



# The Land of A Million Elephants and Me: Cross-Culturally Analyzing My First Experiences in Laos



Laslie Ling-ling Phongsa

Department of Counseling and Psychology

Tennessee Technological University

## Abstract

Expounding upon Earnest E. Boesch's chapter in *Psychology and Culture*, "First Experiences in Thailand," I will be providing an outlook similar to his regarding another country: Laos, Thailand's neighboring country. As a first-generation Laotian-American, I visited my family's home country for the first time as a teenager. I will discuss my first experiences in Laos and how, in retrospect, they connect with different aspects of psychology and culture. The topics discussed include, but are not limited to, overall Laotian culture in relation to American culture, priming different cultural mindsets when experiencing events, and the importance of food in the Laotian culture. References to Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions will also be used to analyze my first experiences in Laos.

## Background

I am a 22 year old, first generation Laotian-American daughter of a family that migrated to the United States from the southeastern Asian country of Laos. When I was in high school, I took a trip with my family for the first time to visit their home country. I experienced many events and people that were extremely different from my own home country of the United States. Now that I am a graduate student with a B.S. in Psychology, I have been given the chance to analyze my Laotian trip in relation to the knowledge I have gained about my field and culture in general.



My family and relatives get together for a photo after a *su khwan* ceremony, 2013.

## Lao Culture

- **Individualism vs. Collectivism, degree of acting as individuals versus as a group (Hofstede 1993):** Major importance was placed on family and how others would perceive and react to one's actions, the biggest difference I remember when comparing America and Laos. My relatives attended to us very closely while we stayed in Laos, regardless of how exactly we were related to them. Though there is not an official analysis of cultural dimensions for Laos, it can be inferred that this country scores higher in the *Collectivism* dimension than America does.
- **Religion:** My family and I were greeted with many different Buddhist ceremonies, an important one being *su khwan* (Cooper, 2010). Because this was my brother and my first time seeing our relatives, they were all eager to call upon the souls in the community to wish us well on our trip to Laos, back home, and everything in between with this ceremony.
- **Homes:** My grandparents and roughly one-fourth of my relatives lived in the rural areas of Laos. Though more people are shifting from rural work to city work (Bouté & Pholsena, 2017) in Laos, my grandparents had moved to the country to retire. My younger cousins, however, followed this trend of working in the cities and residing there, especially in the capital of Vientiane.
- **Food:** Food played a major factor in the togetherness of the Lao culture. My family and I were often offered food and drink at times of our first arrival and when we left, or even if our relatives just wanted to show us affection. I had off handedly mentioned that I loved to eat hog maw (pig stomach) to one of my aunts, and she immediately went out the next day to get some prepared for me. "Especially buying and cooking organ meat for you, that means they really love you," my mother said when she saw what my aunt had gifted to me.



My grandmother dresses in traditional clothes for a ceremony to bless my family on our travels back to America, 2013.

## Cultural Mindset

Several instances allowed me to switch between thinking in an American cultural mindset and a Lao cultural mindset with simple priming.

- Conversations with my peer aged cousins either started in Lao OR English.
- Aspects of Western culture appeared in Laos, such as the way malls were set up in the city. Comparatively, shopping centers that were more rural reminded me of the few Lao shops I had seen in America. I found it easier to speak Lao to these vendors than the ones at the big, urban malls.
- Greetings were followed mainly by a *nop*, a small bow with the hands clasped together (Cooper, 2010).

## References

- Bouté, V. & Pholsena, V. (2017). *Changing Lives in Laos: Society, Politics, and Culture in a Post-Socialist State*. Singapore: NUS Press.
- Cooper, R. (2010). *Culture Shock! : CultureShock! Laos : Laos (2nd Edition) (2)*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Ptd.
- Hofstede, G. (1993). Cultural constraints in management theories. *The Executive*, 7(1), 81. Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/210520806?accountid=28833>
- Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations Across Nations (Second Edition)*. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage Publications.
- Hofstede, G. & Minkov, M. (2010). *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind (Revised and Expanded 3rd Edition)*. McGraw-Hill.