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**Announcements:****Call for Article Submissions for the JLS:**

The study of Laos and the Lao has grown significantly over the past decade. With the opening up of some historical and manuscript archives, the improvement of communication and transportation, and the launching of joint Lao-foreign research projects, Laos has attracted a number of new scholars in diverse fields of expertise. The *Journal of Lao Studies* (JLS) is an exciting new scholarly project which is expected to become the first and most prestigious venue for researchers who work on Laos.

We are now accepting submissions of articles, book review suggestions, review articles (extended reviews of major publications, trends in the field, or of political, social, or economic events). These submissions can cover studies on Laos, the Lao diaspora (Northeast Thailand, Europe, the Americas, Australia, and so on), or studies in regards to ethnic groups found in Laos (Hmong, Akha, Khmu, among others).

Language: Lao and English are the main languages, other languages are welcomed. Please check with the editors first before submitting articles in other languages not listed here.

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# Folk Epidemiology Recorded in Palm Leaf Manuscripts of Laos

Bethany G. Elkington, Kongmany Sydara, John F. Hartmann, Bounhong Southavong, D. Doel Soejarto<sup>1</sup>

**Key terms:** epidemiology, traditional medicine knowledge, medical ethnobotany

## Abstract

In an effort to preserve traditional medicine knowledge and to uncover information about disease patterns and treatment in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR), linguistic experts have scanned centuries-old medical palm leaf manuscripts for disease entries. A list of more than 7000 diseases has resulted, shedding valuable light onto the medical history and traditional medicine heritage of the people of Laos, as well as providing an index for faster research into specific diseases and their traditional treatments.

## Background

The use of palm leaves for record keeping is believed to have originated in India, dating back to the sixth century BC, and was brought to Laos by Buddhist missionaries in the form of Pali-Sanskrit scriptures.<sup>2</sup> Traditionally, palm leaf manuscripts (*bailan* in the Lao language) found in Laos have been created by Buddhist monks as a means of keeping religious records. However, the manuscripts have also been used to keep other kinds of records, such as those relating to history, law, customs, astrology and magic, as well as traditional medicine and healing.

The palm leaf manuscripts of Laos are typically created with leaves from the palmyra palm (*Borassus flabellifer* L., Arecaceae), a palm tree with large, fan-like leaves. A similar material that has been used to make the manuscripts comes from leaves of *Corypha* sp. (Arecaceae). Both of these trees are featured in figure 1. The leaves are cleaned, dried, and sanded to form a flat writing surface. Then a sharp object, like a metal-tipped stylus, is used to scratch characters onto the leaves. The rounded characters found in the manuscripts are probably indicative of the material constraints that inform their creation; straight lines and angles tend to tear the palm leaves while curved lines do not. Conversely, rectangular characters may be associated with records carved in stone.<sup>3</sup> Usually, there are four or five lines of engraved writing on each side.

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<sup>2</sup> John F. Hartmann, "The Spread of South Indic Scripts in Southeast Asia," *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 3, no. 1(1986): 7.

<sup>3</sup> Hartmann, "The Spread of South Indic Scripts," 15.

Once the writing is complete, a mixture of soot and oil is rubbed onto the leaves, and the soot gets caught in the scratches to make the characters stand out. The tools are shown in figure 3. It has been reported that the soot or ashes often come from the cremated remains of a monk's teachers, attesting to the sacredness of the documents.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 1:** Trees used to make palm leaf manuscripts. a) *Borassus flabellifer* L. (Photo courtesy of Morakot Wattanasak and Rungsima Lertjanyarak.) b) Lan tree. *Corypha lecomtei* Becc. ex Lecomte. (Photo courtesy of Monchai Phongsiri.)

<sup>4</sup> Justin T. McDaniel, "Some Thoughts on Hoi Kaeo and Wohan in Lao Buddhist Literature," Presented at the Second International Conference on Lao Studies at Arizona State University, May 5, 2007.



**Figure 2:** Palm leaf manuscripts.

Typically, one palm leaf measures around 45-55 cm in length and 4-5 cm in width. There is a commonly held belief in the temples that one can tell the subject material of a manuscript by the length of its bundles. For example, religious manuscripts will be the length of an arm, and medical manuscripts the length of a forearm. The leaves are threaded together with cord and held between wooden covers, and they are usually wrapped in cloth for storage. Although they are susceptible to decay from mold and insects, if the manuscripts are properly stored, they will last for hundreds of years.



**Figure 3:** Instruments used to inscribe palm leaf manuscripts.



Another type of material that has been used to keep records is paper made from the bark of the paper mulberry tree (*Broussonetia papyrifera* (L.) L'Hérit. ex Vent., Moraceae), known as *sa* in the Lao language (figure 4). Using this material allows for the creation of a larger and softer surface area to write on (figure 5), but it is much less durable than the palm leaves.



**Figure 4:** Paper mulberry tree, *Broussonetia papyrifera* (L.) L'Hérit. ex Vent.



**Figure 5:** Reading from a paper mulberry book.

The Preservation of Lao Manuscripts Programme (PLMP) of the Lao Ministry of Information & Culture, which received support from the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was established in 1992 and ran for more than ten years. It followed an inventory project funded by the Toyota Foundation in Japan, which laid the groundwork to reignite interest in the manuscripts held in rural Lao communities.<sup>5</sup> The PLMP surveyed more than 800 *wat* (monasteries) and, in the process, managed to preserve more than 86,000 texts.<sup>6</sup> Through active interaction with local communities,

