

The Multifaceted Roles of Lao Monks: Intersections of Buddhism, Occult Practices, and Animistic Beliefs in Lao Society

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Abstract—Buddhism in Laos is a combination of Buddhist, Brahmanical, and animist traditions. The roles and relationships of Lao monks, including beliefs in sacred amulets, occultism, palmistry, and fortune-telling, as well as consecration ceremonies and rituals rooted in traditional animism, are examined in the context of Lao society, past and present.

The article "*The Multifaceted Roles of Lao Monks: Intersections of Buddhism, Occult Practices, and Animistic Beliefs in Lao Society*" uses cultural, religious, and sociological analyses to show that Lao monks are not just religious leaders in Theravada Buddhism. Instead, they are very important as links between Buddhist teachings and old folk beliefs. Beliefs in the occult, such as the use of incantations, sacred tattoos (*Yantra*), and the consecration of amulets, remain popular among the public, reflecting a need for psychological security, protection, and hope in life.

Some monks also read palms and tell fortunes, serving as life coaches and advisors to people who believe in them. This shows that people can believe in both religion and the occult at the same time. At the same time, animistic rituals, such as honoring the spirits of ancestors, the home, and nature, remain very important in Lao life and often accompany Buddhist ceremonies. Thus, monks lead religious ceremonies and participate in folk rituals, showing how Buddhism can fit into Lao society in various ways. Nevertheless, these kinds of relationships usually cause arguments about whether monks should be involved in occult activities, which may go against traditional Buddhist teachings. On the other hand, this relationship shows a socio-cultural reality in which these parts can't be separated. This article highlights the unique characteristics of Lao Buddhism, marked by a multifaceted integration of beliefs and its continual adaptation to ongoing social, cultural, and spiritual changes.

Keywords—Lao Monks, Sacred Amulets, Occultism/Magic, Palmistry, Fortune-telling,

Consecration Ceremonies, Traditional Beliefs/Animism, Theravada Buddhism, Folk Rituals, Yantra (Sacred Tattoos/Designs), Incantations, Ancestral Spirits, Spiritual Beliefs.

Laos' Buddhism is a lively mix of Theravada Buddhism, Brahmanical influences, and native animistic beliefs (Kislenko, 2009: 55). This mix of religions has changed the spirituality of the Lao people and the roles and duties of the Buddhist monastic community. Monks are usually thought of as protectors of Buddhist teachings and moral discipline, but in Lao society, they do much more than that. Theravada Buddhism has long been the main religion in Laos and has had a significant impact on morals, social structures, and cultural practices. But you can't fully understand Lao Buddhism just by reading the canonical texts. Instead, it should be analyzed within the wider framework of indigenous beliefs, especially animism and occult traditions that predated the introduction of Buddhism in the area (Rasdavong, 2006). In this religious landscape, Lao monks play a big role. People have always seen them as protectors of the Dhamma, but they also serve as spiritual guides, healers, and ritual experts. Their participation in rituals like amulet consecration, sacred tattooing (*Yantra*), and divination exemplifies a comprehensive socio-religious amalgamation that defines Lao society (Holt, 2009).

Lao Buddhism, a unique form of Theravada Buddhism, is the basis of Lao ethnic culture. Monks are important to society in Lao Buddhism. They live in temples called *Wat* and assist the devout in their spiritual pursuits. All Laotian communities hold animist beliefs despite Buddhism being the

predominant religion.¹ These beliefs are based on *Phi* (spirits). They delineate the dynamics among the Lao people, the environment, and society. Animism has a long history in ancient Lao culture and predates Buddhism. Spirit houses are created on the grounds of many Lao residences. People worship the spirits by presenting food and other tributes. Elderly males are frequently involved in spirit work. They oversee a variety of customs, including marriages, birth ceremonies, and unofficial gatherings.² Moreover, the coexistence of Buddhist doctrine and animistic practices is not contradictory but rather complementary. As Justin McDaniel notes, local Buddhist traditions often adapt to the needs of lay communities, incorporating ritual practices that may not strictly align with canonical texts but serve important social functions.³

