

Keeping Traditions Alive in Laos



IN THE NORTHERN PROVINCE of Luang Prabang, Laos, ethnic minorities constitute the majority of the population. As the province struggles to balance entering the developed world and conserving its ethnic identity, a local museum, the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre (TAEC), has stepped in to lend a helping hand.

“Language, traditional handicraft skills, and traditional knowledge are all being affected,” says Tara Gujadhur, co-director of TAEC. “For most outsiders, the easiest thing to notice is the lack of traditional clothing—most ethnic people wear market-bought western or Lao-style clothing now. Further, young people, as they are going to school, working outside the village, and being trained in new skills no longer practice traditional arts, such as basket-weaving, embroidery, natural dyeing, etc., or they are practicing the skills but without the same mastery and expertise as their parents or grandparents.”

Housed in a UNESCO World Heritage Site, this private, nonprofit museum works to celebrate and preserve Laos’s multiethnic heritage by creating opportunities for learning and exchange. The permanent collection displays full ensembles of traditional clothing, organized according to each of Laos’s four ethnolinguistic groups: the Austroasiatic, the Sino-Tibetan, the Hmong-Yao, and the Tai-Kadai language speakers. The collection also highlights unique cultural details; the Akha (Sino-Tibetan) women keep a needle case under the waste of their tunic for stitching. The temporary collections are products of extensive research, and the museum’s educational component serves the local community and tourists.

Splendour and Sacrifice: Taoism of Northern Laos, on display through September 30, looks at the fifth-century B.C. Chinese philosophy-turned-religion practiced by the Yao ethnic groups who migrated to the county’s north in the eighteenth century. The tradition “has a rich history but a challenging future,” explains Gujadhur. The product of two years of research, the exhibition presents clothing, masks, and tools used during rituals, including a three-year-old silk-embroidered Yao Mun priest’s robe and a one-hundred-year-old ceremonial robe. Future temporary exhibitions will showcase basketweaving and wedding ceremonies.

The TAEC was founded in 2007 by Gujadhur, an American with a background in anthropology and indigenous community development, and Thongkhoun Souththivilay, a local resident and the former collection manager and conservator at the Luang Prabang National Museum. Their combined knowledge fosters a vibrant learning environment where visitors can participate in special events and children’s activities. “We’ve had requests for tailored tours for school groups and textile specialists, and seminars that focus on the impact of tourism on ethnic cultures in Laos,” says Gujadhur.

In the face of modernization and increased tourism, people are seeing value in maintaining Laos’s rich cultural heritage. In October 2010, Luang Prabang celebrated its first Ethnic Cultural Festival. The celebration drew numerous ethnic minority communities who came to share their traditional culture through song, dance, games, food, and handicrafts. With the support of the TAEC, Laos is hanging on to its cultural legacy, while still keeping an eye on the future. www.taeclaos.org

ABOVE: The Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre. RIGHT, TOP: Kmhmu Kouene girls in traditional dress. Photo: Philippe Coste. RIGHT, MIDDLE: A Louma woman’s outfit from Phongsaly province. RIGHT, BOTTOM: The center’s Akha exhibition. All images shown courtesy of The Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre in Luang Prabang, Laos. All photos by Kees Sprengers unless otherwise noted.