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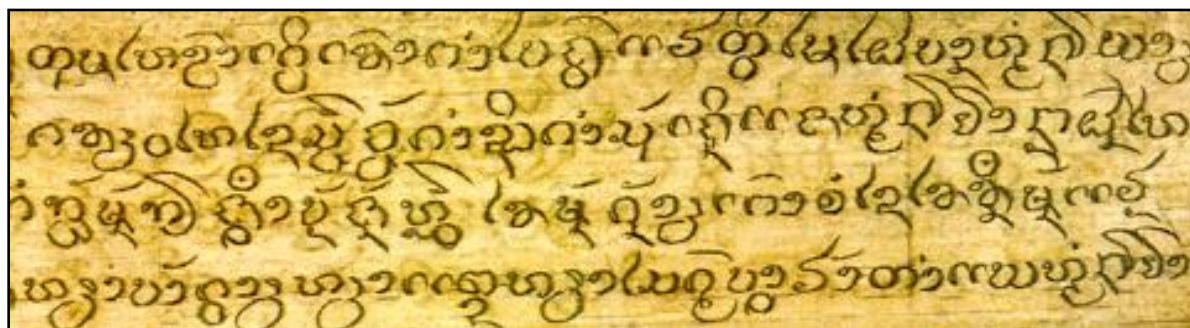
<sup>5</sup> Dara Kanlaya, “The Preservation of Palm-leaf Manuscripts in the Lao PDR,” in *The Literary Heritage of Laos: Preservation, Dissemination, and Research Perspectives*, ed. Kongdeuane Nettavong et al. (Vientiane: National Library of Laos, 2005), 362.

<sup>6</sup> Harald Hundius, “Lao Manuscripts and Traditional Literature: The Struggle for their Survival,” in *The Literary Heritage of Laos: Preservation, Dissemination, and Research Perspectives*, ed. Kongdeuane Nettavong et al. (Vientiane: National Library of Laos, 2005), 5.



the project has emphasized the importance and proper handling and storage techniques of the manuscripts. During the surveys, microfilm duplicates of nearly 12,000 texts were reproduced *in situ*, the majority of which were recorded on palm leaves. Each text in the microfilm was catalogued with a unique code, allowing for easy recognition of the origin and subject matter of the manuscript. These microfilms are now incorporated in the Digital Library of Lao Manuscripts Collection. The National Library of Laos launched a website allowing public access of more than 8,000 of the images on microfilm in 2009. The website can be found at <http://www.laomanuscripts.net>.

The oldest manuscripts held in Laos today are from the beginning of the sixteenth century.<sup>7</sup> At least seven different spoken languages have been found in the manuscripts held at the National Library, transcribed in at least nine distinct written scripts.<sup>8</sup> However, in the majority of the manuscripts in Laos, the Tham script is used to transcribe the spoken Lao language,<sup>9</sup> as demonstrated in figure 6. The word “Tham” signifies the Lao term for the Pali term *Dhamma*. Tham is a written script derived from a Mon alphabet, which, in turn, has roots in South India. Pali, another term that is frequently associated with the manuscripts, is an Indic language that has traditionally been used to record poetry, as well as ethical, astrological, medical, narrative, historical, and grammatical texts in parts of South Asia and among the majority of the Buddhist lineages of mainland Southeast Asia.



**Figure 6:** Example of Tham-Lao in a medical palm leaf manuscript.

Many Buddhist monks have also been healers, and have kept a record of their treatments in the palm leaf and mulberry paper manuscripts.<sup>10</sup> Some of the manuscripts containing information about healing and medicine date back at least two hundred years. The National Library has digitized at least 1500 microfilm images containing information about healing or traditional medicine. Adding to the data, the Institute of Traditional Medicine (ITM) in Vientiane holds a collection of medical manuscripts, which they began translating into modern Lao script more than ten years ago.

<sup>7</sup> National Library of Laos 2009, “DLLM Collection,” “Texts,” second paragraph.

<sup>8</sup> National Library of Laos 2009, “DLLM Collection,” “Languages and Scripts,” “Statistics,” “Number of texts and digital images by language and script.” Languages include Monolingual Pali, Pali and Vernacular, Lao, Lan Na, Tai Lue, Tai Nuea, Tai Dam, Thai, and Other. Scripts include Tham Lao, Tham Lan Na, Tham Lue, Khom, Lao Buhan, Lik Tai Nuea, Thai, Tai Dam, and Other.

<sup>9</sup> McDaniel, *Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words*, 35, 143.

<sup>10</sup> Kamala Tiyavanich, *The Buddha in the Jungle* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 326, 335.

As many anthropologists have noted, medicine and magic often go hand-in-hand,<sup>11</sup> and many of the “medical” manuscripts contain entries that include what is often referred to as “magic” or “sorcery.”<sup>12</sup> For example, there are entries in the manuscripts about love potions and instructions for regaining lost items. As a result, the National Library has sorted medical and magical manuscripts into the same category. However, the vast majority of manuscripts about traditional healing cite the use of different plants to treat different ailments.

## Objectives

In its broader context, this research is part of an international, multidisciplinary project, which aims to improve human health through the discovery of new medicines, biodiversity conservation, and the promotion of scientific research and sustainable economic activity in Vietnam and Laos.<sup>13</sup> One objective of the present research was to develop an index of diseases, thereby minimizing the amount of time required to find information about specific ailments. Thus, if a researcher is interested in the traditional treatments for a specific disease or symptom, he/she can simply do a search of the database to find all listed instances of that disease and then go to the original manuscripts to learn more about the treatments.

At the same time, this study also aimed to quantify and analyze the ailments that were treated in Laos in the past and shed some light on the medical history of the people. Certain trends in what was treated in the past may be indicative of diseases that are presently plaguing the people of the region.

## Methods

Through the National Library’s categorization methods, thirty-one rolls of microfilm containing 1,039 digital manuscript images were identified as containing information about healing or traditional medicine. Two professional translators at the National Library, Ajan Bounleuth and Ajan Thongxeuy, read through the 1,039 pages of digital manuscripts and made a list of what they found. Two healers who had previously been monks and had learned the Tham script – a traditional healer named Bountham Panyachit and a medical doctor named Uthai Souanasee – examined six bundles of medical manuscripts held at the Institute of Traditional Medicine, the National Library, and a few temples, also making a list of the diseases that they found. The lists referenced where each entry could be found in the manuscripts, effectively generating an index for the manuscripts.

