

# The Influence of Indian Culture on The Lao Buddhist Tradition and Culture

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**Abstract**—Buddhism's background in Laos is closely related to Indian culture, religion, and society during the Buddha's lifetime. Since before Laos became a nation-state, Indian culture has had a significant impact on the development of Buddhism and Lao culture. Theravada Buddhism spread through missionary monks, trade routes between Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent, and the Mekong River region, which later became the center of Lao civilization. In the religious dimension, India is the birthplace of Buddhism, where the place of enlightenment, the place of the first sermon, and the place of Nibbana, as well as the doctrines, Vinaya, and Tripitaka scriptures that the Lao people uphold all have their foundations in Indian Buddhist philosophy. Therefore, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) is one of the many countries that received Buddhism indirectly from India and later on became the main religion. Theravada Buddhism brought ritual forms, ordination practices, Paritta chanting, and Samatha-vipassana meditation practices that were obviously inherited from Indian traditions to Laos through Sri Lanka and the Sukhothai Kingdom, which included the Mon and Khmer Kingdom.

The ceremonial practices of the Lao Buddhist tradition are derived from Indian Buddhist-Brahmanical traditions, customs, and cultures, which have been modified to fit into the cultural context of Laos. Furthermore, Buddhist-Indian cosmological concepts like Deva, Peta, heaven, and hell are still frequently depicted in Lao literature, artwork, and temple murals. Buddhism is one of the many religions in this world that has taught a set of various virtues/principles, like other religions, such as peace, the Eightfold Noble Truth, and *Majjhimāpāṭipadā* (middle way), to follow and practice, which lead to a harmonious and non-violent life. "The influence of Indian culture on the Lao Buddhist Tradition and Culture" focuses on the integration of Indian traditions into Lao Buddhist culture and practice in daily life, as well as the literature, Brahmanical tradition, and the similarities between Lao Buddhist culture and Brahmanical tradition practice in Laos.

**Index Terms**—Lao Buddhist tradition, Indian culture, Brahmanical traditions, Theravada Buddhism, Missionary monks, Mekong River, Cosmology, Tripitaka, Vinaya.

Looking back at Lao history, it is surprising to realize that at first, the Lao people did not believe in Buddhism; instead, they held animist beliefs and a Brahmanical tradition. Nowadays, most people in mountainous and ethnic groups in Laos are still following Animist beliefs and Brahmanical tradition. Brahmanical tradition is also spread among all Laotian ethnic groups together with the Buddhist belief. If you're in Laos on holiday or during the Lao New Year Festivals and have a chance to join in the Animist practice belief in the local community, you will see and know clearly about the mixture of Buddhist tradition, Brahmanical tradition, and Animist practice in Laos. And how they performed, and what exact ritual was performed in each region.

They believed that spirits, ghosts, and other supernatural powers lived in hills, mountains, rivers, big trees, villages, houses, etc. The Phi cult is still deeply rooted in the beliefs of the Lao people. There are spirit shrines in almost every home in Laos today, either inside or outside the house. The spirit shrine is a focus point for worshipping the particular Phi of that land. And every morning, householders, families, and devotees have to provide food, water, sweets, flowers, and other offerings in front of the spirit shrine, which they will replace day by day. To give a clear idea of this practice, I will also highlight the concept of the *U-Tid-Suan Boun* (transfer of merits to the ancestor's spirits) or *Kao Pa Dap Din* that is related to the *Pitr Pakṣa* (पितृ पक्ष) ceremony or *Piṇḍa dana*, in the Hindu tradition, along with the practice of worshipping the ghosts, *Mud-Khen*, which is related to the *Raksha Sutra*.

Buddhism in Lao society is a mix of Sāsana-Phi (Animism), Buddhist practice, and Pram (Brahmanical tradition), practiced either at home or at the Buddhist monastery. The position of Brahmanical tradition has been a subject of considerable interest for millennia. There will be many religious beliefs in all societies, especially in the Indian society, where one person may not be a believer or worship only one God; they may worship many Gods. Let's look back to Ancient Indian history, i.e., the Rg Vedic period (1500 BC- 600 BC). The people believe through the form of natural elements or the form which produced by nature, because it is believed that nature gave them life and for the sustenance of the life provided water for the growth the agriculture for surviving day by day, the sun produces heat to keep the body warm, the moon created the light to recover from the darkness in the night and so on. Therefore, this ideology gradually and widely spread throughout the ancient Lao society until the present day, which believes in Phi-Fa-Phi-Thean/Payāthean.<sup>1</sup> Lao society follows Theravāda Buddhism; it is the religion most people in Laos believe in. Theravāda Buddhism in Laos also adopted many beliefs and customs from the Hinduism of the Khmer Empire that remain integral parts of the faith today.<sup>2</sup>

