

The roots of Lao New Year customs

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The longstanding Lao New Year traditions performed by our forefathers many years ago are still alive today and we in turn perpetuate these rituals each year.

Former Head of the Culture Research Institute, Mr Houmphanh Rattanavong, said the Pi Mai celebrations largely remain unchanged, but many people don't know the history behind this special occasion.

Mr Houmphanh, who has studied various aspects of Lao culture including the history of Pi Mai Lao, said "Pi Mai is a great festival of the Buddhist religion. Buddhists flock to temples to earn merit through various activities. The most significant activities of Pi Mai take place in temples."

With the arrival of Pi Mai each year, Buddhists visit temples to pour water over Buddha images and the faithful spend more time than normal at temples as they are eager to take part in time-honoured rituals.

Mr Houmphanh said the activities associated with Pi Mai have their roots in Brahmanism, with which Buddhism forged a link many centuries ago.

"If we look deeply into our history, we can see differences between Brahmanism and Buddhism. We hold *baci* ceremonies to wish everyone happiness at Pi Mai, but actually this has its origins in Brahmanism. The *baci* is reminiscent of both Brahmanism and animism," he said.

Pi Mai has close associations with certain activities and the month of April. Mr Houmphanh said people often ask why our ancestors chose this month to celebrate Pi Mai over any other month of the year.

"Based on the longheld beliefs of our forefathers, in the Brahmanism religion it was believed that the time from January to the first day of Pi Mai in April is a dark, or bad, period of the year. In Buddhism, the last day of Pi Mai is seen as a bright or prosperous period, so our ancestors chose April as the month of the New Year," he



People flock to temples to pour water on Buddha images at Pi Mai. (File Photo)

said.

On this occasion, Buddhists happily flock to temples and give offerings, hoping to dispel misfortune with the passing of the old year, which is viewed as being dark.

Some people recognise that they behaved badly in the past year and now wish to regain the respect of others, including their parents, as the year comes to an end. When they visit a temple, they wish for all the undesirable aspects of their life and character to disappear, and for better things to come in the new year.

On the last day of Pi Mai, Buddhists hold *baci* ceremonies in their homes and visit their parents, other relatives, friends and people whom they respect. They honour them and wish them happiness, good health and prosperity at Pi Mai, hoping this will dispel all the darkness of the old year.

Attending a *baci* ceremony with monks in a temple to bring good fortune into one's life is another Pi Mai tradition. Others include building stupas made out of sand on the riverbanks, and releasing caged animals.

Our forefathers did these things too, on the first and second days of Pi Mai. They also cut their hair and nails and



Elderly people pay their respects to one another at a temple.

used water that had been poured over Buddha images to pour over their own heads. They also collected the water used in *baci* ceremonies attended by temple monks to bathe in.

Mr Houmphanh said that even today the present generation continues these customs. In days gone by people would smear soot on a person's face to indicate they had some deficiency or that their behaviour was inappropriate in spirit and word.

"Everyone has the right to put soot on a person's face, including well-respected people. People who got soot on their

face knew without doubt they had caused offence."

He said that even now people in some parts of Laos put soot on the faces of their friends, and it is accepted.

It is good to remind ourselves of the stories behind the Pi Mai Lao celebrations, and it is hoped Mr Houmphanh's words will inspire the younger generation to look more deeply in our old customs.

In fact, Theravada Buddhism is dominant in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand and Buddhists here also celebrate the new year in April.