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<sup>11</sup> William Halse R. Rivers, *Medicine, Magic, and Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1924; New York: Routledge, 2001 reprint), 36.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Pottier, *Yu Di Mi Heng: être bien, avoir de la force; essai sur les pratiques thérapeutiques Lao* (Paris: Ecole Française Extrême Orient, 2007), 124.

<sup>13</sup> Djaja Djendoel Soejarto et al., “Studies on Biodiversity of Vietnam and Laos: The UIC-Based ICBG Program,” *Pharmaceutical Biology* 37, Supplement (1999): 100-113; D. D. Soejarto et al., 100; “Ethnobotany/ethnopharmacology and Mass Bioprospecting: Issues on Intellectual Property and Benefit-sharing,” *Journal of Ethnopharmacology* 100, no. 1-2 (2005): 17-18.

Dr. Kongmany Sydara at the Institute of Traditional Medicine then translated the disease entries from Lao into English. Both the English and Lao entries were analyzed. The number of occurrences of entire names of ailments was counted to gain an overview the list. Following this step, a search was done for shorter, simpler search terms of one or two words relating to different body parts and symptoms.

## Results and Discussion

A database containing 9,706 entries from the manuscripts was created. Of these entries, 325 disease entries came from original palm leaf and/or mulberry paper manuscripts, and 9,381 entries came from the microfilm. There were 1,210 citations of *sainyasat*, very roughly translated as “magic,”<sup>14</sup> 711 entries that did not contain medical information, and 532 notes about entries that were unclear or illegible. In total, from the 9,706 total entries in the database, there are 7,080 citations about treating specific ailments. An excerpt from the database is shown in table 1.

**Table 1:** Sample of medical palm leaf manuscript index

Province	Microfilm Code	Disease (Lao Script)	Possible English translation
Luang Prabang	0395_322	ໄຂ້ບວດຕົວ	Fever with body ache
Luang Prabang	0395_322	ໄຂ້ໜ້າແດງ	Fever with red face
Champasak	0910_145	ບໍ່ແຈ້ງ	Not clear
Salavan	0897_390	ບໍ່ມີ	No disease listed
Khammuan	0739_361	ຢາກິນຜົດ	Food allergy
Savannakhet	0820_063	ຢາຂີຮາກ	Cholera
Salavan	0897_390	ຢາແຂ້ວໜັ້ນ	Maintain teeth
Khammuan	0739_360	ຢາໄຂ້ຕີນເຢັນມືເຢັນ	Fever causing cold feet and hands
Xayabouly	0613_402	ຢາຄະຍື	Asthma
Salavan	0897_390	ຢາແຈ້ບແຂ້ວ	Tooth ache
Salavan	0897_391	ຢາແຈ້ບຕາ	Eyes ache
Xayabouly	0613_402	ຢາແຈ້ບທ້ອງແລ້ງ	Abdominal pain
Xayabouly	0613_402	ຢາແຈ້ບຫົວໃຈ	Chest pain
Vientiane	0025_075	ຢາແຈ້ບຫົວຝາຍດຽວ	Migraine
Xayabouly	0613_402	ຢາຍຸ່ງວ	Urination
Vientiane	0025_076	ຢານ້ຳນົມຫລາຍ	Galactagogue

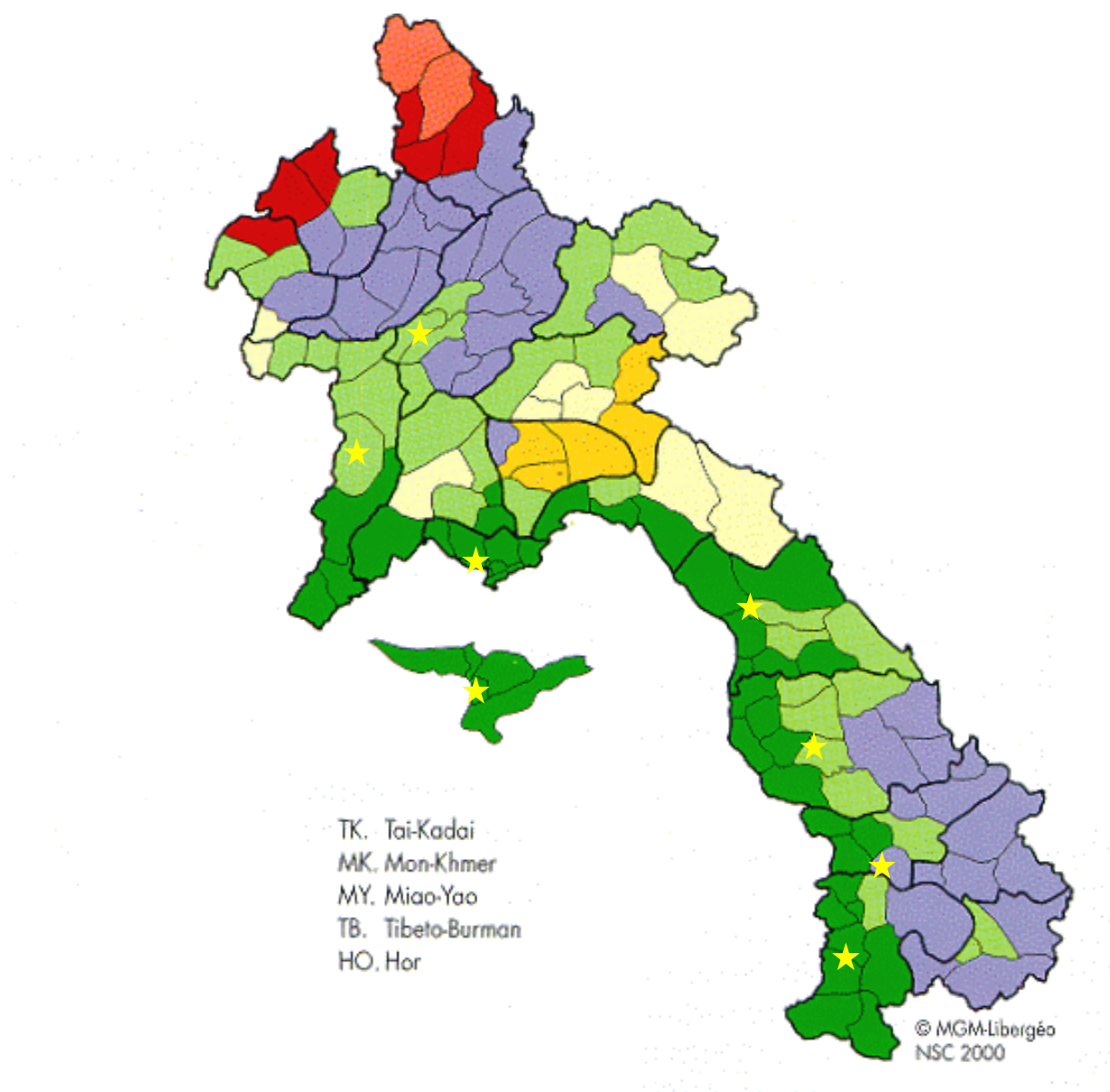
<sup>14</sup> Justin McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand* (New York: Columbia University, 2011), 109-111.



