

Hans Georg Berger

## Het Bun Dai Bun

### Art project, meritorious deed, meditative exercise

Within the context of the cultures of Southeast Asia, Laos has developed its own characteristic forms and contents; Lao art has its own distinctive qualities, the literature of Laos, Lao Buddhism, the rituals and ceremonies in Laos, are all different from those of the neighbouring countries. Until now this distinctiveness has hardly been heeded in the West; we know little about the country at the heart of the Southeast Asian peninsula, a country about the size of Great Britain with some five million inhabitants. For decades Laos experienced war, civil war and isolation. Like Vietnam and Cambodia, it was the theatre of colonial conflict which not only lasted for generations and devastated the country's political and social order, but also turned out to be one of the most brutal conflicts of the twentieth Century. Despite this, the country has managed to preserve much of the strength of its culture and the core of its civilisation. It sustains its cultural heritage in the rituals of Luang Prabang, a heritage whose beauty instantly touches and speaks to our senses.

My photography project was conceived and completed together with many people from the city of Luang Prabang. In the early months the monks were the first to take an interest and participate in the project and its aims, but they were soon joined by an increasing number of lay people. We agreed not only to record and document the city's rituals, ceremonies and festivals, thus trying to preserve them for posterity; it was also important to us to support and encourage all those who still continue to celebrate these rituals to this day, as it was clear to us that they would be subject to profound changes in the near future. We agreed that our mutual project would have three stages: first, contemplation of the contents and the approach (which rituals are important to us; where should the camera be placed?); then the photographs themselves (each positioning of the camera was individually discussed); and finally, the assessment and joint selection of the photographs (mounting an exhibition of the photographs in the city's monasteries was part of this project). My authorship of this work is simply a part of this whole. The point of the project was not to fix my personal images of the ceremonies in Luang Prabang in the shape of photographs. On the contrary, my intention was to be involved in the creative, communal production process of a work.

Photography is an artistic medium well suited to comprehending complex cultural relationships and social practices. The constraint of having to continually concentrate on the extract of reality framed by the camera gives rise to very concrete questions about the necessity, the meaning and function of each individual object that will later be visible on the prints. Step by step, the gathering of the pictures leads into the realm of the objects; the eye and the camera are transformed into a teacher who selects the study material. But photography can also promote and organise the participation of many in a mutual, creative project. To put it in western terms, in Luang Prabang we experimented with photography as a process of perception and production, a process that searches for symbolic relationships and which finally culminates in a 'report'. But we also took one further, more decisive step. Through our reflections on the rituals of the city, something new developed in a mutually experienced process - and this could well be the most important aspect of the whole project. It is as if we had been using different layers of tracing paper, each bearing a representation of the same object, and then laid one on top of the other to produce a new, startling image. On the other hand, the people of the city defined and named our project in their own surprising terms. From a Lao point of view we had organised a great *bun* together: a festival, a worthy deed, a great pleasure, a present, something that has a reciprocal effect on all those who participated in its making. And, as the project progressed, photographing the festivals and ceremonies actually developed into a new ritual for Luang Prabang. It was only logical that the exhibition we presented in nine different monasteries and other sacred places in the city at the end of the project, was opened with a series of diverse ceremonies lasting ten days.

Many of my photographs depict people looking into a camera for the first time in their lives. During the project they came closer to and experienced the medium of photography. But photography in general has been present in the life of Luang Prabang for a long time. Although quite isolated from the western world, the royal court of Luang Prabang employed photographers at the beginning of the twentieth Century and collected their pictures. The spiritual elite in the monasteries also looks back on decades of experience with photography. Portraits were taken of eminent abbots from Luang Prabang at least once in their lives. During certain ceremonies (especially the ordination of monks), commemorative photographs were also taken. A number of monks have systematically collected such pictures and preserved them; they were the first people I spoke to when I began my project in 1994. Without their understanding (and their agreement) I would never have been able to carry out my work. They introduced me to the Buddhist perception of pictures, including photographs, which sees in them the reflection of the religious strength and spiritual progress attained by the person portrayed. The wisdom of the portrayed monk radiates back to whoever contemplates such a photograph. In this way the preservation and contemplation of

photographs becomes a spiritually healing, meditative exercise. As a result a photograph, like any other sacred image or sculpture, may play a supportive role in every Buddhist's progress along the inner path: therein lies its value. This understanding derives from the *darshan*, the age-old Indian teaching of the power of pictures and visual perception, a classical philosophical system that has remained alive in Buddhism and Hinduism throughout the centuries.

The rites of Luang Prabang create complex relations with the Sacred and generate possibilities of access to salvation for those taking part. This applies equally to Buddhist, Brahmanic and animistic rites. They are always symbolic acts which mean more than is visible at first sight. Their symbolism can only be really understood in the cultural context, in the general view of what constitutes reality, and in the belief of the individual and the group. Each symbol does not simply mean, it is: the water at the New Year ritual really does cleanse, yet its purifying qualities mean more than cleansing; the chicken meat that the mother of the newborn baby eats during the *su-khuan* rite is really being shared with the gods Indra and Brahma, to whom the chicken has been dedicated.

Everything that happens during the ritual has to be beautiful and right so that it can be effective; ceremonies that are not beautiful have no effect, no matter how lavish they may be. To the learned Buddhists, the rites and ceremonies of Luang Prabang, which they celebrate with such dignity, are never more than a reflection of what the Enlightened One has taught them to do. They accompany only very indirectly a person's true way to insight and enlightenment. But they are useful because they strengthen religious feeling and help to fulfil the desire for beauty in the world.

*Het bun dai bun* is the title the people of Luang Prabang gave to our mutual photography project as work progressed. It is a Lao proverb that explains the reward of deeds: whoever does good, the beautiful or the right, will receive the same as a gift in return. The rituals, festivals and ceremonies of Luang Prabang are a contribution to peaceful coexistence and, in the final instance, to the happiness of the city.

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