



# Pha Tad Ke Botanical Garden

Newsletter Nr. 7 - July 2012

**PHA TAD KE - THE CLIFF TO UNTIE AND RESOLVE**  
Newsletter number 7, the magical number, honours the banana tree, the Fruit of Paradise. Under its good sign admire the work of our staff who have transported over 400 trees from Chiang Mai to Luang Prabang. Our Botanists who have just returned from Singapore have made remarkable photos and our chroniclers show that art and gardens are a great match.  
**RIK GADELLA, PHA TAD KE BOTANICAL GARDEN**

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*The Pha Tad Ke Newsletter is distributed 3 times a year via e-mail.*

*Big thanks to our volunteer collaborators, and if anyone is interested to writing articles or help us with occasional translations please let us know.*

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*Zingiberaceae Hedychium coccineum*



*Zingiberaceae Zingiber sp 'Khin Pa'*

## Friends of Pha Tad Ke Botanical Garden

In January 2010 the Friends of Pha Tad Ke Association was created in France followed in July 2011 in the Netherlands and September 2011 in Laos. Each of these non-profit associations helps the creation of the Pha Tad Ke Botanical Garden with scientific support, fund raising efforts and educational projects. In addition the Luang Prabang Fund for Culture and Conservation that was created in 2011 in the USA accepts donations that are tax-deductible for the benefit of Pha Tad Ke Botanical Garden or other cultural and conservation projects in the Lao PDR.

Helping the Friends of Pha Tad Ke will allow you to follow the day-to-day evolution of the garden, look behind the scenes of its operations and participate in the Pha Tad Ke adventure !

**Information:** [www.friends-pha-tad-ke.com](http://www.friends-pha-tad-ke.com)

**When you become a member for the creation phase, your 5-year (2010-2014) membership will entitle you to:**

**Member - € 100:**

- Our newsletter (3 times a year, english/french) contains news about the garden, on-going work and actions, and articles about the flora, arts and culture of Laos.

**Friend Member - € 300:**

- Private visit to PTK, including boat trip and picnic (for 2 pax, booking required)
- A 30% reduction on the garden's publications and products (except Folies)
- Access to our favoured travel agent in Laos, reductions on hotels and restaurants etc. (see list of the partners of the Friends)
- Mention of your name on our website
- An invitation for two people to the official opening.

**Support Member - Institutions & Companies - € 2,000:**

- Mention of your name on our website with your logo
- Discount of 10% on one of our editions « Folies »
- A private reception at the pre-opening for a group from your institution/company.

**Donor Member - € 5,000 €, or more:**

- Discount of 10% on two of our editions « Folies »
- Inclusion of your name on the donor plaque at the entrance to the garden.

**Members can increase their involvement in the creation of Pha Tad Ke by supporting one or more of our individual projects:**

• **Adopt a tree: from € 50 to € 2,000**

Buying and planting a tree is only a beginning. It must then be fed, cared for and pruned. This takes time, money and care. Love your tree and adopt a seedling or a mature tree.

• **Sponsor a Bookparty: € 400**

Guided visits to the gardens for groups of children or students, who will spend a day learning about Pha Tad Ke's work and plants. The package includes transport to the garden and lunch. At the end of the day, every participant will receive a copy of our specially published books.

• **Sponsor a student: € 4,400 for 4 years**

In conjunction with three institutions, PTK has set up a grant for the best first-year student. At the end of the first year of study, the winning student will be offered a scholarship that will allow him or her to continue his or her studies. In exchange, the recipient will be required to do a two-month work placement at the garden during summer recesses and to work at the garden for one year at the end of his/her studies.

• **Sponsor a research post: € 1,800 for one year**

Given the heavy workload at the university and the very low salaries in Laos, there is little time left for building research projects. With this grant PTK will enable a post doc to do a year's research on a topic chosen in consultation with PTK.

• **Sponsor a field trip: € 10,000**

In conjunction with the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, we have set up a three-year partnership to train our horticultural team and to carry out an ambitious program of monthly field trips to gather specimens for a collection of living plants that will be unique in Laos. At the same time we will collect specimens for a herbarium. Each trip will require a substantial investment in time and money but this work is imperative as it will form the very foundations of our garden and its collections.

• **Sponsor a building: from € 15,000**

Several buildings will be required to house our collections and staff, and provide facilities for visitors. These buildings will include: Nurseries (€ 15,000), Orchid House (€ 27,000), Butterfly Farm (€ 32,000), Reception area (€95,000), Restaurant (€ 95,000), offices for research staff (€ 130,000), Traditional Medicines House (€ 135,000) and Library or Herbarium (€ 190,000).



The whole team at Pha Tad Ke wishes you a happy Laos New Year  
***Sock di Pimai !***



In February 4 of our staff spend 2 weeks in Singapore Botanic Garden on a study tour. This important trip was made possible by the generous invitation of Singapore BG and the help of the SDC grant from the French Embassy to the Friends of Pha Tad Ke Association.





We would like to thank the  
Queen Sirikit Botanic Garden  
for their generous donation of special Trees.  
As well as the specialised nurseries in  
Chiang Mai for their help spending the  
money we raised with the action

***PLANT A TREE***

We will be very busy the coming month planting !





Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft  
Confédération suisse  
Confederazione Svizzera  
Confederaziun svizra

Swiss Agency for Development  
and Cooperation SDC

We have organised our first book parties to distribute the children's books we published with the generous grant from SDC.

In collaboration with Exotissimo we also organise these parties now for groups of interested tourists.



# EXOTISSIMO

TRAVEL Asia

LAOS

Luang Prabang

## Save a Tree

### SUMMARY

Support the Pha Tad Ke Botanical Garden and help local schools in a fun filled activity donating books and interacting with the students.

### IN-DEPTH

Visit a local school and donate books published by the PhaTad Ke Botanical Garden to educate local children about natural flora and biodiversity in Laos. The Pha Ke Botanical Garden will officially be open to the public in 2015 with the aim to promote environmental education and raise public awareness of the importance of local plants and habitats. Until then the team at Pha Tad Ke will donate publications on Lao flora and other educational books for schools. This is a great opportunity for local interaction helping local schools and students learn about their environment and improve their resources.

### FAQ

- Refreshments will be served
- Great for Groups and FIT's
- Approximate price per group: \$200-\$400 donation to the school and to Pha Tad Ke Botanic Garden

### SELLING POINT

Great local interaction and also a great way of supporting one of the Exofoundation projects, helping local schools and promoting environmental awareness.

The Exo Touch





Dr. Jana Leong- Skornickova, *Zingiberaceae* expert from Singapore BG, visited PTK in June with Tran Huu Dang (SBG) and Otakar Sida (National Museum Prague) and undertook several field trips with PTK staff.

We collected over 70 species for our living collection, over 130 herbarium specimen as well as a new *Curcuma* species as yet undescribed.



Helena & Stefan from Sweden stay every year a few months in Luang Prabang where they teach art & ceramics.

Sim and Phat from Pha Tad Ke were their eager students for a 6 week workshop.



Somsanith Bouamanivong, Director of the National Herbarium Laos, spend a week in Pha Tad Ke in April to work on the selection of plants for the Medicinal Plant Garden. She will also author our next publication for children on the Medicinal Plants of Laos.



Dr. Carl Lewis, Director of Fairchild Botanical Garden in Florida visited PTK in April. Specialised in Palms his advise on the plantings we will be doing the coming months was very welcome.



