

'Flowers of Devotion', the first study of ethnobotanical traditions in Laos

In early 2012, Biba Vilayleck and Baj Strobel published '*Les fleurs de la dévotion*' ('Flowers of Devotion'), a study of the role of flowers in Laotian religious, social and artistic life. The book gives us an opportunity to find out more about both the temples in Vientiane and Laotian culture in general.

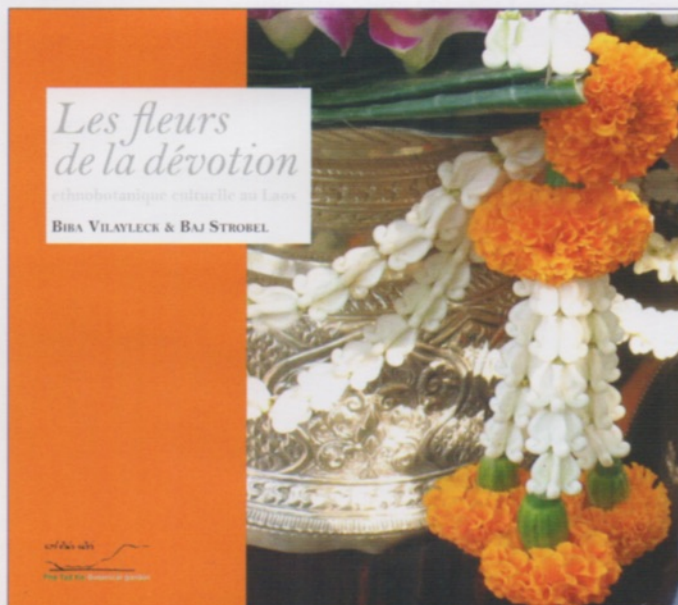
Abundantly illustrated, it represents the culmination of almost three years' work by its two authors, the former an ethnobotanist and the latter an art historian. The book has been beautifully put together by Olivier Leduc Stein, a graphic designer and friend of the authors, and was printed in Laos, as the first title in a programme started in Luang Prabang by Rik Gadella, director of the Pha Tad Ké botanical garden.

As its title suggests, the main focus of the work is the subtle yet ever-present interweaving of the plant world, in all its forms, with religious and everyday life in the Buddhist populations of Laos. In Laos, the flora, from the simple water lettuce to the majestic and imposing ficus religiosa, is an essential component of all that is sacred, representing through shape and symbol, perfume and colour, the bonds between man and man, in rituals and customs, as well as the bonds between man and the spiritual world beyond him.

Most of the analyses and testimonies focus on the temples and monasteries in Vientiane town centre, but the authors were also keen to demonstrate how, in addition to their sacred role, plants and flowers play an important part in the lives of Laotians throughout their lives, particularly in traditional rites of passage. Thus the book is divided into three main parts:

- **Town temples:** presentation of Vientiane's vats, organisation of the different areas of the temple, buildings, etc.
- **The role of plants in religious and social life:** analysis of how the sacred domain and religious ceremonies have extended into the home.
- **Art and decor:** the relationship between plants and how they are portrayed, and the passage from natural shapes to artistic representations.

Lastly, there is a **scientific section** comprising a vernacular



phytonomy, a list of scientific names, a glossary, a bibliography, etc.

Ethnobotany enables us to decipher the realities of plant lore and customs, first identifying the plants themselves before going on to describe how they are used and the symbolic meanings ascribed to them. In this book the authors introduce us to plant-related gestural codes, how plants are used and what is made from them, whether used directly as part of a traditional ritual or custom, or transformed into a religious artefact, as well as describing their integral presence at robing ceremonies, cremations and pilgrimages. A special bouquet for every celebration!

In Laos, artistic creation has always been highly influenced by plant motifs and follows the recognised Indian tradition of always ensuring that plants and flowers accompany any portrayal of Buddha for his further magnification and honour. Art and religion are closely interwoven and together embody a stylistic form – which is what the authors wanted to make explicit in this book. Over the years a system with its own specific vocabulary has gradually taken shape, which includes a special way of representing flowers and trees so that they are an integral and effective part of the religious and ceremonial decoration of statues and sacred buildings. The authors hope that this study of ethnobotany and art will provide all the elements their readers need to fully understand this key component of Lao culture.

Biba Vilayleck & Baj Strobel
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