Savannakhet	0820_062	ຢາບວດຫິວ	Kidney pain
Salavan	0897_390	ຢາຟີປາກອາກ	Abscess with open apex
Savannakhet	0820_062	ຢາສະເອີະ	Hiccup
Salavan	0897_390	ຢາໝາກສຸກ	Eruptive fever
Savannakhet	0820_062	ຢາໝາກໂຫກລົມ	Heartburn (only wind)
Luang Prabang	0395_320	ຢາຫ້າມໄຂ້ສັນນິບາດ	Fever with convulsions
Salavan	0897_391	ຢາຫູໜວກ	Deafness
Khammuan	0739_360	ຢາອາບນ້ຳມົນ	Bath of water empowered by mantras
Xayabouly	0613_402	ຢາເອ້ນ	Tendon diseases
Xayabouly	0613_403	ຢາຮານຂີໝູ	Jaundice
Champasak	0910_143	ໄສຍະສາດ	Magical art

The palm leaf manuscripts that were studied originated from the provinces of Champasak, Khammuan, Luang Prabang, Xayabouly, Salavan, Savannakhet, and Vientiane. These are indicated in figure 7. Four written scripts (Lao Buhan, Tham Lao, Tham Leu, and Thai) were found to transcribe four spoken languages (Lao, Pali, Tai Leu, and Thai). Only three of the manuscripts were dated, with dates of 1275 CS (1913 CE), 2491 BE (1948 CE), and 2520 BE (1977 CE).<sup>15</sup> All other manuscripts were undated.

<sup>15</sup> CS stands for “Cullasakarāja,” which is an era beginning at 638 CE. CE stands for “Christian Era,” which is the same as “Anno Domini” or AD. BE stands for “Buddhist Era,” beginning in 545 BC (Before Christ) in Thailand and Laos.

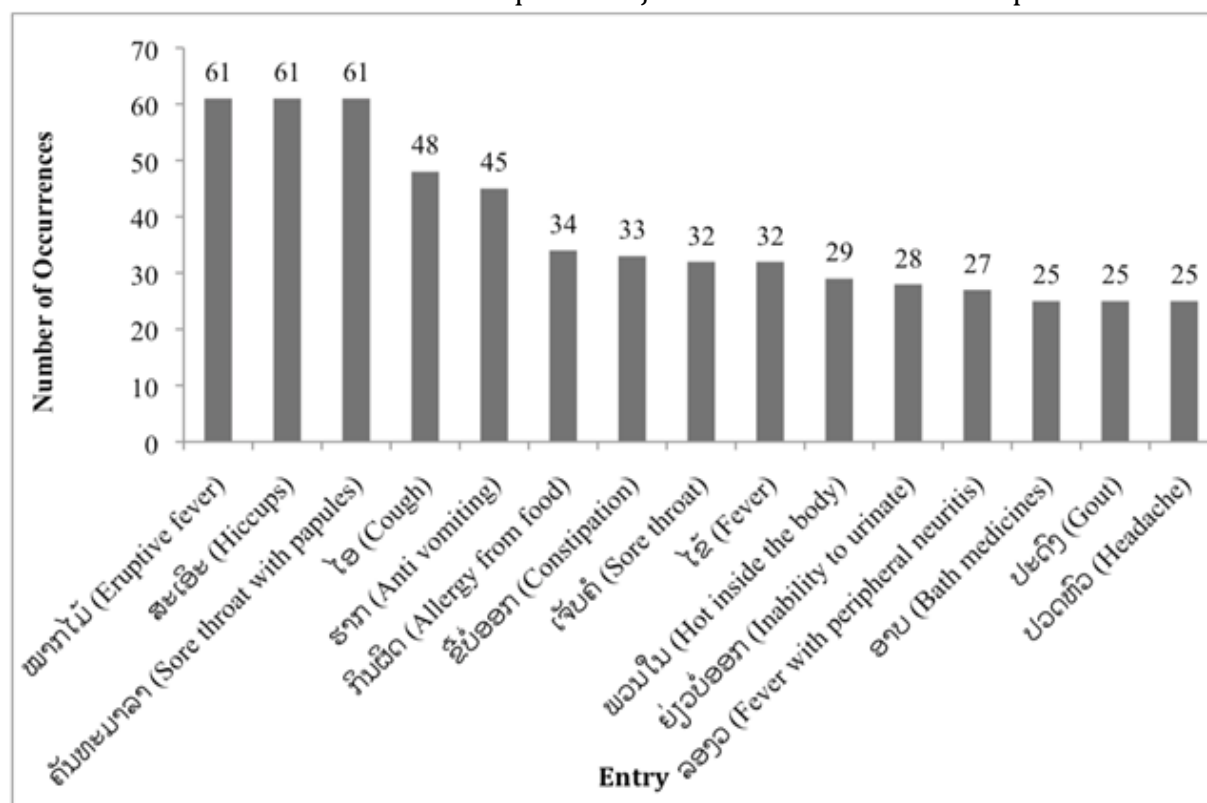


**Figure 7:** Map of the study area, denoting ethnolinguistic areas. Yellow stars indicate the approximate origins of the manuscripts used in this study. (Image adapted from Bounthavy Sisouphanthong and Christian Taillard, *Atlas of Laos: Spatial Structures of the Economic and Social Development of the Lao People's Democratic Republic* [Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2000]: 45.)

