



Working Paper No. 3, March 2006

OF *SOUKHUAN* AND LAOS

Elena Gregoria Chai Chin Fern

Working Paper Series

**Faculty
of
Social Sciences**

uni
DS
555.42
C434
2006

OF SOUKHUAN AND LAOS

Elena Gregoria Chai Chin Fern

Faculty of Social Science,
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SARAWAK

Introduction

Modern societies need ritual elaborations as much as they need science (Ernest Gellner; 1992:91). As Gellner puts it, "ritual now mirrors, not the real situation, but the past or fictitious distribution of social power in Laos". The *soukhuan* is the most ubiquitous of all occasions and celebrations, according to a Lao scholar, Phoumirath (2002) in his paper titled *Laoness Performed: Rituals, Memory and Identity In Laos Wedding*. Phoumirath wrote that the *soukhuan* ceremony is an integral part of the Lao village life. It can be compared to the Javanese *slametan* that Clifford Geertz (1960:95) called a 'core ritual' which acts as "..... a kind of social universal joint, fitting the various aspects of social life and individual experience together in a way which minimizes uncertainty, tension, and conflict - or at least it is supposed to do so". Like *slametan*, the Lao *soukhuan* can be held for various ceremonies such as farewell, welcoming someone, birth of a baby, house warming, job promotions, harvesting season, acquisition of a new car, and during a marriage ceremony. The *soukhuan* is also performed for special people such as foreign guests or ambassadors, and during special events such as the New Year and at formal receptions.

The practices of traditional beliefs is part and parcel of the daily lives of Lao. Although they have begun to embrace the modern world, the government of Laos has reinstated many traditional practices and ceremonies into mainstream society. One of them is *soukhuan*, which literally means 'the calling of souls' which has been incorporated into various local and national events. It has even come to a point where it is considered a part of national identity. Nevertheless, the perception that links *soukhuan* to animistic beliefs will prevail in the minds of many people. Although the term 'animism' is contentious among scholars, it is my personal belief that *soukhuan* can be defined as an animistic belief as it concerns the indiscernible world dealing with human souls.

The *soukhuan*, known also as *baci* ceremony, according to Phoumirath, is one tradition that best characterizes the Lao identity. He added, "although this custom is not unique to the Lao, it has been said that it is a Lao ceremony 'par excellence'. Attempts have been made to raise the ceremony to the level of national identity for the Lao" (2002:1). Ruth-Inge Heinze in her book entitled *Tham Khuan* (1982:98) wrote, "The idea of *khuan* cuts across Western categories of 'psychological' and 'spiritual'. The *khuan* concept does 'objectify' certain psychological features, most specifically the 'psychological balance' or equilibrium of the individual, but it also 'spiritualizes'