



## Kout Songkarn 2562: The Lao New Year Tradition

On behalf of the Lao Community of San Diego, we would like to welcome you to the “Kout Songkarn 2562,” a celebration of the 2562 Lao New Year.

As we begin the new year of 2019, we believe it is appropriate to reflect upon our rich cultural tradition that begins with Kout Songkarn, a celebration of an ending of the past year and a beginning of a new year. Kout Songkarn occurs when “Rasimin” is ending and “Rasimet” is beginning, between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> day on the fifth month of each Lunar year. It coincides with the end of the dry season and the beginning of the monsoon season. It is seen as a day of rebirth and rejuvenation.

According to a Lao legend, Kout Songkarn began in a peaceful and harmonious village where there lived a wealthy couple who had everything a man could wish for, except a child. One day the couple decided to ask for help from the guardian angel, Tayvabood, who took their message to the God Pra In, with a personal request that the couple be granted a child. In response to the couple’s plea Pra Inn sent his own son, Tape Pra Bout, to be born to the couple. The couple named their child Thammaban, who possessed knowledge superior to all humans.

As a grown man, Thammaban faced many challenges and adversities, but none more difficult than the life and death challenge of Kabinlaphom’s three-part riddle. Thammaban had received special training and education, which allowed him to know and do everything. Thammaban could answer any question when asked. He was clever and knowledgeable. Thammaban was a great teacher and conducted many ceremonies for the people. Hearing about the extraordinary reputation of Thammaban, Kabinlaphom who was a deity and lived at the highest level of Heaven, came down to the world to test Thammaban’s knowledge and wisdom. Kabinlaphom challenged Thammaban to solve a riddle within seven days, with a condition that if he cannot solve the riddle, his head would be cut off. On the other hand, if he could solve it, Kabinlaphom would cut off his own head. Thammaban accepted the challenge. The riddle consisted of three questions: 1) where is the virtue of a person in the morning?, 2) where is the virtue of a person at noon?, 3) where is the virtue of a person in the evening?. For five days Thammaban struggled and couldn’t find even one answer to the questions. He was mentally and physically exhausted in his quest for answers. On the sixth day decided to take a rest under a big tree in the forest. As he closed his eyes, he heard a couple of eagles high on the tree discussing the contest between Kabinlaphom and Thammaban. The husband eagle told his wife that Thammaban would lose the bet for sure, because the questions were very hard and no one in this world knew the answers except himself and Kabinlaphom. The wife eagle became curious and begged her husband to disclose the answers. Without any hesitation, the husband explained them to his wife. Thammaban, who understood the bird’s language, now had the answers and went home happily. On the seventh day, Thammaban and Kabinlaphom came face-to-face and Kabinlaphom demanded for the answers. Thammaban answered with confidence, “In the morning, the person’s virtue is on the face, because when a person wakes up he or she washes his/her face.” At noon, the virtue of a person is on the chest and the body, because he/she puts water on the chest and takes a bath. In the evening, the virtue of a person is on the feet, because he/she washes his/her feet before going to bed.” Kabinlaphom was stunned, but he gracefully accepted his defeat by agreeing to cut off his own head. Because Kabinlaphom’s head was so holy that if it dropped onto the ground, it would cause fire and burn down the world; if his head is thrown into the air, it would dry up the air, and people would not be able to breathe; if it fell into the ocean, the ocean would dry up. Therefore, before cutting off his head, he asked his seven daughters to gather around to tell them of his fate and ask them to follow his instructions to prevent the catastrophe. “My daughters,” he stated, “After I cut off my head, one of you has to take turns to bathe my head with holy and perfumed water and parade it around Mount Sumeru each year.” Kabinlaphom then cut off his own head and the seven princesses

followed his instructions to avoid the monumental catastrophe to human lives every year. This is the birth of the Lao New Year celebration and the parade of NangSangkhan, the seven daughters of Kinlaphom.

Throughout the millennia the legend of Thao Kabinlaphom continues to be reenacted during the Lao New Year celebration. The community chooses one young female to represent one of the seven daughters as Nang Sungkhan, to cleanse their father's head and lead a procession by holding a replica of the head in a ceremonial tray called "Khun."



Kout Songkarn culminates in a three-day celebration, which begins with Songkarn Luang, then Songkarn Nao, and ends with Songkarn Keun.

Songkarn Luang is a day for all Buddhists to gather during an afternoon to perform an invitational ritual for the Buddha to enshrine his holiness within statuettes of his likeness in each of our homes and temples. Each Buddha statuette must be cleaned before being bathed with floral laden and scented water, just as Nang Sungkhan's cares for Thao Kabinlaphom. The purpose of such ritual is to welcome the rain to replenish

streams, wells, rivers, and falls to sustain the life for all Lao, and to wish everyone peace and prosperity.

Songkarn Nao is a day of rest, reflection and appreciation of our loved ones, including our ancestors, father, mother, husband, wife, children and grandchildren. Almsgiving or donations are made in their honor within one's home. It is customary that everyone engages in fun activities such as visiting relatives and friends, and throwing water on one another in cleansing of one's soul. The festivities continue into the night with feasting and dancing.

Songkarn Keun is the beginning of the New Year, where everyone gathers at the Buddhist Temple for almsgiving or donations made in honor of our loved ones, and to earn merits and blessing for our hereafter lives. A sand stupa or spiritual monument is created to symbolize a path to enlightened mind or universal divinity. Buddhist Statuettes, Buddhist Monks, elders, friends and family are showered with floral laden and scented water to wash away all bad deeds and disease and to make room for all things good.

Songkarn Keun concludes with a Baci or Suekhuan ceremony where "Morphon" or a ceremonial leader calls upon our wandering "Khuan" or soul, to return to its rightful body. Morphon and the well-wishers use Fai Phouk Khaen, or a ceremonial string, to tie on the wrist to secure the soul. Captive animals are rescued and released symbolizing our eternal quest for freedom and as an act of kindness and absolution for our mistreatment of animals throughout the year. And finally, the Buddha statuettes are returned to Hor Pra or the Buddha altar.

We hope the legend of Kabinlaphom helps you understand the significance of our three-day Kout Songkarn or Lao New Year tradition.

May You and Your Family Find Peace, Happiness,  
Good Health and Prosperity throughout the New Year.