To fully comprehend how Buddhism spread in Laos, you need to understand how it interacted with pre-Buddhist animistic traditions. Prior to the dissemination of Theravada Buddhism, indigenous communities engaged in forms of spirit veneration focused on ancestral and territorial spirits (*Phi*). Even though Buddhism became the most popular religion in Laos, these native beliefs remained strong and were incorporated into Buddhist practice.⁴

Animism is a traditional belief system that came before Buddhism in Laos. Buddhist monks are not directly linked to it. Buddhism and animism both borrow and exchange practices, such as Buddhist monasticism and shamanistic rituals, but the main parts of practice differ. The Buddhist way of life is to follow the Buddha Dhamma, meditate, and find the way to the supreme destination, which is free from the cycle of birth and death, or Nibbana. Animistic practices are still very much a part of Lao culture, especially in rural areas. People often engage in rituals with ancestral spirits, household spirits, and nature gods alongside Buddhist ceremonies (Holt, 2009).

Animism, on the other hand, is the belief that spirits or other supernatural beings inhabit natural phenomena, objects, and ancestral realms. It is based on long-standing local customs and is done by many different ethnic groups in Laos. Animistic beliefs and rituals are frequently linked to quotidian activities, including birth, marriage, agriculture, and healing, and the supreme goal is to be reincarnated in the human world or to be born in heaven by offering to the spirit deity and seeking their blessings. Buddhism in Laos has adapted to local culture and incorporated Animism into its practices. You can see this in the way temples are built, such as the spirit shrines that are part of temple complexes, and the way animistic symbols and rituals are used in Buddhist ceremonies.⁵ Lao animists believe that these spirits can change people's lives for the better or for the worse, and this is why they are superstitious. When you break the animist tradition, you'll hear the term "*Pid Phi*," which means "offense committed to the ghost," more often. If you find the *Cham Ban* and let him take you to the *Hor Pou Ta* for healing by giving to the *Phi cult*, your offense will be erased. If you don't, you or your family members will get sick, or the castles will die for no reason.

There are different kinds of spirits in the Lao animist tradition. There are many types of spirits, such as *Sam Pa Ve Shi* (wandering ghosts), *Phi Ban* (village spirits), *Phi Pa* (forest spirits), *Phi Pu-Ya* (ancestor spirits), and *Phi Ta Heak* (rice spirits). To keep things in balance and avoid bad luck, each kind needs gifts and rituals. Animism teaches that living in harmony with nature is important. People think that sacred natural places like mountains, caves, and trees are home to powerful spirits (Holt, 2009: 164) and that disturbing them without the proper rituals can bring bad luck. For example, before building a house, a ceremony is held to ask the *Mae Tho La Ni* (land spirits) for permission and to make sure the family is safe and happy. People think some things are bad

¹ Rasdavong, Maha Khamyad, *The History of Buddhism in Laos* (Laos: Xangkhout printing, 2006), 22.

² Boike Rehbein, *Globalization, Culture and Society in Laos* (London: Routledge, 2007), 131-132.

³ Justin McDaniel, *Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words: Histories of Buddhist Monastic Education in Laos and Thailand* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 40-41.

⁴ Grant Evans, *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998), 45.