Theravāda Buddhism was introduced into Laos and other countries in the Suvaṇṇabhūmi area during the reign of Aśoka, the great king of India. King Aśoka sent the missionary elder monks, the Venerable Soṇa and Venerable Uttara, one of the night missionaries who knew the Tripitaka well, to the Suvaṇṇabhūmi area<sup>3</sup> after the third Buddhist council.<sup>4</sup> When Buddhism was first introduced into Laos, it was Mahāyāna Buddhism, brought from China. At this

time, no religion was practiced by the Lao people except for native beliefs, i.e., Animism, nature worship, and animal worship, as well as Hindu traditions from Cambodia. During the 7th Century, Tantric Buddhism was also introduced to Laos from the kingdom of Nan-Chao, an ethnically Tai kingdom centered in modern-day Yunnan, China. This form of Buddhism greatly influenced the Lao people for a long period.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Theravāda Buddhism was then reintroduced into Lane Xang in the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE under King Fa Ngum, the great king of the Lane Xang Kingdom, whose wife was a Khmer princess (Ahir, 2001: 88). Since this period, Theravāda Buddhism has been established in the Lane Xang Kingdom until the present day

The Phi cult is an ancestral belief among the Lao people and other peoples of Southeast Asia, especially in the Mekong River region. The Lao people believed in the Phi cult, known as Phi-Fa-Phi-Thaen/ Phraya Thean or Phi/Pii. The cause of the Phi cult was the sacred object they wielded, and they believed their state gods had created the land. At this time, they had no knowledge of religion; thus, they still believed in natural power and the consequences of natural power, such as heavy rain, thunder, lightning, and storm. This natural phenomenon was believed by the ancestral Lao people to be caused by mysterious forces, especially Phi and deities such as Phi-Fa-Phi-Thaen, who inflicted various violent or orchestrated events as punishment for the human world (Khampui: 158-159). For example, the celebrants killed animals such as pigs, goats, cocks, hens, buffaloes, cows, and elephants<sup>6</sup> and presented or sacrificed them to the gods as a form of worship. In this way, they were

<sup>1</sup> According to Lao people belief that *Phi-Fa-Phi-Thean* is one form of God, and this God is very beneficial to the Lao society as well as to the way of ritual practice in which *Phi-Fa-Phi-Thean* can fulfill their desire through the worship and animals sacrifice, and this *Phi-Fa-Phi-Thean* was the state gods who had created the land of the Lao society; likely *Brahma* God, as the Creator God as per the Hinduism.

<sup>2</sup> Kislenko, Arne. *Culture and Customs of Laos*. London: Greenwood Press, 2009, P. 56.

<sup>3</sup> Suvaṇṇabhūmi is still a contradictory area, which doesn't know exactly where it is. But this area is still

a conflict area because many countries, such as Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, and Cambodia, try to claim it and say that it belongs to them.

<sup>4</sup> Vachirapanyo Maha Daosiam. *Buddhism in Laos*. (Bangkok: Medzay Printing, 2555 A.D, P. 31-32

<sup>5</sup> Khampui Phonlueza, Vanpeng Chanthalavong. *LAO-SUEK-SA (A Study of Laos)*: Banking Institute of Lao. P. 163-164.

<sup>6</sup> The elephant was sacrificed for the gods in ancient times, but the elephant is not used anymore as a sacrificial offering. It is now protected in Laos.

worshiping ghosts and spiritual ancestors.<sup>7</sup> Nowadays, these kinds of animal sacrifices are still in existence in Lao society, especially in the Ban Tangbrong Village, Dakjueng District, Sekong Province. In this village, buffaloes are tied to the main pillar in the open air or at the proper ritual place, called Kuan, and a ritual of sacrificing buffaloes to appease ancestral spirits (Phiis), particularly the spirits of the sky and the spirits of the earth, is performed. This ritual practice, passed down from their ancestors for the ancestors' spirit and fulfilled their desire and demand, so that they receive good fortune, prosperous careers, and abundant harvest in the agriculture industry, is still observed today every year in December.<sup>8</sup> These kinds of rituals are still performed in other parts across the country, especially in the rural areas and mountainous areas, particularly in the south and some northern provinces, such as Salavan, Attapue, Pongsali, Xayyabuly, and Paksong Plateau District.

