



From olden times, Isahn people believed in gods and guardian spirits, and in household spirits, benevolent spirits and the spirits of departed relatives, for example. However, every large village had a Buddhist temple and the only way to receive an education was to ordain [as a novice] and study in the temple. The subjects studied were Lao, Tham, and Khom scripts, and traditional methods of arithmetic using formulas in Sanskrit mixed with Lao (the Thai script was not yet studied in those days). Isahn people held that every boy should ordain in order to learn how to read and write, and anyone who had not ordained was seen as immature and ignorant (that is, had not been to school). The tradition of making merit was the same [as the Lao] in every way. The biggest and most important festivals were the Boun Mahasat Festival and the Boun Bang Fai [Rocket] Festival (the season for holding the Boun Mahasat Festival was usually from the fourth to the fifth month, while the Rocket Festival was held between the full moon of the sixth month until the waxing moon of the eighth month).

I would like to speak specifically about the Boun Mahasat or Boun Phavet Festival (the festival for listening to sermons on the story of Prince Vessantara), which is the biggest festival. Before setting up the festival the monks and the villagers would meet together to agree the dates and which villages would participate (which villages would be invited to hold a joint festival). When this was agreed, the manuscript of the Vessantara Jataka – which is 13 volumes in palmleaf manuscript – would be shared out amongst those who would recite the sermons, comprising monks from the local temple as well as those invited from other villages (sometimes there were 40 or 50 in all). The books that were shared out in this way are called kan and they were divided up according to the monks to be invited. Leaflets were written (announcements and invitations for the festival) to be distributed along with these books, saying “Respectful Greetings! All of us, lead by Abbot (or The Venerable), together with the elders and village chief, are joining together to hold the Boun Mahasat Festival and would therefore like to invite the elders, parents, and young men and women to listen to the sermons and partake of our hospitality.”

The [local] villagers shared in helping to provide food and hospitality for people from other villages, with each residential area or group of 34 households providing for one village, which is called “the festival support.” Besides this, the household members who were supporting a particular village would erect pavilions within the temple grounds until these surrounded the main building except for the entrance way, and when the day of the festival arrived, mats would be spread out and water jars put in place. People coming to the festival would shelter in the pavilions built by the laypeople. At dusk, the villagers would carry out food and eat together in a

relaxed way in the pavilions, and when night fell the young men would visit them to court the young women. There would be music and folk songs and recitation of verses and it was a time of great enjoyment, completely free from any wrongdoing, quarrels, or fighting and killing. This is just a brief account of the customs of the people in my birthplace and of the many things that I saw with my own eyes which make me feel that the culture or traditions of former times and the present are as different as heaven and earth.