*Les fleurs  
de la dévotion*

ethnobotanique culturelle au Laos

BIBA VILAYLECK & BAJ STROBEL

*After 2 years in preparation we are very proud to present*

## **Les Fleurs de la Dévotion** *Biba Vilayleck & Baj Strobel*

*Now also available in France !  
all orders to: [contact@pha-tad-ke.com](mailto:contact@pha-tad-ke.com)*

Book design by Olivier Leduc-Stein  
204 pages, 339 illustrations, 25 x 22cm  
Published in French language  
January 2012, Price 35 \$ / 29€

all orders at:  
[contact@pha-tad-ke.com](mailto:contact@pha-tad-ke.com)

Splendeur, sensualité, luxuriance qualifient les fleurs et plantes tropicales du Laos ; bien qu'utilisées comme comestibles, pour leurs vertus médicinales ou comme matériaux de construction, elles ont aussi une forte charge symbolique et une fonction dans l'art religieux.

Les auteurs, Michèle-Baj Strobel et Elisabeth Vilayleck ont observé avec attention les pratiques contemporaines de la tradition bouddhiste dans les temples monastères de Vientiane. Elles apportent ainsi un éclairage nouveau sur le culte, les décors et l'art floral d'un peuple profondément ancré dans son environnement naturel. Toutes les plantes utilisées (140) sont répertoriées par leur nom lao, leur nom européen, quand il existe, et par leur nom scientifique ; un glossaire et une bibliographie complètent l'ouvrage.

Splendid, sensuous, and lush, tropical flowers and plants in Laos, also play a powerful role in Lao traditional life not only as food, medicine and construction materials for shelter, but also as enduring spiritual symbols and delicate works of art. Delving thoughtfully into the living traditions of Buddhist practice in the ornate temples of Vientiane.

The authors, Michèle-Baj Strobel and Elisabeth Vilayleck, describe a rich tapestry of devotion and discipline in the floral decoration, ceremony and symbols revered by generations of orange-clad monks and the people they guide on the journey of life.

All the 140 plants described in the text are noted with their Laos, vernacular and scientific name, an index as well as a bibliography complete the publication.

## Bananas - the Fruit of Paradise



*All the flowers, so generous, offer themselves as a theme  
With the spring, my ink is barely sufficient,  
Only the banana lets me save, I love it.  
Which with one serene leaf, bears my poems.*

LI YU THE SECRET LETTERS XVII

The Chinese poet gives us the first of many characteristics of the banana tree; it fruits all year long. But it has so many other attributes which make it at once an irreplaceable tree and a large but very fragile plant.

### The Asian stable

The theory that first banana trees originated in south-east Asia (some say the Indochinese peninsula) has been confirmed. They were then spread eastwards, according to archaeological studies showing that the Papuans cultivated them 7000 years ago.

They also travelled as far as India, carrying a great diversity in their genome and transforming themselves gradually into a sterile but easily eaten plant with seedless fruit. From there, the fruit arrived in Africa 2500 years ago. Then it was taken to the New World where it acclimatized in remarkable fashion, with some countries in Latin America having become the premier producers of bananas. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, bananas have been cultivated intensively and shipped across



1 Fruits can weigh up to 40kg and have to be supported.

2 Bryan Poole, drawing from 1963.



the seas on banana boats. Commercial banana plantations have become one of the symbols of colonization, a monoculture imposed to answer the needs of consumers in temperate climates. Some fifty species of bananas and a thousand cultivars now grow in both humid and dry tropical zones.

### **A giant herb**

The banana is a strange plant, a giant herb that reproduces by setting out a series of shoots from its underground stump. From this stump grow the big long leaves - as long as three meters and as wide as 60cm, tightly wrapped around each other into a pseudo-trunk which gives the plant the shape of a tree with a trunk. After about thirty of the leaves open up, the stem develops into a flower stem which appears at the crotch of the pseudo-trunk, growing at the end an inflorescence which develops and finally emerges at the top of the plant and is then dropped. With most edible varieties of the fruit, the inflorescence reaches towards the ground and the bud hangs vertically. This is made up of purple spathes at the base of which are two rows of flowers, the 'hands'. The bud continues its growth, the spathes lift up and usually fall off, letting the flowers appear, pointing obliquely to the base of an elegant spiral. The first to come out are the female flowers of which the ovaries become the bananas, the 'fingers' of the

*1 Small flowers are inside the spathe.*

*2 The elegant spiral of a regime of bananas.*

*3 The large banana trees provide shade for other plants.*

*4 In Borobudur a god dreams under a banana tree.*



1 In the 1920ties bananas were considered to have restorative qualities. 2 Egg-Bananas and Sabar-bananas. 3 Water-bananas.

hand. After a certain number of hands, (no more than 14) the male flowers form at the end of the stem and quickly deteriorate. The collection of flowers coming to maturity make up a 'regime' of bananas. These last are harvested green and continue their maturation after being cut off at the base. When these are cut, the young shoots formed at the base of the mother plant will create more pseudo-trunks.

The banana that we eat is for the most part a sterile fruit, without seeds, the result of successive hybridizations over many years to the point where the taxonomy of the banana is still under discussion. Most of the bananas consumed in the world are the fruit of a hybrid, (*Musa paradisiaca*) between the original species *Musa acuminata* from Malaysia, and *Musa balbisiana* which is found in India and in the Philippines. But all these names are invalid because they don't take into account the complexity of existing clones. One thing is certain however and that is the name of the genus, which was given by Linnaeus to honour Antoine Musa, the physician of the Emperor Auguste who cured him of liver disease.

### Fig or banana ?

If there has always been some uncertainty over the geographical origins of the banana tree, there has also been some indecision over what to call this strange exotic fruit. When Alexander the Great arrived in northern India, he seemed quite struck by the enormous size of its leaves and the abundance of its fruits. Pliny recounts that for him, just one of the fruits was enough to feed four people. It was the Arabs





who told of the plant from India, which they called the ‘fruit of Paradise’. Eastern Christians, just like the Muslims, saw the banana tree as the source of Adam and Eve’s covering garments after their sins. Likewise, the western tradition saw the fig in that role.

The confusion thus established between the two names is often found in the texts in the 17th and 18th centuries as “fig tree bearing bananas”. But the Lao, quite distant from that cultural framework, have a banana named *kouay namva*, which literally means “banana-fig”. Is there perhaps some further connection between the two fruits besides the creation story ?

As for the name ‘banana’, it is generally thought to be from Guinea, borrowed from the Portuguese and then the Spanish and the French, who introduced it to the Antilles, ‘where the term became current.’ So says Friar Labat, giving us a good example of linguistic colonialism, writing at the beginning of the 18th century :

*“The Spanish call banana what the French call fig, and plantain that which the French call banana. I do not know who is right, as no one can contest the right to name things. They discovered America first, so they have acquired the right to impose upon the fruits of the country whatever names they consider fitting.”*

The great diversity of names for the banana plant touches also on the different ways it is eaten. While for most Europeans, there is only one banana and that is a fruit that one eats ripe for dessert, but it is quite different in most tropi-



1 Wild bananas have large black seeds used for medicinal and decorative purposes. 2 Banana flower eaten raw in the *khao phoun*, and left cooked in *or lam*. 3 The inflorescence of decorative bananas is turned upwards.





cal and equatorial countries which have developed a whole range of ways to prepare bananas, depending on the variety, and where people eat them both raw and cooked. Thus in the French Antilles the dessert banana is called a fig and plantain is the one that is cooked. The best-known cultivars have also been given names like the *Gros-Michel* in Cameroon, or *poyo* in Guinea, or *fehi* in New Caledonia.

### A many-faceted vegetable

This exotic fruit is quite common in temperate countries, no doubt because it is available year-round in the markets and because it is so easy to eat. It makes up a quarter of world fruit production although its introduction into the industrialised world is fairly recent, dating from the end of the 19th century. Not only has the banana become a dessert and a treat but it also is impressive for its nutritional qualities, and seems to be the only truly nutritious fruit. One is reminded of the post-war slogan ‘A banana is as good as a beefsteak.’ And of the famous brand ‘Banania’ which offered ‘a delicious sugary meal of banana flour.’