Kan-Lieng-Phi, offering food to the ancestral ghost, is an ancestral ritual practice dating back to ancient times and cannot be separated from the Lao people. There are two kinds of Kan-Lieng-Phi in the Lao tradition: one is the offering of food through the Buddhist tradition, and the other is through the animist tradition. According to Buddhist texts, the realm of the hungry ghosts, or Peta, is a place of pain brought on by unwholesome karma, especially greed, stinginess, and a lack of kindness towards others. An important narrative concerning King Bimbisāra appears in the *Khuddaka Nikāya*, specifically in the *Tirokuḍḍa Sutta*, which describes Petas outside the wall, who wait and hope for the offering items to depend on merit from their living relatives.

The commentary explains that when King Bimbisāra offered food to the Buddha and the Sangha but did not dedicate the merit to his deceased relatives, the Petas, his former relatives, received no benefit whatsoever. Subsequently, when the Buddha advised him to dedicate merit from the almsgiving, those Petas were freed from suffering, received food and clothing, and

experienced improved living conditions. This narrative thus provides an important foundation for the Buddhist concept of dedicating merit to the deceased (Philavong, 2013: 88).

Moreover, this concept of offering and dedicating of merits also clearly reflected in Lao Buddhist traditions, particularly in ancestral spirit feeding ceremonies and the Bun Ho Khao Pa Dap Din festival, during which people prepare food, rice, water, and sweet dishes, placing them on the ground, under trees, or around temple grounds to dedicate to ancestral spirits and spirits without relatives. Therefore, this ritual practice serves as a symbol of merit-making and loving-kindness toward all ancestor beings who suffer in every realm.<sup>9</sup>

Lao People, Thue Phi (Worship ghost) in every part of the country, and the way of Thue Phi is also different in nature of the Phi. Most of the Phi will get the sacrifice foods from those who benefit from them or are sincere to them as an ancestral ghost. They never offer to the evil ghost except for the Petas during the Bun Ho Khao Pa Dap Din festival. One significant example is that Kan-Lieng-Phi is the ritual held in March (the third month of the waxing moon, according to the Lao lunar calendar) and June, called Lieng Phi Pou Ta. At this point, we will talk only about the part of Hadxayfong District. This ritual was held in the Dongponlao village, inside the Ngew-Ngew temple. There is a separate region which have small cottage, decorated with colorful robes and a flower stupa, called Mak Beng, and a plate of candles and other offering items inside that particular cottage, and claim that this is the place of Don Pou Ta. This Phi is the protector and supporter of the rice field and of all people in the village. Lao people believe that if they offer to the Phi Pou Ta, the Phi Pou Ta will return as much, or more, to them in the harvest season. In some areas, they call this protector ghost the Phi Hor Ban. Furthermore, Farming will be productive. Therefore, there is an offering to respect the Phi Pou Ta every year before planting the rice. There is another important

<sup>7</sup> Rasdavong, Maha Khamyad. *The History of Buddhism in Laos*. Laos: Xangkhou printing, 2006, P. 24.

<sup>8</sup> Louanxay Yumdoo "The sacred ritual and tradition way of life of the Ban Tangbrong," Facebook,

December 20, 2025,  
<https://www.facebook.com/Louanxay>.

<sup>9</sup> Philavong Khamphun. *Lao Culture and Ancient Tradition*. Vientiane: Sengsouvanh Press, 2013, P. 88-89.

thing for the medium of the Phi Pou Ta, which is called the Cham Ban (Philavong, 2013: 79). This Cham Ban is the medium between the human world and the ghost world, and also, all the messages will pass through the Cham Ban only, even the good news or bad news, the Pou Ta will deliver to the Cham Ban, and then the Cham Ban will transfer to the people in the village. The Cham Ban may be the senior person in the village and knowledgeable about the ritual practice. The villagers are well aware of this Phi's location. In case somebody in the village did something wrong in the Don Pou Ta, called Phit Phi, that person must prepare the sacrifice items to offer at the Hor Pou Ta; otherwise, an incident will happen to that person. Additionally, for students and merchants who will go to study or do business in another city, they will come to Hor Pou Ta to prepare the offering items and receive the blessing, achieving whatever they wish. These kinds of belief still observed in today's way of living life of the people in Dongponlao village and other places around Hadxayfong District. Moreover, the items used in this ritual practice to pay respects to Phi Pou Ta include: one bottle of white liquor; a small hard-boiled chicken or a full-boiled chicken; mixed soup; flowers; incense; candles; one bottle of water; soft drinks; and a box of sticky rice (Ka Tip Kao). After that