⁵ Khampui Phonlueza and Vanpeng Chanthavong. *LAO-SUEK-SA (A Study of Laos)* (Vientiane: Banking Institute of Lao), 158-159.

luck or the work of upset spirits, so they are not allowed to do them. For instance:

- People don't whistle at night because they think it will summon lost spirits.
- Pregnant women are warned against visiting cemeteries or haunted places, as spirits are thought to be attracted to them.
- People believe that dreams are a way for spirits to speak to them. Some dreams, like seeing a snake, are seen as signs of things to come, like a new romantic relationship or a big change in your life.
- Farmers perform rituals to honor *Phi Ta Heak* (rice spirits) and ensure a good harvest. When to plant or harvest crops is also determined by superstitions, which are often based on lunar cycles or the advice of a shaman.
- Before going on a trip, people give gifts to *Phi Ban* or *Phi Pu-Ya* to ensure a safe trip. Spiritual beliefs say that some days are good or bad for starting a journey.
- People who believe in ghosts often avoid places they think are haunted, such as old houses or graveyards, especially at night. People think that seeing a ghost or disturbing a person's resting place can bring bad luck, illness, or strange things to happen.

Lao Buddhist monks do more than just teach Buddhist teachings. They also serve as spiritual guides to society through a variety of esoteric practices, such as palmistry (*Hatthāsat*), divination, and writing sacred yantras on the palm or other objects. These customs have been closely linked to folk beliefs and occult traditions in Laos from ancient times to the present. In the past, people often thought of monks as protectors of moral authority and secret knowledge. People thought they could read sacred texts and were spiritually disciplined, so they were seen as trustworthy interpreters of fate and destiny. People often used palmistry, which involves reading the lines and features of the hand, to figure out someone's character, karmic disposition, and future prospects. In the same way, fortune-telling methods, from astrological calculations to gut feelings, gave people information about things like marriage, work, and health (Tambiah 1970). People didn't think these practices were against Buddhism; instead, they saw them as useful tools for dealing with everyday problems.

In Lao culture, it is common to ask monks for predictions about the future. It is a tradition passed down through generations and remains relevant and accepted today. In Lao society, monks are very trusted people. People value their predictions more because they are thought to be spiritually pure and connected to the divine. This trust makes the community even more dependent on monks in various aspects of life. Monks are often very important in big life events and community ceremonies. For example, Buddhist monks in Laos engage in fortune-telling for various reasons, such as monks are asked to perform fortune-telling during weddings, house blessings using holy water consecration, and to show an animal image on it for a gambling win, and during the New Year's celebration to ensure events occur at an auspicious time and bring prosperity and good luck to their family members, even though lay devotees come directly to the Wat for asking the senior monks to do the fortune-telling to them. This kind of thing, we can observe in every city across the country, sometimes, in the Wats that dwelt in the forest as well. Sometimes, monks act as intermediaries between the human and the spiritual domains, or as people or deities who no longer exist but did 2000 years ago, and initiate the process of fortune-telling. These kinds of superstition are still prevalent in Southeast Asia, especially in Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia.

People in Laos often call a Buddhist monk and non-Buddhist monks who tell fortunes a "*Mor Doo/Mor Moh*." *Mor Doo* is the name for someone who translates fortune or prediction. "Doo/Moh" means prediction or fortune-telling, and "*Mor*" means specialist. People seeking help and guidance in various parts of their lives hold these monks in high regard and actively seek them out. *Mor Doo* undergoes extensive, rigorous training in the Buddhist Tradition. They read Buddhist texts, learn about philosophy, and practice meditation. They also learn various ways to foretell the future and develop their intuitive skills through years of training and guidance from experienced monks. *Mor Doo* can be found in temples or may set up their own places to practice. People often go to these places for advice. Some develop a reputation for accuracy and insight, attracting more visitors. *Mor Doo* uses a variety of divination methods. These might be:

- Palm Reading: Looking at the lines, shapes, and patterns on a person's palm to learn

more about their personality, past events, and possible future events.

- Tarot Cards: They can use a deck of tarot cards to learn about different parts of a person's life, such as their relationships, job, and personal growth.
- Astrology Charts: Looking at the positions of stars at the time of a person's birth to guess their personality, strengths, weaknesses, and possible future events.
- Meditation and Intuition: Some *Mor Doos* use their *Nung Tang Nai* (deep meditation practice) and intuitive skills to help them make decisions and see the future.

