

Kees Sprengers

Project Space • Luang Prabang 2011

Sacred Rituals of the Yao

Kees Sprengers

Kees Sprengers worked for 14 years as the photographer for the Waikato Museum of Art and History in New Zealand and then branched out into social issues. Since 2002 he has focused on photo documentary in Lao PDR, specializing in portraiture, cultural change in rural and village life and the religious ceremonies of minority groups in the province of Luang Namtha. He regularly photographs cultural assignments for the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Center in Luang Prabang.

Publications include “*Contemporary Maori Art*” written by Katarina Mataira and his work is represented in the collections of Waikato Museum of Art and History, Auckland City Art Gallery, and TAEC.

Kees Sprengers has had solo exhibitions in Hamilton, Auckland, Bangkok and Vientiane and been part of group exhibitions in New Zealand and the USA. Since 2002 he has been documenting with his wife Dorothy Culloty northern Lao food preparation, Lao ingredients, and Lao recipes, which has culminated in the wonderful book “*Food from Northern Laos: The Boat Landing Cookbook*”.

This first exhibition at Project Space • Luang Prabang will show a series of 18 photographs taken between 2005 and 2009 in northern Laos in Luang Namtha. Different ceremonies from the *Yao Mun* and *Yao Mien* minorities are shown with an intimacy and a play of light and shadow that reveals the thoughtfulness and respect of Kees Sprengers work for these people and their traditions.

Kees Sprengers is currently living in Thailand, but visiting Laos regularly for further documentary photography.



Taoist ceremonies, as performed by Yao Mun and Yao Mien people in Northern Laos

Yao Mun people, also known as the *Lantien* or *Kim Mun Lantien Sha*, migrated to Northern Laos from China. They practice a unique form of Taoism, a religion they adopted over 700 years ago. Their practice of Taoism includes elaborate ceremonies using ritual equipment, such as masks, paintings, horns and manuscripts written in Chinese script. Over the few centuries they have been in Laos, the *Yao Mun* have kept fairly much to themselves as people, and preserved their culture.

I was fortunate enough to be invited by the priest of Ban Nam Lue, Mr Lao Lee, to attend several of their ceremonies over the past few years, in order to photograph them. Most ceremonies take two or three days, with mainly the men participating in the formal proceedings, and the women being busy with cooking to feed the family and guests.

In order to not disturb the atmosphere during the proceedings, I restricted my photography by not using flash. This leads to somewhat grainy and sometimes high contrast images, due to often very low lighting levels in the house.

I wish to express my gratitude to Mr Lao Lee and the people of Ban Nam Lue for granting me the privilege of attending their sacred ceremonies. I hope my work will in the longer term assist in preserving knowledge about the ancient *Yao Mun* traditions.

For more on this go to:

www.pbase.com/kees5/lantien_ceremonies
or: <http://kees.zenfolio.com>

1-3 Ceremony for the spirits of the dead.

The first ceremony I attended. Mr Lao Lee's older sister's husband died about a year previously. It is the custom that after one year a ceremony is held to encourage the spirits that inhabited him to come back from wherever they were hovering and return and come to rest in the house where his family lives. It is a ceremony that takes about 3 days and involves long preparation. An 'altar' is constructed from bamboo and bamboo paper (produced in the village from bamboo pulp by the local women), adorned by coloured strips of paper. In the past, these would have been paintings of the gods and ancestor spirits. As many of the paintings have been lost or sold, now coloured paper with the name of the god inscribed are used as proxies.

The activities include constructing both the altar and a portable 'hearse' or bamboo structure, similarly adorned, which will eventually at the end of the ceremony be carried outside the boundaries of the village and ceremonially burnt.

Sacred text are copied from old manuscripts onto paper bags made of bamboo paper, and then ceremonially burnt, thus sending the message it contains up to the gods.

1 Is a portrait of a shaman dancing. The dance involves complicated movements while he waves a sword around.

2 Shows the copying of the sacred text onto another sheet of paper.

3 Shows a shaman reading the old text, while in the background others are preparing more cut paper ornaments to be used in the ceremony, and a dancing shaman in ceremonial robes. Note the shirt one man is wearing carries a McDonalds logo, although McDonalds is not allowed in Laos, certainly not at that time.

4 Was made during an ordination ceremony in Ban Nam An, Muang Long District.

While I lived in Vientiane in those days, my friend in Luang Namtha was contacted by Mr Lao Lee, and asked if I was interested in accompanying him to an ordination ceremony in a different place, a few hours by car away from his village. The ceremony would start in two days, which left me just one day to drive up to Luang Namtha, a journey that ended up taking 14 hours. The following day we drove Mr. Lao Lee, his wife and son up to Ban Nam An, where the ceremony had just started when we arrived. His daughter married a man from ban Nam An a few years ago, and had not been back home since, so the mother was very happy to be able to make the journey. I'd brought a guide to help with translation, and because the village was full of visitors to attend the rare ceremony, we slept down the road in Chiang Kok, on the Mekong river and border with Burma.

Due to various technical and transport hitches, I only managed to capture part of the ceremony, but it certainly was an eye-opener for me.

I was fortunate enough to attend a similar ceremony again, this time completely covering it, in 2009.

Not all the priests can actually read and write fluently in Chinese script, but most can. The ceremony is very much a team undertaking, many of the men taking part in various parts of it. There is a definite script, which includes acting out stories, some of which almost come across as a piece of theatre, and is seen as often highly entertaining by the big crowd attending.