But in many tropical countries the banana is first a vegetable and sometimes a staple food, such as in Ethiopia with the banana *ensete*. In these regions, generally, sweet fruits are not as well-liked. Moreover the fruit is not the only part eaten; also the flower, the trunk and the root. In Laos, where there are

many varieties, about thirty names are currently used both as food, in art, medicine and in religious practice. To be able to better distinguish these, to know about harvesting them, to know their uses one must be a Laotian countryman, but we will attempt to enumerate them.

Eaten ripe but raw, are the tiny: *kouay krae*, (egg bananas), *Kouay hom*, (perfumed bananas), the long: *kouay ngao* (sabre bananas) and *kouay lep meu nang*, (lady finger bananas).

*Kouay nam* (water bananas) are eaten both raw and ripe or cooked as well. When almost ripe, they are offered grilled as snacks by street vendors; cooked in coconut milk, they make liquid deserts (*nam vane*) or are rolled into balls as bonbons. They are also wrapped in banana leaves and steamed, or fried in oil as fritters. Still green, they are treated like vegetables - raw, cut into thin slices, they are served with *kebao poon* or other Asian versions of fondue. Cooked, they are added to sour fish soups and some curries.

Other much-used bananas are *kouay tip* (narrow banana) and most of all *kouay thani* (gibbon banana); prepared as above they are made into sour salads (*tam som*), and pickled vegetables (*som phak*). Sometimes there is a sour salad made from very young bananas, *kouay thani kène* (gibbon banana seeds). Another part of the banana tree, which is eaten, is *mak pi* (spindle-shaped fruit), which is the flowers or, more precisely, the sterile cone at the end of the inflorescence. Raw and finely chopped, those of *kouay thani* or *kouay nam*, after being

1 Banana leaves are used as wrapping material.

2 The banana trunk is cut and used to make boats for the festival.

soaked in acidulated water are mixed in with the *lap* to add consistency or as an accompaniment to *kebao poon*, a kind of thick soup of coconut milk and vermicelli. French cuisine has also adopted this product, which is offered nowadays as a salad. In India, as a subtle refinement, the flowers are extracted from the bracts and cooked with curry. However, the entire bud is also cooked in soups and stews, particularly among the Hmong people. These flowers are also used as an anti-diabetic.

More rarely, the heart of the trunk of the banana tree, *kène*, is cooked and eaten with a spicy sauce or in a curry, but it seems that this use is associated with times of scarcity as well as the consumption of the rhizome itself. The pulp of the trunk is made into a tea to treat dysentery.

Since Laos is within the area of the original domestication of the banana, there are also many wild varieties called *kouay pa* (forest bananas). The fruits are filled with big, black seeds which make eating difficult, but some people like them for their sweet, slightly acidic, taste while others consider them to be quite poisonous. The seeds are also used as medicines to treat pimples, wounds, and ulcers. This same wild banana has another, unexpected use, which is that it is a good indicator of soil quality for nomadic peoples in the countryside.

### **An irreplaceable material**

The banana, the fruit of paradise, which not only was able to help hide the nudity of Adam and Eve with its huge leaves,

is in everyday reality also an indispensable material, at least for the moment. In all tropical countries, the big leaves have multiple uses. They are used as protection against the sun and the rain, they take the place of table linens and plates at mealtimes, and of wrapping paper in the markets. They are wrapped around steamed foods including fish, chicken and cakes made of sticky rice. In Laos, for cooking, the leaves (*bai tong*) of *kouay thani* are preferred because they are less moist than others and don't impart their flavour to the foods that they wrap.

If they are too stiff they can be softened by passing them over a flame or steam. The leaves of the banana are carefully cut, pleated and joined to form little pyramids stuck with yellow and white flowers that are placed in temples. Simply rolled into cones and filled with flowers, they are offered during some ceremonies. They are rolled and filled with tobacco instead of cigarette papers. They are also used for catching the sap of rubber trees or resins of other trees. They also have the reputation of being able to staunch the flow of blood. It is to be hoped that this excellent biodegradable material is never completely replaced by polluting synthetic materials.

The false trunk of the banana is made up, as we have said, of leaves tightly sheathed around each other to form a stem and this stem is much used by artisans. It is known as *kaap*

*The kathong is a basket to keep the bad spirits away and is made of the sheaths of the banana leaves.*



in Laos, and as amplexical by botanists. Louis Carnet, who visited Laos in 1870, noted that the nobility of Laos “*had heads surmounted by broad brimmed hats made of the outside layer of the banana tree*”.

Nowadays these are the wide baskets for offerings to keep away evil spirits (*kathong*), which are made of this material, which is thicker than the leaves, spongier and quite flexible. The central spine of the leaf, stripped of its limbs, is a versatile material. It is ridden by children when they play *ma kan kouay*, or ‘banana leaf horses’, but pregnant women must be careful not make a habit of biting through this central spine for fear of giving birth to a malformed baby.

Before the banana has fruited, the trunk is cut and used in many ways. It is cut crosswise into slices, which serve as the base for little boats which are sent out into the waterways at certain festivals, but they may also be stripped for the fibre. In Laos this fibre is not used unless necessary but children make them into jump-ropes, *seua kouay*. On the other hand, in the Philippines, they use a banana fibre textile, *Musa textilis*, called abaca. As for the trunk, it is used to make little sticks to fasten the flowers of a bouquet - a speciality of Luang Prabang - the *poum*. And lastly, local pigs enjoy eating the leftover trunks.

Banana trees are therefore of such practical use that when they are used in religious rites it is difficult to say if this usage is of a functional or a symbolic importance.

### **Between functional qualities and ritual essentials**

It is easy to understand that the banana could symbolize abundance and sharing as is the case in many parts of Asia. In the ancient Indian texts, Mount Meru, the centre of the universe, is described as surrounded by four trees including the kadali, a golden banana which shows the way to the world of the gods. In Laos, bananas are the fruits most often placed on the altars to the spirits and offered at the temples, along with the coconut, in thanks for a prayer that has been answered (*ke ba*).

Banana trees are planted in sanctuaries when certain festivals are held to celebrate the erection of the signpost for a town. Sometimes decorated with wax flowers, small banana trees are placed on the altars, “symbols of the tree of life” says Zago. These same trees of life crown the *vetiya* or sand stupas made at the New Year’s celebrations.

The groom, before crossing the door sill of the house of his future in-laws, first puts one foot on the door sill covered with banana leaves, which is then sprinkled with holy water, as does the *Mò mène* who comes in to bless a new house. The bouquet, which is made to celebrate a new house, is principally made of banana trees and sugar cane mixed with seasonal flowers. At one time in Cambodia, a young woman who began to menstruate ‘moved into the shadow’ and planted a banana shoot. When it produced its first fruit, that was the signal for her to emerge from the shadow and



Astonishing sculptures are made of banana leaves for special occasions.



the fruits were given to the temple. Still today, to find out if a marriage should take place, one draws a banana called the golden banana and interprets it, starting from the date of birth of the young woman.

Banana leaves are wrapped around many offerings made at the temple - flowers, incense and candles. Is it as a symbol of sharing or because the wrapping is practical and natural? Is it a ritual or is it simply a functional practice to wrap the shaved hair of a future monk in the leaves of a banana or a lotus and place them at the foot of a tree? The ceremonial platters, the pagodons carrying offerings, the jars of alcohol prepared for important rituals are edged with banana leaves cut into saw-toothed edges (*bay si*), which suggests strongly that this decoration has a ritual function as it is evoked in the words that are recited on these occasions.

The banana is likewise tied to death. After a death, traditionally, the coffin is placed on trunks of a banana because as this plant is only a herb, the person is henceforth without bodily existence. But since the trunk of the banana is soft and spongy, it is easy to carve and to stud with the flowers that one always sees around the catafalque. In traditional houses,



- 1 The fibre of the trunk is very white and used for coarse tissue
- 2 Before going into the house of the betrothed the grooms feet are put on a banana leaf and washed.
- 3 At several ceremonies entire bananas are put at the altar.