Another important part of this role is writing sacred yantras on the palm (*Serm Doung Lay Mue*) or on physical objects to make amulets and holy items, such as *Pha Yan* (sacred cloth), Buddhist amulets, and talismans. People think that these kinds of inscriptions, which usually include sacred Pali and *Tham* script and liturgical formulae, will protect them from bad luck, bring them more wealth, and make them mentally stronger. These ritual practices, while originating from occult traditions, have been modified and assimilated into Lao Buddhism (Tambiah 1970). Wat Mahaxok Phouangsavan, a well-known temple in Savannakhet Province in southern Laos, Wat Donkhamoa in Dongkalong, Champasak Province, and Wat Bounyalin in Vientiane Capital are examples of this. People often go there to make merit, ask for blessings, and get spiritual advice from the monks who live there. This temple shows how the monastic role as an advisor has continued in both religious and folk belief settings.

Many people in Southeast Asia are familiar with yantra (magical diagrams) and mantra (sacred chants or incantations). One practice related to these ideas is practiced by Lao Buddhist monks, who live in both forest and city monasteries. These elements are rooted in the syncretic nature of Lao Buddhism, in which indigenous animist traditions and Buddhist practices converge seamlessly.

In the past, Lao Buddhist monks were not only responsible for preserving the canonical teachings but also for passing on secret knowledge (*Wicha*), including protective magic and ritual knowledge.

These practices were closely linked to the idea of sacred power (*Saksit*), which means the ability to affect spiritual forces that can't be seen (Tambiah 1970). People believed that yantras, often carved on cloth, metal, or the human body, would protect them, make them more attractive, and help them succeed in business (Bizot 1992). These practices show how religion's symbolic and practical dimensions are intertwined in Lao society.⁶

Moreover, Laos did not follow Buddhism by birth but was influenced by Tantric Buddhism, animist traditions, and Brahmanical traditions, including the use of mantras and yantras. Tantric Buddhism emphasizes rituals, meditation, and the use of holy sounds and symbols to achieve spiritual goals. These practices were adapted to the local situation, blending with existing animist traditions and becoming part of the religious practices of Lao Buddhist monks. The Lao Buddhist monks and the Brahmanical tradition both use Yantra and Mantra as superstitions. These ideas are common in the Lao community. Mantras are holy words or phrases that have spiritual power, while yantras are pictures of shapes or symbols. Lao Buddhist monks use them for many things, such as protection, meditation, and spiritual strength. Yantras are sacred diagrams that represent certain gods, spiritual ideas, or principles. These diagrams usually feature complex geometric shapes, symbols, and Sanskrit, Pāli, and *Tua Tham* Lao writing. People think that yantras have spiritual energy and can help with meditation or keep you safe. Lao Buddhist monks can make yantras out of cloth, paper, metal, gold, or wood. They can be put on altars, carried as amulets, or worn as jewelry. When making yantras, people may chant prayers or mantras to ask for the blessings of the gods or other spiritual beings.

Mantras are sacred words, phrases, or syllables that are said or chanted over and over again to have spiritual and transformative effects. During their daily practice, meditation, rituals, or ceremonies, Lao Buddhist monks may recite mantras. Mantras usually have meanings tied to specific gods, qualities, or goals. People think that repeating mantras helps them focus their minds, clear their thoughts, and develop spiritual traits. Depending on their needs, Lao Buddhist monks may teach specific mantras to their followers for protection, healing, or other reasons.

⁶ François Bizot, *The Reformation of the Buddha* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1992), 54.

Different Lao Buddhist monks may use different mantras. Still, they might include popular mantras like "Na Za Ri Ti, Na Ma Pha Tha, Na Mo Phud Dhay Ya, and Na Ma A U," or mantras linked to certain Bodhisattvas or gods.