- Bring offerings to Phi Pou Ta's cottage and decorate, then open the lid of water and liquor, open the sticky rice's box, and pour alcohol into each grass or soil.
- Light a candle as well as to invite the ghost to pick up or eat offerings with the help of the Cham Ban. Along with vowing to make his/her field fertile and produce abundantly. This ritual is still prevalent from generation to generation today, including in some parts of Northeast Thailand (Isan).

In human literature, the mother goddess of fertility and rice appears in several myths, stories, and folktales. The ancient Indus community perceived the Divine Female as Mother Goddess or Devi. Goddesses like Gauri, Annapurna Devi, and Earth Mother gave rice to Indians and taught them how to grow it. It was the practice of personifying the beauty and bounty of the

earth as a goddess, prevalent in ancient cultures. In Laos, the Rice Mother Mae Posop is worshiped as rice itself. Like a mother who feeds her children, it is believed that she gives her body and soul to sustain human life.

Approximately in the first century CE, the Tai were influenced by Indian cultures. If we look back for historical evidence, Laos is one of many ethnic groups, which are counted as Tai.<sup>10</sup> The Indian cultures were spread throughout the countries and subcontinent along both road and sea by traders. Traders and merchants helped spread Indian culture and the Hindu religion to other regions, making other areas influenced by Indian culture, especially Southeast Asia and the Southeast Asian peninsulas such as Bali in Indonesia, Angkor in Cambodia, Siam, and Laos, and so on. Another root of Hindu tradition in Laos is from Cambodia itself; the influence of the Shamanism and Parm (Brahmanical tradition) is very popular in Laos. In the present times, either in the urban, remote area, or in the city, and some Khmer Shamanism sculptures, Hindu deities, and Dewata belief are still prevalent in the Buddhist temple or Buddhism shrine event, the Buddhist devotees worship the same Buddhist ritual/traditions.<sup>11</sup> Laos is one of many countries in Southeast Asia that were indirectly influenced by the Hindu religion from the motherland. In Laos, people still practice and follow Buddhism, Hinduism, Brahmanism, Shamanism, and Animism. These religious beliefs were deeply rooted in the daily lives of people in Laos and bound them together.

Many Brahmanical traditions and Shamanism are still practiced in Laos by the ethnic group, and most Laotians in the city hold to this belief. Many places combine art and architectural design that describe four faiths, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Shamanism, and Animism. i.e., Wat Xieng Khuan, or Xieng Khuan Buddha Park, was created by Sharman priest and is located in Xieng Khuan village, around 25 km from Vientiane Capital. This park, namely, Buddha Park, features the architecture and sculptures of humans, gods, animals, and demons. There are numerous Buddha sculptures, characters of Buddhist beliefs like

<sup>10</sup> Viravong Maha Sila. *Laos's chronology from the ancestral time to 1946* (Lao Version) Vientiane: National Library,2001, p. 11-12.

<sup>11</sup> Athyal, Jesudas, M. ed., *Religion in Southeast Asia: An Encyclopedia of Faiths and Cultures*. California: Abc-Clio, 2015, P. 422-425.

Avalokiteśvara, and characters of Hindu lore, including Shiva, Vishnu, and Arjuna.<sup>12</sup>

We can see the Brahmanical tradition in every part of Laos nowadays, either in the Buddhist temple, manuscripts, sculptures, ancient monuments, literature, such as Phra Lak Phra Ram (Ram Ma Kien), which is derived from Ramayana, Vessantara Jataka, and some inscriptions found in the Sanskrit and Pali languages, including Tham Script from the palm leaf; some festival is mixed with the Brahmanical tradition, Phi, and Buddhist. Some scholars also said that Lao culture and tradition are a mix of Pram, Phi, and Buddhism. We can find many similarities between Lao and Hindu culture and art in Laos, especially in the sculpture of Hindu and Buddhist deities at the main gate, wall murals, and temple complexes. The most important and holy place for both traditions, such as the Lao Buddhist and Brahmanical traditions celebrated together, is the Vat Phou in Champasak province, which was built as a sacred site for the ancient Lao people to worship Lord Shiva. And in the 21st century, on the base of the Phou Kao Khouy mountain in Ban Nayang Village, another temple was built, with houses sculpted in the form of Hindu deities such as Lord Shiva, Uma Devi, and Ganesh, as well as other Hindu cultural statues and traditions.