1 The ceremonial platform for the elephants is surrounded by the 100 fruits-banana.

2 Ceremonial platter covered with banana leaves.

the coffin does not come out of the house carried by living people but a special stairway is made to evacuate the dead and this stairway is made of the trunk of the banana, undoubtedly reflecting both this same symbolism and the ease with which one can work with this material. In Vietnam the banana is also part of death rituals; once, the fibres were used for a death garment, a kind of rough voile worn by the wife and children of the deceased at the burial. When this garment is removed, the family members wear hats made of dried banana leaves. Is this to protect it from the sun or to evoke death?

Both strong and fragile at the same time, the banana tree has a somewhat ambivalent place in biology, but also in the symbolism which it conveys - that of fecundity by the abundance of its fruits and of impermanence by the frailty of its structure.



**NATURE, ART, PAYSAGE**

Par Gilles Tiberghien

Editions Actes sud/Ecole nationale supérieure du paysage  
Centre du paysage, 2001

**Un nouveau lieu pour la création ?**

Faut-il quitter les galeries, les musées, les places fortes de l'art contemporain et se tourner vers la nature, intervenir en/sur elle, là où souffle le vent, brille le soleil et où l'artiste compose son projet en accord ou en opposition à ce qui se donne à voir ? Voilà ce que propose d'emblée cet ouvrage.

Bien des artistes ont fait ce choix qui remonte assez loin, aux années soixante, et comprend divers mouvements qui ont développé de nouvelles tendances artistiques, complètement inédites. Les plus connues sont de la mouvance du **Land Art**. Assez peu soucieux de transformer la nature, ces artistes y recherchent plutôt une expérience vécue, tout en laissant la nature subsister intégralement. Ils s'y immiscent, la détournent, la subliment en suscitant en quelque sorte une aventure avec elle.

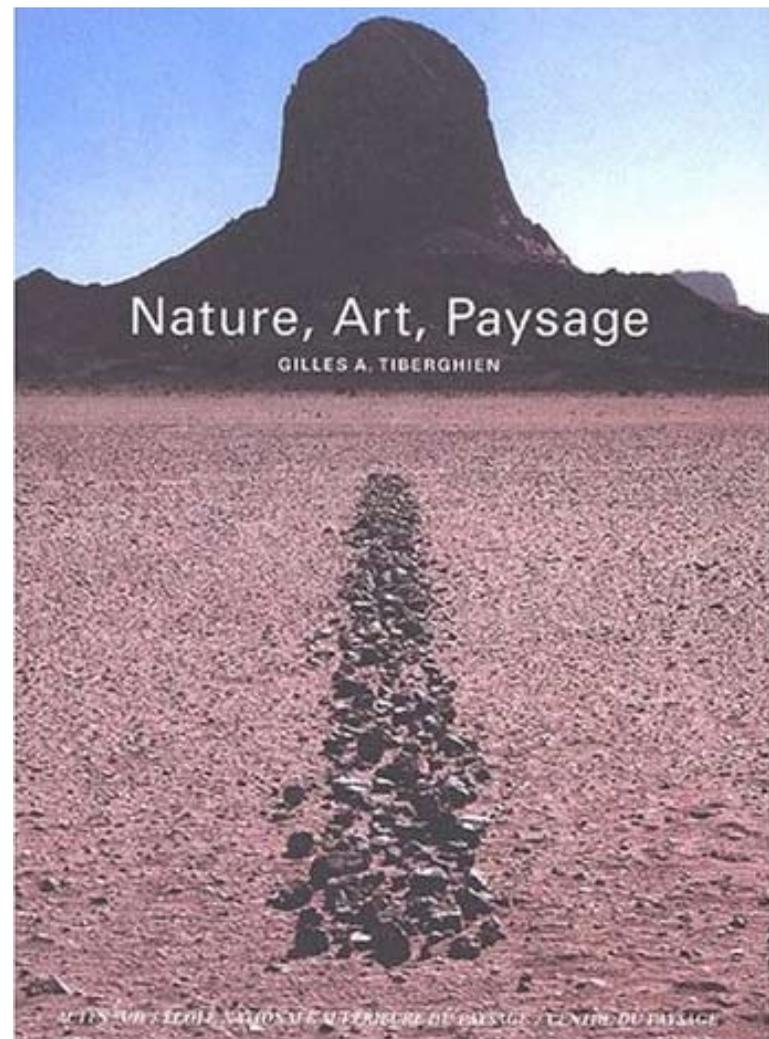
Cet ouvrage, malgré son ancienneté, puisqu'il a plus de dix ans, reste une référence pour ce qui concerne les rapports entretenus pas les artistes actuels et les vastes territoires naturels.

En fait, il faut bien comprendre que : *« tout artiste qui travaille dans la nature, n'est pas forcément un landartiste et ne s'intéresse pas nécessairement au paysage. Le land art concerne des artistes actifs, pour la plupart américains qui, dans le sillage du minimalisme et des réflexions produites sur l'espace du musée, sur la place du spectateur et*

*l'engagement physique de l'artiste, ont privilégié le travail avec la terre et ses dérivés. »* (Page 8).

Evoquer ces questions revient à tenir compte de perceptions individuelles mais aussi de représentations collectives de la nature, de la société, de la contemplation esthétique, de la maîtrise du territoire, et même de questions politiques. Différents discours s'articulent autour de cet éventail de questions et nous rendent conscients de notre appartenance et notre singularité au monde.

Dans un premier temps, il faut bien se dire que les interventions des artistes sur le milieu naturel permettent un dialogue entre les sédimentations du temps géologique et l'identité profonde des paysages, leur histoire. Aux artistes de faire *« remonter des images archaïques »*, de composer avec les épaisseurs de sens qui renvoient à l'enfance de l'humanité, aux cultes ancestraux, aux rites de la mort, aux rapports avec la terre-mère des mythes anciens. Travailler au cœur de la nature place l'artiste, consciemment ou non, dans une relation avec une identité profonde, avec l'origine des choses auxquelles tout spectateur peut être sensible. La terre agirait-elle comme gardienne de la mémoire ? Avant d'être une réalité esthétique, la nature est d'abord une construction humaine, que nous avons en partage avec d'autres, affectivement et intellectuellement investie. Cela est également visible en ce qui concerne les diverses quêtes nostalgiques de *« retour à la nature »* ou d'un Eden perdu qui ont parfois suscité un militantisme idéologique plus ou moins virulent en Europe.





Arrêtons-nous un moment sur un concept largement évoqué dans l'ouvrage et qui concerne l'opposition entre nature sauvage et nature domestiquée. La notion de réserve est au cœur du propos. A partir du milieu du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, le « *sauvage* » était à conquérir. Cela se vérifie sur le terrain des conquêtes vers l'Ouest américain autant que sur celui des peuples à

« *civiliser* ». De là sont nés le goût et la vogue des parcs nationaux, aux Etats Unis d'abord, puis ailleurs dans le monde. Au fur et à mesure que s'avançaient les pionniers le long de la frontière, les peuples autochtones qui furent décimés, se virent contraints de se réfugier dans les réserves, comme s'il s'agissait de sauvegarder, pour le regard et la contemplation

des envahisseurs, la « *wilderness* » par ailleurs allègrement bafouée dans sa réalité et soit disant composante humaine. « *Cette préservation était devenue nécessaire pour asseoir l'identité américaine et du même coup l'édification de son futur.* » (P. 19-20).

Les célèbres peintres de l'école de la vallée de l'Hudson, dont Thomas Cole, ont immortalisé ces grands espaces, ces « *réserves du monde* », - l'art devenant le meilleur avocat d'une nature déshumanisée- car rares sont les humains représentés dans de tels espaces.

