended up marrying nice well-educated young girls from their parental villages in a traditional ceremony, and are now happily living in Canberra with their own families.

In the Lao-Australian diaspora in recent times travel between the two countries has been less difficult bureaucratically and more affordable economically. In Canberra alone, there have been at least half a dozen cases of Lao-Australian young men going back home to find a bride. Other cases involved people taking trips home for a visit ending up finding a marriage partner\(^{25}\). It is more rare to find young girls (or women) going home to find a spouse. Societal expectations and fear of adverse gossip appear to be the main reasons forbidding this trend. By the same token, many Lao girls from the homeland ‘invested’ (or in some cases, the ‘investment’ was funded by relatives in

\(^{21}\) See an explanation of this phrase in Footnote 43, Chapter VI, p. 31.

\(^{22}\) See Chapter I, pp. 22-23 for comments on the Lao belief about ordination before marriage.


\(^{24}\) See also an article by Keith Butler where he talked about ‘arranged marriages’ in the Indian diaspora in Australia. Keith Butler: “A Suitable Boy”, *Good Weekend (The Sydney Morning Herald Magazine)*, December 11, 1999; pp. 19-24. It is interesting that this article also mentioned ‘the exchange of horoscopes (of the prospective betrothed) prior to the arrangement going ahead; and that the invitation card (to the eventual wedding) is in ‘traditional colours’ and in English and Gujarati languages, with the date of the wedding given in both the Indian lunar calendar and the Gregorian calendar.

\(^{25}\) Lusa Mathouchanh (see Picture VII-1 in this chapter) met his wife on one of the trips home.
diasporic communities) in a trip down under in the hope of finding marriage partners\textsuperscript{26}. Many have succeeded.

This phenomenon of desiring a marriage partner of the same cultural background goes beyond the desire for everyday comfort emanating from the familiar, but for the psychological stability that comes from mental comfort. It also means the many shared beliefs, cultural traditions, food and language, all the things that make a marriage work. As a Vietnamese academic said about Vietnamese men wanting to marry 'a traditional' Vietnamese woman:

\textit{When a man yearns for 'a traditional' Vietnamese wife, it is not so much for one who cooks his rice, cleans the house, and watches over his children – although that is part of it – as it is for someone who will strengthen his memory, his mentality of the land he left behind.}\textsuperscript{27}

\textbf{Invitation Cards}

None of my informants recalled when the invitation card made its appearance in connection with Lao weddings. By the late 1960s they became an ubiquitous part of the wedding festivity, at least in the urbanised Lao cities. Many of my older informants remember receiving invitations to weddings, but they did not send out invitations to their weddings (which would have been done by their parents in any case). Some of my informants, like the late Tiao Nith Nokham and Phagna Pane Sisouphanthong,\textsuperscript{28} suggested that this practice could have begun when members of the European community (meaning initially French, and later the Americans) were invited to weddings hosted by some Lao high officials (especially those who had been educated in France). According to some younger informants, it coincided with the period when members of the Lao urbanised elite, most of them educated in France,

\textsuperscript{26} Lamthong Chanthapanya, my brother-in-law now living in Sydney, is one such case. He met his second wife when she was in Australia on a visit to her relatives.

\textsuperscript{27} Professor Phan An, Professor of Ethnology, Institute of Social Sciences, Ho Chi Minh City; quoted in \textit{The Los Angeles Times}, September 19, 1994; p. A1.

\textsuperscript{28} Tiao Nith Nokham was Tina's grand father, and Phagna Pane Sisouphanthong was a good friend of Intong's father. Interviews with the author in Vientiane, January 2000.
were trying to be acdav.set  ‘modern’, that is socialising with drinking and Western dancing.  29

Many of them recalled that invitations were fairly ‘standard’ in size, colours and wording. Most were in Lao and French languages and invited guests to participate in the ‘Lao traditional ceremony of soukhouane at the bride’s house’, then ‘afterward to partake in lunch in honour of the newlyweds’.  30  Some would also invite a number of guests to attend an evening reception. The most popular venue in those years was the ‘circle’ at the Mission Militaire Française (the MMF to the locals).  31  It was a ‘diplomatic’ courtesy and a social nicety of the European social circle that was picked up and adopted by the urbanised Lao social society. It was in fact an invention of a new tradition in the Lao wedding: a printed invitation and a wedding celebration outside the confines of the bride’s parental home.

In the Lao diasporas of Australia and the USA, early wedding invitations in Lao language were done on manual typewriters or even were hand-written, and then printed, usually in gold or blue. The format was along the ‘traditional’ pre-1975 lines of having the groom’s family on the right and the bride’s on the left. There was an important line exhorting the guests to participate in the ‘traditional soukhouane’ ceremony – either at the bride’s house or at a hired venue. With the advent of computers with Lao fonts, it became a lot easier for families to plan the choice of invitation cards. This, combined with the ‘coming out’ of the community, ensured that ‘traditional’ designs such as the phakhouane started to appear on invitations.

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29 Conversations with Tanh Avong Vorabout and Somsos in Canberra, and Viliam Praxayavong and Sakone in Sydney.
30 Cf. Pictures-I-38, 39 and 40, Chapter I, pp. 47-48 for an example of a typical pre-1975 wedding invitation card.
31 Information collated from some interviews with the following informants: Phagna Pane Sisouphangthong; the late Tiao Nith Nokham, Mr Khaphoui Luangkhot (all of Vientiane); Mrs Orady Souvannavong; Mr and Mrs Viliam Praxayavong (of Sydney), and Tanh-Avong and Somros Voravout in Canberra.
Picture VII-1: An example of an early wedding invitation card in Sydney. The picture shows the left half in Lao only (the right half is in English. This invitation says that the 'bacI' will be held in a church hall at 4pm, to be followed by dinner. (From the author’s private collection).

It could be said that this appearance of the traditional designs was a product of the atmosphere of acceptance and tolerance by the mainstream societies of the multicultural expression of identity by the ethnic minorities.

However, in more recent times, the younger generation of Lao in the diaspora have turned away from ‘traditional’ designs and chosen more artistic Western designs. This phenomenon is occurring in parallel in the homeland: the trend is to ‘be Western so as to be seen as being modern’. There is a thriving wedding ‘industry’ in Laos, at least in the printing of wedding invitation cards. Having wedding invitation cards to send out for one’s marriage is a ‘normal’ practice for families in Laos now. I visited some of the biggest printers in Vientiane and all of them had large collections of stock wedding cards available in a wide variety of designs, colours and price ranges. Pakpasak and Pracha had them on display on their counters; Vientiane Printing had some albums in which these stock cards could be perused, while other printing houses could show their range on demand. These stock cards were all imported from Thailand. The prospective couples only had to supply details of their wedding, such as names of the betrothed, the host families, and the date and time of the marriage and/or

32 Pakpasak Printing, in Wat Chan; Pracha Printing, Nongdouang Tai; Manthathourath Printing Press, Xiengganeun; Vientiane Printing Company, Haysok.
reception. There seemed to be no convention of how these cards were to be printed. Languages used were mostly Lao and French, while some had Lao and English.\footnote{A Lao parent I met in Hamburg, Germany, had an invitation for his daughter’s wedding printed in Laos, using Lao and German languages, and using the ‘standard’ cards from the printer’s range. The only addition was the inclusion of the picture of the betrothed. Discussion with Mr Kaychanh Inthilith, of Hamburg, May 1 2000.}

The most popular colours were of course gold (for its connotation of auspiciousness and prosperity) and blue. The available designs were mostly in Western styles – a pair of hearts, bride and groom in wedding gown and tuxedo and top hat, rings and doves and cakes and champagne. Only two printing houses, Pakspasak and Pracha, could produce sample cards with Lao designs, one with the phakhouane and the other with an angel throwing flower petals, but they were not on display. Only Pakpasak was willing to print cards to a customer’s own design, at an extra cost. This is the ‘in thing’ in Vientiane now- the adoption of the Western practice of issuing wedding invitation cards. I say ‘issuing’ of cards, because it was not ‘sending’ these cards in the normal sense of using the postal service to send them.
People in Vientiane still felt that they needed to hand invitation cards to invitees in person whether at home or at places of work (like shops in the morning market, or at the places of work). This practice is the same with the diasporic Lao in Australia. In my twenty-five or so years in Australia and having been invited to countless weddings, I have not received more than ten invitation cards by post. I have seen these cards being handed out to invitees at some functions and even at festivals at the temple. One practice very popular among the Lao in the diaspora is to post a pack of cards to one person and to ask that person to hand-deliver them on one’s behalf to the addressees.

With the hand-delivery of cards, only the names of the invitees needed to be on the envelope. As befitting a modern day wedding, sometimes the names on the envelopes were computer-generated. Even in present-day Vientiane, the hosts would supply the list of invitees to a computer company who handled such matters. The computer-generated list then double as a guest list and a gift list. The latter would normally be used to note down the gifts brought by the invitees. In turn, most invitees would use their envelope to hold their cash gift and deposit it in the receptacle upon arriving at the soukhouane or the reception (refer to discussions of the weddings of Tina, Soraya and Thipphaphone in Chapter VI).
However, although they adopted the Western practice of issuing invitation cards, the Lao did not go the whole way with the ‘acceptance card’ or the ‘thank you’ card. Only, Lou and Tham’s wedding and Fongsamouth’s wedding (Chapter IV) had these two latter cards. One further progression of wedding cards in Lao weddings, especially in the diaspora, is that cards are now part of the packages offered by reception centres/restaurants. Most of these ‘packaged’ cards are in Chinese designs, not ‘traditional’ Western types or Lao *phakhouane* design. The most striking features of these cards are the colour red and the predominant place of Chinese characters depicting some auspicious wording.

In Laos, as in Lao diasporas in Australia and the USA, it was expected that guests would give gifts of cash to help the hosts pay for the wedding. The question is what would be the appropriate amount to give. There seems to be general agreement that there is some sort of sliding scale for the amount of the cash gift: a more prestigious location (such as the Lao Plaza Hotel, or the Mekong Restaurant in Vientiane; or any of the international class hotels in Sydney) commands anything from 50,000 Kips to 100,000 kip (with equivalent amount in Thai or US currencies welcomed) or $A50 per head in Australia and equivalent in the USA. The evening receptions at the home of the bride are usually lower on the scale. But the size of the gift also depended largely on the prestige of the hosts and the guests themselves: what would be deemed appropriate for the ‘face’ of both parties.

One other similar phenomenon in the package offered by restaurants and function venues was the inclusion of wedding cakes (refer Tina’s wedding in Vientiane, Chapter VI). Many Lao wedding receptions now take on a new ‘look’, albeit somewhat incongruent, with brides in Lao traditional wedding dress cutting wedding cakes in a Chinese restaurant. Some brides now change from their Lao traditional dress to put on a Western white wedding dress for the cake cutting ceremony. There is, however, one difference between the homeland and the Lao diaspora: many young Lao newlyweds in the Lao diaspora play games, like the groom removing the garter from the bride’s leg, and the bride throwing the bouquet to a group of young girls,
whereas I did not witness such games in Laos. However, there is one western wedding ‘tradition’ that has not been adopted by the Lao, either in diasporas or in the homeland: the phenomenon of the newlyweds ‘going away’ on their honeymoon while the guests were still celebrating their wedding. The newlyweds and their families were usually the last to leave the wedding party.

Concluding remarks

For the Lao people, a marriage between a man and a woman is more than a ‘rite of passage’, changing the status from the affinal to the conjugal status. It means one is becoming an adult, able to fully participate in the social, religious, economic and political affairs of the family and the community. It also means an increased responsibility towards one’s newly extended family. This family includes most (if not all) members of one’s own consanguineous family and one’s affinal family. The social norms, the traditional laws and beliefs dealing with this marriage of the Lao have shaped Lao society. The Lao people, both in the homeland and in diasporic communities, still hold the belief that for such an important occasion as the kindong they want to do all they can to make the marriage ceremony an auspicious one, thus as ‘traditional’ as they can possibly make it. By the same token, a wedding provides an excellent opportunity to show off their wealth and the ability to be seen to be ‘modern’ with the adoption of Western aspects of the marriage ceremony.

Tradition, by definition, is something that has grown out of repeated occurrences embraced by popular acceptance and transmitted from one generation to the next. This something might be statements, beliefs, legends or customs. Tradition for one generation can be the places, the objects, the rituals, the images and the practices, which have been points of reference, models and markers of identity for that generation. But, tradition is a changing thing, and new traditions are being invented to suit new situations in which people find themselves. Since the work of Ranger and Hobsbaum (1983), we know that ‘tradition’ can and has been proven to be ‘of recent invention’. Much of the traditional understanding of the kindong has been lost to both Laonok and Laonai after the 1975 Great Political Divide.
This chapter's study of Lao wedding rituals shows that it is difficult to determine the provenance of some of these rituals because of the lack of written records of the processes and procedures. It also shows that, as a result of diasporic movement of Lao people into new and different political, social and cultural milieus and surviving under the new political regime in the homeland, old traditions have been revived, new ‘traditions’ have been invented and adaptations of practices and traditions from other cultures have been incorporated into the accepted practices of the Lao people. Old ‘traditional’ notions such as courtship and the concept of auspiciousness have taken on new features and practices to accommodate the new environments, while ‘alien’ practices such as the evening receptions and invitation cards have become ‘new traditions’ in the scheme of the Lao wedding ceremony.

For members of the new generation of Lao, in the diaspora and in the homeland, expediency and the appearance of being ‘modern’ are more crucial than blindly following the ‘old’ tradition. New material, new models and new standards are more accessible than the old because they are synonymous with prestige, social success and progress. To them, these models are markers of their own new, yet Lao, identity. In the diasporic Lao communities in Australia and in the USA, as well as the Lao communities in present day Laos, this dichotomy between old and new models and values is no more apparent than in the performance of wedding rituals. If the traditional khanmak was the epitome of Lao hospitality, congeniality and the union of two families, the wedding invitation card has become a symbol of the newlyweds’ popularity and the extensive networks of friends and relatives, and the wedding cake is the ‘symbol of modernity par excellence’ (Edwards, 1982; 1987; Hendry, 1981; Goldstein-Gidoni, 1997; Kendal, 1996).

In the post-1975 era of Lao society, both in the homeland and in the Lao diaspora, these cultural ‘borrowings’ have become standardised, even commercialised. The performance of wedding rituals among the Lao, especially since 1975 when the current Lao diaspora began, depends largely on the remembrance of these rituals by members
of the older generation, and transmission to the next generation by osmosis. The
danger that could disrupt/corrupt this transmission of tradition is that aesthetic criteria
and social and moral reference points are being 'imported' or 'borrowed' more and
more from other cultures, and then standardised and internalised in one's own culture.
Chapter VIII

Kindong – Site of Constestation
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Kindong – Site of Contestation

Lao people in the diaspora and in the homeland maintain the traditional wedding ceremony, while at the same time incorporating and adapting new practices leading to the invention of 'new traditions'. In so doing, they perform the Lao traditional wedding without the ‘old’ understanding of the processes and procedures and concepts of the very ritual they are performing. This performing without proper understanding creates a contestation, a questioning, between the new and old generations of Lao people.

This chapter will explore this contestation in three areas: the notion of home, the shifting balance of power in the inter-generational household and the effect of the use of modern technology of memory. It will then examine what effect these contestations are having on the collective memory of the Lao and the notion of the Lao identity.

Home as a Site of Contest

In case studies of Lao weddings in this thesis, the emphasis has been on the importance of the bride’s parental home as the location of the wedding. This is where the main wedding soukhouane takes place. However, this chapter contends that the notion of ‘home’ becomes problematic, especially when it includes the notion of ‘parental home’ and ‘ancestral home’. So, in the context of the Lao traditional wedding, particularly those in the Lao diaspora, where is ‘home’ for the Lao?

Diaspora means disconnection, to be uprooted from one’s home, one’s soil and one’s family. Uprootedness means dispossession and separation from objects and places of familiarity and comfort that cannot be replaced. However, uprootedness is not all negative. It also means a new beginning. But it is a new beginning which nevertheless signifies disjuncture and loss, both temporary and permanent, that is directly linked to, and reflective of, the past. Remembrance of things past in people of older generations can be seen as a mechanism to ‘correct’ this loss. For
the diasporic Lao, this loss is no more keenly felt than in the sense of loss of the parental home – the disconnection from their traditional ‘habitus’.

Diaspora also implies movement in mental and spatial spheres. The ‘re-routing’ of one’s life journey, made essential by diaspora, means ‘re-rooting’ in a location that may be quite different to the one expected. This ‘re-rooting’ means an acceptance of change – an acceptance that needs to be mental, spatial and physical. Peter Read (1996:101) suggests that homes are ‘mentally constructed’, and that they can be anything from a building on a quarter-acre block, to a suburb, to a whole city, to ‘a single plant in the garden’. After discussing the notion of home, Read asks whether it is possible to separate the physical dwelling from the people who provide the lived experience in that environment (1996:125).

For the Lao, traditionally, ‘home’ is what Schutz (1964:18) calls ‘an expression of the highest degree of familiarity and intimacy’. According to Schutz, traditional Lao life at home...

...follows an organized pattern of routine: it has its well-determined goals, and well-proved means to bring them about, consisting of a set of traditions, habits, institutions, timetables of activities of all kinds, etc. ...The way of life at home governs as a scheme of expression and interpretation not only for my own acts but also those of the other members of the in-group....The system of relevances adopted by the members of the in-group shows a high degree of conformity. (Schutz 1964:108)

Home for the Lao is a static entity where a family can grow roots at the one place. For the Lao, the notion of ‘home’ is most poignantly and eloquently expressed in the ‘parental home’ for the soukhouane in a wedding. My informants in the Lao diaspora maintain the soukhouane they have is very much ‘like at home’, meaning like the soukhouane they experienced in the traditional habitus of the parental home. But, as we have seen, this notion of ‘parental home’ is problematic for the Lao: some weddings analysed in this thesis were not held in the bride’s ‘parental home’ at all. So, what is the Lao notion of ‘home’? How does this notion relate to the diasporic notion of ‘homeland’? Where is ‘home’ for the Lao in the Lao diaspora?
Laos is home for the Lao, the hammock for the Lao to sleep in.

(Translated by the author)

This first line from a ‘political document to remind the diasporic Lao’ (Phimmasone 1981:2) of the tumultuous events of 1975 that caused the current Lao diaspora, starkly states that the nation-state of Laos is the ‘home’ where the Lao people live, and the ‘hammock’ where the Lao sleep. In this sense, the nation as the homeland is also the physical location where the Lao people make their living and spend their life. For the Lao, there is always a very strong connection between a place where one makes a living and spends the rest of one’s life. Another book, published by a diasporic Lao-Australian, entitled *Thinking of Home* (Viengkeo Sengchanh 1984), as the title suggests, reminisces about the beauty of the ‘homeland’. As discussed below, *ban* means village, house or home; and *keut* is ‘birth’ or ‘to be born’. So, the word *bankeut* connotes the notion of the place of one’s birth, the homeland. In this book, the ‘homeland’ is synonymous with the land of one’s birth, thus ‘motherland’ or ‘fatherland’. The book describes, in verse and with line drawings, the various ‘memories’ the author has of his ‘homeland’: the beauty of the countryside, the various festivals at the *wat*, the *soukhouane* ceremony and the sticky rice that the Lao cannot be without. The drawing on the last page of this book accurately captures the Lao diasporic life in Australia. The drawing shows two persons, a husband and wife, sitting at a table having a meal. On the table, apart from the obvious plates of soup and other dishes, there are a sticky rice container, a cask of rosé and two glasses – hardly a picture of a traditional Lao meal setting. What is also not ‘traditional’ is that there is no sign of an ‘extended family’ – no children, or other adults at the table.\(^1\) Further, the room looks out onto a veranda where in the distance one can see the Sydney skyline. On the wall, there is a framed picture of the Sydney Opera House.