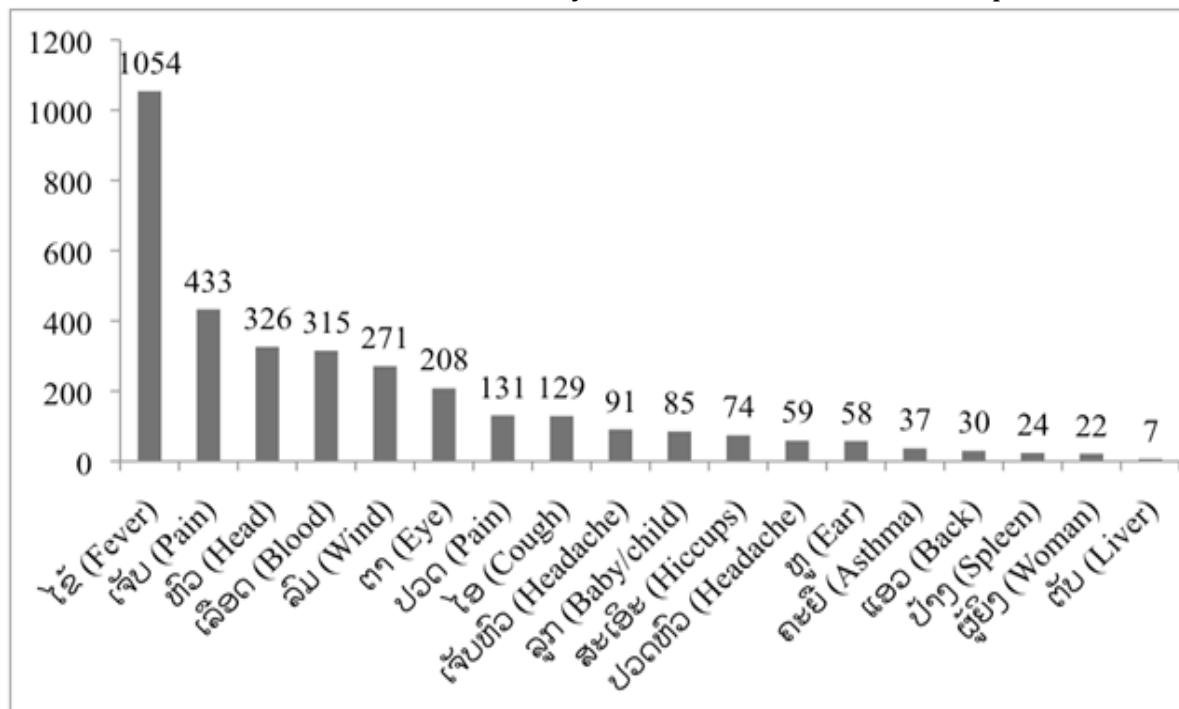
The database was sorted to see which entries were most common (table 2), and some simpler, arbitrary terms were counted (table 3). It is worth noting that there were 61 entries for “hiccups” (*sa eu*) when the list was sorted by entry, but 74 entries were found when doing a specific search for the same term. This is because some entries contained more than one ailment and, therefore, were sorted differently. Treatments containing the term “fever” (*khai*) were listed quite frequently, with 1,054 citations. “Pain” was indicated by at least two different terms (*jep*, with 433 citations, and *pouat*,

with 131 citations) and the term for “head” (*hua*) came up 326 times. Remarkably, there were only 7 occurrences of the term for “liver” (*tap*), a major cause for discomfort in Laos today. In fact, liver cancer is the leading form of cancer in Laos, with lower survival rates than seen in many other ethnic groups.<sup>16</sup>

**Table 2:** Occurrence of the most frequent subject entries in the manuscripts.



<sup>16</sup> Liver cancer is largely attributable to, among other causes, Hepatitis B. See: World Health Organization, International Agency for Research on Cancer, *GLOBOCAN 2008: Cancer Incidence, Mortality and Prevalence Worldwide in 2008*, “Lao People’s Democratic Republic” Fact Sheet, <http://globocan.iarc.fr>; Sandy L. Kwong and others, “Disparities in Hepatocellular Carcinoma Survival among Californians of Asian Ancestry, 1988 to 2007,” *Cancer Epidemiology, Biomarkers and Prevention* 19 (2010): 2747-57, <http://cebp.aacrjournals.org/content/19/11/2747.full.pdf+html?sid=cdd12423-589a-429a-8e4c-9effc9a269c3>; Hepatitis B Foundation, “Hepatitis B and Primary Liver Cancer,” Hepatitis B Foundation, November 2, 2010, [http://www.hepb.org/professionals/hepb\\_and\\_liver\\_cancer.htm](http://www.hepb.org/professionals/hepb_and_liver_cancer.htm).

**Table 3:** Occurrence of different arbitrary search terms in the manuscripts.

Difficulties encountered in this project were mainly in spelling and translation. For example, the previously-mentioned term *sainyasat* (spelled ໄຊຍະລາດ and ໄສຍະລາດ) and other culture-bound syndromes involving spiritual and animist terms, such as the phenomena of *khwan*, *pii*, and *lom*, are rather ambiguous and difficult to translate into biomedical terms.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, many entries were non-specific. The entry *fii nai thong*, roughly translated as “sores in the abdomen,” was translated into biomedical vernacular as “tuberculosis” by one translator and as “stomach ulcers” by another. The list was revised multiple times for consistency.

