

Cultural Do's and Don'ts: Laotian Elderly

- The most important, culturally sensitive approach in meeting Lao elderly is to express symbolic politeness and respect that is interpreted through body movements. For greetings, one should bow deeply, holding both hands in a praying position and lowering the head and shoulders, bending at the waist. This should also be done upon leaving.
- The formal greeting upon meeting a Lao is to say, "Sah-bye-dee." Lao people very much appreciate hearing this greeting from strangers and visitors.
- The use of words in the Lao language is often complicated and based on beliefs about the relationships the Lao people have with spirits. Some sincere expressions used by the Lao people may be considered inappropriate to Americans, or even to other cultures. For instance, a Lao may say, "I hate your baby very much." Actually, the person means, "I love your baby very much." This expression is used because the Lao believe if you claim to love the child, a demon will take the baby's soul away. The expression, "I hate your baby very much," is meant to fool the demon, thereby protecting the baby from evil. For the Lao, the meaning of words do not necessarily refer to the translation. They refer to how words need to deflect bad feelings, situations, etc., while enhancing good feelings.
- In Lao culture, three units play important parts in paying respect to the elderly: the family, society, and religious leaders. For families, the parents play the most important role. Respect is shown by bowing and bringing the praying hands up to the bottom of the nose. For social leaders, such as an important community elder or a statesman, the praying hands should touch the eyebrows. Finally, for the head monks in the temple, the hands should be brought up to the top of the forehead.
- Do not call elders by their first name. Respect is shown by calling middle aged (50 to 60 years old) men "nya-poh" and women "nya-meh." Old elders (60 years on up) are called "poh-tu" for men and "meh-tu" for women. It is also acceptable to say, "Mr." and "Mrs."
- If you pass in front of an elder who is sitting, make sure to show respect by bending the body while walking.
- Give the elderly priority--let them go first in line, be the first to sit, stand, eat, etc.
- It is a sign of importance to be introduced to the leader of the monks. Monks are considered "more pure" because of their way of life. A monk can indicate if it is allowable for men to touch him. **Women should not touch the monk.** If this should happen, the monk will have to go into a three-month period of purification. Please be most careful around Lao monks.
- Do not touch the head of a Lao person, especially an elder. Placing one's hand on someone else's head is positively offensive. Women, especially, should not touch a man or boy's head.

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Do not reach for objects above the head of the elderly without permission. The Lao believe that the body is inhabited by 32 souls. The head has primary significance.

- Just as the head holds a special, positive significance to the Lao people, the foot represents a negative significance. It is considered very rude and insulting to touch another person's body with one's foot. Raising the foot to point at an object or to show direction is objectionable. Instead, one should use the finger to point out an object, location, or direction. Likewise, sit with both feet on the floor, never placed on furniture or crossed at the knee so that the foot is pointing at someone.
- Removing the shoes before entering the home or temple is necessary.
- If possible, try to use an interpreter to know the correct way of addressing your client.
- Be careful using the word "friend." Friendship is defined very differently in Lao culture. Being friends means a life and death support of each other. Friendship is signified by a ceremony between two people.
- The elderly believe in the following saying: "You can finish doing many things but you can never finish forgiving."
- If possible, it is appropriate to bring a little dessert dish or small fruit basket to the family when meeting with them.

Traditional Holidays

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| February 24 | • Makabusa (Bread Festival), a religious day |
| March 23 | • Army Day |
| March 26 | • Phravetsandon, Buddha's previous incarnation, a religious day |
| April 14-16 | • Lao New Year |
| May 24 | • Independence Day |
| June 27 | • Vesaka Busa, the birth, enlightenment, and death of Buddha, a religious day |
| July 22 | • Asalaha Busa, a religious day marking the first day the Monk enters the temple for three months of seclusion |
| September 4 | • Ancestor's day, a religious day to offer food |
| September 19 | • Ancestor's day, a religious day to offer food again |
| October 19 | • Boat Racing Festival, a religious day ending the three-month period the Monk spends in the temple |
| November 17 | • That Luang Festival, an international fair day |