\(^1\) Even if there were children or other adults in the house, the fact that they are not represented in the picture could indicate a life style in the Lao diaspora that is different from that of a ‘traditional’ Lao family life; that is, a family having a meal together sitting on the floor around a *phatok*. 
There is no one Lao term that directly corresponds to the term ‘home’. There are terms that in various combinations could convey the notion of the ‘home’, but in themselves they may not signify the ‘home’:

- **معنى** - *Ban* - means ‘village’; would be closest to the meaning of ‘house’ or ‘home’;
- **معنى** - *Heuan* - means ‘house’, most likely the physical building, a stand alone dwelling;
- **معنى** - *Yao* - means ‘house’; not commonly used by itself to mean ‘house’ or ‘home’;
- **معنى** - *Xaan* - means ‘the veranda of the house’;
- **معنى** - *Xong* means to peep in, to look out – synonymous with ‘to look through the window of a house’.

The Lao use a combination of the above terms to convey the notion of ‘home’. Thus

- **معنى معنى معنى** - *ban heuan* - means ‘home’ or ‘household’;
- **معنى معنى معنى** - *yao heuan* - means ‘home’ or ‘household’; especially in the sentences *معنى معنى معنى* - *penh ban penh heuan* - meaning ‘to have a ‘home’; to live a homely life; or to have a family.
- **معنى معنى معنى** - *heuan xaan ban song* is a sentence to connote the physical house and the lived experience in that environment.
- **معنى معنى معنى** - *heet yao khong heuan* is a traditional treatise on housekeeping for the male and female heads of the household, as well as on expectations of how members of the household should behave toward each other.
In Avtar Brah’s (1996) formulation, home has two referents. The first invokes ‘home’ in the form of a simultaneously floating and rooted signifiers. It is an invocation of narratives of the ‘nation’. This signifier can become the basis of the claim that a group settled ‘in’ a place is not necessarily ‘of’ it. In this sense, ‘home’ implies an image of a site of everyday lived experience. It is a discourse of locality, the place where feelings of rootedness ensue from the mundane and the expected of daily practice. It connotes a network of family, kin, friends, colleagues and various other ‘significant’ others. The Lao notion of a ‘home’ always connotes the physical building where one resides as well as the lived experience in that environment - the traditional *habitus* for successive generations of Lao people.

Traditionally, a Lao house is all timber from the posts that lift the house off the ground, to the floor, and the walls and the roof (Sayan Dongdeng 1999:12). The layout of the building serves both the functional living conditions and the traditional and ritual requirements of the household (Sayan Dongdeng 1999; Sophie Charpentier 1982; Pierre Clément 1982). This implies a married head of the household with an extended family. It is not uncommon to see three generations of Lao living under the same roof. In the context of a wedding *soukhouane*, then, a ‘home’ or ‘residence’ is traditionally understood to be the ‘parental home’. As most houses are inherited, normally passed down through the youngest daughter of the house, the ‘parental home’ is almost always synonymous with the ‘ancestral home’, especially if the bones of dead ancestors are kept in the nearby *wat* supported by members of the family.

Therefore, the importance of the ancestral home lies in the fact that it contains the ‘spirit’ of the family: layers of symbolic values inscribed upon it by successive generations and by numerous regular domestic rituals and celebrations. The ancestral home, to the Lao, has a genealogical heritage and value, not only commercial property and usage. Traditional Lao homes do not have lockable bedrooms; it is an open plan of free flowing energy, knowledge, experience of love, kindness and care. A Lao traditional house is an environment where *habitus* and learning by osmosis can freely take place. In Peter Read’s words, a Lao home
is where one starts from (quoting T S Eliot) and truly ‘the resting place of the meaning of all the lost places’ (Read 1996:125).

But, as many works on diaspora, identity and the post-modern migration ask: where and what is home in a post-modern geography? (Putman 1993, Brah 1996, Baldassar 1997, Pattie 1994 and Saffran 1991). Pattie posits, for the diaspora, that the nature and location of home has shifted from ‘the specifics of the present or past residence of family and kin, to the ideal national borders and to an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson)” (Pattie 1994:185). It is in this ‘imagined community’ that a diasporic identity grows out of the ‘sensory memories, other narratives and kinship ties’ and finds a ‘home’ in diaspora and in the changed environment of the homeland. This ‘new home’ is fast becoming the ‘virtual ancestral home’ for the Lao people.

Materially, Lao ‘homes’ in the diaspora are modern buildings of more or less uniform shape and size, similar to the rest of other buildings found in the urban sprawl of Western countries. Normally, owners don’t have any say in the construction, let alone an opportunity to perform any ritual associated with the construction of one, such as choosing the auspicious day to lay the first stone, or plant the auspicious post for the house, or decide on the orientation of the house. Unlike the Vietnamese refugees in Mandy Thomas’ study (1999:42-43), the Lao in the diaspora pay much less attention to the geomantic characteristics of a new dwelling they acquire. Most people would instead hold a ‘traditional’ house warming (คำเชื่อมั่น Khuen Heuanmai) on an auspicious day – even though this could be a weekend as is the case with weddings. This house warming consists of both a religious ceremony and a soukhouane to bless the dwelling and all those who live in it.

However, while in both Lao diaspora and in the homeland, a new place of residence is becoming the ‘virtual ancestral home’, the concept of ‘ancestral home’ itself is losing its hold on the Lao people. We have seen, in this thesis, that many

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2 According to Sayan Dongdeng, it is regarded as auspicious to build a house facing the nearby river or stream, not perpendicular to it (Dongdeng; 1999:12).
Lao ‘traditional’ wedding *soukhouane* are held in the bride’s ‘ancestral home’. In fact, these ‘homes’ were not their ‘ancestral homes’, and in some cases not even their ‘parental homes’ in any real sense of the word.

In the Lao diaspora, it can be taken for granted that most wedding *soukhouane* do not take place in an ‘ancestral home’. In Chapter I, we learned that the Lao diaspora began in 1975 and grew in the following ten years in both Australia and the USA. Home ownership among the Lao was higher than most comparatively ‘young’ diasporic communities. Most wedding *soukhouane* in Australia and the USA took place in ‘homes’ of the bride’s siblings (cf. Thasniya, Omethip, Tinh and Chanh in Australia and Daosadeth in the USA). More often than not, wedding *soukhouanes* in the Lao diaspora, particularly in the earlier days of settlement in Australia, were held in the family premises (including older siblings and close relatives) rented commercially or from a government housing commission. One of the ‘biggest’ weddings in Sydney, that of Mimi Souvannavong (Chapter IV), was held in a rented premise (and that of her younger sister, was at yet another rented premise). In a later trend, wedding *soukhouane* moved away from ‘ancestral homes’, even parental homes, to a place owned by the betrothed themselves. In Australia, Vatthana and Tham had their *soukhouane* in a house they jointly bought prior to their nuptials. Mout’s wedding (Chapter IV) was held in a house bought jointly by her brother and parents. They all shared the house.

In Laos, the weddings I studied featured *soukhouanes* that could not be said to be held at the ‘ancestral homes’ of the bride. Both Tina and Soraya and their families live in their ‘permanent’ homes in Canberra. They returned to Laos for their wedding because their families wished. The houses where the *soukhouanes* were held were the houses where the brides’ parents lived and grew up prior to their escape to Australia, but by the time of the wedding, had passed as inheritance into the hands of other aunts and uncles. Tina’s wedding was at the home of her

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3 Vatthana Khanthavongsa (Lou) and Tham married in Canberra in 1996. They had both Lao and Vietnamese traditional wedding ceremonies as well as an evening reception in a Chinese restaurant, when the bride changed to a Western white wedding dress for the cake cutting ceremony.

4 Mout’s wedding reveals another aspect of the traditional marriage – the groom helps to ‘improve’ the bride’s house prior to the wedding day. Yo, the intended groom, worked as an architect with Westfield Construction. He actually ‘took charge’ of the renovation of the house that added a whole new second floor – with three bedrooms, a bathroom and a sitting room.
mother’s older sister, inherited when all her other siblings fled the country. Although this aunt had her own property with her husband and her own family, she moved back to her parents’ home when her husband passed away in order to keep her elderly parents company. Strictly speaking, Tina’s ancestral home would be in Xiengkhouang where her grand father was one of the direct descendents of the former Royal House of Xiengkhouang.\(^5\)

Only Thipphaphone’s wedding (Chapter IV), in Ban Kokninh, could be said to be held in her ‘ancestral home’, the family having lived in the same house for at least three generations. The three generations still shared the house at the time of the wedding. In the other weddings studied, the ‘parental homes’ had usually been acquired by the parents after the 1975 Great Political Divide. In another wedding in Vientiane, Anoudeth Vongpaseuth, in 2001, the *soukhouane* was held at the groom’s parental home, not the bride’s. This was very much dictated by necessity and convenience, as the bride’s parental home was in a crowded and inaccessible area of the town.\(^6\) The evening reception was held at a fashionable restaurant in town.\(^7\)

In the homeland too, the concept of the ‘ancestral home’ is losing and loosening its hold. Mr Khamphoui Luangkhot, one of Intong’s maternal uncles, now lives in Nongbone, a suburb of Vientiane. He grew up in his parent’s traditional Lao wooden house in another suburb, Xieng-Gneuin. As a result of the change since 1975, he inherited the ‘ancestral home’. But, instead of moving in to live, he pulled it down and replaced it with a modern Western-style brick house which he called ‘Villa Luangkhot’ in honour of the family’s memory.\(^8\)

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\(^5\) Interview with Toy (Tina’s mother) and Tiao Nith Nokham, Tina’s grand-father, Vientiane, 2000.
\(^6\) Interview with Anoudeth’s older sister, Nang; Vientiane, 20 April 2001.
\(^7\) The reception could have been held at one of the many venues owned by government ministries. These ministries own boarding houses to accommodate employees from the provinces. One of Anoudeth’s sisters had her reception in such as venue in 1996. Interview with Anoudeth’s older sister, Nang; Vientiane, 20 April 2001.
\(^8\) Interview with Mr Khamphouii, Vientiane, January 2000; supplemented by conversations with Intong on her family’s history. At the time, the house was rented by an international Non-Government Organisation.
This seemingly ready acceptance of the new notion of home by the Lao is yet another expression of Lao pragmatism, similar to the adoption of the new notion of auspiciousness. This pragmatism is expressed in the Lao saying

Build a house to suit the one who will live in it;
Put up the hammock to suit the one who will sleep in it

The earlier quote (p. 3) about ‘Laos being for the Lao’ is, perhaps, a diasporic longing for the missed home/land.

The desire to hold the wedding soukhouane in an ‘ancestral home’ is characteristic of the fact that this ‘ancestral home’ is a lieu de mémoire. One of the consequential outcomes of this phenomenon is the new understanding and application of the concept of chaokhot-loungta, meaning ‘elder relatives’. The concept of chaokhot-loungta is not directly equivalent to ‘ancestors’. The ‘chaokhot’ is the titular head of the family, or clan, literally ‘ancestors’, and ‘loungta’ is more a term of endearment for ‘elder relatives’. Together they come to mean ‘elder relatives’ who represent the families’ ancestors at rituals and other family occasions, especially at the wedding soukhouane. Nowadays, on modern wedding invitation cards these are the people who are listed as ‘hosts’ and are expected to represent the families and carry the families’ prestige and ‘face’.

The concept of chaokhot-loungta has always been a flexible one, able to include anyone from grand-parents, aunts and uncles of the betrothed to the siblings and ‘auspicious’ persons in the community. The choice of people to be chaokhot-loungta is all a matter of ‘face’ for the hosts and the auspiciousness of the occasion, being seen and known to associate with people of respect, wealth and power. In this sense, even some siblings of the betrothed, and other prominent members of the community, have been included as chaokhot-loungta. The absence of older people in the early days of the Lao diaspora, both in Australia and in the USA,

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9 The concept of ‘face’ can be translated in Lao as piab. It is basically equivalent to the combination of ‘reputation’ and ‘honour’.
meant that the *chaokhot-loungta* party was made up of people from outside the families.

One important qualification for a *chaokhot loungta* is auspiciousness. Being a member of the family appears to be sufficient to qualify one as *chaokhot loungta* – no matter how distant the kinship is. However, if one is from outside the families of the betrothed, there appears to be a strong emphasis on ‘auspiciousness’: this is not just wealth, power and respect, but being from a good family and with children of one’s own. The author and his wife is a case in point. We were perceived in the Lao community as being professionally successful, having good income and commanding respect and authority (I was for some time the President of the Lao Association of the Australian Capital Territory). But, for medical reasons, we could not have a family of our own. Many families confided in us later that they would have liked to ask us to be part of the *chaokhot-loungta* for their offspring’s marriage, but we were considered not ‘auspicious enough’ for not having children of our own. Things changed after we adopted a child from Laos and were seen as being a complete family (at least in the ritual sense).

*Changing Semantics of Kindong*

Like the concepts of ‘ancestors’ and ‘ancestral home’, the semantics of *kindong* reflects the changes brought about by the 1975 Great Political Divide and the contestation between the *Laonok* and *Laonai*, even though the language of the *soukhouane* is unintelligible to most young people, especially the bride and groom.

The term *kindong* is a Lao indigenous word for marriage or wedding, made up two words: *Kin* to eat, or to consume; and *Dong* which has three meanings: (1) fermented, or pickled (generally of food); (2) pertaining to marriage, to be related by marriage, and (3) hard outer shell of animals (like crabs or turtles). However, in contemporary usage of Lao, there are other terms denoting ‘marriage’. An analysis of the wording from a collection of invitation cards to Lao weddings, from across time and space, helps to illustrate this point. Guests are invited to attend

- ້໌ໍ່້ໍ້໌ໍ້່ ngan viva ha mongkhon somros.
- ້໌ໍ່້ໍ້໌ໍ້່ ngan viva ha mongkhon,
None of these cards, as well as the thirty or so others in the author’s private collection, mention the word คำว่า kindong that is in the title of this thesis. Nor is the related term of คำว่า tengdong (to marry) used. There is also another term คำว่า tengngan that is in colloquial use, but, this is not used in the ‘formal’ sense in invitation cards. All of the cards shown use two other terms to mean ‘the newly married couple’, or the ‘newlyweds’: คำว่า khou sang khobkhoua mai, and คำว่า khou somros. So, in Lao language, there are at least eight terms that mean ‘marriage’ or ‘wedding’: viva ha mongkhon, mongkhon somros, viva ha mongkhon somros, kindong, tengdong, somros, tengngan and sang khobkhoua mai.

Tengdong is similar in meaning to kindong. Teng แก้ means to prepare, to make things orderly; thus tengdong could mean to regularise matters by a marriage. Tengngan is a central Thai word that, according to Sathienkoset, means ‘to order things properly’ (1965:98).

คำว่า sang khobkhoua mai, literally means ‘to build a new family’. It was a term instituted by the new regime when they took over power in 1975. It was used as a cultural counter to the terms viva ha mongkhon, mongkhon somros, viva ha mongkhon somros, somros and tengngan that they regarded, indeed branded, as feudal, decadent and reactionary by dint of their association with the sakdina system and their royal sounding features. However, in the late 1990s, these terms were back in popularity as people began to accept the arguments that these words were ‘traditional words of ancient origins’ denoting, as they do, auspiciousness of the occasion.¹⁰

¹⁰ Interviews with Maha Kykeo, Loung Thit Gnai and others.
With the exception of sang khobkhoua mai and tengdong, the words for ‘marriage’ or ‘wedding’ listed above, of Pali and/or Sanskrit origins, do not correctly and properly describe Lao traditional marriage practices. Somros means a marriage ceremony instituted in the Siamese Court and involved the sprinkling of lustral water on the bride and the groom. As the word mongkhone (Pali: Mangkala) means ‘auspiciousness’, we are now left with the term vivaha. In the halcyon days of Lao culture, there were two types of ‘marriage’ described by two related terms:

- विवाह vivaha means a marriage whereby the bride goes to live with the groom’s parental family (patrilocality); and
- अवहा avaha is the opposite of vivaha, that is, the groom goes to live with the bride’s family after their marriage (matrilocality).

Although the original practice for the newlyweds’ living arrangements was patrilocal, none of my informants, nor the written sources, could provide any explanation for the change to matrilocal. In colloquial use vivaha now signifies matrilocality, that is the opposite of its original meaning as evidenced in the plethora of invitation cards and in colloquial speech. One can perhaps trace the reversal of the meaning of this word to a combination of two phenomena.

There is a popular saying in Lao that points to the practice of matrilocality:

\[
\text{เอื้อ жизнь \ แต่ต้อง ที่นั่น \ บนนี้ \ เหมือน \ เอาไป \ ทำให้ \ เหลือ \ เสีย\}
\]

\[
\text{To have a son-in-law to support the father-in-law is like having a silo full of rice; to have a daughter-in-law to support the mother-in-law is like bringing a plague into the house.}
\]

This belief appears to stem from a folktale in *pou sone lane - Grand Father Instructs Grand Children.* Although the moral of this story is that forgiveness ends the cycle of vengeance (which in this case lasted for three reincarnations), the calamity that befell the family with two daughters-in-law living in the same household is an omen for the people not to have a daughter-in-law move in to live with the husband’s family. While the practice of matrilocality for the woman is regarded as ‘inauspicious’, and hence taboo and discarded, I contend that the term describing the practice was kept in use because the term for patrilocality is inauspicious. This word has fallen into disuse, and disrepute, as a victim of semantic association with inauspiciousness. The word sounds like the prefix meaning ‘no’ (or ‘in the negative sense’ not unlike the prefixes ‘un’ and ‘in’ in the English language). The term like *avicha*, meaning without knowledge, ignorant, comes readily to mind. So was semantically linked to meaning ‘inauspicious’, or ‘inauspiciousness’. It was discarded as a term, but the practice of the groom moving to live with the wife’s family, that is, was continued as an avoidance of the taboo. So, for reasons of auspiciousness, the ‘wrong term’ was kept in use for the practice that was once usual but ended up being taboo.

The above discussion of the Lao terms for ‘marriage’ has implications for the discussion of matrilocality/patrilocality, the authority within the household and family inheritance. In Laos, this household might have three generations living
under one roof. The man (normally the oldest married man) is the head of the household and represents the family face to the outside world. Secondly, to show respect for the aged, juniors must defer to seniors, who in turn take responsibility for their welfare and upbringing. Thirdly, the inheritance of the family house (almost) always goes to a woman, usually the youngest daughter who, in all likelihood, cares for the elderly parents, and inheriting the parental house in return.

In a situation where a family has many offspring, it is rare to find more than one married offspring living in the parental home at the same time. Normally, the older married sister would move out with her husband/family to start her own household before the next sister gets married. This practice is called អុីកាហាន ok-heaun, or ‘moving out’ (from the parental home) to start one’s own family. Thus, the youngest daughter would end up staying in the parental home. It is partly for this reason, I think, that the bride price for the youngest daughter is set perhaps higher than other daughters. Thus the sayings

- អនាលាតា មូលឈឺ, the youngest daughter [gets] overwhelmed by the inheritance.
- អនាលាតា កាលាបាស្ត្រាគឺ, the youngest daughter [has] very high khadong.

This practice of matrilocality is not only pro-female in family inheritance matters, but also shows that the son-in-law has to submit to the authority of his wife’s family, at least during the initial period prior to ok-heaun, or until he takes over as the head of the household upon the death of the father-in-law. In practice this authority is not limited to the parent-in-law but encompasses the many other elder male relatives of the wife. This authority serves as a ‘training ground’ for the new son-in-law in the conduct of married life in earning his livelihood and for his participation in society.

Another beneficial effect of matrilocality is that the children of the new couple grow up with both sides of the family. Lao children grow up in a habitus where they learn about life – respect, obligations and contribution to the family. Boys learn about rice cultivation, fishing, hunting, making tools; while girls learn about weaving, raising farm animals, child rearing and tending to small chores around the
house. Both boys and girls will also learn to take part in various rituals and festivities in the family, in the village and in the wat. Matrilocality emphasises the paramount role of the mother in raising children and in the well-being of the family. But, as Keyes commented, the practice should be ‘more precisely’ termed ‘uxori-parentilocal’ since the house to which the son-in-law moves belongs to both parents, not to the mother alone (Keyes, quoted in Bayard and Uthaiwee, 1985:24).

**Shifting (Economic) balance of power in kindong**

While matrilocality is the norm in Lao marriage the connection between the location of the soukhouane and the ‘home’ for the newlyweds is symptomatic of another aspect of the kindong as a site of contestation. The changing nature of the balance of power between the old and the new generations of Lao people, especially in the Lao diaspora, is at once and the same time the cause and the result of changes in procedures and processes and understandings of Lao traditional weddings. This section examines the changing nature of intergenerational contestations and their impact on the notion of the Lao traditional wedding and on Lao identity.

