



Soo Kwan

calling the spirits that inhabit the human body

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Before the 14th century, the Lao people were Animists. They believed in spirits (Phee). It wasn't until King Fa Ngoum united the Kingdom of Lan Xang (the Kingdom of a Million Elephants) that his wife, Queen Keo Keng Ya, the daughter of the King of Angkor and a devout Buddhist, introduced Theravada Buddhism by bringing respected monks and the statue of Pha Bang, a beautiful gold Buddha image cast in Sri Lanka. Though Laos has now become a Buddhist country, the belief in spirits still runs deep throughout the country, even among the Buddhists.

One of the beliefs that run in parallel with Buddhism is a belief in the existence of Kwan, the spirits that inhabit the main parts of the human body. There is no widely accepted figure on exactly how many Kwan there are, although thirty-two is a minimum recognised by the Lao and Tai Lue. Other ethnic groups like Tai Dam (Black Tai) and Tai Daeng (Red Tai) put the figure as high as ninety.

Every section of the human body has its own Kwan. There are Kwan of the head, of the hair, of the eyes, of the ears, the mouth, nose, teeth and bones, of each finger, the hands, of a woman's womb and even the eyebrows. All Kwan each have their own vital strength. They give life and vigour to the part of the body in which they live and protect. They are responsible for the spiritual and physical strength of the person whose body they inhabit.

Kwan are believed to be volatile and can leave their part of the body under a range of circumstances, mainly during periods of major changes in the person's life: illness, an accident, a long journey, a change of social position. All are transitional phases within the course of the person's life. Whether they are natural, social, intentional or accidental, they represent a shift from one state to another. When one or more Kwan leave the body, you are no longer completely yourself. You have lost your equilibrium, exposing you to any number of bad omens. It is then necessary to call for the return of your Kwan. Once they are back in their respective part of the body, you will regain your own self again. You will enjoy good health, happiness, prosperity, success and most importantly, peace of mind.



In order to facilitate the return of a Kwan, a Bacl or Soo Kwan ceremony must be carried out. This is a Brahmanist and Animist rite not officially recognised by Buddhism, therefore Buddhist monks are not involved. In Laos however, it is often the case that elements of Buddhism, Brahmanism and Animism are present at the same ceremony. This form of ecumenicalism (the application of multiple religious beliefs and practices) exists in many Lao ceremonies and is readily accepted across Lao society. Soo Khan is a very important to Lao people. It is organised at all levels: within the family, in businesses and at state level to welcome official guests. Within a more official setting it is usually known as a Bacl.