Certains artistes se sont employés à travailler à leur manière la cartographie elle-même, comme Dennis Oppenheim et Robert Smithson qui affirma : « *Le paysage commence à apparaître plus comme une carte en trois dimensions que comme un jardin rustique* » (P.61). Auteur de la célèbre Spiral Jetty, datant de 1970, réalisée sur une mer morte dans l'Utah avec de la pierre noire, des cristaux de sel, de la terre, des algues rouges, son œuvre maîtresse s'étend sur plus de 450 m. d'envergure.

Selon lui : « *les meilleurs sites pour l'earth art sont ceux qui ont été bouleversés par l'industrie, une urbanisation incontrôlée ou les destructions de la nature elle-même* ».

### **Land Art : Cartes, nids et espaces de l'art.**

On voit donc se dessiner divers types de sensibilité à la nature. La première est du **registre de la nostalgie**, celle d'un état originel dont on cherche à restituer un équivalent à travers les pratiques artistiques, comme chez Richard Long, par exemple. Cet artiste est conscient de la dégradation du monde naturel et cherche donc à créer un rapport authen-

tique avec lui, même s'il est évident que « *la mort et la destruction de la nature sont irréversibles* ». N'est-il pas urgent de s'en remettre à l'utopie, faire en sorte qu'elle se réalise ?

Le second type de sensibilité met plutôt l'accent sur **la puissance et l'énergie** de la nature, ses capacités de transformation et de renouvellement. Celles-ci peuvent être mises en scène comme le fait Walter de Maria, en captivant la foudre ou encore en détournant les forces naturelles et en mettant en avant leurs propriétés basiques : l'argile, le sable, les constituants élémentaires du sol, et retrouver ainsi les gestes et les pratiques des Indiens des Plaines ou des Aborigènes d'Australie. En constante transformation, la nature impulse des forces physiques et sociales chaque fois renouvelées et non pas données une fois pour toute. Ces deux formes d'approche ne sont nullement contradictoires et peuvent coexister chez un même artiste. Le travail avec et sur la nature est aussi ancien que l'art lui-même, pensons aux mégalithes, pierres dressées, menhirs et autres installations magico-religieuses qui inscrivent une culture dans une nature étonnante et qui ne cessent de nous interpeler.

### **Le thème de la Cabane chez Niels Udo**

Cet autre thème illustrant la nostalgie originelle apparaît comme suffisamment prégnant dans la production artistique contemporaine pour être considéré comme symptomatique d'un rapport premier au monde de la nature, compréhensible par chacun de nous et que les artistes comme Niels Udo ont fait revivre intensément à travers leurs œuvres.

Le désir de cabane remonterait aux origines de l'humanité. Selon Vitruve, le célèbre architecte romain : « *les hommes commencèrent, les uns à faire des huttes avec des feuilles, les autres à creuser des loges dans les montagnes* ». On voit ainsi que l'architecture primitive prend modèle sur des formations naturelles : trous, cavernes, constructions de branchages pour se protéger et s'isoler, à la manière des oiseaux. Le nid est une création emblématique car il représente à la fois une forme de protection et une idée d'origine. Plusieurs « *Nids* » ont ainsi été réalisés dont le plus poétique reste sans doute *Waternest*, datant de 1995, où l'on voit un enfant lové dans un cercle de branches d'osier et de foin. Ces structures sont réellement construites pour le corps en prenant leur forme de l'intérieur et à partir de lui. Il s'agit bien



d'un abri mais combien exposé à nos regards! L'œuvre une fois posée dans la nature, est abandonnée à son sort - sans le personnage - mais elle existe de manière photographique « comme un point perdu dans l'univers ». Une autre manière d'habiter la nature consiste, comme le fait Michael Singer, à fabriquer des structures fragiles et éphémères qui se confondent presque avec le sol qu'elles prennent en compte sans trop se démarquer. Elles se fondent dans la nature, à la manière d'un camouflage comme ces *Ritual Series*, en bambou et branchages, qui sont des « *indicateurs ou des palpeurs de vision* ». On retrouve là un équivalent d'une construction sacrée, une signalétique destinée à accueillir ou repousser les esprits comme on peut en voir à l'entrée des villages *Akha* au Laos. On n'est pas loin non plus de penser à un temple dans la nature, qui serait en quelque sorte l'aboutissement de la cabane.

### Une voie vers l'écologie ?

Les artistes du Land art, pratiquement tous Américains, sont à la fois nourris de références romantiques puisqu'ils retrouvent le sacré dans les choses les plus infimes et sont aussi observateurs des sociétés autochtones et des civilisations américaines (détruites par leurs ancêtres) mais ils gardent cependant une maîtrise du monde naturel dont ils amplifient les qualités, tout en faisant jouer des facteurs architecturaux et symboliques. Seraient-ils ainsi les précurseurs d'un art qui placerait les questions d'écologie au centre d'un débat sur la création artistique ? Issue du minimalisme cette tendance a

sans doute suscité bien des interrogations au moment même où les questions de « *sauvegarde de la planète* », au tournant des années 1970, commencèrent à devenir préoccupantes.

Maintenant ce type de réflexion autour de la création artistique en dialogue avec la nature nous amène aussi à imaginer une appropriation du site du futur jardin botanique de Pha Tad Ke. Ne serait-ce pas un lieu propice à une réflexion sur le paysage, à la fois dans sa dimension naturelle et domestiquée ? Des artistes laotiens ou étrangers y trouveraient, dans le cadre de résidences, un lieu original pour manifester leur conception de l'espace, proposer une certaine vision du monde et de la vie sur terre « *au milieu d'une nature sans cesse en évolution* ».

A lire en plus :

#### **L'Idée de Nature dans l'Art Contemporain**

*Colette Garraud*, Flammarion 1994

#### **L'Artiste Contemporain et la Nature**

*Colette Garraud*, Editions Hazan 2007

#### **Architecture Naturelle**

*Alessandro Rocca*, Actes Sud 2006





## Portfolio by Bee & Done

Kittisack Phouthavong and Keooudone Souvannakhoummane graduated from National University of Laos two years ago and are working in Pha Tad Ke as our on staff Botanists.

They organise regular field trips with Pha Tad Ke horticulture staff and with visiting international researchers to add to our living collections as well as herbarium specimen.

They advise together with Somdi, our head gardener, what plants are suitable for our collections and plantings.

Bee loves nature, mountain and forest with fresh and pure air. He is interested in flowering family, such as: Gesneriaceae and Myrsinaceae and in collecting Bamboo and Arecaceae in the wild.

Done is especially interested to study about Balsaminaceae and Begoniaceae families as well as the Zingiberaceae family in Laos.