Traditionally, parents of the betrothed bear the cost of a wedding, from such traditional expenses as khadong, kha kheunphi and the wedding feast. The parents contribute to the expenses and agree on their share beforehand. In more modern times, the expenses may include the hiring of the venue, invitation cards and the evening reception. Thus contemporary Lao weddings, with the obligatory traditional soukhouane and the evening reception, have become financial burdens for many families. They have adopted many strategies to cope that I found to be similar in both the homeland and in the Lao diaspora.

The most common and obvious method of paying for a wedding is to pool the family resources (either in cash or in kind), as would be the ‘traditional way’. Some of these contributions are in the form of ‘gifts’ to the betrothed. Although none of my informants were explicit about this ‘contribution’ toward the expenses by the relatives named as chaokhot loungta, it is understood that the two things are linked.
Another method of financing a wedding is to participate in the "len houai" (Thomas 1999:48). This is an informal money pooling scheme in which a group of people (anything from seven to twenty-four, not necessarily related to each other) pool a set amount of money at a set interval (normally a month). At a set time, the group came together and bid for the pool of money by a secret tender process in which each nominated 'an interest rate' they were willing to pay to the other for the remainder of the agreed term of the len houai. The one who 'won' the pool of money would keep putting in his share plus the nominated interest. Many intending grooms who are employed participate in this scheme, thus ensuring that they had control of the funds needed for the wedding.

The other method of financing a wedding is to take out a loan, either from a private lender, a rich friend or relative or a financial institution (although the latter source was the only one mentioned). This could be undertaken by the family, or by the intending grooms personally, if they could satisfy the lending criteria.

From my close involvement with many weddings in Australia, I know that many intending grooms (and in some cases, the intending brides also took out a separate loan to contribute to the cost) either participate in the len houai and/or take out a loan. Thus, in the Lao diaspora in Australia, much of the economic balance of power over a wedding has shifted from the parents to the betrothed themselves. This gives them a strong leverage and power to 'control' and plan their own wedding. As such, the betrothed have a larger say on who they want to marry, when and where the wedding will be, and what form it will take (church wedding, civil wedding, soukhouane, evening reception or a combination of some of these).

This has two important consequences for the economics of the wedding. Many families regard the expenses as an investment that they will recoup from the cash gifts brought by the guests. Hence, the ever more elaborate receptacle for the

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14 A modern variation to this witnessed in Australia was that a business person (eg. a shop keeper) acting as the controller and guarantor. He would 'operate' the len houai, and guarantee he would pay any shortfall (due to cheating or genuine financial difficulty of a member) to the next winner of the pool. I have witnessed an interest rate as high as forty per cent; while between twelve to twenty per cent was the norm in Canberra.
guests to deposit their envelopes of cash gifts prominently visible at the entrance to
the wedding reception\textsuperscript{15}. The other consequence concerns the ‘traditional’
hospitality of the hosts. Many parents have to limit guests to close friends and
relatives only, because the betrothed ‘controlled’ the guest list and parents were
allowed only a certain number of their ‘own guests’.

In many weddings, the language of economics is taken a step further, especially by
friends and relatives who come to help clean up the day after the wedding. Many
times I have witnessed these people asking the hosts if they had made any profit
from the wedding. The wedding has become a business undertaking by the family,
and the success of the wedding festivities is measured by the profit/loss of the
wedding, not by the warmth, camaraderie and conviviality shown towards the
betrothed by friends and families.

\textit{Technology of Memory}

This analysis of \textit{kindong} in the Lao diaspora and in the homeland finds that they
are becoming increasingly similar in their processes and procedures, as well as in
the contemporary understanding of the traditional notions of Lao wedding.
Another area of similarity is the impact of globalisation, especially the tyranny of
modern technologies of memory such as video tape and photographs. This
technology of memory has similar effects on Lao weddings in both the Lao
diaspora and in the homeland. It is also having a reciprocal effect on Lao weddings
all over the world as well as on the collective memory of the Lao people.

In her book, \textit{Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, The AIDS Epidemic and the
Politics of Remembering}, Maria Sturken writes that

\begin{quote}
Memory forms the memory of human life, affecting everything from the
ability to perform simple, everyday tasks to the recognition of the self. Memory
establishes life’s continuity; it gives meaning to the present, as each moment is constituted by the past. As the means by which we remember who we are, memory provides the very core of identity.”
\end{quote}

(Sturken, 1997:1)

\textsuperscript{15} See Picture VI-13, Chapter VI, p.34 for an illustration of the receptacle.
She goes on to say that cultural memory is articulated by using ‘technologies of memory’ such as objects, images and representations (p. 9). These ‘technologies of memory’ are ‘not vessels of memory in which memory passively resides so much as objects through which memories are shared, produced and given meanings’. For the Lao, the performance of the wedding *soukhouane* with the proper traditional paraphernalia are the ‘technologies of memory’ as the Lao cultural memory is produced, evoked, represented and given meaning.

If, like this thesis, one subscribes to Benedict Anderson’s notion of ‘imagined communities’ (1999) to describe the Lao homeland and the Lao diaspora, one should also accept his point on the importance of mass media in giving the people, and sustaining in them, the sense of shared experiences. If one goes beyond Anderson’s nation-state as a focal point, and substitutes it with the scenario involving the homeland and the Lao diaspora, it would be interesting to see the role that mass media – video, films, the internet and satellite TV – play in creating and sustaining the Lao identity through the ‘technologies of memory’ discussed above. The dislocation of places, people and culture resulting from the 1975 Lao diaspora not only changes the world of the people who physically move, but also those in the new places as well as those who remain at home in the homeland.

In this section, I look at the part that the wedding video plays in creating and sustaining Lao identity in both the homeland and the Lao diaspora. The control exercised by the betrothed over their wedding extends to whether or not they have a professional photographer and video cameraman to record the wedding. Almost all the weddings I witnessed have been professionally recorded. But herein lies the irony of the modern technology of memory. The stated reason for recording the wedding is for souvenir, as memory of the ‘once in a life time’ occasion to share with friends and relatives near and far. The analysis in this thesis depends largely on video tapes of past weddings.

Like a person’s remembrance, a video recording of a wedding is selective in its content. While the families and the betrothed might have the ‘complete’ version of the event (as do Mout, Mimi, Tina and Rick for their respective weddings), the version for showing to friends and relatives were in most cases limited to the three-
hour duration of the tape. They all share some basic characteristics in their content. They begin with a picture of the *phakhouane* followed by the process and procedures of the wedding, in truncated form, particularly the *soukhouane* invocation. If there was an evening reception (as was the case with all weddings in this thesis), the recording of this part is usually longer and more detailed than the part dealing with ‘the traditional ceremony’. The reason for this was that ‘everybody knows about the traditional ceremony’, and that people who were not at the wedding may like to see if people they know were there also.\(^{16}\)

Other shared features of these tapes, symptomatic of the tyranny of the modern technology of memory, was that they did not record the other rituals like the paying of homage to the guardians of the kitchen and of the main stairs and the sacrifice to the spirits of the ancestors. Most of them omitted the happenings at the groom’s place – his preparation, his individual *soukhouane*. Only the tapes of Mimi’s (Chapter IV) and Monireth Sramany’s (Chapter V) wedding had footage of the ‘engagement’ part of the whole proceeding. As recorders of the momentous rite of passage in a person’s life and keepers of memory, these tape recordings are by their nature selective and defective for research purposes but not as a souvenir.

**Concluding remarks**

Descriptions of weddings in Laos and in diasporas reveal that “the wedding became an icon of modernity: a locus of conspicuous consumption, evidence of a family’s worldly achievement, and even a temporary leveller of class and other distinctions (Harker, 1998:viii). Also apparent is the paradox of the performance of the ‘traditional’ *soukhouane* ceremony under the cloud of ‘new conception and understanding’ of traditional norms and notions.

The reasons for having a wedding *soukhouane* varied greatly. Many young betrothed have a *soukhouane* out of the sense of duty and obedience to their parents. Some brides, such as Chanh, had stated expressly that they wanted to have

\(^{16}\) This is certainly the reason my friend and host in Germany, Vanh Prakosay, gave me a copy of a wedding he went to in Paris to use for this thesis. Conversation with Vanh Prakosay, in Düsseldorf, Germany, April 2000. I thank him for his kind permission for the use of this tape, and his hospitality during my stay and his assistance in introducing me to many members of the Lao diaspora in Germany.
a Lao wedding complete with a *soukhouane*, because ‘she was a Lao’. The betrothed in an inter-faith marriage fall mainly into two categories of desire for a Lao traditional *soukhouane* at their wedding: one, for the Lao partner (especially when the partner is the bride) to maintain her tradition; and two, the ceremony ‘looks nice and exotic’ (especially if the bride happens to be non-Lao, thus the novelty value in having the *soukhouane*).

While the bride might not want to have a *soukhouane* for their wedding, the decision is nevertheless taken by her parents, who want ‘to do the Lao traditional’ thing for their daughter. Mayoura had to convince her daughter, Vanh, to have a Lao wedding after having Australian and Muslim ceremonies, because Vanh was her first born daughter. At first, Mayoura wanted to have a simple *soukhouane* (as she had for her niece, Jane) for Vanh. But the family (my wife and I included) convinced her that because Vanh was her eldest daughter, she should have the ‘proper ceremony’ complete with the groom’s procession and associated rituals.17 Mr and Mrs Sisong Khammana, of Sydney, also had to convince their daughter, Jenny, to have a Lao wedding ceremony (held on 21/07/2001) as well as an Australian one when she married her Australian husband she met while working in Japan. With these two girls, the parents bore all the expenses for the Lao traditional weddings.

Some Lao Christian families have compromised for the weddings of their children. Mr and Mrs S and U of Canberra had five children (three boys and two girls). The eldest daughter and the youngest son married Lao spouses in Lao traditional wedding ceremonies with the daughter also having a Christian church wedding as her spouse was Catholic. The other three did not marry Lao persons and did not have a Lao ceremony. Yo’s (Mouth’s husband, Chapter IV) family is another case of compromise. Although Yo was a Christian, when he married Mouth, it was in a traditional Lao wedding ceremony only. The same applied to one of his sisters who married a Lao man, however his other sister married an Australian man in a Christian white wedding only. When his elder brother married a Chinese Catholic

17 In the end, some rituals were omitted from the ceremony: no individual Soukhouane for either of the betrothed, no offerings to the main stairs, to the ancestors and to the guardian spirits of the kitchen.
girl, a Lao wedding, complete with a *soukhouane* in a hired hall followed by an evening reception was held. The following week they then had a church wedding, followed by a dinner at a Chinese restaurant.

It is evident, however, from the interviews with the brides and grooms, in all three researched locations, that while they thought having a *soukhouane* for their weddings was ‘being Lao’, they only showed a superficial understanding of the ritual itself. There was less attachment to the importance of the *soukhouane* in the younger generation. For them, it was enough to have a *soukhouane* ‘because they were Lao’ or to follow their parents’ wishes.

Among Lao diasporic families while the decision to have a *soukhouane* for a wedding is ‘to declare their Lao identity’, this decision is mostly made by the parents. This is mainly because the betrothed do not understand the importance of the *soukhouane* for the wedding. They do not know what is involved – the sort of paraphernalia and the rituals involved and they do not know how to go about the procedures and processes of the ‘traditional’ wedding ceremony. In the end, it is left to the parents to arrange everything for the *soukhouane* while the betrothed take care of the invitations and the reception. In many cases, in order to convince their offspring to have a *soukhouane* for the wedding, parents would bear all the costs, issue the invitation and plan the entire event. The only thing they asked of their offspring was to participate in the *soukhouane*.

This contest is between the memory of the ‘traditional’ Lao wedding ceremony and the harbinger for the ‘good old days’ on the one hand and the exigencies of modernity and the new understanding of the notion of ‘following in the ancestors’ footsteps’ on the other. This site of contestation is apparent in many aspects of ‘traditional’ Lao weddings in the places researched. New interpretations and understandings of old procedures and processes are becoming a contest between different generations of Lao, between modernity and tradition. To some extent, *kindong* as a site of memory is a familiar picture in the plethora of books on the *soukhouane*, the many photos and videos, and more importantly in the remembrance of many older people.
The part played by the ‘technologies of memory’ on the performance the ‘traditional’ wedding ceremony and the re-conceptualisation of old norms, traditions and notions, cannot be underestimated. Not only does mass media help to create and sustain a sense of shared experiences for people in ‘imagined communities’, it effectively influences this re-conceptualisation. Thai mass media – print media and television in particular played a significant part in the changes in the performance of the Lao wedding ceremony in Laos. Moreover, the videos of Lao weddings that are shared between friends and relatives, in both the homeland and in the Lao diaspora, are impacting on weddings in these two locations by making them more similar. However, the hidden dangers carried by these videos lies in their convenience: they come in truncated, abbreviated formats that impart little of the importance of the sense of the occasion and the cultural significance. Through these videos, the ‘magic’ is no longer in the ‘words’ of the soukhouane, but in the social message they carry in the pictures.
Conclusion

Home is Where the Soukhouane Is
CONCLUSION

Home is Where the Soukhouane Is

In the kindong studied in this thesis, we have the foundation of a society and the feeling of belonging, implying continuity of tradition and the identity of a community. This study is not only concerned with the process that serves to construct the image of an ‘unmarried person’ through the ‘rites of passage’, but also how this image has shifted through the diasporic journey. It is clear from the analysis of wedding ceremonies in this thesis, in diasporas as well as in the homeland, local knowledge and past experiences have been selectively discarded, adapted, transformed and elaborated by Lao people who find themselves living under changed and changing circumstances.

In effect, this study of the kindong is an analysis of tradition and change, and the consequence of change. It deals with the notion of ‘tradition’, and the invention of tradition, in the sense of the critical response of a people to the history and politics of their time. Thus, ultimately, to study the Lao wedding becomes a study of the Lao identity as Lao in many different circumstances attempt to define themselves through their own history and against changing perceptions of the Others, be that the Australian, American or Thai others.

The thesis focuses on the role of the kindong in deconstructing and re-constructing ethnic identity and in mediating tensions between tradition and modernity in Lao-Australian and Lao-American diasporas and in present day Laos. In particular, it asks three questions:

- Is this identity in the present always dependent on the (remembered) past?
- Is Lao identity sustained by the performance of the kindong remembered from experience gained in habitus?
- Will the kindong be diluted both in Laos and in Lao diasporic communities should there be a loss of social memory because of the absence of the traditional habitus?
In an attempt to answer the above questions, the thesis will touch upon matters pertinent Lao family and society in general: class and status in Laos and diaspora as revealed through the *kindong*; the family and the state as they impact on the performance of the *kindong*. The issue of gender relationship, both in diaspora and in Laos will also be examine, as will the *kindong* as a site of contestation: the society against the state and the inter-generational relationship within the household.

**Class and Status as revealed through the kindong**

In Chapter I, the thesis looks at the kindong in pre-1975 Laos, while Chapters IV, V and VI examine weddings held by the *Laonok* and *Laonai* after 1975. The pre-1975 *kindong* is characterised by observance of the traditional ways: obedience towards one’s parents in the choice of marrying partners, following the customs and tradition as far as the performance of rituals (homage to the ancestors and various guardian spirits). Rules of auspiciousness and taboo with regards to courtship and the preparation of the wedding were strictly observed. Issues surrounding the discussion on the *khadong*, the payment for the ‘milk of the girl’s mother’ (*kha nam nom mae*) and ordination of the boy prior to marriage were discussed and agreed to by the two families.

Traditionally, there was no evening reception for Lao weddings. Expression of and difference in the class and status of the conjugal families were thus limited to the ‘extravagance’ of the *soukhouane* ceremony and its accompanying paraphernalia, the bridal attire of the betrotheds and the number and social position of the guests.

By contrast, the performance of the *kindong* in the Lao diaspora and in present day Laos, (Chapters IV, V and VI) while purported to be ‘traditional’ actually shows a lot of deviations and variations. The fundamental difference is that observance and understanding of the ‘traditional ways’ has undergone some changes: auspicious days for a wedding are now dictated by consideration for convenience of a weekend; the absence of traditional paraphernalia means having to make do with what is at hand. Most importantly, the invention of a new tradition of having an evening reception provides a new avenue for ‘flaunting’ the class and status of one’s family. The evening reception as a site of commercialism has been a perfect
arena where social differentiation can be seen quite clearly. The reception, especially in Lao diaspora in Australia and the USA, more often than not, includes such ‘western’ features as the wearing of the Western white wedding dress by the bride, and the cake cutting ceremony by the bride and groom.

The weddings in present day Laos of Tina, Soraya (Lao-Australians returning to wed in Laos), and of Anothay and Thipphaphone (native of Vientiane) all had lavish (and expensive) evening reception at some of the best venues in Laos, while Anoudeth had his reception at a government-sponsored venue. The wedding of Pakasith and that of Khampheng had their respective evening reception at the house of the bride, with the decoration and the catering ‘home made’. In Australia, the weddings that stood out as revelation of class and status would be those of Fongsamouth and of Mimi (Chapter V). These two weddings were examples of the successful ‘marriage’ of their parents’ nostalgic, perhaps idealistic, remembrance of the homeland and the newlyweds’ own embrace of new life circumstance of opportunity, hope and dreams. Both weddings broke the mould and set new boundaries: both were held at ‘posh’ venues outside the defined ‘ethnic enclave’: Fongsamouth had her reception at the Sydney Hilton International hotel, and Mimi had hers at the Sydney town Hall.

*Family and the State and their impact on the Kindong*

The current regime in Laos tried, in their first few years of their taking power in 1975, to impose their doctrinaire way on the tradition and performance of the *kindong*. The state tried to impose restrictions on the size and extravagance of the wedding festivity. So much as that, it ordered government departments to draft a ‘code of conduct’ for the staging of wedding ceremony.

The arena where the state also tried to impose their authority vis-à-vis the wedding was to instigate a new term for the *kindong*: *

\[ \text{ngan sang khobkhoun mai}\]

that is the festivity to build a new family. While the term *kindong* is an indigenous Lao word for marriage or wedding, two other terms were also popularly used - *

\[ \text{ngan viva ha mongkhon somros}, \text{ and} \]

\[ \text{ngan viva ha mongkhon somros}, \text{ and} \]
The state promoted the new term as a cultural counter to the two latter terms they regarded, indeed branded, as feudal, decadent and reactionary by dint of their association with the *sakdina* system and their royal sounding features. However, by the late 1990s, these terms were back in popularity as people began to accept the arguments that these words were ‘traditional words of ancient origins’ denoting, as they do, auspiciousness of the occasion.¹

Moreover, family pressures within many high-ranking officials in the new regime (many of whom grew up and had worked in the old regime, and who by then were becoming quite prosperous) led to the failure of the state’s control on the excesses of wedding festivity and on the terminology of *kindong*. The members of the state apparatus themselves were ‘guilty’ of practising the very things they tried to suppress: the excesses and extravagance of the festivities, and the use of the ‘decadent’ terms. One thing that this ‘failure’ demonstrates is that for the Lao, wedding is truly a family affair, and that the family has the greatest impact on the performance and the conduct of the *kindong*. While legal restrictions and government regulations may have some impacts on the wedding, politics *per se* have very little to do with the performance of the *kindong*.

**Gender Roles**

If anything, the research for this thesis shows that in Lao society – past, present, diasporic or present day communist, there is still a strong perception of gender roles especially with regard to the performance of the *kindong*. Despite the changed and changing reality of daily life in the research locations, Lao men and women still feel obliged to scrutinise their respective roles in the performance of the rituals associated with the marriage. If this scrutiny was not overtly expressed, or if the concerns were not strongly articulated, there were still visible symptoms in the discomfiture about the ritual performance. These symptoms could be in the form of belittling the old or the new ‘traditions’, the arguments about who know best about which aspects of the ritual, and who should participate in certain phases of the wedding ritual.