Additionally, another link with Brahmanical tradition, well known in Laos, is Mud Kaen, which involves tying the Fai Pouk Kaen (white thread) on the arms. This rite was influenced by the Indian tradition, which either comes from the Hindu Sadhu, who tied a thread to devotees at the temple for protection and good luck, or from Raksha Bandhan, in which the sister ties a talisman or amulet, called the Rakhi, around the wrists of their brothers. Therefore, this influenced the rite still performed in Laos but with a difference name, called Mud Kaen.

Mud Kaen is similar to the Basi ceremony in the Lao Buddhist-Animist tradition. There are various Mud Kaen, either from Buddhist monks, from the Parm, or from the senior person in the society; all of these are just processes for making one happy through an illusion in one's mind. This process will happen when

one dreams about the bad, one of the family members who has passed away, and all the bad dreams. When one dreams, one will go to the temple and invite the senior monk to tie the Fai Pouk Kaen on the arms, and then the venerable one mutters and blows the Montra on Fai Pouk Kaen for them to take it back home.

Another similarity influenced by Indian culture is Boun Khao Pa Dup Din, or the Dead Festival. To celebrate this festival, People make unique rice-packet offerings to all deceased, whether ancestors or non-ancestors, including Petas, which will be held in the September during the middle of the Buddhist Lent every year.

This ritual practice in Laos is similar to the Hindu tradition; it is called the Pitṛ Pakṣa (पितृ पक्ष) ceremony or Piṇḍa dana, in which the first generation died and the second generation has to perform such a ritual for the ancestor ghost to live a better life and escape from Yama.<sup>13</sup> According to Hinduism, the Piṇḍa dana ceremony is a ceremony practiced for more than a thousand years, which is believed to offer food items or Prasādam to the forefather, who dwells in the ghost or hellish life. This ideal was the same as the practice ritual in Laos, whereas, during this Boun Ho Kao Pa Dup Din Festival, the Yama (King of the world of deaths, i.e., Yamaloka) will open the door of hell, let all the Petas/Pretas come out from the hell to come back to get all the merits from their family members and relatives dedicated to them. If any families did dedicate merits for their ancestors, they would get it; if not, all the Petas/Pretas would not get anything. Therefore, the Lao people influenced this ceremonial ritual not only nowadays, but it started from the ancestral time. It was also mixed with many faiths; this ritual is a mix of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Animism. The influence of Indian culture has played an exceptionally significant role in the formation and development of Buddhist traditions and culture among the Lao people from ancient times to the present. Buddhism spread from the Indian subcontinent into the Mekong River basin, not only bringing the religious ideas, scriptures, language, and rituals but also the Indian culture and ideology, philosophy,

<sup>12</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BuddhāPark>. Accessed on 01/01/2026

<sup>13</sup> Benimadhab, Barua. *Gaya and Bodhā-Gaya: Early history of the holy land*. Calcutta: Indian Research Institute, 1934, P. 91-93.

which blended in well with the Lao people's beliefs, such as the law of karma, the cycle of death and rebirth, and the aim of achieving Nirvana, including the idea of merit-making and Loving-kindness to another beings. Moreover, Buddhist art and architecture, such as stupas, Buddha images, and mural paintings, reflect patterns and belief systems inherited from India through processes of cultural transmission.

Even though Buddhism played a crucial role in the practice of other religions across the country, most people in the country follow Animism, blending it with Hindu and Brahmanical traditions and cults into Lao Buddhism in daily life. Some devotees still follow and practice Brahmanical tradition and Animism, which are rooted in ancient times and, because of these beliefs, are ingrained in their hearts from generation to generation. The Brahmanical tradition's ritual practices still maintain annual festivals throughout the year, such as the twelve traditions and fourteen customs (Hit Sip Song, Kong Sip Si), sculpture of Hindu deities, and wall murals that constitute the distinctive identity of Lao society, which has ancient origins.

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