Pook Sek/Som Pod, which means "object consecration," is how Lao Buddhist monks make yantras. This includes difficult ceremonies, chanting holy verses, and meditation to fill the diagram with blessings and spiritual energy. People think that consecration gives the yantra its power, which makes it useful for what it was made for. People often use yantras as things to meditate on. When Lao Buddhist monks meditate, they may focus on the yantra's symbols, geometric shapes, or central deities. The yantra's visual representation helps you focus on and become aware of the specific traits it embodies. Yantras are often used as protective charms in Lao Buddhism. People think they protect against bad energy, evil spirits, and things that get in the way. People sometimes write yantras on cloth or metal, wear them as amulets, or keep them in their personal belongings to protect themselves and bring them good luck. The connection between Lao Buddhist monks and yantras and mantras comes from the fact that animist and Tantric ideas have been mixed into Lao Buddhism over time. Monks play a crucial role in their creation and use, serving as spiritual authorities who provide protection, blessings, and guidance to their communities.⁷

Buddhist monks are very respected in Laos as spiritual healers and teachers. They often do things that are thought to be occult, like blessing people, holding rituals to keep evil spirits away, and giving advice based on what they learn from spiritual sources. Many people believe that monks have magical powers derived from strict ascetic practices, meditation, and the wisdom passed down through the ages. These abilities enable them to perform rites that safeguard people and groups from harm.⁸

The widespread use of sacred amulets is one of the most obvious signs of how Buddhism and occult practices have come together in Laos. People think that these things will keep them safe, bring them good luck, and keep bad things from happening. Monks are an important part of making and blessing these amulets, which gives them spiritual legitimacy (Tambiah, 1984). Chanting (*Paritta*), meditation, and calling on protective forces are all common elements of ritual empowerment for amulets. Richard Gombrich says that these practices show the practical side of Theravada Buddhism, in which rituals address the everyday problems of laypeople.⁹ Amulets serve as tangible manifestations of faith and identity. Charles Keyes says that religious objects in Southeast Asia often serve both symbolic and practical purposes, strengthening social and cultural values.¹⁰ The fact that amulets are still popular in Laos shows that people still believe in spiritual protection in a world that is always changing.

Amulets of spiritual power, called *Phra Khueng/Khueng Lang* or *Kong Khang* in the native language, are made by monks. The materials used to make *Khueng Lang* or *Kong Khang* are usually sacred, such as metals, plants, clay, wood, and gemstones. To give them spiritual force, they are frequently made by monks or accomplished craftspeople and dedicated through complex ceremonies that include chanting, prayers, and meditation. Nearly all *Khueng Lang* are made to resemble the head of a Buddha figure or holy person, sometimes in the form of Tattoos on the human body.¹¹ On the opposite side, there is often an essential *Yan* and some *Khom* or *Tua Tham* script. Many *Khueng Lang* in Laos were made to remember a very Venerable monk who sadly passed away. Yet, their pupil desired to make the *Khueng Lang* for their teacher.¹²

Phoudthaphisek "consecration" is said to provide several protective benefits, such as protecting the wearer from harm, bringing good fortune, and warding off evil spirits or negative energies for the

⁷ Athyal, Jesudas M, Ed, *Religion in Southeast Asia: An Encyclopedia of Faiths and Cultures* (California: ABC-Clio, 2015), 820.

⁸ Kislenco Arne, *Culture and Customs of Laos* (London: Greenwood Press, 2009), 62

⁹ Richard Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism: A social history from ancient Benares to modern Colombo* (London: Routledge, 1988), 147.

¹⁰ Charles F. Keyes, *The Golden Peninsula* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1977), 210.

¹¹ Robert Cooper, *CultureShock! A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette: Thailand* (New York: Marshall Cavendish, 2008), 86-88.