¹ Interviews with Maha Kykeo, Loung Thit Gnai and others.
The late Mrs Bouaphanh Sundara was regarded as an ‘expert’ in making the makbeng and the phakhouane. Despite her status as a widow, therefore not an ‘auspicious’ person to construct a wedding phakhouane, I found that she was in great demand as a ‘hired hand’ to make phakhouane around Vientiane. However, while Mrs Bouaphanh was an acknowledged expert in making the phakhouane, she was never involved in the conduct of the soukhouane ritual. This is the traditional preserve of the male in Lao society. As explained in Chapter II, most mophones are male as they are the ones more likely to be exposed to a learning environment in which they could acquire the arcane knowledge of conducting the soukhouane ritual\(^2\). Lao women, on the other hand, are expected to take care of the household chores and the wellbeing of family members. Thus, with regard to the wedding ceremony, while the male is expected to be proficient with the knowledge of the ritual, the female are in charge of the mechanics of the wedding: the making and decorating of the phakhouane, the performance of the various propitiation rituals, and the leading in of the bride and the groom. This implicit division of labour and division of spheres of influence had been observed in Lao diaspora and in present day Laos. Despite the acceptance of the changed social environment that professes equality of the sexes, Lao communities, both in diaspora and in Laos, still assume and expect that Lao men and women would intuitively ‘know their place’ in the performance of the rituals. It is still expected that ‘bodily automatism’ (Connerton) would be as evident as it has traditionally been since the days of old.

*Kindong as a site of contestations*

The performance of the Lao traditional ceremony of the kindong necessarily accepts that the concept of auspiciousness, mongkhone (Pali Mangala), that has been internalised by the Lao culture and tradition as indicators of living within the Buddhist way. Buddhist values evident in the performance of the kindong would include generosity, concern for and cooperation with others, devotion to the family and religion, and honesty. These are the characteristics of Lao tradition found in the traditional habitus. To many Lao of the new generation - those born after the political change of 1975 both in Laos and in Lao diaspora – this is but a site of

\(^2\) While I have witnessed a female mophone conducting a soukhouane, it was either for a birthday or for a newborn baby, but not a wedding soukhouane.
contestation between the notion of Lao traditional ‘habitus’ and their wish to ‘be modern’. To them, the older generation is caught up in a time warp when word of mouth was the invitation to a wedding of one’s offspring, and face-to-face contact was a social requirement.

It was the time when hospitality was shown and shared by having a session of betel nut chewing from the same khanhmak, when betel nut chewing was the height of civility and social sophistication. It was the time when the bride-to-be would weave her own silk sin, blouse and phabieng and when the family would host and bear the expenses for the wedding. The new generation now lives in a ‘modern’ time - a time when the khanhmak is a piece of decoration in the display cabinet (if the family has any). The khanhmak as a symbol of hospitality is replaced by a bottle of whiskey or a dozen cans of beer. This is the time when a modern bride-to-be does not weave her own wedding outfit, but rather would order her ‘traditional’ wedding attire from a commercial supplier as well as go and have a fit-out for her white Western wedding dress for the evening reception.

The changing cultural landscape, brought about by diaspora and political change, leads to the breakdown of the extended family network and the traditional habitus. However, the changed landscape is full of paradox. At the time of the wedding when the chaokhot loungta are required, people from outside the family are ‘recruited’ to become members of one’s extended family to lend the occasion some auspiciousness and aura of tradition. But in the new re-interpretation of old value, the co-opted chaokhot loungta is a sign of social and political networking. This paradox is symptomatic of the new-age disposable society. Floral decoration now depends on the whims of the betrotheds; plastic flowers are acceptable if they look nice; the phakhouanes are recycled rather than especially made for a specific wedding and sometimes are made by ‘hired’ hands. All these are of course for show: they look nice for the photos and the video. So, many Lao ‘traditional weddings’ in this ‘modern time’ ends up being more of a performance than for the tradition.

The changing nature of intergenerational contestation and their impact on the notion of the Lao traditional wedding and on Lao identity manifests itself more
clearly in the shifting economic power in the *kindong*. The changing nature of the balance of power between the old and the new generations of Lao people, especially in the Lao diaspora, is at once and the same time the cause and the result of changes in procedures and processes and understandings of Lao traditional weddings. While matrilocality is the norm in Lao marriage, the connection between the location of the *soukhouane* and the ‘home’ for the newlyweds is one aspect of the *kindong* that has become a site of contestation.

Traditionally, parents of the betrothed bear the cost of a wedding, from such traditional expenses as *khadong*, *kha* *kheunphi* and the wedding feast. The parents contribute to the expenses and agree on their share beforehand. In more modern times, the expenses may include the hiring of the venue, invitation cards and the evening reception. Thus contemporary Lao weddings, with the traditional *soukhouane* and the evening reception, have become a financial burden for many families. They have adopted many strategies to cope that I found to be similar in both the homeland and in the Lao diaspora.

The most common and obvious method of paying for a wedding is to pool the family resources (either in cash or in kind), as would be the ‘traditional way’. Another method of financing a wedding is to participate in the *len houai* (Thomas 1999:48). This is an informal money-pooling scheme in which a group of people (any number from seven to twenty-four, not necessarily related to each other) pool a set amount of money at a set interval (normally a month). At a set time, the group came together and bid for the pool of money by a secret tender process in which each nominated ‘an interest rate’ they were willing to pay to the other for the remainder of the agreed term of the *len houai*. The one who ‘won’ the pool of money would keep putting in his share plus the nominated interest. Many intending grooms who are employed participate in this scheme, thus ensuring that they had control of the funds needed for the wedding.

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3 A modern variation to this witnessed in Australia was that a business person (eg. a shop keeper) acting as the controller and guarantor. He would ‘operate’ the *len houai*, and guarantee he would pay any shortfall (due to cheating or genuine financial difficulty of a member) to the next winner of the pool. I have witnessed an interest rate as high as forty per cent; while between twelve to twenty per cent was the norm in Canberra.
The other method of financing a wedding is to take out a loan, either from a private lender, a rich friend or relative or a financial institution (although the latter source was the only one mentioned). This could be undertaken by the family, or by the intending grooms personally, if they could satisfy the lending criteria.

From my close involvement with many weddings in Australia, I know that many intending grooms (and in some cases, the intending brides also took out a separate loan to contribute to the cost) either participate in the _len houai_ and/or take out a loan. Thus, in the Lao diaspora in Australia, much of the economic balance of power over a wedding has shifted from the parents to the betrothed themselves. This shift gives them a strong leverage and power to ‘control’ and plan their own wedding. The betrothed have make their own decision about who they want to marry, when and where the wedding will be, and what form it will take (church wedding, civil wedding, _soukhouane_, evening reception or a combination of some of these). Many Lao families in Lao diaspora, such as Mrs Mayoura and Mr and Mrs Sisong Khammana of Sydney, had to bargain with their daughters to be allowed to stage a wedding _soukhouane_ for them. In both cases, the parents bear the cost of the _soukhouane_ and the lunch, as well as part of the costs of the evening reception. Moreover, there are many cases where the betrothed, having the controlling power over their own wedding, allowed their parents to invite a few of their friends. This had caused the parents to ‘lose face’ vis-à-vis the community.

This shift in financial control has two important consequences for the economics of the wedding. Many families regard the expenses as an investment that they will recoup from the cash gifts brought by the guests. Hence, the ever more elaborate receptacle for the guests to deposit their envelopes of cash gifts prominently visible at the entrance to the wedding reception⁴. In many weddings, the language of economics is taken a step further, especially by friends and relatives who come to help clean up the day after the wedding. Many times I have witnessed these people asking the hosts if they had made any profit from the wedding. The wedding has become a business undertaking by the family, and the success of the wedding

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⁴ See Picture VI-13, Chapter VI, p.34 for an illustration of the receptacle.
festivities is measured by the profit/loss of the wedding, not by the warmth, camaraderie and conviviality shown towards the betrothed by friends and families.

Identity

A fragmented identity is a strange thing. You always feel other people are more secure and assured in their identity, which they’re almost certainly not. And you always have a feeling of not fully knowing yourself, of why strange desires and passions and identifications erupt and endure.

(John Docker 2001:ix)

In “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, Hall posits that there are two ways of thinking about identity: one is ‘sameness and continuity, and the other differences and discontinuity’ (Hall 1990:221). According to Hall, though, these identities are not fixed on some essential past, but they are ‘subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power’. Like Brah (1996), Hall sees identity as a never completed and an on-going process and a production constructed within representations. These representations are an on-going process of re-telling the past. Thus, according to Hall, identity is ‘the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past’.

Is my identity – a diasporic identity of a Lao refugee living in Australia - necessarily ‘fragmented’ as John Docker writes? Or is it continually and continuously being (re)negotiated? Between what”? Between ‘home’ and ‘host’? For a person in a state of disapora, does ‘identity’ imply identification with a place of abode – a nation-state or a home that is one’s current residence – or a nostalgic memory – a diasporic longing of one’s motherland that was left behind? Or does it mean the belonging to a certain culture and tradition – as in a certain way of thinking, feeling, reacting and connecting to one’s personal, social, cultural and economic context?

The thesis demonstrates that Lao identity is maintained through the performance of the Lao traditional wedding ceremony, the kindong, and is based on remembrance of experience gained in traditional habitus. Much has been made in this thesis of the importance of parental home as a depository site for traditional experience and
knowledge and as a *habitus* for the teaching and learning of these traditional knowledge and skills, and as a location for the wedding *soukhouane* for the daughters of the family.

We have also seen that the Lao house in modern times, in the homeland and as expected in Lao diaspora communities, has changed dramatically in architectural style and as a site for *habitus*. Gone are the wide-open veranda and the open living plan of the old days. The ‘modern’ concepts of privacy and personal living space have diluted the impact of the house as a *habitus*. Unless there is a conscious move to ‘recreate’ this habitus, the *kindong* will be diluted, both in Laos and in Lao diaspora. There are many contributing factors, many of which have been discussed in the thesis. Globalisation, inter-ethnic and inter-faith marriage lead to the invention of new traditions. The Lao’s desire to be modern and their ‘national’ traits of wanting to keep the harmony with all sentient beings, their readiness to accept the fate that befalls them (their Karma) will also have a large bearing on the direction of where the Lao *kindong* is heading.

As Parekh comments on identity

> Our identity refers to who we are, how we are constituted, what makes us the kind of persons we are. It includes the central organising principles of our being, our deepest tendencies, dominant passions, characteristic ways of thought, deeply held values, ideals, attachments, commitments, our psychological and moral dispositions, traits of temperament, the way we define ourselves and understand ourselves.

(1995:257)

Lao identity, both in the homeland and in Lao diaspora, is shaped by its culture and tradition adapting to new and changing circumstances and adopting features from other cultures that tend to reinforce each other due to globalisation, and the collective memory. This adoption/adaptation of new traditions by many Lao people is very similar to the way they practice their Buddhist faith. They are born into Buddhism, they follow it and practice it unquestioningly and willingly; some without even trying to understand its import and deeper meaning. They do it because it brings them harmony and good Karma; it makes them happy - and this is the core of Lao identity.
My informants define Lao identity as knowing the Lao language, adhering to traditional values, eating glutinous rice and ឆារ​ ឈាយ Padek, and having a soukhouane at some stage of one’s life. Most of all, my informants emphasise, it is most important for people of this generation of Lao to maintain and pass on Lao culture and tradition to the next generation of Lao. The soukhouane, especially at wedding ceremony, is very high on the priority of 'things' to be passed on. One constant is to be Lao one must have a soukhouane, especially for a wedding. The soukhouane in the landscape of a Lao diaspora is like an English oak tree in an Australian garden. It may looks alien and exotic, and looks good, indeed magnificent, in its ‘new’ home, but it can never be called a ‘native’ tree. Moreover, its presence is evocative of a history of settlement of the English people in a once-alien land. It will always be a trigger for the memory of the uprooting and transplanting of a life.

Further directions

Bearing in mind the original purpose of the thesis, and the location of its academic inquiry, this thesis, apart from making small contribution to the corpus of work on Lao culture and on diaspora, opens a small window into the complexity of cultural maintenance by a diaspora. Knowledge and appreciation of the value of the past is a great force for an ethnic community. It is which will move it forwards into the future and to assimilate modernity. It is what will affirm its own ethnic identity. A respect for a people is gained by what they can offer to others by ways of original culture rooted in centuries of the soil/soul of their nation, but at the same time open, supple and adaptable to progress. Specifically relating to the multicultural nature of Australian society, much effort on academic and government levels has been made to study and understand migrant culture and the issues affecting migrant settlement experience. As a contribution to achieving the government’s stated aim of having a cohesive, harmonious and stable multicultural society, Australia must seek to know itself and in that process must try to genuinely understand its component migrant community in every aspect. The Lao and Lao culture has generally been either ignored or undervalued. This work is but a small step towards filling the void, but much remains to be done.
As the thesis has shown, Lao culture in Australia, especially the traditional *kindong* ceremony, has undergone tremendous changes and will undoubtedly go through further changes. Ritual adaptation and adoption of features from other cultures is a necessary and continual process for the maintenance of tradition in its negotiation between ancient custom and modernity. However, can a line be drawn to show a limit of this adoptive process and adaptive capacity? What is likely to happen, in Lao diaspora and in the homeland amidst rapid social changes, to the traditional notion and understanding of the *kindong* and related rituals? Furthermore, what happens in the situation where there are increasing incidents of inter-faith and inter-ethnic marriages? How much more can the *kindong* change and adapt before it loses its meaning and character? How will this change affect the relationship between belief in traditional value of the *kindong* and identity? These are some issues that perhaps warrant further inquiry.

Two areas of research that may further our understanding of the nature and direction of the change of a diaspora’s culture would be

- the impact of globalisation on the relation of *Laonok* and *Laonai*, including the return home in search of a marrying partner phenomenon; and
- the effect of inter-faith and inter-ethnic marriages on the maintenance of Lao culture, especially the *kindong soukhouane*.

This will be important because the *soukhouane* is, in Pierre Nora’s word, a ‘*lieu de mémoire*’ that becomes a signifier, in the Lacanian notion, which triggers memory of other things Lao – the home, the family, kinship, hospitality, religion, language and tradition. The *soukhouane*, in Appadurai’s word, is a locale where ‘everyday objects’ assume the importance of cultural meaning, even more so for the Lao in diaspora. The *soukhouane*, for the Lao in the homeland and in Lao diaspora, is a political statement proclaiming their ethnic identity, their history and the survival of their shared beautiful tradition. Tradition as embodied in the collective memory of the Lao as manifested in the performance of the *kindong*, can then be viewed as a cause in the formation of a social group as well as a source of a group’s perpetual social survival and stability. In particular in Lao diaspora, when the Lao people attend a traditional *kindong*, they can stop being ‘the other’ as members of an ethnic minority and be members of an ethnic group in an environment where
familiar food, language, sounds and rituals re-create an atmosphere of the homeland, creating a familiar habitus.

The *kindong soukhouane* provides the physical and social environment in which people who share the same tradition, customs and language can reproduce many aspects of the culture for themselves and attempt to pass it on to their children. The *soukhouane* for the Lao is the embodiment of a haven – a home and a habitus - in which the language is spoken, traditional clothing is worn, traditional Lao food is prepared and shared, where traditional ways are valued and the ‘*bodily automatism*’ appreciated.

As a saying goes, for an Australian or an American, home is where you hang your hat.

For a Lao, home is where the *soukhouane* is.
Appendix
and
Bibliography
Appendix A
Explanatory Note

Appendix A (a) to (n) is a collection of invocations for various *soukhouane*, and the wordings for other associated rituals, as well as words the tying of the cotton threads on the wrist of the guest of honour, especially for the bride and groom. This collection is gathered from some written sources and from transcripts of the actual *soukhoaunes* recorded by the author in the course of the research for this thesis. Translations into English are by the author.

The sources of these invocations are given on each piece. Some of the sources are listed in the Lao bibliography. Many of them show remarkable similarity, with some very slight variations. While some are reprints of earlier collections, a few appear to be edited by the authors from ‘original’ sources of the Palm Leave manuscript, as evident by the works by Maha Sila Viravong and Samlith Bouasysavath.

These invocations appear to follow the same formula, although some ‘reprints’ do not show the texts of the ‘whole’ process. This formula can be discerned thus:

*Sadhu* – the opening word, a salutation of blessing used at the beginning of a prayer or an invocation

*Namo Tassa* (in Pali, to be said three times) – the opening stanza of a Buddhist prayer, paying homage to all past, present and future Buddhas.

*Sakke* (in Pali) – the formula to call on the Gods and guardian spirits to come and participate in the soukhouane.

*Sakke* (in Lao) – a rendition of the same formula but translated into Lao.

*Sadhu* – again
bhuddan (in Pali) – a Buddhist prayer, paying homage in the Triple Gem – that is the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

Si Si – meaning ‘glory, splendour, auspiciousness’. This signals the beginning of the invocation proper. Within the invocation, there also appears to be a formula. It begins with the proclamation that the time and day are auspicious for a soukhouane. Then a description of how and by whom the phakhouane is made, the listing of the ‘gifts’ on the phakhouane. Then the calling of the khouane, sometimes enumerating the khouanes of the bodily parts.

siiildj (in Pali) – a formula of the four auspicious, precious and sacred blessings: This is the most common Four Precious Blessings a person, including monks, can give to any person – no matter their age, gender, social or political status - or the occasion of the soukhouane.

The first, siiildj ayu – means ‘age’: the wish is for the person to have a long age; thus ‘longevity’.

The second, siiildj vannang (and the derivatives siiildj vanna and siiildj vanno) is also derived from a Pali Sri that has two meanings: (1) Complexion (2) Caste. So, to wish someone siiildj or siiildj is to wish the person ‘a good complexion’ or ‘to be of a high caste’ – both of which can be regarded as auspicious wishes. To a Lao person, the common understanding of this wish is ‘to have a good complexion’ – thus ‘good health’.

soukhang means to have good or happy living; thus ‘happiness’.

phalang means ‘power’ or strength’- this is to wish someone ‘strength’.

Therefore, the most common Four Precious Blessings one can give to another person is Longevity, Good Health, Happiness, Strength.
Appendix A

Appendix A (a)

Words for the engagement, with English translation by the author.

From ផ្លាស់ប្តូរ ស្នូលមូលនៃប្រមៃ (ំពីបារាំង និង ប្រេស៊ី): អាហារប្រមៃប្រមៃមួយប្រមៃ, សារិយា; អគ្គមាន; អង្គបែន

Many of the incantations in this book are exactly the same as an earlier publication: ដែលប្រមឈើមកតាម អាហារប្រមៃមួយប្រមៃ, សារិយា: អាហារប្រមៃប្រមៃមួយប្រមៃ, និងរ៉េីីរ៉ីេ អគ្គមាន; អង្គបែន
Translation

Words for the presentation of the engagement of the other’s daughter

We, all of us here, have come to ask for the hand of the daughter of this house, esteemed father and mother,
The elders have chosen a day that is auspicious; thus they have asked me to come to ask for the truth;
I ask that Esteemed father and mother and the chaokhot loungta. Please accept the engagement;
Ask that you name a date so that we have time to seek advice from learned acharn
Those scholars who know about the day of fortune and good days; so that we have time gather cigarettes, betel leaves and areca nut for chewing;
As well as all the silver and gold in a khanh to lead the son-in-law into marriage
So that he could begin his married life, so that they could be an auspicious couple until a ripe old age,
Till the end of their long life; May you be blessed with longevity, Vanno¹, Good Health and Power.

Words for the acceptance of the engagement

Today is the proper day, a most auspicious day, you Esteemed father and mother and the chaokhot loungta
Have come to ask for the hand of the daughter of this house from the esteemed father and mother,
I as the elder [of the family] now know the truth [of the purpose of your visit]; we of the girl’s side, we will take all we can;
As long as [our daughter] could become a daughter -in-law of the chaokhot loungta; we have present no obstacles;
As long as they become a loving could, we have no trouble the amount of money and gold you brought;

¹ See the note to Appendix A.
But if you come with basketful, we will accept right away; As long as they be hardworking husband and wife who work together; Never leave [each other] as they promise; May you be blessed with longevity, Vanno*, Good Health and Power.