*Done & Bee*





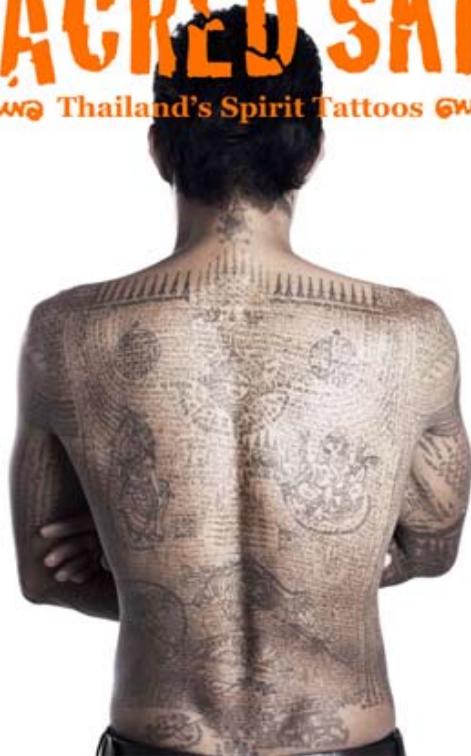






# SACRED SKIN

Thailand's Spirit Tattoos

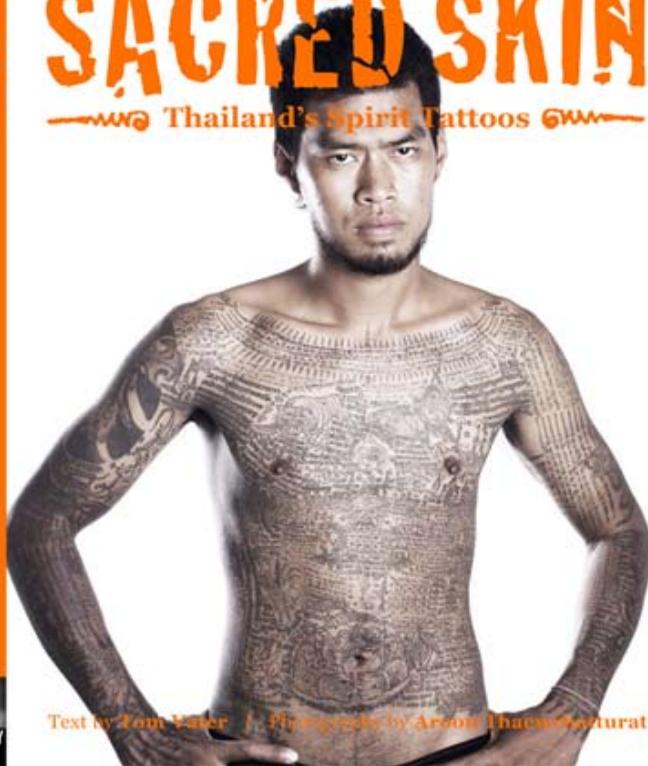


SACRED SKIN - Thailand's Spirit Tattoos - Tom Vater | Aroon Thaenchoatturat



# SACRED SKIN

Thailand's Spirit Tattoos



Text by Tom Vater | Photographs by Aroon Thaenchoatturat

## SACRED SKIN - THAILAND'S SPIRIT TATTOOS

*Tom Vater, Photographs by Aroon Thaenchoatturat*

Visionary World, Hong-Hong 2011

200 pages with over 170 color photographs

ISBN 978 962 85637 9 1

Available from bookstores and through Amazon.com

**Sacred tattoos**, called sak yant in Thailand, have been around Southeast Asia for centuries and are said to bestow protection from accidents, misfortunes and crime. Young women have themselves tattooed with love charms to attract better partners, while adolescent males seek the protective power of their yant in fights with rival youth gangs. For most though, the tattoos serve as reminders to follow a moral code endorsing positive behavior.

**When a tattoo master** applies a sak yant, he also establishes a set of rules that his tattooed disciples are expected to follow for the rest of their lives, usually starting with Buddhism's first five precepts. Failure to observe the guru's instructions causes the sak yant to lose their power.

**Every day**, young men and women gather in temples and tattoo masters' studios around the country to get inked: Tens of thousands of teenagers, motorcycle and taxi drivers, construction workers, night club bouncers, street vendors, factory employees, boxers and working girls – an entire strata of Thai society – are having a second, magical skin applied. Foreigners are not immune either. Even Angelina Jolie has been checking in to Thailand for tattoo sessions.

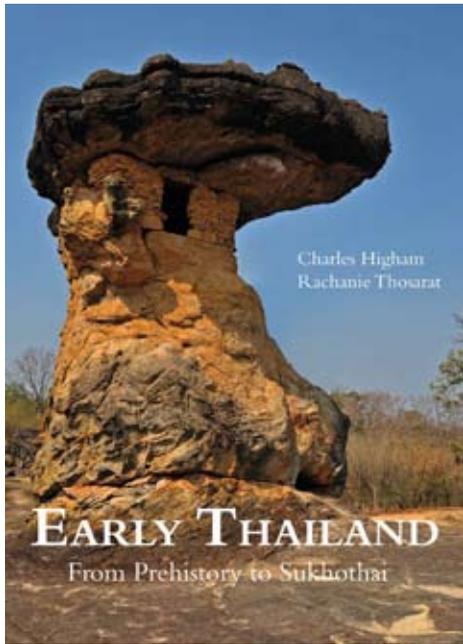
**Thailand's sacred tattoos** are a visual feast. The ancient Khmer writing system used for the magic spells looks like a language from a lost world and stretches from the lucid to the illegible, from the poetic into the anarchic. On backs and chests it looks like text, the instructions mysterious and obscure. On hands, legs and throats it's all abstract, trippy and brutally crude. Yet there is more to this than the written word. It goes deeper.

**The sak yant devotees** come in reverence and the monks and tattoo masters etch images of archaic sacred pillars and fearsome animals onto their skins. The Indian monkey god Hanuman makes an appearance, as do tigers, dragons, birds, snakes, lizards, hermits and eels. Indian mythology, Buddhism, Brahmanism, animism and common superstition make for a colorful hotchpotch of religious ideas embedded into skin, which may challenge the more formalised approach to celebrating the spiritual life and occasionally enrages Buddhist conservatives.

**But the world of the sak yant** exists through such a bizarre clash of circumstances, of faith and history, of order and chaos, of seekers and charlatans, of humility and machismo, that it has a life all of its own and is unlikely to fade any time soon.



*Left Tom Vater, Right Aroon Thaewchotturat*



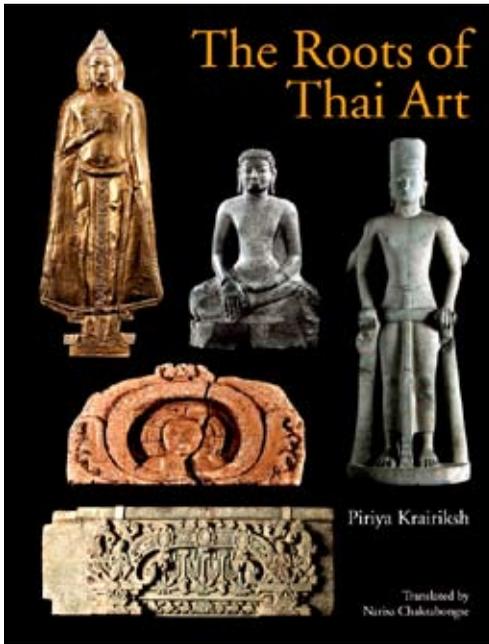
**EARLY THAILAND:  
FROM PREHISTORY TO SUKHOTHAI**

*Charles Higham & Rachanee Thosarat*

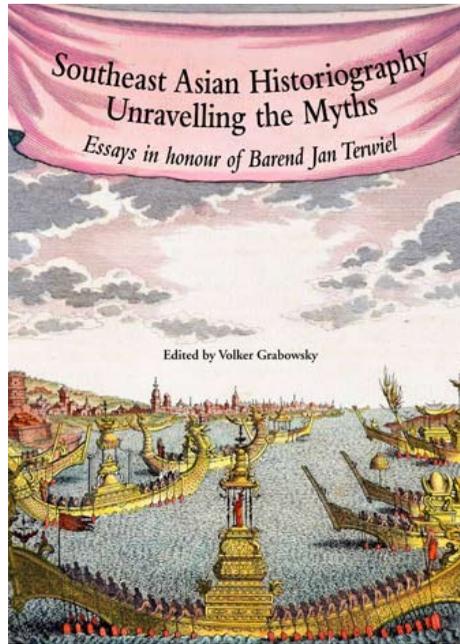
River Books, Bangkok 2012

ISBN 978 974 9863 91 6, 288pp. \$ 25

Dramatic new archaeological discoveries over the past ten years demand a new look at Thailand's past. Drawing on their previous work, Prehistoric Thailand, this substantially updated book covers the history of the Kingdom from the first human settlement to the earliest civilisations and gives a fresh appraisal of the early hunters and gatherers, and



of the origins of the first rice farmers. A new chronology reveals the dynamic social changes that came with the Bronze Age, and the rapid advance to the foundation of early states that followed. The outstanding art of the Bronze Age, as seen in painted ceramic vessels a thousand years earlier than those from Ban Chiang is portrayed, as is the wealth of Iron Age chiefs who contributed so much to the foundation of the Kingdoms of Angkor and Dvaravati. In the far south, we find early cities founded along the Southern Silk Road, bringing exotic ideas and goods through sea-borne trade. Most of all, the authors present the rich cultural heritage of the Thai people.