¹² Athyal, Jesudas M, Ed, *Religion in Southeast Asia: An Encyclopedia of Faiths and Cultures* (California: ABC-Clio, 2015), 820.

person who hangs and holds it. Every *Khueng Lang* had to do this. People who want the monk's blessing for their effectiveness think very highly of them. The monks' involvement in occult rituals and the creation of amulets show that animistic beliefs have been added to Lao Buddhism. Because of this cooperation, Buddhist teachings can peacefully coexist with regional spiritual traditions. This makes the religion more relevant and easier for community members to access.¹³

Khueng Lang and *Kong Khang* possess a supernatural power that cannot be seen by human eyes. Some *Kong Khang* could not be shot by a gun or other weapons. There are various uses of the "*Khueng Lang*" and "*Kong Khang*." For example, *Khueng Lang* is used to protect against evil and negative energy that may harm the wearer and family members, and to bring good fortune to the wearer. *Khueng Lang* is a small piece, easy to carry, such as hanging around the neck like a pendant or kept in a wallet that has undergone consecration by the venerable monk or *Keji*, such as a Buddha pendant, a magic bullet, or an amulet cloth.

People think they have special powers and traits, and they are often used in rituals and stories. In Laos, occult magic is a central part of the region's folklore and cultural traditions. Stories, myths, and legends often shape the rituals, beliefs, and practices associated with occult magic that have been handed down through the years. These stories are part of the huge tapestry of beliefs and practices in the Lao occult tradition. People who practice the occult may write sacred symbols, scripts, or yantras on talismans and amulets. People think that these engravings make the talisman stronger and allow spiritual energy or protection to flow through it. People who practice the occult may do *Pouk Sek* rituals and spells to bring in money, business success, and financial abundance.

The Lao monks at the intersection of Buddhism, occult practices, and animistic beliefs exemplify the complexity and interrelation of religious systems. These traditions don't work as separate or opposing systems; instead, they work together to show what Lao society is really like. In this case, monks are more than just teachers of religion; they also connect Buddhist teachings with the beliefs of the people who

live there. Using yantras and incantations, blessing holy amulets, and practicing palmistry and fortune-telling are all still very important parts of everyday life. By making people feel safe, providing direction, and offering peace of mind, these activities meet the community's physical and emotional needs.

Monks who do these things are more than just teachers of religion; they are also experts in rituals and give advice. At the same time, animistic traditions, especially those connected to the spirits of ancestors and nature, remain very important in Lao culture. These beliefs are often part of Buddhist practices, and monks may take part in or approve of these ceremonies. This shows a practical view of religion, where keeping social harmony and cultural continuity is more important than anything else.

This study has shown that the consecration of sacred amulets, the use of yantras and incantations, and the practices of palmistry and fortune-telling are integral to Lao culture. These practices help everyday people by giving them protection, emotional support, and useful advice. When people aren't sure of themselves or their society, rituals like these can make them feel safe and hopeful. Buddhism can endure in a world that is always changing because Lao monks can adapt to it. Religious practices must change as Lao society becomes more modern and globalized to remain relevant. Buddhism is still important in everyday life because monks are willing to help with both old and new needs. This flexibility not only helps people maintain their cultural identity but also strengthens the bonds between religious groups and the people they serve.

In short, Lao monks do a lot more than just lead religious services. Their participation in occult practices and animistic rituals indicates a broader and more inclusive understanding of religion, one that appreciates diversity, flexibility, and pragmatic relevance. In the final stages, the many roles of Lao monks show how religion, culture, and society in Laos work together in complex ways. Lao Buddhism continues to evolve to meet the spiritual and social needs of its followers in a world that is always changing. It does this by combining traditional teachings with local customs. Their participation in sacred amulets, occult practices, palmistry, and

¹³ Terwiel, Barend Jan, *MONKS AND MAGIC: Revisiting a Classic Study of Religious Ceremonies in*

Thailand (United Kingdom: Marston Digital, 2012), 69-72.

animistic rituals exemplifies the lived experience of religion in Laos. Even though people are still arguing about whether these roles are right, they show how adaptable and strong Buddhist practice is in a world that is always changing.

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