* amis, aiitu is a Pali word that has two meanings: (1) Complexion (2) Caste. So, to wish someone amis or aiitu is to wish the person ‘a good complexion’ or ‘to be of a high caste’ – both of which can be regarded as auspicious wishes. To a Lao person, the common understanding of this wish is ‘to have a good complexion’.
Appendix A

Words for the presentation of the khanhmak

From ទីនៃ ឬទីនៃនៅក្នុងសារ និងរឿងខ្ពស់: និយមន័យយូរអាស៊ី, ប្រភេទមូលហើយ, អំពីចុងក្រោយ;

Many of the incantations in this book are exactly the same as an earlier publication:

ភាពយន្តនៃ ឬទីនៃនៅក្នុងសារ និងរឿងខ្ពស់: និយមន័យយូរអាស៊ី, ប្រភេទមូលហើយ, អំពីចុងក្រោយ;

និយមន័យយូរអាស៊ី ដែលមានស្ថានភាពថ្មី និងធាតុ។ និយមន័យយូរអាស៊ី ដែលមានស្ថានភាពថ្មី និងធាតុ។

ធាតុជំនួយចំនួន

ដែលមានស្ថានភាពថ្មី និងធាតុ។ និយមន័យយូរអាស៊ី ដែលមានស្ថានភាពថ្មី និងធាតុ។

ធាតុជំនួយចំនួន

ដែលមានស្ថានភាពថ្មី និងធាតុ។ និយមន័យយូរអាស៊ី ដែលមានស្ថានភាពថ្មី និងធាតុ។

ធាតុជំនួយចំនួន

ដែលមានស្ថានភាពថ្មី និងធាតុ។ និយមន័យយូរអាស៊ី ដែលមានស្ថានភាពថ្មី និងធាតុ។
Translation

Words for the presentation of the khanhmak

Today is the proper day, a most auspicious day, we have come to present the khanhmak and the khanh ya\(^1\);
We have the young areca nuts from (name of Village), tobacco from Ban Home\(^2\);
We have all here – the prepared areca nuts, good betel leaves, all in the khanh for you;
We invite you, Esteemed father and mother, to partake in the betel chewing;
After the chewing you could then tell us the price you want for your daughter and impose the price of the son;
If it not much, we will search [for that amount]; if a lot, we will build [up to that amount]; So [they] would not be separated; and be blessed with all the best wishes;
So [that they] could be a couple full of good fortune; helping each other to build;
So [that they] stay united as they wished. May you be blessed with Longevity, Vanno\(^3\), Good Health and Power.\(^4\)

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\(^1\) This word mimi\(\)9D means a khanh containing cigarette or tobacco (for the betel nut chewing). It is more likely to have cigarettes, as the tobacco is already included in the khanhmak.

\(^2\) Ban Home is a village of some thirty kilometres south of Vientiane, renowned for its tobacco leaves.

\(^3\) mimi9D is a Pali word that has two meanings: (1) Complexion (2) Caste. So, to wish some one mimi\(\)9D or mimi\(\)9D is to wish the person ‘a good complexion’ or ‘to be of a high caste’ – both of which can be regarded as auspicious wishes. To a Lao person, the common understanding of this wish is ‘to have a good complexion’.

\(^4\) The saying mimi\(\)9D mimi\(\)9D is a Pali formulae of wish a person ‘a good complexion’ or ‘to be of a high caste’ – both of which can be regarded as auspicious wishes. To a Lao person, the common understanding of this wish is ‘to have a good complexion’.
Yes, verily, the chaokhot loungta have come to present the khanhmak and the khanh ya\(^5\);

Today is the proper day, a most auspicious day, as decreed from ancient times, the boy and the girl have spoken in unison;

Have discussed and agreed on their wishes;

To have *sam bouak khoua none*\(^6\), Esteemed Father and Mother and the chaokhot loungta have

Reduce that down to *sam bouak xang*\(^7\), [You] have not missed the money for the mother’s milk

As stipulated by tradition that should be three *Bi*\(^8\), this is not to pay back a debt, but to pay for the mother’s milk;

This is the practice handed down from ancient time, decreed by [our] ancestors;

May [this marriage] be a marriage full of auspiciousness and long lasting;

May [they] be the one and only husband and wife;

May you be blessed with Longevity, *Vanno*\(^9\), Good Health and Power.\(^{10}\)

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\(^5\) See previous note.

\(^6\) *sam bouak khoua none* means ‘three mud holes where buffaloes wallow’. The saying is referring to the contents of the *khanhmak* to be as large as to fill three mud holes.

\(^7\) *sam bouak xang* means ‘three mud holes where elephants wallow’. Again, the saying is referring to the contents of the *khanhmak* to be as large as to fill three mud holes where elephants wallow. The connotation is that the *bouak xang* is smaller than the *bouak khouai*.

\(^8\) See previous note.

\(^9\) See previous note.

\(^{10}\) See previous note.
Appendix A

Appendix A (c)

Words for the presentation of the khanhguen

From 江南 心灵之海 (中国和 日本): 湧流之海
From 写真 表现・交流・参加: 写真之海

Many of the incantations in this book are exactly the same as an earlier publication:

Some of the incantations in this book are exactly the same as an earlier publication.
Today is the proper day, a most auspicious day, a day of great victory, of great fortune;
We have brought our offspring so that [they] could be married [in to your family];
So that they could build [their own family] and to emulate the wealth of Esteemed father and mother; the elders have chosen [today] as an auspicious day and time;
Chosen today as the *khaokong*[^1] [a day conducive] easy to make a fortune; earning one hundred per day; save bit by bit a day now [we] have a thousand;
Put them all in a *khanh* to give to you, to pay homage in gratitude to the father and mother;
We ask that you, the elders, accept this offering, including gold of (amount) *Bath*[^2];
Have not missed the money for the mother’s milk as stipulated by tradition that should be three *Bi*[^3], this is not to pay back a debt, but to pay for the mother’s milk;
This is the practice handed down from ancient time, decreed by [our] ancestors;
May [this marriage] be a marriage full of auspiciousness and long lasting;
May [they] be the one and only husband and wife;
May you be blessed with Longevity, *Vanno*[^4], Good Health and Power.[^5]

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[^1]: A name given to a day in Lao horoscope believed to be auspicious for earning a living, making a fortune, accumulating wealth.
[^2]: A traditional unit of weight that is equivalent about half an ounce.
[^3]: A unit of old Lao currency: 10 *At* = One *Bi*; 10 *Bi* = One *Kip*. The *Kip* is still used as the basic unit of the Lao currency.
[^4]: A Pali word that has two meanings: (1) Complexion (2) Caste. So, to wish some one *Khip* or *Kho* is to wish the person ‘a good complexion’ or ‘to be of a high caste’ – both of which can be regarded as auspicious wishes. To a Lao person, the common understanding of this wish is ‘to have a good complexion’.
[^5]: The saying [*At* *Khip*] is a Pali formulae of wish a person ‘a good complexion’ or ‘to be of a high caste’ – both of which can be regarded as auspicious wishes. To a Lao person, the common understanding of this wish is ‘to have a good complexion’.
Words for the acceptance of the khanhngeun

Yes, verily, the chaokhot loungta have brought our offspring so that [they] could be married [in to your family];
So that they could build [their own family] and to emulate the wealth of Esteemed father and mother; the elders have chosen [today] as an auspicious day and time;
Chosen today as the khaokong⁶ [a day conducive] easy to make a fortune; earning one hundred per day; save bit by bit a day now [we] have a thousand;
Place them all in a khanh to give to you, to pay homage in gratitude to the father and mother;
I, acting as the chaokhot loungta , now accept the offering including , including gold of (amount) Bath⁷;
Should not missed the money for the mother’s milk as stipulated by tradition that should be three Bi⁸, this is not to pay back a debt, but to pay for the mother’s milk;
This is the practice handed down from ancient time, decreed by [our] ancestors;
May [this marriage] be a marriage full of auspiciousness and long lasting;
May [they] be the one and only husband and wife;
May you be blessed with Longevity, Vanno⁹, Good Health and Power.¹⁰

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⁶ See previous note above.
⁷ See previous note above.
⁸ See previous note above.
⁹ See previous note.
¹⁰ See previous note above.
Appendix A

Appendix A (d)

Invocation for Individual soukhouane (prior to the wedding proper)

from

NOTE: before the soukhouane, at both the groom’s and the bride’s house, they would each prepare a phakhouane. They would each have their individual soukhouane at their house; this is called soukhouane noi (small soukhouane). This is the invocation:

...
Translation

Si Si¹, today is a good day, an auspicious day of great fortune,
This Tok² is made of sandalwood; This Tok here is made of Mai Keo³,
The Lords have decorated them and have asked me to call the khouanes,
Saying Ahi Tata Piya Poutta Puretha Paraming Hathayangme
Phisanchetha Karothavachamang Mama Akhatsathi so go the saying, please come
oh your khouanes!

Now I will begin with the time when your mother was pregnant with you,
You stayed in your mother’s womb for ten months;
Then your mother began having pain; so all came many relatives,
The grandparents, they also came to see you. Your mother was in great pain,
becoming restless, alternatively sitting down and moving about;
Then, with continually pain, she writhed on the floor;
As if she was going to die.
She could not stand the pain, and fainted for a while.
Then she delivered the child – a daughter would be born on her back, and a son
would be born face down;
Your mother was still in great pain, still delirious, alternatively reaching for the
umbilical cord and the belly button;
[She] Lifted you up with two hands to wash, put you on a large dong⁴ and take you
outside to tell the wild spirits.
The owl, having thus known, called Kook-Koo that was my son.
[Your mother replied] If this was your son, come and take him now; after this day,
he was mine.
[From then on] Your mother raised you. She put you in a hammock; and she
stayed by the fire⁵;

¹ See note to Appendix A.
² คำ or คำ is a raised wooden plate, mostly made of rattan, and used as a lower table to serve
family meal. A good picture of this type of phakhouane is found in Chapter VI, the wedding of
Anothay Outhensackda.
³ A tree similar to an orange tree, Murraya paniculate Jack. The use of the name of the tree, คำ, could also signify the association of the phakhouane to auspiciousness of the name, as คำ also
means ‘gem’ or ‘precious stone’.
⁴ A large flat bamboo basket used for winnowing rice.
⁵ คำ or คำ, ‘the situation of a woman stying by the fire after childbirth’.
Rocking you to and fro; your mother took hot water, burning her mouth;
The fire grew stronger; your mother grew restless and discouraged; she rocked [the hammock] and swore;
My young one do not make any trouble, please sleep in this cotton hammock; then she moved you into the hammock of silk- your parent still loved you.
This is the natural way of your father; this is a natural way of a birth mother.
If your mother’s milk is warm, you still drink; your mother wrapped you in a whole blanket;
You woke up in the middle of the night to drink [the milk], your mother still adored you;
Your birth mother hated you for the way you were, [that was why] they wanted to kill you;[and you escaped] and be born as a dear son of your mother and father.
May the brave one like Hanuman, and the courageous one like Sankip come and lend you support;
May they bring back your khouanes, do not wander off for your parents were calling [for them];
And your grandparents they all called for your khouanes: Akhasahi – may your khouanes come back; Tatadoula- the apple of your mother’s eye;
Adsa – on this day which is a good day; full of auspiciousness; a day that is better than any other day, a day to conquer all enemies;
The soothsayer has chosen today as a day of good fortune; a day devoid of sorrow; devoid of all sickness and diseases;
May your khouanes come to enjoy the fortune till you are old, till your life is no more.
If it rains, you should not go out to drink from the squirrel’s footprints; If the sun shines, you should not go out to drink from the cattle’s footprints;

6 This line is a bit obscure- it might refer to the baby’s habit of causing trouble by waking up in the middle of the night. That is why in his previous life, ‘they’ wanted to kill him; he escaped from them and came to be born with his parent in this present life.
7 Hanuman and Sankip are two of the bravest of soldiers of Rama in the Ramayana (which the Lao know as Phra Lak, Phra Lam).
Your parents still loved you. While growing up, your mother teaches you to sleep, you sleep; shoe teaches you to know, you learn to know. Do not waste your mother’s effort [in the way] she curled up to let you feed on her milk.

Now you are grown with a body and complexion that all admire; in the evening, they want to see you. Now it is the occasion of the new year;

In the third month, Dok Hang\(^8\) begin to burgeon; in the fourth month they begin to bloom beautifully;

There are flowers of Dok Keo, and Dok Chouang and Dok Chanh;

Flowers of Saraphi, Champi, and Champa, Khannika, Khed\(^9\);

There are also Dok Ngangthed, Lamdoune and Dok Keo;

Ever blooming are the Dok Sampi, Dok Samengmad, and other flowers\(^{10}\);

Your mother then invited young girls to make garlands; young boys come to flirt with them;

Then they assemble these garlands on the khanh on your phakhouanes;

Complete with multicoloured shirt to dress your khouanes;

May they come and live in peace in this town and palace, and be the master for the next thousand years;

All the bad things be banished, as well as all sickness and diseases for a long time;

Eye sores and stomach aches [be banished] from this house;

This big auspicious house – a house of strong elephant;

May you live here happily till old age; for a thousand years;

With limitless amount of possession; May you be a Phagna\(^{11}\);

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\(^8\) กิ่งแก้ว a hardwood tree, *Pentacme siamensis Kurz* (Vidal)


\(^{10}\) ดอกแก้ว Dok Ngangthed – trees of the *Dipterocarpus* family; ดอกนางแอม Lamdoune (also called ดอกแอม Damdoune) – *Popowia aberrans*; ดอกแก้ว Dok Sampi – *Helychrysum bracteatum* (Immortals);

\(^{11}\) A high mandarin ranking in the service of the old Lao court.
Your father will find you a mate, do not be in a hurry;
May treasure come your way; may you have a house that is large and extensive;
Surrounded by all your adoring relatives. Do not be complacent:
Carry out all your tasks with diligence, and well thought through; Do not neglect
the observance of the Sila and Dana;

Give alms [to the monks] and donate lunchtime food [to them]. On the वंसिन्ह
Vansinh, you should learn and meditate;

May you be blessed with the Four Precious Blessings - अंतरिक्ष एवं अंतरि
Longevity, Good Health, Happiness and Strength –
Age- may that be for along time; Vanna – may you have good complexion;
[Full of] happiness and not with sorrow; Strength, may you have all the strength till
your old age, till your last day;
May you be without sickness and diseases; conquer all the enemies;
May you be blessed with prestige and authority; and endless wealth;
May your have plenty of auspiciousness; have a goo live until Nirvana which is the
most precious of places [to live in];
With the power of the Triple Gems:
All the blessings of the Buddha; all the blessings of the Dharma; all the blessings of
the Sangha – Sathasothi Phavantute.
Appendix A (e)

Words for the *phoukkhene* for the mophone before he performs the ritual of *soukhouane*.

From ព្រះព្រះរាជាណាចរ (ព្រះរាជាណាចរ): *បែកបញ្ជាក់សិក្សា*; អាពារ, ពោធិ៍សារ៍; ១០០០ តែនិង ព្រាហ្ម័យ និង សុខភាព ដែលនៅក្នុងបែកបញ្ជាក់សិក្សា

Phanh Inthavongs (ed): *Soukhouane Tradition*; Orly, France, 2000 (Roneoed copy given to the author by Mr Pheng of Virginia, USA, in June 2000)

*Si* *Sri*  with the most auspicious of royal wish, these precious threads are born in the centre of Heaven,

Indra ordained them from the heaven, therefore I am now tying on your wrist to bestow some wishes on you, [name of the mophone]. May you live well and be strong, stronger than before;

---

1 A note by Mr Phanh states that this is to be performed by one of the elders in the gathering around the *phakhouane*, before the mophone commences the ritual of *soukhouane*. This ritual is to ensure that the performance by the mophone would be sacred and potent. This booklet is the only one that specifies this ritual, and has wording for this performance. It is noted that Mr Phanh does not call the person performing the *soukhouane* as ‘mophone; he calls the person ‘*mophone*’; that is ‘the one who performs the *soukhouane*’. But later in the text, he uses the term ‘mophone’.
May you be a *mophone* who processes potent magical power as the sharpest of knife;

May *Indra* and *Brahma* from Heaven come and give you the power to perform this wishing ritual; May your word and speech be potent for the children and grandchildren;

May you have very long age [so as to] be the shelter with much accumulated merit for the children and grandchildren;

As the Glorious *Bhodi* Tree with its branches and leaves
Providing shelter for all kinds of birds;

May you be blessed with Longevity, Good Health, Happiness, Strength

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2 ពាន់ព្យាយាម សុខសុំ សុីសុំ សុីសុំ  This is the most common Four Precious Wishes a person, including monks, can give to any person – no matter their age, gender, social or political status - or the occasion of the soukhouane. See the note to Appendix A.
Appendix A

Invocation for wedding *soukhouane* – traditional style


1 This periodical was a publication of the Literary Committee of the Royal Lao Government, Vientiane, of which Maha Sila was a long-serving secretary general. I inherited this particular volume from Mr Bouaphet Chanthapanya, my father-in-law, thanks to the generosity of his son, Pakasith.
Sri Sri with the auspicious of royal blessing, this most glorious, victorious and auspicious of marriage, imbued with the most potent magic and power,
Today is a good day, an auspicious day, full of great fortune;
This is a plateau of sandalwood; this khanh is made of mai keo
The elders have desired so and have prepared these phakhouane thus placed;
There are cotton threads for wrist-tying; there are rings for the finger, bracelets and necklaces; there is food aplenty along with other things,
There are good betel leaf and prepared areca nuts all arranged;
Fragrant flowers, small bottles of liquor for the phakhouanes are all here;
Rice cake with banana for the baci, unblemished boiled eggs.
There are the Supreme Gods from Heaven;
The one in front is called Khoun Si Khouan Phanh – all good looking;
They brought a Royal Decree endowed with the proper authority,
this royal blessing that is full of supreme power,
Saying Glorious Victory, Victorious auspiciousness
It is now the right year for victorious marriage
Promote to be the beloved wife in accordance with ancient customs.
Bowls of flowers lifted level with the eye; somma bowls for the chaokhot loungta
Filled with appropriate jewels and silver; the eldest daughter, the middle daughter and the youngest one have very high khadong; all very appropriate, not lacking anything.

Now the parents and all the elders are all here;

Rain is abundant on the New Year; thunder are frequent in the third month

All the young men and women are now gathered to praise you.

Do not separate; be married with much love as you wished for.

All the elders on your father’s side know and accept, and now they have prepared

And bring along the phakhouane, adorned with areca nuts and flowers and other gifts for you. All your grand parents, your parents and other elders, along with young men and women, they come to help carry the phakhouane, all around left and right;

On the left is the man with the [welcoming alcoholic] drink; up on higher places are the elders.

Now I will call the khouane of the husband to come into the body; I will invite the khouanes of the wife to also come in the body, and stay together with those of your husband. Oh come all ye khouanes!! When you arrive, put on dok khownphoum, there are nice buds of dok khadkhao; put them on to cover your eyes; your beautiful hair down to the shoulders, come and stay with your new beau; khouanes of both of you please don come stay in your bodies this very day.

Khouane of the shin please come in the shin; khouane of the leg come into the leg; stay within your place. When people come, be strong and alert, carry your man [the body].

On this joyous day, carry your man to be with the girl; along with the foot, tail head of the Garuda and the Naga and steel lance. As specified in the legend, there must be appropriate seating [because] you have been chosen by Thené to be a pair; now the elders and parents tie your wrists to make you a couple.

To make you my son so you can carry on the family line; you two are blessed and made for each other Indra up on heaven ordains so that you will be married till old age; as long as a hundred years.

May you have many sons and daughters, a lot of slaves and servants; all things that come with your Nene aplenty. May you have everything – elephants, horses with golden saddles.
The magical and most powerful Phagna Tham as stated in the legend that Indra has bestowed the wishes as advices to the realm of Humans; this precious stone of phatok [is here] to receive the phakhouane as if the angels from heaven come down to prepare it; Indra has given the flowers for you to put on your hair. Now I will invite the khouanes of both of you

Ma Yeu Khouanes Eui – Oh come ye khouanes!

When the sun sets behind the Pa seng; when the sue glows red going down behind the bush, your khouane come to be with your beloved without delay; your mother makes a separate bedroom for you furnished with multicoloured blankets and mattress, embroidered with red silk; khouane of you two dear ones come and stay side by side;

If your khouanes had been away in the far away land, please come back today;
If your khouanes still pine for former lovers, please come back today.