### Future Work

The National Library holds many more medical manuscripts that could be incorporated into this data, thereby providing more reliable statistics. There are also other analyses that could be carried out. It would be interesting to determine if there is a correlation between the frequency of specific disease entries and the region where the palm leaf manuscripts were found, possibly indicating if one region and/or ethnic group has had more experience with different diseases. A comparison of these results with similar studies from countries in the same geographic region, as well as with studies from other countries throughout the world, may reveal some interesting trends. GIS

<sup>17</sup> Pottier, *Yu Di Mi Heng*, 117, 266-280, 498, 499, 506-509.

programs might assist in the analysis as well, especially since the data are arranged according to geographic occurrences, i.e., provinces.

The major limitation of this project was the need to translate the entries before investigation, for information is easily lost in the process of translation. A possible solution to this problem could be to conduct a digital character recognition search directly from the digitized microfilm images.

## Summary

A great deal of the traditional healing art in Laos is well preserved in historical medical manuscripts still found in the country today. Analysis of these medical manuscripts could lead to invaluable new discoveries about the medical history of the people of Laos and alternative medical treatments. In-depth studies of the manuscripts by the scholarly community are helping to demonstrate the importance of the manuscripts while, at the same time, affirming the Lao people's intellectual ownership of particular methods of disease treatment. All of this helps to encourage their preservation.

## Acknowledgements

We are thankful to the Director and staff of the National Library of Laos for granting us access to the Palm Leaf Manuscripts room, along with the use of the digital images of the medical manuscripts. Professor Harald Hundius and David Wharton have provided invaluable insights regarding the project. Mr. Monchai Phongsiri, Ms. Morakot Wattanasak, and Dr. Rungsima Lertjanyarak supplied the photos of palm leaf trees. We are eternally indebted to the Buddhist community and traditional healers who shared their knowledge with us. Funding for this project was provided by Kraft Foods, the International Cooperative Biodiversity Group Grant 2-U01-TW001015-09-10 (via funds from the US National Institutes of Health, the US National Science Foundation, and the Foreign Agricultural Service of the United States Department of Agriculture), and the Institute of International Education (via a 2008-2009 Fulbright Grant).

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# Tai Dam Funeral Forest Management can be used in REDD

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## Abstract

The proposal to reduce emissions for deforestation and degradation (REDD) has widespread support from many non-governmental agencies. Problems in implementing REDD include: 1) establishing historical forest cover and composition baselines, and 2) creating culturally relevant management strategies that can be run by local populations. The Lao People's Democratic Republic is one of the first countries chosen to participate in REDD, and this ethnobotanical and ecological study proposes a way to determine historic forest cover and composition baselines as well as a way to include local villagers in management strategies. Lao funeral forests – forest fragments preserved through culturally dictated traditions – can provide a baseline for local forest cover and composition. The culturally-dictated traditions, which include forms of active forest management on the part of the village head, should be included in management regimes of these REDD projects in order to make the conservation efforts locally relevant.

## Introduction

Deforestation is one of the leading causes of biodiversity loss and carbon dioxide emissions, which can contribute to climate change.<sup>1</sup> In 2005, a proposal to reduce emissions from deforestation and degradation (REDD) was presented to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Montreal, Canada. Since then, the proposal has gained widespread support for its potential to mitigate climate change and preserve biodiversity by maintaining intact ecosystems, and for its capacity to support the livelihoods of local people, specifically those dependent on forest resources. While REDD has not yet been approved globally, many non-governmental organizations (NGO's), such as the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), have adopted REDD as an achievable means to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions and implement sustainable forest management practices.<sup>2</sup>

A common difficulty for REDD projects is the establishment of a historic baseline with which to compare deforestation or reforestation rates. Most countries participating in REDD projects have suggested that historical national deforestation

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization, Advisory Committee on Paper and Wood Products, "Reducing Emissions from Deforestation in Developing Countries: Recent Developments in UNFCCC," June 6, 2007, <http://www.fao.org/forestry/12785-0cb33b433a0aa336a2edbce9a75d38f4c.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> International Union for Conservation of Nature, "REDD Opportunities: Integrating Sustainable Forest Management Approaches," IUCN, September 17, 2008, [http://cmsdata.iucn.org/downloads/redd\\_opportunities.pdf](http://cmsdata.iucn.org/downloads/redd_opportunities.pdf)



rates should be included in baseline calculations.<sup>3</sup> Historical baselines are typically estimated from deforestation rates over the last 10 years.<sup>4</sup> However, many countries do not have the data to establish historical baselines. A second challenge facing REDD projects is the establishment of effective monitoring and forest management programs that will implement the conservation strategies necessary to meet REDD goals.<sup>5</sup> Many REDD proposals include capacity building by incorporating indigenous rights into the REDD framework. Depending on the proposal, this can take a number of forms, from employing local leaders as the overseers of reforestation projects to implement a community based compliance plan, where community members monitor deforestation rates and forest use.<sup>6</sup> This study focuses on the Luang Namtha region of Lao, PDR. I explore land tenure changes and deforestation rates in an effort to establish a historical baseline, as well as identify local knowledge and customs, which can help determine possible management strategies (sympathetic to local customs) that can be implemented with REDD.

In July of 2008, the Lao People's Democratic Republic – hereby referred to as Laos – was selected by the World Bank as one of the first 14 countries to receive funds for REDD through the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility, or FCPF.<sup>7</sup> These funds were awarded to help Laos establish baseline reference levels for emissions, implement strategies to help reduce national deforestation, and design management and monitoring systems to regulate deforestation.

In the Namtha region of Laos, the Tai Dam tribe uses forest fragments as cemeteries (hereafter referred to as funeral forests or forest cemeteries). These areas represent the last remaining intact forest in the Namtha region. The Tai Dam burn their deceased on a funeral pyre, then place the remains in a spirit house (see figure 1) built from resources in the funeral forest; over time, the remains break down and the body is returned to the forest. Only during the multiple days of the funeral ceremony can food, medicine, and other resources be collected from the forest. In addition preserving the cultural importance of the forest, a local conservation group, Green Discovery, proposed connecting several of the funeral forests in the valley with fallow land in order to create a green corridor by the end of 2010. Wildlife in the valley had disappeared over the previous 20 years, according to Green Discovery, and they hoped a new wildlife corridor would bring some of the animals and birds back into the valley.

