

Cultural News

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History of Lao New Year

The Lao people celebrate their New Year, Pii May (pronounced Pii-My) or Kut Songkaan according to the ancient Hindu calendar, which falls around April 13, 14, or 15 in the Gregorian calendar. The celebration is considered to be the most important and biggest traditional festival in the country. The festival coincides with the end of the dry season and the start of the monsoon season. It is seen as a day of rebirth and purification.

According to a Lao legend, the Pii May celebration started after Thao Kabinlaphrom lost his life in a bet to a man named Thammaban Khuman. Thao Kabinlaphrom was not able to solve a three-part riddle. Per his request, his seven daughters (representing each day of the week) took great care not to let his severed head touch the ground or there would be great destruction throughout the world. The head was kept at Mt. Sumeru until Pii May of each year when each daughter would take turns cleansing it. Today, this story is reenacted during the Lao New Year celebration. The community chooses one female to represent Nang Sangkhan one of the seven sisters, to lead a procession or parade while showcasing a replica of Thao Kabinlaphrom on a ceremonial tray called Khan.

Pii May Lao is a three day event. The first day is called Sangkhan Luang or the last day of the old year. This is the day when people clean their houses in preparation for the New Year. On this day, people earn merit and blessings by building mounds of sand, usually on the river banks and temple grounds, which are then decorated with small triangular flags, flowers, money and candles. This day falls on Sunday April 13th in 2014.

The second day is called Sangkhan Nao, which is the day between the old and the New Year (This day is considered neither to be part of the old year or the New Year).

Sangkhan Nao is also known as the day of rest, which means all work is forbidden. Only fun activities should take place such as visiting relatives and friends, taking a day trip or the customary throwing of water on friends and passersby. At night time, there is usually a Lamvong or circle dancing party and everyone dresses their best to partake in the celebration. Plenty of food and drinks are available well into the night. This year, Sangkhan Nao is only one day long and falls on Monday, April 14th.

The third day of the Lao New Year is called Sangkhan Kheun Pii May. It is the start of the New Year and is the most joyous day of the festival. People go to the temple and make offerings to gain merit. Young people prepare scented water with flowers and visit their grandparents, parents, and elders. They rinse the elders' hands with the water and ask for their blessings and forgiveness for any wrongdoings in the past year. At home they engage in a special family ceremony called the Suukhwan or Baci to welcome the New Year in which participants then take turns tying the blessed white strings around each other's wrists to wish them good luck and prosperity for the New Year. For 2014, the Lao New Year day falls on Tuesday, April 15th..

Written by Vinya Sysamouth, Ph.D.



APRIL 2015 CALENDAR

NATIONAL MINORITY HEALTH MONTH

CELEBRATE DIVERSITY MONTH

WORKPLACE CONFLICT AWARENESS MONTH

ARAB AMERICAN HERITAGE MONTH

- 1-7 - Laugh at Work Week
- 3 - Mahavir Jayanti (Jain)
- 4 - Therevadin New Year (Buddhist)
- 5 - Easter (Western Christian)
- 8 - Buddah Day (Historical Birth Date)
- 10 - Holy Friday (Orthodox Christian)
- 12 - Global Day to End Child Sexual Abuse
- 13 - 17- American Indian Awareness Week (US)
- 14 - Baisakhi - New Year (Sikh)
- 14-15 - Lao/Thai/Cambodian New Year (Buddhist)
- 15 - Lord's Evening Meal (Jehovah's Witness Christian)
- 16 - Yom HaShoah (Jewish)
- 17-19 - Global Youth Service Days
- 19-25 - Animal Cruelty/Human Violence Awareness (US)
- 21 - First Day of Ridvan (Baha'i)
- 24 - Yom Ha'Atzmaut (Jewish)
- 25 - World Tai Chi & Qigong Day
- 26-05/02 - Air Quality Awareness Week



THERE IS NO AN APP FOR THAT!

It seems that there is an app for just about everything these days. One that can help me find a parking spot and another to tell me how many calories I burn. There are translation apps for just about every language. Recently, I was in the Emergency Room with a young woman who was highly traumatized and needed immediate psychiatric treatment. She was a Spanish speaker and had no English comprehension or verbal skills. As I sat there with her lying in my arms, I wished that I could talk with her. I wanted to tell her that I would stay with her, she would be safe and we would make sure she was taken care of.

When the doctor arrived in the exam room, I was sure that he would call an interpreter, so she could understand him and share her feelings. From my experience, when an interpreter arrives, the traumatized individual feels a sense of relief because they can begin to communicate their needs. The loneliness and isolation lifts.

What the doctor did next was unexpected – he took out his cell phone and logged into a translation app. He had preprogrammed questions that he would play and wait for the patient's yes or no responses. Sometimes she would understand the question and sometimes she would look at the doctor with confusion. All I could think of was that whenever I translated Spanish into English on some translation apps, I would find near-gibberish. Obviously, she was having the same experience.

The doctor ended up releasing the patient because she answered all of the yes/no questions. She was not able to express herself, and the doctor was not able to ask her open-ended questions, which might have revealed more of her distress.

One week after we sat in the ER, we were back at another ER, this time because she'd tried to harm herself. I often wonder if there had been a professional interpreter who had been able to give voice to this young woman's trauma, that interpreter would have made a difference in our first ER visit. I guess we will never know the answer to that question. What I do know is that an app on a cell phone cannot give voice to the inner pain, the struggle and the despair that many of my clients go through. For that – only a professional interpreter will do!

Story by Molly Corbett, a board member of VOL and the Executive Director of Asylee Women Enterprise (AWE).

<http://voice-of-love.org/there-is-not-an-app-for-that/>

New Interpreter Profile: Faith Fogel

Faith grew up in the Northeast. She attended the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston for her undergrad studies, and then spent many years in Maine. She began learning Spanish through intensive study and volunteer work in Guatemala. After that, she began doing bilingual social service work at the Preble Street Resource Center, a shelter for the homeless and low income individuals in Portland, Maine. After moving to California about 8 years ago, she pursued a Master's degree in Spanish and French at the California State University, Sacramento, spending one year of the program in Valladolid, Spain. Locally, she has worked for La Familia Counseling Center and for the Outdoor Youth Connection program, a partnership between SFSU & the State of California.

In her spare time Faith loves to travel, having an extraordinary network of community and friends all over the world. She loves to dance, hike, travel, cook, work in the garden, and be with friends & family.

Something we may not know about Faith: in her own words, "Being left-handed, when everyone else instinctively turns one way, I'm naturally inclined to turn the opposite way. Don't worry, I'm figuring out the layout of the hospital bit by bit".

We asked Faith her thoughts about joining the Medical Interpreting Services team. Faith said, "Wonderful! Thank you for the opportunity. It feels like the culmination of many years of hard work, and a lifelong love of having very direct, meaningful interactions with people from all walks of life. At the same time, it feels like a doorway into a whole new world with a lot of possibilities and room for growth. I have tremendous admiration for the hardworking and dedicated staff on this team. Thanks to everyone for all the help and training you've provided in recent weeks". Welcome aboard, Faith! We are happy you joined our team.