Ma Yeu Khouanes Eui – Oh come ye khouanes!

Come wash your hair and put on dok bouaraphanh; come and put on the chanh perfume prepared by your mother; once arrived come and put on flowers of golden lotus; come and put on [the clothes] you mother has prepared; come put flowers on your hair; if your hair is not long enough for the chignon, add the hair extension²

All the people and relatives from the south village wait for you; all the girls from the north village wait to see you [because] the reputation of your beauty.

Oh please come to have the midday meal at the newly prepared phakhouane, so that your two can feed the ‘blessed egg’³ to each other as decreed in ancient customs.
They say today is an auspicious day, I will call again for your khouanes to come and lie on this mattress together; May you carry on the family line in the footstep of your parents.

When come the month and season, and the 7th –8th and 14th -15th days you will perform the takbath without fail.

Oh come, khouanes of your eyebrows come and stay in they brows;
Khouanes of your eyes, come and stay in the eyes;

² ² ²
³ ³ ³
Khounes of your mouth, cheeks and your chin; of your hip and breasts may you all come and encircle the phakhouane.

Ma Yeu Khounes Eui – Oh come ye khounes!

Today is an auspicious day; it is today when the old ones become younger;
It is today when you receive money by the ten of thousand while you are sleeping;
It is today that you receive money by the hundred of thousand when you awake;
It is today when you reach out your hand and be given a precious gem;
Today is the day when the arms of the bride and groom intertwine;
Today is the day when your silo is filled with rice grains
May you receive a precious stone within three days;
May you receive clothing within five days;
May you both be well, be happy and remain loving [toward each other].
Now that you are a son-in-law, be generous, and not show off;
When you chase away chickens, use the So! So!
When you chase away the dog, say Se Se!
When you chase away the buffalo, use Heu! Heu!
Don’t be naughty, and kick the helm of your cloth in front of the elders;
May you stay faithful to your beloved.
Now that you are a daughter-in-law, you should love your mother-in-law;
You don’t gossip about your own husband; or be unfaithful;
May you be a learned person, seeking to hear [monk’s] sermon;
On dark night, don’t go out and play;
That low-set house belongs to your [paternal] uncle;
The tall one nearby is the house of your [maternal] uncle and aunt, that is the one with the wide veranda to hang the horse saddle;
The pot inside the house is the precious water;
This building your father bequeaths to you two;
May you continue to make merit without fail, and continue the family line forever;
When you have some meat for a meal, give some to your elders; when you have fish for a meal share it with your mother in law. They all talk about you as being lucky; if
you have a son may he be a precious one; may you have offspring born of your own womb.

May you listen to the advice of your elders and parents; may you be generous towards your relatives. With your left eye, you should not look another man; with your right eye, you should not be looking for a lover. In the afternoon, you should prepare the [evening] meal, in the morning you should prepare lunch; you should not sleep too long and get up too late, it is taboo. You should prepare the areca nut and cigarettes for the Khanhmak. Once you are married, you should forget about all past lovers. The alcoholic drink in the small pot is to be distributed among the servants; the one in the large pots is for the high officials.

Today is an auspicious day for the bride; I want to emphasise it and add to more blessings for you which are the advices from Indra for the realm of humans; now you are lucky to be thus blessed, may you be patient and work for it’

*Oh come ye Khouanes!*

Khouane of the husband come and admire those of the wife unceasingly;

In the evening, you should both go to bed; with your heads on adjoining pillows

May you turn to each other with love always.

Thus may you be blessed with the a marriage of great auspiciousness;

May you be blessed with the four precious wishes: longevity, good health, happiness and strength.
Appendix A

Appendix A (g)

Khampheng Thepphavong's wedding

This is a transcript and translation of the *soukhouane* invocation at the wedding of Mr Khampheng Thepphavong, Vientiane, January 2000 (Ch. VI). The *mophone* is Mr Vanhsy.

At the beginning of the tape, the bride was led into the *phakhouane* indicated by a female voice asking the *mophone* where should the bride sit. After a few minutes of general brouhaha, a voice called out to announce the arrival of the groom. Once the groom was seated, a male representative of the families opened the proceeding by making a general announcement to the gathering. Part of what he said was to say that the purpose of the gathering today was to witness, and the *phoukkhene* to wish the betrothed who are beginning their new family. The betrotheds had performed everything in accordance with the ‘tradition’ – the asking for the hand in marriage, the engagement. As well, they have their marriage approved by the village authority properly. Today was the *soukhouane* for their wedding.

Then an elder of the family ( StartCoroutine) tied a white cotton string on the *mophone* and asking him to perform the ritual of *soukhouane*. The *mophone* began by saying:

Now is the auspicious moment, and a good time (to begin the ritual); (I) invite all the fathers and mothers and all the elders to bestow good wishes – asking from them the ten most auspicious wishes”. Then he told the betrotheds to receive the *phakhouane* as he spoke on behalf of the elders: “Today is a good day, now is an auspicious time, all the parents and relatives from near and far had prepared a *phakhouane* to give a *soukhouane* to wish you two to be husband and wife; these are the elders who now bear witness (to this marriage)”.

Then he began the invocation:

```
lang head
masa' tsaat
ma bai tsaat bai naat taa ti la taa
ma bai tsaat bai naat taa ti la taa
ma bai tsaat bai naat taa ti la taa

samet taa bai teui thi bai tongk lang kai
smac taa taa teui la thim bai tongk lang kai

samet bai bai
```
ឃុំ អង្ការ បំពាក់ ឧបករណ៍នៃជំនាញអរើន នេះ។

ក្រោយបន្ត់ រឹមក់ ប្រការនៃអរើន សម្រាប់ វិទ្យាល័យ និង នាយក。

ភាពសម្រាប់ បញ្ហារវាង គ្រូបង្រៀន និង ឈើករ។

ភាពសម្រាប់ បញ្ហារវាង គ្រូបង្រៀន និង ឈើករ។

ភាពសម្រាប់ បញ្ហារវាង គ្រូបង្រៀន និង ឈើករ។

ស្តាប់ ស្តាប់ អាការដែលបាន អគ្គនាយកនាយក ប្រការនៃអរើន ឬបញ្ហារវាង គ្រូបង្រៀន និង ឈើករ។

ភាពសម្រាប់ បញ្ហារវាង គ្រូបង្រៀន និង ឈើករ។

ភាពសម្រាប់ បញ្ហារវាង គ្រូបង្រៀន និង ឈើករ។

ភាពសម្រាប់ បញ្ហារវាង គ្រូបង្រៀន និង ឈើករ។

ខ្លឹមខ្នះ អាការ ក្រោយបន្ត់ រឹមក់ វិទ្យាល័យ ។

ភាពសម្រាប់ បញ្ហារវាង គ្រូបង្រៀន និង ឈើករ។

ភាពសម្រាប់ បញ្ហារវាង គ្រូបង្រៀន និង ឈើករ។

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ភាពសម្រាប់ បញ្ហារវាង គ្រូបង្រៀន និង ឈើករ។

ភាពសម្រាប់ បញ្ហារវាង គ្រូបង្រៀន និង ឈើករ។

ភាពសម្រាប់ បញ្ហារវាង គ្រូបង្រៀន និង ឈើករ។

៣ ១ រឹមក់ ឬប្រការ ឬគ្រូបង្រៀន និង ឈើករ។

វាក់ត្រា រឹមក់ ឬគ្រូបង្រៀន និង ឈើករ។

មានការបង្កើត ឬការធ្វើអាការ គ្រប់គ្រាន់។

គ្មែរ្រួម ឬការធ្វើអាការ គ្រប់គ្រាន់។

រូបភាព គឺជាឧបករណ៍ ។

ការបញ្ហាអីស្ទើរ ឬការបំណែក ការធ្វើអាការ ។

ឈើករ ឬគ្រូបង្រៀន និង ស្រីក្បាល។

អាការ និង ស្រីក្បាល ។
គ្រោងព្យាយាមពីការ ប្រការពាក់កណ្តាល ប្រការពាក់កណ្តាលយោងពាក់ព្យាយាមពីការ
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អតិថិជម្រូ ប្រសិទ្ធភាព ប្រសិទ្ធភាពយោលបានអធិរាជធានី
(អនុរដ្ឋអង្គមើល របស់ក្នុង និង អនុរដ្ឋអង្គមើល នៃទីផ្សារនេះ)

ការពិភាក្សាមុនការដែលរើសចំពោះប្រកួតប្រជុំនេះដោយ

មានប្រការិយាល័យអនុរដ្ឋអង្គមើល និងអនុរដ្ឋអង្គមើល ដែលបានអនុញ្ញាតូលលេខប្រកួតប្រជុំនេះ

ការអនុញ្ញាតូលនូវប្រកួតប្រជុំ បានប្រការិយាល័យអនុរដ្ឋអង្គមើល និងអនុរដ្ឋអង្គមើល ដែលបានអនុញ្ញាតូលលេខប្រកួតប្រជុំនេះ

ដើម្បីប្រការិយាល័យអនុរដ្ឋអង្គមើល និងអនុរដ្ឋអង្គមើល ដែលបានអនុញ្ញាតូលលេខប្រកួតប្រជុំនេះ របស់ក្នុង និង អនុរដ្ឋអង្គមើល នៃទីផ្សារនេះ

ប្រការិយាល័យអនុរដ្ឋអង្គមើល និងអនុរដ្ឋអង្គមើល ដែលបានអនុញ្ញាតូលលេខប្រកួតប្រជុំនេះ

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ដើម្បីប្រការិយាល័យអនុរដ្ឋអង្គមើល និងអនុរដ្ឋអង្គមើល ដែលបានអនុញ្ញាតូលលេខប្រកួតប្រជុំនេះ របស់ក្នុង និង អនុរដ្ឋអង្គមើល នៃទីផ្សារនេះ

ដើម្បីប្រការិយាល័យអនុរដ្ឋអង្គមើល និងអនុរដ្ឋអង្គមើល ដែលបានអនុញ្ញាតូលលេខប្រកួតប្រជុំនេះ របស់ក្នុង និង អនុរដ្ឋអង្គមើល នៃទីផ្សារនេះ
Translation

Sathou Sathou

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma SamBuddhassa (three times)

Sakkhe Kame ....

Sathou Sathou

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1 A formula in Pali to invite the gods and guardians spirits to come and witness the wedding. It is followed directly by a rendition in Lao language, which is translated above.
We all us here gathered invite you the gods and guardians of the tree and forest; the gods and angels in Brahma level, the gods and angels Ek-Kaka level; all the guardian spirits of all locations; guardian spirit of Chanthabury Sisattana Khanahout Lanxang Vientiane, along with guardian spirit of this house; may you all come to witness and participate in this soukhouane for this wedding ceremony with us here today!

_Sathou Sathou_

_Sri Sri_ with the proper authority, this royal wish that is full of supreme power,
The glorious, auspicious majestic marriage full of good signs,
Today is a good day, an auspicious day, full of fortune;
This is a plateau of sandalwood; this _khanh_ is made of _mai keo_
The elders have desired so and have prepared these _phakhouane_ thus placed;
There are cotton threads for wrist-tying; there are rings for the finger, bracelets and necklaces;
There is food aplenty all bringing good luck
There are good betel leaf and prepared areca nuts all arranged;
Fragrant flowers, small bottles of liquor for the _phakhouanes_ are all here;
Rice cake with banana for the _baci_, unblemished boiled eggs.
They are all in the _phakhouane_ as decreed by ancient customs;
The _Khanh_ of flowers is lifted to the level of the eyes;
There is also _Khanh somma_ for the _chaokhot loungta_ with appropriate jewels and silver;
The eldest daughter has much for her _khadong_; the last daughter has a lot for hers also; all very appropriate, not lacking anything.
Now the parents, the elders and young people are all here to lift the _phakhouane_, all around left and right;
On the left is the man with the [welcoming alcoholic] drink; up on higher places are the elders.
Now, they have asked me to be the _mophone_. I therefore ask for blessings from the Triple Gems, that is the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, and invite all the Enlightened Ones in this Universe; with angels who possess magical powers and the angels who have much _somphanh_. I also invite Thao Khamkhad [inaudible] and the _Thene Luang_ who is the Supreme Gods from Heaven; and the _Thene Thao_ who inaugurated this wishing. I invite them all to come and bestow wishes on you two; come and admire the gifts for you. When you arrive, out on _dok_
khoumphoum, there are nice boughs of dok khadkhao; put them on to cover your eyes; your beautiful hair down to the shoulders, touching you lovely skin – what a good match for the bride who waits. Indra up on heaven ordains so that you will be married till old age; as long as a hundred years.

Khouane of the shin please come in the shin; khouane of the leg come into the leg; stay within your place. When people come, be strong and alert, carry your man [the body]. On this joyous day, carry your man to be with the girl; along with the foot, tail head of the Garuda and the Naga and steel lance. As specified in the legend, there must be appropriate seating [because] you have been chosen by Thene.

May you have many sons and daughters, a lot of slaves and servants; all things that come with your Nene aplenty. May you have everything – elephants, horses with golden saddles.

The magical and most powerful Phagna Tham as stated in the legend that Indra has bestowed the wishes as advices to the realm of Humans; this precious stone of phatok [is here] to receive the phakhouane as if the angels from heaven come down to prepare it; Indra has given the flowers for you to put on your hair. Now I will invite the khounaes of both of you

Ma Yeu Khouanes Eui – Oh come ye khouanes!

(chorus of the gathering calling the khouanes, and scattering grains of rice and popcorns)

Oh come you khouanes of the bride; once arrived come and put on flowers of golden lotus; come and put on [the clothes] you mother has prepared; come put flowers on your hair; if your hair is not long enough for the chignon, add the hair extension²

All the people and relatives from the south village wait for you; all the girls from the north village wait to see you [because] the reputation of your beauty.

Oh please come to have the midday meal I the prepared phakhouane, so that your two can feed the ‘blessed egg’³ to each other as decreed in ancient customs.

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² xEC3<br>³ xEC3
They say today is an auspicious day, I will call again for your khouanes to come and lie on this mattress together. May you carry on the family line in the footstep of your parents.

When come the month and season, and the 7th – 8th and 14th – 15th days you will perform the takbath without fail.

Oh come, khouanes of your eyebrows come and stay in they brows;
Khouanes of your eyes, come and stay in the eyes;
Khouanes of your cheeks and your chin; of your hip and breasts may you all come and encircle the phakhouane.

Ma Yeu Khouanes Eui – Oh come ye khouanes!

(chorus of the gathering calling the khouanes, and scattering grains of rice and popcorns)

Khouane of your mouth stay with the mouth [inaudible] Khouane of the neck come and put on your necklace; khouane of the index finger come and put on your ring; khouanes of your chest and shoulders, and of the ears, oh please all come today.

If your khouanes stay at the rice field planting rice, please return today;
Today is an auspicious day; it is today when the old ones become younger;
It is today when you gain money by the ten of thousand while you are sleeping;
It is today that you gain money by the hundred of thousand when you awake;
It is today when you reach out your hand and be given a precious gem;
It is today that you will be without any punishments;
Today is the day when you are without any bad omens;
Today is the day when the arms of the bride and groom intertwine;
May you receive a precious stone within three days;
May you receive clothing within five days;
May arms of groom and bride stay intertwined, be happy and remain loving [toward each other].

Now that you are a son-in-law, be generous, and not show off;
When you chase away chickens, use the So! So!
When you chase away the dog, say Se Se!
When you chase away the buffalo, use Heu! Heu!
Don’t be naughty, and kick the helm of your cloth in front of the elders;
May you stay faithful to your beloved.

Now that you are a daughter-in-law, you should love your mother-in-law;
You don’t gossip about your own husband; or be unfaithful;
May you be a learned person, seeking to hear [monk’s] sermon;
On dark night, don’t go out and play;
That low-set house belongs to your [paternal] uncle;
The tall one nearby is the house of your [maternal] uncle and aunt, that is the one with the wide veranda to hang the horse saddle;
The pot inside the house is the precious water;
This building your father bequeaths to you two;
Ma Yeu Khouanes Eui – Oh come ye khoanes!
*(chorus of the gathering calling the khoanes, and scattering grains of rice and popcorns)*
May your thirty khoanes assemble [in your body]; may your ninety khoaunes come together;
Khouane of the husband come and admire those of the wife unceasingly;
In the evening, you should both go to bed; with your heads on adjoining pillows
May you turn to each other with love always.
Thus may you be blessed with the a marriage of great auspiciousness;
May you be blessed with the four precious wishes: longevity, good health, happiness and strength.
Appendix A
Appendix A (h)
Thipphaphone Keomoungkhoun’s wedding

Invocation for the wedding *soukhouane* for Ouday and Thipphaphone’s wedding, Ban Kokninh, Vientiane, 29 January 2000 (Ch. VI) (Recorded, transcribed and translated by the author).

 Invocation for the wedding *soukhouane* for Ouday and Thipphaphone’s wedding, Ban Kokninh, Vientiane, 29 January 2000 (Ch. VI) (Recorded, transcribed and translated by the author).
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Translation:

Sathou Sathou

Nama Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sammukkha (three times)

Sakkhe Kame

Hear me, oh you all the gods and angels! I mean the gods and angels in Brahma level, the gods and angles on *Kaka* level; all the guardian spirits of all location; guardian spirit of this house; may you all come to surround and support the *khounanes* of all our children this here today!

Sathou Sathou

Buddham ayavattanam tesivitam yavaniphanam saranam gacchami

[Then follows a stanza of a prayer called ‘Sayanto’ Blessing of Great Victory’ in Pali.]

Si Si², with great joy and much auspiciousness, let us proclaim the marriage of the original husband and wife in front of Father, Mother, ancestors and family elders and a chapter of monks;

Fate has ordained that these two persons to have long connection

Because the chain of love from *Thene*³ and the line *Nene*⁴ from the beginning, organised these two persons to pick *dok kadanggna*⁵ together to make offering to the Lord’s stupa;

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¹ This is a Buddhist prayer formula known as ‘Seeking Rege in the Buddha, Dharma and the Sanga”, that is the Buddha, his Teaching and his Disciples. See Khanphilo, above. However, this version is seeking the refuge so that one could be blessed with longevity and prosperity until one reaches Nirvana.

² See note to Appendix A.

³ *Thene* is the name by which the Lao know the highest God who sends down one of his sons, Khoun Bourom, to rule over the land down below at Dien Bien Phu, in present day North-western Vietnam. It was one of Khoun Bourom’s sons who later ruled the area where situated present day Luang Prabang. This son of Khoun Bourom is believed to be the original forefathers of the ruling house of Luang Prabang down to 1975. See Souneth Phothisane: *The Nidan Khun Borom: Annotated Translation and Analysis*; Unpublished PhD Thesis, Departement of History, University of Queensland, 1996

⁴ *Nene* A indigenous Lao word meaning the line of fate that links two (or more) people together in love.

⁵ *Cananga odorata* Flower with name of *Cananga odorata Baill.* (Vidal)
They picked flowers together from the same bush; pick *dok gno* together, gather the *dok vane*\(^6\) from the same garden; collect *dok damdouane*\(^7\) from the same branch. They used to rest under a tree for a chat; used to drink from the same *khanhmak*; used to pledge their love to each other in the same room. They were pleased to fulfill the same dream. They used to bathe in the area of the river; they heard (the monks’) sermon together; take part in the Vetsantara festival together; pay homage to the stupa and pray together at the That Luang\(^8\) in Heaven. These two persons are thus meant for each other. As they have pledged their love, their fate has brought them together again and again. They took part in the building of the *That Phantom*\(^9\) and *That Phrabat*\(^10\).

Thus they have been together in all their previous lives: your fate is so strong, you are still paired together. No matter if you were born a thousand leagues apart, far from your ancestors and families; but fate had ordained that you should share the same [bed]room. You both have accumulated [enough fate] to be born in this progressive socialism, with the administrative authority and the leadership of the Party, with your parents who adore you as their own heart. They raised you with difficulty, depriving themselves of sleep. Sometime they were awakened from their sleep when you cried. When you were sick, your father would go to find a cure while your mother sat and waited at home, wrapped you up in a blanket and cradled you against her body. She sang a lullaby to lull you to sleep. When you cried, your mother cried with you, and when you laughed she laughed with you. The *Bounkhoute* of parents is as heavy as half the earth. They raised their children till they reached the age of five or six. Now they are happy with your progress in becoming young adolescents.