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<sup>3</sup> Arild Angelsen, ed., *Moving Ahead with REDD: Issues, Options and Implications* (Bogor Borat, Indonesia: Center for International Forestry Research, 2008), [http://www.cifor.org/publications/pdf\\_files/Books/BAngelsen0801.pdf](http://www.cifor.org/publications/pdf_files/Books/BAngelsen0801.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Angelsen, *Moving Ahead with REDD*.

<sup>5</sup> Angelsen, *Moving Ahead with REDD*.

<sup>6</sup> Arild Angelsen, Sandra Brown, Cyril Loisel, Leo Peskett, Charlotte Streck, and Daniel Zarin, *Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD): An Options Assessment Report* (Washington, DC: Meridian Institute, 2009). [http://www.redd-oar.org/links/REDD-OAR\\_en.pdf](http://www.redd-oar.org/links/REDD-OAR_en.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> World Bank, "First Countries Named to Benefit from Forest Carbon Partnership," *World Bank, News and Broadcast*, July 21, 2008, <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/NEWS/0,,contentMDK:21846447~pagePK:34370~piPK:34424~theSitePK:4607,00.html>.





**Figure 1:** A Tai Dam spirit house erected in 2004 for a female villager who died at the age of 65 (according to the tomb stone). Photo credit: Kristine Callis

The goals of this study are, first, to better understand the relationships between plant use, funeral ceremonies, and forest management (and, in doing so, to understand the local forest management practices of the Tai Dam in Luang Namtha), and second, to discover if current forest preservation or management techniques affect forest composition. While there were many limitations that decreased the scope of this study (e.g., the disappearance of a local leader, the halting of any ecological research in this area, and the vastly increased deforestation of the valley), the data collected from this study can still contribute to the nation-wide data being collected to help implement the REDD project in Laos. Studying the ecology and overall health of funeral forests will help establish forest composition baselines that can be used to establish local historic baselines for the REDD project. The ecological data collected here, while limited in scope, can contribute a baseline understanding of the ecology of the local funeral forests. Examining the ecology of these forests, including the relative abundance and distribution of biodiversity in tree species, will provide a more accurate view of the ongoing land use changes in this region of Laos. Other than the cultural taboos surrounding the forest, the management practices of the Tai Dam within these forest fragments are unknown. Understanding the management practices used in these forests may provide a mechanism that can be used by REDD project leaders in Laos to implement sustainable management regimes in remote areas and develop integrated

management practices that could be incorporated into broader REDD management plans.

## Methods

This research was conducted in the Luang Namtha valley, in northwestern Laos, over two consecutive summers (2005 and 2006), under the supervision of the community development branch of Green Discovery, a regional NGO lead by Sompawn Khantisouk, and the Boat Landing, run by Mr. Khantisouk and William Tuffin. These two organizations dealt with ethical issues regarding the interviewing of local citizens, requests for permission to work in the funeral forests, the hiring of trained Lao and Tai Dam translators, and the locating of funding and resources. Further research in this area was halted due to the disappearance, and alleged kidnapping, of the primary conservation advocate working on the project, Mr. Khantisouk, and subsequently all research and conservation work on this project was halted in 2007. In January 2007, eye witnesses last saw Mr. Kahntisouk being escorted to an unmarked vehicle by men in green uniforms while on his way to the police station to discuss developments in a case involving an arson attempt on his home. Although his wife and three children have remained in Namtha, Mr. Kahnitsouk's whereabouts are still unknown.

Three villages, each with a corresponding funeral forest, reside near the Namtha River. The oldest of these villages, Ban Pong, is to the north. Younger villages are dispersed along the river due to the migration of families that left Ban Pong in order to find additional resources and space. Ethnobotanical data was collected during the summer of 2005 to determine traditional environmental knowledge, TEK, and the presence of active forest management. Ecological data – including GPS points, basal area and diameter at breast height (DBH) – were collected in both the Ban Pasak forest and the Ban Pong forest during the subsequent summer. These are the two forests that will form the capstones of the Green Discovery proposed corridor.



**Figure 2:** Map of the two study forests, Ban Pong and Ban Pasak. Areal image used from Google Maps.

## *Traditional Environmental Knowledge Study*

This study used a combination of participant observation, formal (structured) key informant and informant interviews, informal (non-structured) interviews, field interviews and mapping.

From July to August of 2005, I used participant observation to collect the desired TEK data. This method allowed me to pay specific attention to important plants and their uses. Interviews were conducted in Lao whenever possible and in Tai Dam when participants did not speak Lao. For all interviews, one or sometimes two native translators from the local English program were present and spoke Lao, Tai Dam, and English. Key informant interviews – in this case, three village heads – were also important. Formal and informal interviews were also conducted with male and female village members over the age of 30. Each village has fewer than 300 members, and almost half of those are children (ages unknown). Many interviews were conducted twice, once in the villager's home and once in the forest, in order to compare answers about the quantity, quality and location of important plants. This method was used to neutralize biases in answers due to visual cues at each location. Questions were constructed to measure the villagers' ability to identify important tree species and to gauge their knowledge concerning the management and harvesting techniques for these trees. The data collected during the interviews were used to identify species important for funeral rituals and to determine how they were used. After compiling this list, I assessed the cultural importance and habitat type, as primary or secondary forest, for each species (table 1). When the plant was available, voucher specimens were collected and deposited in the herbarium at the National University of Laos, under the supervision of Dr. Somchanh Bounphanmy.