**THE ROOTS OF THAI ART**

*Piriya Krairiksh Photography Paisarn Piemmettawat*

*Edited by Peter Sharrock, Translated by Narisa Chakrabongse*

River Books, Bangkok 2012

ISBN 978 616 7339 11 5, 416pp. \$ 65

The genius of the Mon and Khmer peoples, who inhabited what is present day Thailand from the 4th to the 13th centuries, manifested itself in the absorption of influences from India and China into a distinctive local sacred art with quite exceptional aesthetic qualities. Thailand's pre-eminent art historian Piriya Krairiksh retraces these multiple interactions in the early and mediaeval period so as to reveal the roots of the unique cultural identity we know as Thai. The description of this splendid range of early pre-Thai creations is rendered in a powerful new language of sacred art which expresses the depths of philosophy and evolving beliefs of the two major religions, Buddhism and Brahmanism, that underpin Thai society and culture today.

**SOUTHEAST ASIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY  
UNRAVELLING THE MYTHS : ESSAYS IN HONOUR  
OF BAREND JAN TERWIEL**

*Edited by Volker Grabowsky*

River Books, Bangkok 2012

ISBN 978 974 9863 97 8, 320pp. \$ 30

This collection of twenty-one essays in honour of Prof. Barend Jan Terwiel deals with a wide range of issues spanning various periods of time, both modern and pre-

modern, in countries throughout Southeast Asia. The contributors have been inspired to challenge and unravel established paradigms of this diverse region's history and in doing so propose new insights and interpretations. Renowned historian Thongchai Winichakul sets the scene by discussing Thai history in the context of Siam's colonial conditions before B. J. Terwiel himself reviews the controversy surrounding the Ram Khamhaeng inscription. Other topics covered include the rise of Thai nationalism, concepts of gender and ethnicity and the role of magic and religion in contemporary society. The view then widens from Thailand to look at issues of historiography in Laos, dialogue and interaction between Europeans and various Southeast Asian nations using Dutch and Portuguese sources, and issues such as the relationship between myth and nation in Vietnam, Buddhism and political legitimisation in Burma, and migration and stereotypes in Indonesia. In effect, this publication sets about debunking the myths and commonly held perceptions of Southeast Asia's vibrant and at times volatile history.

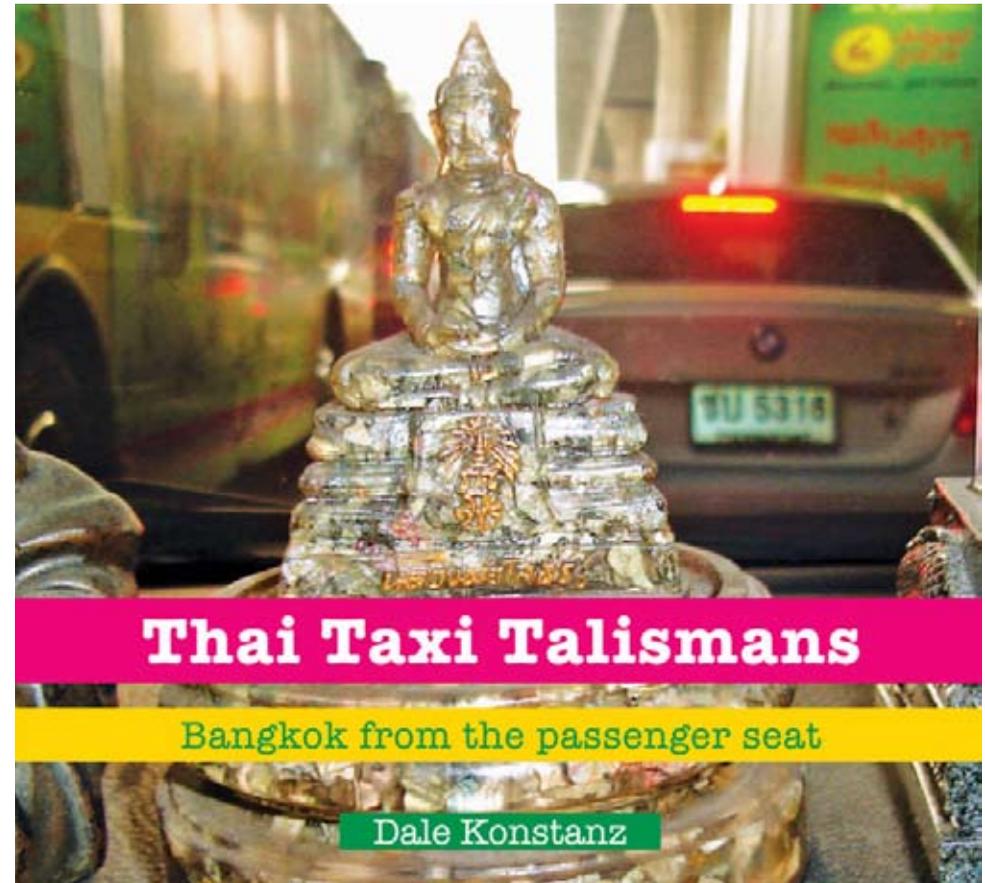
**THAI TAXI TALISMANS:  
BANGKOK FROM THE  
PASSENGER SEAT**

*Dale Alan Konstanz*

River Books, Bangkok 2012

ISBN 978 616 7339 08 5, 160pp. \$ 30

Strings of beads and amulets hang from rearview mirrors, swaying as the driver negotiates his taxi through Bangkok's chaotic streets. Statuettes of the Buddha glued to dashboards sit patiently beside flower garlands and beribboned objects. Buddhist ritual patterns adorn the ceilings, and images of monks are everywhere. The author Dale Konstanz has spent over four years documenting the interiors of Bangkok taxis, photographing the iconography and asking what it means to the drivers. In *Thai Taxi Talismans*, he recollects and ruminates as to the meaning of these mini-altars, accompanied by colourful photographs and the explanations and philosophies of the Bangkok cabby. This



book is a cultural study of Thai beliefs, an appreciation of Thai popular design and a document of the daily existence of Bangkok taxi drivers. It is fascinating, fun, and culturally significant.



## Project Space • Luang Prabang

**Project Space • Luang Prabang** is a multifunction nonprofit space for producing exhibitions and events. The building with three floors, and a rooftop terrace with stunning views, is in the centre of Luang Prabang and will host several exhibitions per year and collaborate with other cultural institutions in Luang Prabang and elsewhere, on joint events and projects.