---

\(^6\) It is indeterminate which *Damdoun* is referred to in the invocation, as there are about three or four that it could be.

\(^7\) *Damdoun* (also called *Damdoun* Damdoun) – *Popowia aberrans*;

\(^8\) The invocation uses the same name as the That Luang in Vientiane.

\(^9\) *Lamphoun* One of the most sacred stupa in the Lao belief, situated in present Province of Nakhon Phanom, North-East Thailand.

\(^10\) *Phrabat* – Stupa of the Buddha’s Foot Print. It is thought to referred to the one situated in present Meuang Phra Bat Phone Sane, Province of Borikhan, on the national highway between Vientiane and Thakek, central Laos.
Wherever you go, people praise you; your relatives rejoice in your growing up, and they look after you. You go to school to get education and knowledge in the school of our nation.

Now you are young boy and girl past your fifteen years. People talk about your beauty; all the boys and girls look at you unblinkingly; when they see you they forget to walk on, staring at you unceasingly. You two are equal in your beauty, your Karma are also equal that’s why you are born in the same land. As you have given alms (to the monk) in same alms bowl you instantly like each other when you meet; you speak the same language, follow the same tradition. You used to walk the same path, bath in the same river; your lines of Nene are still linked, you are still meant to be together. In accordance with the tradition of your forefathers, the groom’s procession is right on time; my beloved please come quickly. Here I proclaim

Si Si today is a good day; Si Si today is a day of great fortune [inaudible] Today is a Monday of the Second month which is an auspicious day, day for amassing fortune, days of the rich people. Today is the day when Sinxay\(^1\) gained magic power. Today is the day when Kalakhed\(^2\) married Nang Manichanh; today is the day when your khanh is filled with magic power; today is the day for the boat race; today is the day when you will enjoy sleeping on a mattress; you will both be happy with people young and old come to lift your phakhouane above their head. [Now] I will invite you two to come down from Muang Thene; invite you lines of Nene to come down from the palace; invite King of Mount Kaylat [Sanscrit: Kaylasa], to come down from the mountain. The mophone is waiting for you. The brave one is Nang Thorany\(^3\), Garuda and the Naga [are all invited]; the [village] committee have also come to lend their auspiciousness. Now I will proclaim Vivaha Avaha Vivaho Soukhtato Hotu – May your marriage be filled with happiness.

Now the mophone will call your khouanes to come, thus Ma yeu Khouane Eui – Oh come you all the khouanes! (chorus)

---

\(^1\) One of the hero of a well known and much loved Lao folk tale of the same name.
\(^2\) Name of another hero of another well known and much loved Lao folk tale of the same name.
\(^3\) Lao name for the Goddess of Earth.
May you come to share the same room; both of you, may you come to lay side by side; may you come and share the same meal, share a fish from the same cup. Your altar be decorated with flowers of midnight.

Now you are wedded side by side; may you be strong and assiduous. Let you build on your love for each other, if anyone of you is acting strangely, be patient with each other; let’s talk about it and work it out. You are now husband and wife, you must tolerate and please each other; when you work, do not do like before [you are married]; when you rest, enjoy it with all your heart; when working do not be lazy; work on all things to support your family with husband and wife and children, along with your relatives and family elders. You should help to row the boat; do not think about former lovers; come and share in the same lake and river; help each other to build; do not leave [each other] and be divorced; let’s share in all thing; may you achieve good reputation; possess all the wherewithal in the household. Today is the auspicious day, auspicious month and auspicious year. So I call again: Oh come all you khouanes!!.

If your khouanes arrive in the morning, may there be people to admire you; if your khouanes arrive in the evening, may there be people to praise you; may your reputation sounds like bells, and your name sounds as loud and thunder.

May you be blessed with the Four Precious Blessings - longevity, good health, happiness and strength —
Appendix A

Appendix A (i)

Words for the *phoukkhene* for the newlyweds by the *mophone* (and can be used by anyone who knows it for the same occasion).


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1 In other books of *soukhouane*, there was no distinction between the wording for ‘the groom’ or the ‘bride’ – the two wordings given here are called simply Model 1 and Model 2. See Khambang Channiyavong as listed in the bibliography.
Words for the phoukkhene for the groom

Today is the chosen day, a proper day, a day of fulfilment, an auspicious day. They plant a tree that grows into a forest, it is today; They plant the song\(^2\) tree that grow prolifically, it is today. They plant you two to be married, it is today. From this time onward, may you be a couple like Nok Thoua\(^3\) May you remain husband and wife like Nok leng\(^4\) May you be steadfast as the column of Mount Meru May you be a precious couple, not a couple of hungry ghosts and Mara Oh! Come ye all the khouanes!! Come and be intertwined as a marine rope; may you as close as the elephant rope never untwined; May you be like a wealthy person so that you at ease to live and donate [your wealth]

---
\(^2\) a tree whose latex is used to prepare cosmetic (Kerr, quoting Vidal)
\(^3\) laughing thrush – known for its propensity to stay as a couple for life (Preecha)
\(^4\) Birds in the same group of myna or starling
If you raise a daughter, may you have plenty of them; if you raise a son, may it be [an] easy [task];

May you have plenty of jewellery to spend and dispense
May you be blessed with the Four Precious Blessings
Longevity, Good Health, Happiness and Strength!!

Words for the phoukkhene for the bride

Oh! Come ye all the *khouanes*!!

You who have prestige, intellect that is renown throughout.

Now you are also blessed by supreme luck like *Soumontha* sharing a bed with *Khounphanh*;

May you last together until the end of your lives, never part to become widowed;

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5 Famous couples from old Lao legend.
Oh! Come ye all the khouanes!!
The khouane of your head and spirit of your beautiful body, do not go back to your [previous] boyfriend, you will be blemished;
Oh come your khouane that had escaped from your body, do not hide with your [previous] boyfriend, people will despise you;
May you come and live in this nice house of yours; do not pine for your previous boyfriend;
May you come to build [your own family] with your mother, father and other relatives;
Oh! Come ye all the khouanes!!
When the khouane of your head enters the room in your golden house,
May you be blessed with all the money and all the precious jewellery;
All the robbers and bad elements, enemies, diseases and sickness may they all stay far away from you;
May you be blessed with Longevity, Good Health, Happiness and Strength!!
Appendix A

Appendix A (j)

Words for the *somma* for the parents and the *chaokhot loungta*, with English translation by the author.

From: Chanhmmy Sithimanotham (researcher and collector): *Ancient Traditions of Laos, Part I*; Vientiane, 1999

Translation of the soma to the *chaokhot loungta* by the betrothedss

*Sri Sri*, Blessed with the Holy wishes, flowers give out fragrance, [the] Gods are born on this before noon-time,
All of us have gathered together the *dok khantha* and rice crackers, [other] flowers and hand-rolled candles. That are more precious than most flowers, *dok choumpha* open up to send out fragrance all the time; There are *dok am-pham* in the forest, open all over the forest; the winds blow the leaves and make them fall; [We have] decorated the *khanh* and bring them to pay respect to Father, Mother and the *chaokhot loungta*:

Should we have moved around in the wrong way; should we have held ourselves higher than you all to cause you to startle or be afraid and tremble, To cause you to be frightened;
Should we have done some wrong [against you], or should we have answered you back and argue [with you];
Should we have thrown any basket across your face or any container across you;
Should we have unwittingly committed any wrong with our heart or our speech one way or the other,
We beseech you, Esteemed Father, Mother and all the elders, To forgive us all our trespasses and wrong doings;
Do not condemn us to punishment in the *Sansara*
Please give us, your offspring, your blessings with all the good wishes so that we will have a good life, [and bless us] with Longevity, *Vanno*, Happiness and Strength.

ลองไินทั้งหมด ผู้ใหญ่ ผู้ยิ่งใหญ่
You two have come with hand-rolled candles all wrapped up, with rice crackers and flowers; there are kila and prepared betel nuts. You two have prepared a khanh somma, and promoted me to be the elder as if I were [your] parents and Loungta; you two, the betrotheds, are both beautiful and resplendent; [I] wish you unlimited wealth; bagfuls of beautiful clothes.

Both of you are holding the khanh as beautiful as precious stone; May you be rich husband and wife helping each other to build [your wealth];

May you have many elephants, horses, oxen and buffalos; May all your relatives be supported [by you];

May you have plenty of rice so that even you consume or make alms it remains an endless supply;

May you raise your offspring without any mishaps; If you have daughters, may you have plenty; if you have sons, may you have easy time in raising them.

May you have good time spending jewellery as your currency;

If you raise buffalos, may you have them aplenty under your house;

May you be rich as rich as the richest in the land of Phomma and Indra; your wealth may it be stable;

If you do business, may you have elephants, horses and money aplenty – all flow into you;

Both of you, may you have sons and daughters who are more precious than others;
All your belongings come into your possession;
May you have an age that lasts to hundred and thousand of years;
The clever ones come running to help you; the dumb ones come and share with you; those who have not given to you, may they come now;
If you effort is as high as a foot, may your reward be as high as your eyes;
If you effort is as high as your eye, may your reward be as high as your head;
May you be the master sitting on a pile of treasure;
[May you be blessed with] Longevity, Good Health, Happiness and Strength
Appendix A

Invocation for a new baby

from

Department of Literature
Ancient Traditions – Part I – Various Soukhouane Invocations; Second Printing, 1000 copies; Vientiane, 14 July BE 2502 (1958 AD)
Translation

Blessing of great auspiciousness; it is proclaimed that today is most precious day; all the elders are gathered to welcome the khouane of the mother and of the new baby.

Now I will begin with the time when your mother was pregnant with you, You stayed in your mother’s womb for ten months; Then your mother began having pain; so came all the many relatives, The grandparents, they also came to see you. Your mother was in great pain, becoming restless, alternatively sitting down and moving about; Then, with continual pain, she writhed on the floor;

1 កុុម្មិត្រុចសិលធម៌ វិញ្ញាប្រឹស មួយ, បុណ្យឈុតឈុត. (If a boy or a girl, fill in the name here).
As if she was going to die.
Then she delivered the child – a daughter would be born on her back, and a son
would be born face down;
Your mother was still in great pain, still delirious, alternatively reaching for the
umbilical cord and the belly button;
[She] Lifted you up with two hands to wash, put you on a large dong² and take you
outside to tell the wild spirits.
The spirit of the owl, having thus known, called Kook-Koo that was my son.
[Your mother replied] If this was your son, come and take him now; after this day,
he was mine.
[From then on]. She put you in a hammock; and she stayed by the fire³;
Rocking you to and fro; your mother become tired; she took hot water, burning her
mouth; The fire grew stronger; your mother endured a great hardship. Oh my son,
may your khouanes come and stay with you in this expensive hammock. My
young one do not make any trouble, please sleep in this cotton hammock; then she
moved you into the hammock of silk- your parent still loved you. The good one
sleeps in a cotton hammock, and the bad one sleeps in a silk hammock. She then
rocks you to sleep. This is your natural birth father; this is your natural birth
mother.
If your mother’s milk is full, she will feed you; your mother wrapped you in a piece
of cloth. After your mother feeds you, she takes you out to play. She forever lulls
you to sleep. Your father goes to the field and bring back an egg for you. Your
mother also raises silk worm while alternately breast-feeding you. She adores you
every day from evening to morning; she then gives you the name of (1)⁴ a most
precious son of both parents. We therefore have a soukhouane to call the khouanes
of both baby and mother, thus

_Ahi Tata Piyaboutta (for male) [or Amma Piya Thida for female] Retha Mama
Paraming Hathayang me phisan chetha karotha vachamang mama_

² A large flat bamboo basket used for winnowing rice.
³ ḫīu or ḫī, ‘the situation of a woman stying by the fire after childbirth’.
⁴ Insert the name here.
Oh my dear son, apple of your mother’s eye, you with plenty of merit, come and enjoy the pleasure of all your relatives and

Oh come all ye *khouanes*!

When your *khouanes* arrive, may they grow as tall as your uncles and aunts;
May you be happy and prosper; Oh come all ye *khouanes!* *Khouane* of the baby please come running, and *khouanes* of the mother come and unite mother and son;
may you come and put on flowers along side your son and husband.

*Oh come all ye khouanes!*  

Once you arrive, may you be strong as the red rock; be hard as the rock of Mount *Kaylad*; may you be steadfast as the rock of Mount *Meru*; if you are as tall as a stump, do not break; if you are big as a post, do not move; do not lose your lustre like banana leave; do not be sad as the ash; do not be old and lose your complexion; may you have long life until five thousand years.

May you be blessed with a great victory and great auspicious.

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5 Sanskrit: *Kaylasa*  
6 The abode of the Indic gods.
Appendix A

Invocation for the soukhouane – New Regime style.

This is a *soukhouane* invocation used in the new Lao regime, from a handwritten notebook belonging to the late Mr Bouaphet Chanthapanya of Vientiane, no date. The notebook was given to the author by his son, Pakasith Chanthapanya, in Vientiane, January 2000. This invocation appears to be divided into stanzas that can be chosen for different occasions as appropriate. The last stanza is headed “Soukhouane for a person going overseas for study”.

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(ស្គរីវិប អះអាង គំនិត)

ប្រែឈ្លា និងជំនាញ លោកនាង នូវរឿង ប្រសិនបើ រឿងអាចបន្ត់ពី សូរប់ អាគ្នេង លោកជូន ដែលមាន ប្រដាប់ប្រែ និងអំពីការបង្វឹម និងអំពីការចុះបញ្ចូល។

(ស្គរីវិប អះអាង គំនិត)
សម្រាប់ការ មានភាព ការសាកល្រឹះ អនុសីប សម្រាប់ ការស្វែងយល់ អាចធ្វើឲ្យ ស្រស់ និង អស្ចារ្យ ក្នុងឈ្មោះ ព័ត៌មាន មិនមាន អំពីការ អនុសីប សម្រាប់ ការស្វែងយល់ អាចធ្វើឲ្យ ស្រស់ និង អស្ចារ្យ ក្នុងឈ្មោះ ព័ត៌មាន មិនមាន អំពីការ អនុសីប សម្រាប់ ការស្វែងយល់ អាចធ្វើឲ្យ ស្រស់ និង អស្ចា
TRANSLATION

Si Si today is a chaste day, a day of great auspiciousness
Looking around all is beautiful; today is the day when great peril has departed.
Today is the day when Lord Naga practices the sila; Today is the day when Indra sits on his throne and bestows the ten precious blessings on Nang Phousady.
Today is also the day when King Thammikalath assumes the throne amidst symphony of the conch shell, the khene and other instruments that announces the time of great victory. Today is the day when Khoun Lo the Brave became the first ever king of the Lao. He led a brave and strong Lao army that defeated that of Khoun Cheang. Khoun Lo achieved great victory to the acclaim of people in all lands.
Today is said to be the day when King Fa Gnum married Nang Keokanlaya, daughter of the Khmer king who rules over the Kingdom of Nakhon Thom.
Today is the day when Aphilom united;
Today is the day when grandparents teach their grand children;
Today is the day when the head abbot teaches his students all the arts and sciences;
Today is the day when Phra Sabphayataman ascends to the throne, and vanquished all his enemies in the world; in the thick forest.
Today is the day when the Enlightened Buddha preaches to his disciples;
Today is the day when Adam and Eve were born as the first persons on earth and continue to make the earth a joyous place with all flora and fauna;
Today is the day is the beginning of the great system of socialism.
Today is the day of plenty with many men and women; we have come to work together to make this baci happen for the soukhouane for you in accordance with ancient customs; abundant with all things, with flowers budding and in full bloom giving out scent that is pleasing to the heart; there are bananas and sugar cane as
decreed all lining around the new style phakhouane. The large phakhouane sits on a nice rug, we now gather flowers and nice scent to shown our love for each other, As parents love their children; like rice love the rice fields, and fish love water; love [as we love] a pot of gold; love as we love rice in the silo; love as a wife in the bedroom.

We have not let our customs to wane; or our tradition to wither; we are united together as the flowers decorating [this phakhouane] pleasing to the eyes. There are many varieties of sweets placed between the sugar canes. Our hearts are gladdened, full of love, piety and friendship; do not harbour any hatred or bitterness; our hearts are as pure as dripping honey which is also so sweet. The small candle shines brightly like Dharma being propagated. May you always do good and it will lead you to prosperity and progress always.

The cotton threads – all clean and pure- are arranged on the phakhouane, ready to be tied on your wrists. They are like the bloodline from your ancestors to ensure its continuity, to ensure that you don’t escape from our side, or go away forever. They are symbols to remind us of our close relationship. Whenever you are far away, they would remind you to think of us. If you travel our way, they will remind you to drop in and share a meal with us. Moreover, this small bottle of alcoholic drink that is put in the phakhouane is a reminder that you should not drink to excess. If you do, it will cause you a lot of trouble; you will vacillate from left to right when you walk. If you drink over your limit it will not be any good at all; but it may cause problem in that it may cause some quarrels disturbing the neighbours near and far.

Therefore, only a small bottle is put here in the phakhouane so that you would drink in moderation, drink for joy. All other items like the boiled chicken are also our way of reminding you to think of others. The chicken will remind you of the efforts of your parents. You should also raise some chickens as they provide a source of good food, raise the cocks and the hens and get small chicks – all a good source of food when you are hungry, and to help your nation to be self-sufficient and be a land of plenty.

[Soukhouane invocation for a person going overseas for study]
Now is the most auspicious occasion, our offspring will travel far from Laos, far from his aunts and uncles, other relatives and from all familiar places, to study in a foreign land more civilised, land of socialism where there are all sorts of subjects to study; all parts not afraid of enemies; the teachers are all brave, feared throughout the land.

Your merit is plentiful [now] you have the opportunity for education until completing your course and then return home.

May you concentrate on your study; do not only eat and play; you have to decide about your patriotism; know when to fight for victory. Whatever you learn, remember it well; be generous towards your comrades, no matter male or female. Nowadays, we live under socialism, choose to study things that are appropriate and learn them well. Be serious about your study; study till the end of the course and know the subjects well. Learn all the skills and knowledge; study all subjects: mechanics, medicine, nursing you should learn. All machinery and engine, learn them all: electrical, aviation, construction; cooking, agriculture, building, pottery and sculpture; learn about all metals. All these studies are all progressive. Learn about air traffic control, all the arts and sciences. You should strive to succeed; do not worry about pain and hunger; overcome hundred and thousands of obstacles as the Neo Lao Hak Xad had.

Now your aunts and uncles are all assembled to give you a baci and tie your wrists to bestow all the blessings on you:

May be happy and without any sadness; be without any illness and deceases; be without enemies and perils. Be full of happiness and joy; may you arrive safely at your destination, land of plenty, heaven on earth.

Now I will begin the soukhouane for you by calling your khouanes

Oh come ye khouanes!
If your khouanes go and play on the bank of the Mekong, please come back today;
If your khouanes go fishing on the sandbank, please come back today;
If your khouanes go into the sang bush and Lai bush, please come back today;
Or go to the bamboo bush and bush of hong, do come back today;
If your khouanes go to see people weaving basket; or go to play in Done Thao
Done Nang, please come back today;
If your *khouanes* go and watch people work on the ditch and canals, please come back today;
If your *khouanes* are floating in the river as leaves floating in the air, may you all come back today;
Oh come all ye *khouanes*!
Come and stay in the body under the shirt;
Do not flee and fly far away; wherever you travel may your *khouanes* be united with you always; May you be healthy, have good complexion and big muscles; Broad of chest, and bright outlook on life; travel fast and safely; your thinking is always progressive. Now the time is fast for the *soukhouane* for you in accordance with the ancient customs of the Lao so that it will bring more prestige to the nation; so that Laos will have peace, independence, democracy, integrity and socialism; Because you are a child of your father, a child born of Neo Lao Hak Xad; following in the bright and intelligent direction laid down by the Party and the State gladly and joyously. All parties now wish you longevity, do not be old till you reach five thousand years.
May you be blessed by a great victory and great auspiciousness.
Appendix A

Appendix A (m)

Translation of Mr Pheng's Note on Processes of Lao Wedding

One Man's Remembrance

There is a great paucity of written materials on the processes and practices of the Lao traditional wedding ceremony. Materials discussed previously (cf. ‘Introduction’) do not provide any detailed description of the ceremony in any way. Therefore, I consider myself very lucky that one of my informants, Mr Pheng Chanthavilay, had written down what he remembered for me prior to our discussion. He was one of the elderly gentlemen in the Greater Washington DC area who took part in a discussion organized for me by Kayasith.1 As there are many details in his recollection that are interesting, I include here my complete translation of his note.