5-7 In August 2006, I was invited to attend a second Ceremony for the Spirits of the departed, again in Ban Nam Lue. This time I spent more time at the ceremony, feeling now more confident that I wasn't intruding or disturbing the event. My equipment was much better now, and allowed me to deal much better with the difficult light situation.

8-9 While visiting a neighbouring village, I decided to drop in on Ban Nam Lue to pay my respects to Mr Lao Lee. To my surprise, they sent me to another house, where they were just engaged in the last few hours of another ordination ceremony, where I managed to get a few more images. The strips of paper on the ground, and the bowls of rice with the seals in them made an interesting composition. My understanding is that the strips of paper and the writing on them relate to genealogical connections with the ancestors, but i have not yet been able to confirm that. It was January 2007, and at that time I didn't have a guide anymore, but relied on my own (limited) Lao. At a certain part of the ceremony, all people inside the house went outside, to burn something; I was left with the kitchen showing signs of a big meal being prepared.

10-12 In 2008, while I was assisting the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre in Luang Prabang with their research, we were invited to an ordination in a *Yao Mien* village in Muang Sing district, Ban Jhongka.

Yao Mien can be considered “cousins” to the *Yao Mun*. They both came as part of the Yao ethnic groups from somewhere in China over 100 years ago, but over the centuries, the two groups who both base their life on Taoism, have grown slightly apart in terms of the shape of their ceremonies. Still, some elements of the ordination ceremony are similar, such as the “battle with the snakes”.

11-12 were taken at the culmination of the ceremony, at 3.00am, in a house with all windows and doors closed because of the fierce cold outside, and heated by a wood fire burning on the concrete floor. No Chimney, so from time to time I had to nip outside to get some air, the smoke was very dense inside. The only lighting was one tiny fluorescent bulb, plus 8 candles. The four men sitting down are the ‘novices’ being ordained, the men standing up with the Basque caps (a leftover of the French) are the officiating priests.

14-18 Another ordination in a *Yao Mun* village, Ban Hong Leuay, about 12 km north of Luang Namtha town. Again, assisting the TAEC with their research. This ceremony took in total about 6 days, from beginning to end. The first day, the two young men were taken to neighbouring villages where each in turn, the elders said prayers, made blessings, and offerings, while instructing the young men in some of the secrets of Taoism and their new roles. Instruction and teaching is a central element in the weeklong process.

14 An altar is constructed of bamboo covered by home made bamboo paper, and adorned.

15 The two young men have been fasting and now standing up for what seems like over an hour. I sense that they are being held to stop them from falling over should they faint.

16 This seemed again a crucial stage in the ceremony, although it isn’t clear to me what is actually happening.

17 More copying of old manuscripts, but this time with a modern spirit marker rather than on previous occasions with brush and ink.

18 After the ceremony the altar is taken down and burnt. The father of one of the young men is waiting the arrival of the priests and the young men for one more teaching session and blessing before the guests depart.

19 Over Yao New Year, which coincides with Chinese New Year (this village is only 8 km away from the border with Chinese Yunan province). The shamans perform a ritual dance, in a row of four. Imitating soldiers riding horses, they proceed to cross the room towards an altar, on which offerings to the spirits are put, a slaughtered pig, chickens and rice. Arriving at the altar, they bow, kneel and pray to the spirits. They then go back to the other side of the room and repeat the dance, but miming a new persona each time: the celestial dragon general, the great prince, or a snake. The man on the left is the leader, who shows people what to do.

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Catalogue



Photo # 1 Ceremony for the spirits of the departed I, Shaman Dancing, 2005



Photo # 2 Ceremony for the spirits of the departed I, Copying sacred text I, 2005



Photo # 3 Ceremony for the spirits of the departed I, Shaman reading a sacred text, 2005



Photo # 4 Ordination Ceremony Yao Mun I, Copying a sacred text II, 2005



Photo # 5 Ceremony for the spirits of the departed II, Taking a break after lunch, 2005



Photo # 6 Ceremony for the spirits of the departed II, Untitled I, 2006



Photo # 7 Ceremony for the spirits of the departed II, Communing with the Spirits, 2006



Photo # 8 Ordination Ceremony Yao Mun II, Untitled II, 2007



Photo # 9 Ordination Ceremony Yao Mun II, Cooking for a crowd, 2007



Photo # 10 Ordination Ceremony Yao Mien, Offerings to the Ancestors, 2008



Photo # 11 Ordination Ceremony Yao Mien, Conclusion I, 2008



Photo # 12 Ordination Ceremony Yao Mien, Conclusion II, 2008



Photo # 14 Ordination Ceremony Yao Mun III, Erecting the “Altar”, 2009



Photo # 15 Ordination Ceremony Yao Mun III, Holding on, 2009



Photo # 16 Ordination Ceremony Yao Mun III, Untitled III, 2009



Photo # 17 Ordination Ceremony Yao Mun III, Copying Sacred Text III, 2009



Photo # 18 Ordination Ceremony Yao Mun III, After the Ceremony, 2009



Photo # 19 New year Celebration Yao Mien, Ceremonial Dance, 2009

With all our thanks to the friends who have made this exhibition & publication possible.

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Epson Ultrachrome pigment based inks on Epson Velvet Archival paper.
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