**Project Space • Luang Prabang** is an initiative of Jean-Pierre Dovat and Rik Gadella.

**Project Space • Luang Prabang**  
Kitsalat Road 6 (Opposite Dara Market)  
Luang Prabang, Lao PDR  
Tel: + 856 71 21309

[www.projectspace-luangprabang.com](http://www.projectspace-luangprabang.com)

# PROJECT SPACE • LUANG PRABANG

## ສັດ ລາວ ມັນ Laos Today



Photograph © Phoanakh Thevongsa

ການວາງສະແດງ 100 ກໍ່ວາລີນງານ ຈາກຊ່າງພາບໄວໜຸ່ມລາວຈາກວຽງຈັນ ແມ່ນໄດ້ຮັບການສະໜັບສະໜູນຈາກ ສະຖານທູດ ສະຫາລັດ ອາເມລິກາ  
The exhibition with over 100 works from young photographers from Vientiane is sponsored by the U.S. Embassy

ເປີດງານ ວັນທີ 14/07/12 ເວລາ 6pm Opening July 14th at 6pm  
ວາງສະແດງຕັ້ງແຕ່ ວັນທີ 15/07 ເຖິງ 05/8 - 2012 Exhibition July 15th / August 5th - 2012

Exhibition: July 14th - August 8th 2012

## LAOS TODAY

Over 100 works from young photographers from Vientiane exhibited with support from the U.S. Embassy.

*Laos is a country that is undergoing dramatic changes. While the traditions of the past remain strong and vital, new ideas and attitudes are beginning to exert influence. The photographs in this exhibit explore this tension. The images of people, places, rituals, and daily life force us to consider the question: "What is Laos Today?"*

*This exhibit grew out of a training workshop for Lao photojournalists organized by the U.S. Embassy, the Lao Journalists Association, and the Lang Korng Photo Club in October 2011. At the completion of the workshop, the 14 participants were issued cameras and encouraged to document the world around them. They rose to that challenge, and the photos on display in this exhibit are the results. The exhibit also features photos by members of Lang Korng (Behind the Lens), a group of photography enthusiasts founded only two years ago. Lang Korng members have already made their mark with several successful photo exhibitions, and this exhibit adds to their growing reputation as the best chroniclers of modern Laos.*

*This exhibit makes it abundantly clear that a new generation of Lao photographers and photojournalists are ready to step to the forefront and carry out the most important job of photography: To show us moments of great significance hidden in everyday reality. As the main sponsor of this program, the U.S. Embassy is incredibly proud to be able to support the growth and development of photography and photojournalism in Laos.*

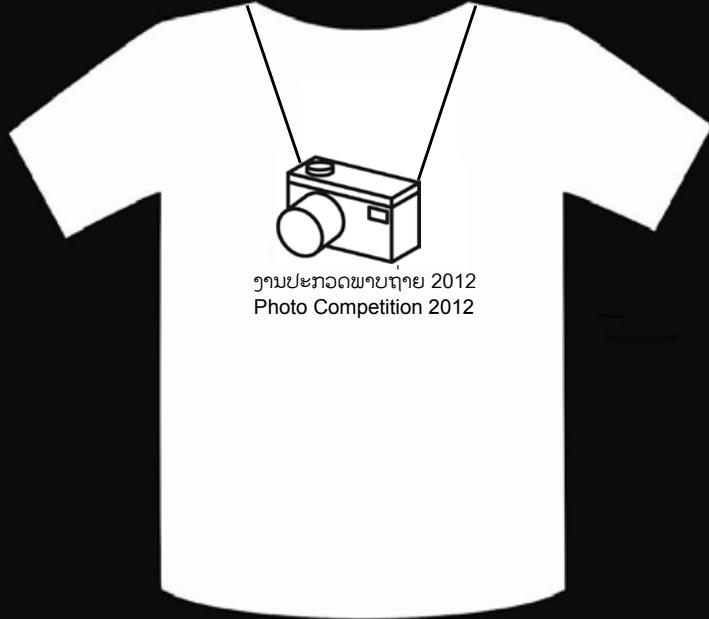
*Thank you and enjoy !*

**Exhibition: August 11th - September 8th 2012**

**PROJECT SPACE PHOTO COMPETITION 2012**  
**“MY LIFE”**

We are proud to bring the second edition of our photo competition, join us for the opening on August 11<sup>th</sup> to see the nominees and celebrate with the jury the selection of the 2012 winners !

*All photographs are for sale and support the work of these young photographers.*



**Exhibition: September 29th - October 25th 2012**  
**MAITREE SIRIBOON - THE TREE OF LIFE**



The geographic and environmental links between Lao (Laos) and North-eastern Thailand (Isaan), separated by the Mekong River, are strong, but the contrasts in the natural environment are striking, almost shocking. On the Lao side, development has been limited and the lush tropical forests and complex natural environment have been largely maintained over the eons. On the Thailand side of the river, deforestation and development have drastically changed the ecology and social environment in only the last 100 years or so. Almost 100% of the Isaan population now works on farms that cover the deforested landscape that is now filled with rice fields, eucalyptus trees, sugar cane fields, casava farms, and, increasingly, dairy farms. Flooding is a constant threat and groundwater supplies are diminishing and more and more saline. There remain only a few mature and stately trees in this almost barren landscape and they seem so out of place as prehistoric symbols of more primitive times. They are threatened by those who view them as only wood or an interruption to the agricultural sameness and do not appreciate their fragile status of these living and lonely organisms.

The young people of Isaan, who have grown up entirely in the “modern” agricultural environment are leaving their homes for work in urban areas and in factories. There are few remaining elders who remember the more diverse and complex environment and the wisdom and beauty of those tropical



*Maitree's early collage work draws from his boyhood in Isaan, transforming half-forgotten memory snapshots into colorful abstractions of rural life. His childhood landscape permeates his art, a sparkling two-dimensional texture filled with trees, rice paddies, traditional farming scenes, and water buffaloes. More recently, Maitree has turned to contemporary photography. His first series, "Isaan Boy Dream," invites foreigners to his childhood home Nong-Bo, placing them against characteristic village backdrops. "Isaan Boy Soi 4" examines, in an idealized fashion, the experience of rural youth transplanted to a big cosmopolitan city, with an underlying motif of sex labor. Most recently, in "Albino & Green" and in "Dream of Beyond," Maitree develops a sensuous (and even mystical) treatment of human models in idyllic pastoral settings.*

*In his recent work, Maitree combines his inner childhood memories and contemporary dreams, creating a new imaginary world with stunning beauty using the traditional "mirror collage technique," so well developed in his earlier works. In the new series entitled "The Rebirth of The Blue Dinosaur," he highlights the dinosaur, a symbol of the new capitalistic culture, chasing the water buffalo, a symbol of the Isaan people, or working class citizens in Thailand. Both animals are struggling through the flood waters (representing global warming). The series includes a cat and a dog, man's best friends, along with himself. Maitree presents his new collage as the dreamlike story, using his unique Thai visual sense of colorful elements, creating a complex collage filled with beauty and light.*

*In 2006 Maitree founded Whitespace Gallery in Bangkok to encourage young Thai artists by providing a venue for solo exhibitions. Many artists have started their professional careers in this gallery. He has been invited frequently to give guest lectures to university students, inspiring them to develop their talents. Today, Maitree continues to work in the Maitree Art Studio with his team and to organize exhibitions to promote young Thai artists from Thailand and around the world.*

forests. The new generation is, quite bluntly, abandoning the rural life and, in the process, are losing an important connection to nature and the ecological and social history of the Mekong.

As an artist from Isaan, someone who grew up on a farm and in a village, I feel great pain when I see the sudden and probably irreversible changes in our region and want very much to increase the awareness of the current generation of the very edge of the world that is disappearing. I have chosen the "Tree of Life" as my theme for the upcoming exhibition in Luang Prabang to utilize my drawing talents and photographic vision to create a series of images highlighting the remaining trees in Isaan and the existing trees in Laos, linking them artistically but also showing the contrasting environments. It will be my contribution to the effort to preserve nature in as many ways as possible and to ensure that the beauty and grandeur of these stately trees are forever in the minds of people who watched them grow over the decades, people who are leaving in the region, and tourists who must be exposed to their beauty and to their plight as endangered species.

"The Tree of Life" is the theme of my exhibition and I request the opportunity to display my art work out of respect for the natural world.