When a man and a woman are in love and decide to live together as husband and wife, the man would inform his parents of his intention. The first action taken by his parents is to appoint a person – either male or female- to sound out the girl’s family in private (tête-à-tête). This could be done by the boy’s mother herself. At this stage, the whole thing is still being kept secret. When this approach is made, the girl’s parents would ask the other side to come back in three days for their decision.

When the girl’s family agreed to the approach that their offspring should marry, the boy’s family would then ask a an astrologer, a Brahmin, to work out an

1 Mr Pheng Chanthavilay, of 8122 Steadman Street, Alexandria, VA, 22309; interviewed on Tuesday 23 May 2000 at a meeting generously organised by Kayasith Rattanavongkhot, a local businessman and good friend of Somsanith and Kotkham Khamvongsa, at his place (6008 Telegraph Road, Alexandria, VA 22310). There were four other old men, in their early sixties, all practicing mophones. Kayasith confined in me that he was working on establishing an organisation – a club, or an association – to support the mophone to keep their practice alive and to propagate the teaching of their vocation. I am indebted to Kayasith’s support and encouragement for my work as well as his generosity and hospitality during my research trip in the USA.
auspicious day to make an formal approach. Once a day has been chosen, the
boy's family would appoint (ask) an elderly man to make the formal approach.
This person is known as  
the go-between. He is accompanied on this
mission by a young boy – his assistant - who carries with him a
bag containing a Khanhmak. This Khanh-mak is prepared by the boy's
parents. It contains 'a complete complement of a proper Khanh-mak': two pairs of
garlands of sliced areca nuts (complete with the seed and the outer skin), a tobacco
container, lime container, betel leaves, candles, cigarettes (tobacco rolled in
young banana leaves). This is called a khanhmak. Everything therein has to be in
even number, and arranged in a silver bowl. This bowl is then covered with a
white cloth and tied with a piece of white cotton. The bowl thus covered is then put
inside a (shoulder) bag of nice design. The assistant is then to carry this while he
accompanies the go-between. On the appointed hour of the appointed day, that is
nearing the noontime, the two of them would set out towards the house of the girl's
parents. They are not supposed to stop for any reason, even to chat to anyone on
the way.

Once they arrived at the girl's house, at the bottom rung of the main staircase (or
at the front door) the go-between would call out to ask the girl’s parents if the
house has any The girl's would then answer that there is no taboo in the house,
and welcome the go-between and his assistant into the house. Once inside the
house, the go-between and his assistant would sit in a polite way. Once the elders
on the girl’s side are ready (sitting in a row facing the go-between), the go-between
would begin by apologising, then bring out the Khan-mak. He would say that he
has been asked by the parents of Mr. A who is in love with Miss B. The
conversation, conducted mostly in idiomatic and verse form, followed the already
known fact about the young people.

2 Translator's Note: 1. Sometimes, the house is low set on the ground, therefore has no staircase.
3 The main taboo referred to here would be if there was any 'pregnant' lady in the house. The Lao
word for 'pregnant' is  which homophonous with another word derived from the Pali word
meaning 'mara' – thus an obstacle, an impediment.
When the girl’s elders acknowledged the proceedings, they would answer the go-between by thanking him; and that they would be discussing the matter and asked the daughter’s intention. They will provide a firm answer with three to five days, as for now they are not ready because “the parents are still on top of the hill; other elders are still up on a tree” (that is they are still pre-occupied with their daily chores).

After the period of three to five days, and if the girl’s parents accepted the proposal; they would ask someone from their family to inform the boy’s family to come and make the approach again. Again, the boy’s family will find an auspicious day, and inform the girl’s family of the day they intend to make the approach again. On the appointed chosen day, the go-between again makes the same trip on the same mission with the same khanhmak. The conversation would again follow the same format. But, this time the girl’s family would ask the go-between to take back to the following effect. The girl’s parents would say that “If the boy has no complaint (about the girl), still loves the girl and her parents, doesn’t mind supporting her parents and any younger siblings; (or if he doesn’t mind that the girl comes from a poor background – or whatever the family would want to say), then they would explain the details of the khadong and the Heet Phi Khong Sang to the go-between, so that he could explain to the parents of the boy. Once the girl’s elders agreed to the proposal (expressed in the Lao term of agreed to share the seedling of the potato and the sugar cane, to allow their daughter to become a daughter-in-law of the boy’s family), they will then accept the khanhmak from the go-between; open it up to check if every thing is in order. Once they started to chew the nut and the betel, and smoke the cigarettes rolled in young banana leaves, this is the signal that they fully agreed to the proposal.

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4 The Lao expression used here is น้าม ງ່າງຄ້າງ; ຍ່າງ ງ່າງ; which is said in a rhyming fashion

5 Khadong - ຈ່າງຄ້າງ is equivalent to the Western term of ‘the bride price’; and “Heet Phi Khong Sang” – ລາຍໂອງ ວ່າງ ໜ້າໜ້າ refers to the ritual of propitiating to the spirits of the ancestors. See Chapter VII for further discussion of these procedures.
Then, the girl’s family would ask the go-between to take back some gifts to the boy’s family. These gifts consist of: a bag of flour, a bag of uncooked rice, some cigarettes, a bag of eggs. Once the go-between brought back the gifts, the boy is then confident that he would now finally be married.

When the boy’s parent know of this acceptance and details of the Khadong, they would gather around their relatives to discuss the finer details, such as choosing the auspicious day; would the marriage take place this year or the next. To have a marriage, the family must have an auspicious day calculated by an astrologer or a fortune-teller, to work out the future for the two young persons. Once the day has been thus chosen, they would inform the other family of the proposed day for the wedding ceremony.

To do this, the boy’s family would again as the go-between to bring words to the girl’s family as to the date set down for the wedding day. Should there be some impediment to the wedding taking place shortly after the acceptance by the girl’s family (such things as the boy’s family is not ready; the boy is detained by his work or study; he is still serving in the armed force, or is still on business trip; or if there are no suitable auspicious date within the year), the boy’s family would ask for a postponement of the wedding but would ask to have an engagement in place. The engagement is then taken place, only the relatives of the boy and the girl would be present at this engagement. The important thing given by the boy’s family at engagement would be a silver bowl, a gold bracelet and a gold necklace. They would make an agreement to the effect that if the boy changes his mind and married someone else, the girl’s family would keep the engagement and may ask for more as penalty; if the girl married someone else. Her family would have to repay double the engagement as reparation for the boy. This is known in Lao as

The Wedding Ceremony
Seven days before the wedding ceremony itself, the boy’s must go to the girl’s house to help fix up the house, the stairs because on the wedding day, when there are many people, there might be some accidents with the stairs and the veranda. They would also fix up the water containers and the hearth.

The Wedding day: Early on this day, the go-between would lead of group of the boy’s friends and family members to bring the Dong (pickled food) and the ingredients for the Dong (pickle); if it is agreed that a buffalo or a pig will be consumed, the animal must be brought at this time also.

Ingredients for the Dong are: 1. Meun of uncooked rice; Phane of salt; some fire woods; some eggs; sesame seeds, chillies, Mak Kheud – quantity in accordance with their family wealth.

If a buffalo is to be consumed for the wedding, the animal must be killed at a place mid-way between the houses of the boy and the girl. The killing is done by slitting the animal’s throat with a hatchet. When it falls to the ground, the top half is taken to the boy’s family, while the bottom half (ie the side that is on the ground) is taken to the girl’s house; the head to the boy and the tail to the girl). If the animal is male; its genitals are given to the girl’s elders to consume; if they don’t consume the animal’s genitals, they would be fines a sum of 5 bath or 10 bath, depending (on their social status? Or on prior arrangement? – not clear here). If the animal if female, the boy family would have to make reparation by providing either a sum of 5 bath or 10 bath, depending.

Wedding celebration begins from the eve of the wedding day; this is called - Meu Oune Dong. This celebration continued throughout the wedding day up till the arrival of the groom’s procession enters the girl’s house.

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6 This is measuring weight equalling to about twelve kilos.
7 One tenth of Meun; ie. 1.2 kilo
8 See explanation and illustration in Alan Davidson: Fish and Fish Dishes of Laos, Imprimerie Nationale du Laos, Vientiane, February, 1975; p. 109
It is the go-between who leads the groom’s procession up until the time when he hands the groom over to the elders of the girl. To do this, the go-between must make the following traditional payments:

1. លេខំធ្ងាក់ – Khai Pa-sa – opening the cemetary – one bath, five Bi

2. ឈុត្សូ – heet Phi – propitiation to the ancestors’ spirit – One Tamleung, four Bath, two kips

3. សុីនាវីណេ – Kha Khao Kheng heuan – propitiation to the spirit of the house – One Tamleung, two kips

4. ែឈុត្សូពេញព្រេងនាគ – powan’ phumaw – tang Pak Sad Lak Khonesong Mea song louk – payment to the mother and daughter – six bath to the mother and three bath to the daughter

5. រំណាជា – Kheng Mae – payment to the girl’s mother – five bath, 2 Bia

6. ឈុត្សូធ្វើឈុត្សូ – pit pouai khin Dai – (?) – four bath, two Kip

7. ស្រីដក្កក – mad Mak phou khouai – (?) – six Bath, and three Kip

8. សុីនាវីណេ – sai loung ta – payment to the elder relatives – three Bath, one Kip and 5 Bi

9. លីដក្កក – lao Kham – price of the head – Khan song, and two Bia

10. ឈុត្សូ – sin Sou – (?) – for 15 years, each two Bia

These ten payments as listed have to be all there at the beginning of the wedding ceremony. If not, there will be no soukhouane; the boy and girl will be kept waiting until all of the above are given. If not, the groom’s party will be asked to leave the girl’s house immediately.
The wedding ceremony is held at dusk. In the morning, the boy and girl would have their individual soukhouane separately at their own house. Then they will have a joint bigger soukhouane at the wedding.

In accordance with the tradition, before a man and woman live together as man and wife, they must have a joint soukhouane. This is an act to inform the elder relatives of both families that they are now man and wife, and that the latter can be witnesses to the fact. Men and women who live together without a soukhouane are called 'thieving husband and wife'. Those who did not have a proper soukhouane acknowledged by the elders are prone to end up in divorce, more easily than those are did it properly. Men and women who have proper soukhouane in accordance with the tradition of the village, are called 'golden couple', and their marriage is likely to last forever.
## APPENDIX B

List of Videotapes used in this thesis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Names of Groom and Bride (Groom named first)</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Reference in thesis</th>
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<td>Ouday Chanthavong*</td>
<td>Thipphphone Keomoungkhon</td>
<td>Vientiane, Laos</td>
<td>31/01/2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Monireth Sramany</td>
<td>Kongchanh Sourivong</td>
<td>Tennessy, USA</td>
<td>dd/mm/yy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Khampheng Thepphavong*</td>
<td>Sirivone Thavisack</td>
<td>Vientiane, Laos</td>
<td>29/01/2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Souliphone Pholsena*</td>
<td>Tina Siri</td>
<td>Vientiane, Laos</td>
<td>12/02/2000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Selected weddings attended in person by the author (but no video):**

1. **Songyod Phoumirath**  
   Mayoura Phengsi-aroun  
   Sydney, Australia  
   Dec 1984  
   Ch. IV

2. **Khampane Phommachanh**  
   Omethip Phoumirath  
   Sydney, Australia  
   04/10/1989  
   Ch. IV

3. **Hans W Klar**  
   Chanthadary Lili Souvannavong  
   Sydney, Australia  
   11/02/1995  
   Ch. IV

4. **Thepprachanh Silaprany++**  
   Nancy Choi  
   Sydney, Australia  
   04/03/1995  
   Ch. IV

5. **Kittisack Tinh Phoumivong**  
   Onechanh Khamsao  
   Canberra, Australia  
   06/05/1995  
   Ch. IV

6. **Lusa Mathouchanh**  
   Chandara Saignasith  
   Canberra, Australia  
   31/10/1998  
   Ch. IV

7. **Yang Chaleunthong**  
   Soraya Sirimanotham  
   Vientiane, Laos  
   09/01/2000  
   Ch. VI

8. **Anothay Rick Outhensackda**  
   Southida Nok Boupha  
   Vientiane, Laos  
   16/01/2000  
   Ch. VI

9. **Kriangsack Phoumirath**  
   Daravanh Phommachanh  
   Sydney, Australia  
   30/09/2000  
   Ch. IV

10. **Anoudeth Vongpraseuth**  
    Viengsamay Souttavong  
    Vientiane, Laos  
    21/04/2001  
    Ch. VI

* Also attended in person by the author.
** Courtesy of Vanh Prakosay, of Dusseldof, Germany.
++ Nancy and Thepphachanh had two wedding ceremonies: a Lao traditional wedding with the *soukhouane* and dinner at a local club reception hall on March 4, and a Christian church wedding and a dinner reception at a Chinese restaurant on March 11.
## APPENDIX C

**Glossary of Lao Terms used in the thesis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lao word</th>
<th>Transliteration</th>
<th>English Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>วินดอง</td>
<td>kindong</td>
<td>wedding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ปิดิ่นดอง</td>
<td>phithi kindong</td>
<td>wedding ceremony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>สุด_sidial_soukhouane</td>
<td>soukhouane</td>
<td><em>soukhouane</em> ritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>พรี_khouane</td>
<td>khouane</td>
<td>vital essence, 'soul'.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>กะดอง</td>
<td>phakhouane</td>
<td><em>phakhouane</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>กะดอง</td>
<td>dok hak</td>
<td>flower of love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>สมอง</td>
<td>mophone</td>
<td>the man who conducts the ritual of <em>soukhouane</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ลาอี</td>
<td>Laonok</td>
<td>diasporic Lao, Lao who fled the country in 1975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ลาอิน</td>
<td>Laonai</td>
<td>Lao who remained in the homeland after the political upheaval of 1975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ฮีทก้อง</td>
<td>Heetkhong</td>
<td>customs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>พาภิเณ่</td>
<td>Papheny</td>
<td>Tradition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>กษาภิเณ่</td>
<td>Kha Khounphi</td>
<td>payment made by the boy's family to the girl's family as a homage to spirit of the girl's ancestors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>กษาคอง</td>
<td>khadong</td>
<td>dowry, bride price, bridewealth. BUT see Chapter II for definition used in this thesis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>สุดหม่อมกินยี่ยม</td>
<td>suat monh lotnam yen</td>
<td>ritual to cleanse the betrothed with sacral water on the eve of their wedding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ผีส์ผีส์</td>
<td>Pho seu/Mae seu</td>
<td>the go-between (male and female respectively).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ซับซับสมบัติ</td>
<td>Seub seua seub takhoune</td>
<td>the mode of choosing a marrying partner for the purpose of continuation of the family line.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>เลนส่า</td>
<td>lensao</td>
<td>courtship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ปู้จอง</td>
<td>longkhouang</td>
<td>ancient mode of courtship where it is conducted in the evening in the courtyard's of the girl's house while she is doing her chores.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lao Term</td>
<td>English Term</td>
<td>Meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>haiham</td>
<td>ancient mode of courtship</td>
<td>where it is conducted while girls and boys visit a cave.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>khongfak</td>
<td>gift</td>
<td>given by a boy to confirm his affection for the girl.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>paifakngeun</td>
<td>another term</td>
<td>for 'engagement'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>phithi hongha</td>
<td>another term</td>
<td>for 'engagement'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>phithi manhmay</td>
<td>another term</td>
<td>for engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pai khosao</td>
<td>another term</td>
<td>for engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>samthao sikae</td>
<td>elders</td>
<td>of the family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chaokhot loungta</td>
<td>ancestors / elders</td>
<td>(of groom or bride)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>phatok</td>
<td>a large round plateau</td>
<td>raised on a pedestal (see picture in Chapter ??)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>khanhmak</td>
<td>betel nut set</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mit sanak</td>
<td>a cutting implement</td>
<td>a part of the khanhmak, used as ritual object to lead the bride and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>groom to and from the phakhouane.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>makbeng</td>
<td>a conical construction</td>
<td>used as offerings, decoration or the basic shape of a style of phakhouane.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>khad khanang</td>
<td>To negotiate 'the price'</td>
<td>of the bride and the groom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vang</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>khathao</td>
<td>price of mother's milk</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kha namnom mae</td>
<td>an ancient unit of weight</td>
<td>equivalent to about 12 kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meun</td>
<td>an ancient formula</td>
<td>for calculating the compatibility of boy and girl before marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamra Houahieng</td>
<td>an ancient formula</td>
<td>mone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vanhsinh</td>
<td>the day when people observe</td>
<td>the Sila in the war.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maemane</td>
<td>pregnant woman</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meu ounedong</td>
<td>the eve of the day of the</td>
<td>kindong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meu kindong</td>
<td>the day of the kindong</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the day after the kindong
wedding, marriage
marriage
wedding, marriage
wedding, marriage
marriage
groom and bride
young boy and young girl
son in law
daughter in law
Royal 'head band'
Gift given by a boy to his 'girl friend'
Objects for the engagement
Ritual performed by a younger sibling who
marries before his/her older sibling to
'strengthen' the older sibling.
Invitation card
To tie someone's wrist
Cotton thread to tie someone's wrist
Confinement after giving birth
Termination of confinement
Ordination, to become a monk
'soul', 'spirit',
A house where there is a wake
Family elders
(paternal) Grand parents,
**Lao lady’s traditional ‘skirt’**

**A traditional style shawl, for lady’s formal wear**

**Piece of cloth, usually silk, for male formal traditional wear (either for religious occasion or a wedding); like the Khmer ‘sampot’**

**Hair pin with a floral shape at the end (normally worn in formal occasion)**

**Hair pin**

**Sleeveless lady’s blouse, with one bare shoulder**

**Lowland Lao**

**Highland Lao (usually top of mountains)**

**Lao tribes residing on mountain slopes.**

**Chosen by the parents**

**Uncooked Grain of sticky rice**

**A mode of marriage where the groom goes to live with the bride’s family**

**To ‘patch up’ a widow/widower, or a divorced person**

**A term for ‘dowry’**

**Piece of multi-purpose cloth used around the house by men and women**

**Nak belt – ‘rose gold belt’**

**Assistant groom, ‘best man’**

**Another term for ‘best man’**

**Assistant bride, matron of honour**

**Another term for matron of honour**

**Returning the phakhouane to the guest of honour**

**A sort of fish scoop**

**A ritual boiled egg as ‘premier’ gift for the guest of honour**

**A soukhouane usually held for high officials, royalty or monks**

**A term used for mophone**
Mocham - Another term for mophone
Mokhouane - Another term for mophone
Pham - Brahma, a term used in royal court circle for mophone
Bot soukhouane - Sounkhouane invocation
Khieumak - Betel nut chewing
Makkhieu - Areca nut
Phou - Betel pepper leave
Peuak had - Bark of Tarietia javanica Br for chewing
Sisiad - Bark of Pentace Burmanica Kurz for chewing
Hae dong - Groom’s procession
Hae kheui - Another term for groom’s procession
Hae khanhmak - Another term for groom’s procession
Sakdina - Feudal system in the old Kingdom of Laos
Sangkhom peiy-ngeiu - Decaying society, referring to the decadent society of pre-1975 Vientiane.
Song seng - Session of self-criticism that became ‘kangaroo court’
Ok heng ngan - Compulsory contribution of labour for coomunal work by villagers
Pai sammana - Being taken to the re-education camp
Hien khan meuang - Compulsory lessons in political doctrines and documents.
Xad sasna [hramaha Nation, Religion, King and khasat rattha Constitution – the national motto of the Kingdom of Laos
Phak Nampha Lad The Party Leads, the State Protects and the Populace is the owner – the national motto of the new regime.
Mahaxon penhchao - The Doctrine of the Three Revolutions
Sam pativat - Grouping of the 21 Organisations (an umbrella group of the twenty ones political organizations active during the
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