### ***Impact Study***

Forest composition was determined using nearest-neighbor plots, measuring the nearest three trees to the center of the plot, every twenty meters along every pre-existing path in each forest. While not ideal for randomized sampling, diversion from these paths was limited due to vegetation density and respect for local practices. Because of the cultural role of these forests, vegetation removal was not permitted, which limited movement away from established paths and into the dense vegetation to better stratify the plots. Nineteen plots were surveyed in the Ban Pong forest, and nine plots were surveyed in the Ban Pasak forest. The difference in the amount of plots in each forest is due to the vast difference in size of the two forests. At each plot, the diameter at breast height (DBH), a standard measurement of tree size, was measured in inches for the three trees closest to the center of the plot. In some cases, due to the dense undergrowth, only two trees were accessible in the Ban Pong forest. Basal area (BA) measurements, a standard measurement of tree density, were taken using a basal area factor 10 wedge prism, as well as GPS points were recorded for each plot; however, at some plots in the Ban Pong forest, the canopy cover impeded satellite signals and prevented GPS location determination. These GPS points were used to formulate the map of the sites (figure 2) and determine the total forested area for both forests. Further ecological data was not obtained due to the cultural taboos in harvesting from the forest and the abrupt end to the study. All statistical analyses were performed using the JMP (SAS, Raleigh, 2007) statistical software package.

## Results and Discussion

### *Traditional Environmental Knowledge Study*

From interviews with villagers and headmen, it has been determined that the estimated duration of service (i.e. the length of time a forest has been used as a funeral forest) for the Ban Pong forest is approximately two hundred years, and, for the Ban Pasak forest, between seventy-five and one hundred years. In each of the villages, the three village heads – one per village – collectively named ten trees as culturally important. Taxonomic identification was possible for eight of these plants using both the local name and samples of the trees (table 1).<sup>8</sup> Many of these plants have not yet been classified in academic literature and, therefore, could not be identified beyond the local common name (table 1).

Of the ten most important plants to the Tai Dam people in the Nam Tha valley, only eight were identified from either the local name or samples of the plant. The two unidentified plants are listed without a scientific name. *Dillenia indicia* is the only plant still found in the valley. The English spelling of local names is phonetic and cross-referenced with Callaghan for spelling accuracy. Informants did not know the exact Lao spelling.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 1:** Culturally important Lao plant names with possible scientific epitaph translations

<i>Phonetic Tai Dam Name</i>	<i>Possible Scientific Name (Family)</i>
Lho	Dinochloa pendulus (Gramineae R.)
Lum (hein)	Tamininadia ulginosa (Rubiaceae R.)
Sa	Dillenia indicia (Delleniaceae L.)
Fang	Lophopetalum wallichii (Celastreaceae)
Han	Acacia pennata (Fabaceae L.)
Kheng	Aglaonema costatum (Araceae N.E. Br.)
Peum	Dioscorea sp. (Dioscoreaceae)
Leng nan	Fissistigma sp. (Annonaceae)
Sta	Unknown
Glaut	Unknown

However, upon touring the funeral forests, the three village heads collectively identified thirty unique trees, twenty of which were culturally important (table 2, category number 1-4). According to all of the village heads, only one of the ten trees identified during the in-village interviews, *Dillenia indicia*, is still found in the funeral

<sup>8</sup> Mike Callaghan, *Checklist of Lao Plant Names: Lao Plants Listed by Botanical, Common and Regional/Asian Names with Lao Names & Lao Script* (Vientiane, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Callaghan, *Checklist of Lao Plant Names*.



forest; the rest are locally extinct, but they can be found in the nearby Nam Ha Protected Area. Only one of the twelve villagers interviewed could identify more than three tree species in the funeral forest or name three culturally important trees (table 2, category number 1-4). This was true both in preliminary interviews and in field interviews.

**Table 2:** Compiled answers to interview questions

Category Number	Question Category	Villagers	Village Heads	Total
1	People able to identify 3+ tree types in key informant interview	0/12	2/3	2/15
2	People able to identify 3+ tree types in field interviews	1/12	2/3	3/15
3	Culturally important tree types identified in key informant interview	0	10	10
4	Culturally important tree types identified in field interviews	1	30	30
5	Trees identified in key informant interview that persist in valley	N/A	1/10	N/A
6	People who claimed conservation is important	12/12	3/3	15/15
7	People who understood the concept of protecting the forest so that it persisted into the future	0/12	0/3	0/15

*Note:* The first two columns refer to the number of people who responded positively to the question or subject over the total number of people interviewed (including villagers and village headmen). The third column is the sum of the two categories over the total number of people interviewed. The result is an overall ratio of positive responses. N/A indicates that that particular question or set of results does not apply to that particular group due to an absence of that question from the interviews.

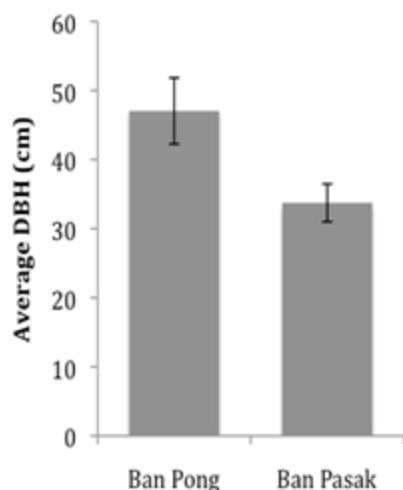
Questions pertaining to conservation were met with excitement, for everyone interviewed stated that conservation was important (table 2, category 6). Further questioning revealed, however, that none of the people questioned could explain the importance of conservation or understood the long-term goals of conservation (table 2, category 7). When asked what would happen if culturally important species were no longer accessible in the forest, villagers and village heads replied that it was inevitable that important species would always be available in the forest. The Tai Dam tradition in these villages teaches that the plants are regulated by the spirits of the forest; therefore, the plants necessary to sustain Tai Dam life will always be available, if not in the funeral forest, then elsewhere in the valley. It is important to note that when asked which species were important, village heads acknowledged that most culturally important

species were no longer found in the valley. When probed about what could have contributed to the local extinction of these species, the answer was always that spirits – not humans – controlled such things. Thus, in their view, the demise of culturally important species in the forest did not have any connection to the absence of conservation practices. To analyze the Tai Dam understanding of conservation, the importance of conservation, and the impact of conservation on their lives, the study included a series of questions involving scenarios in which conservation was not implemented in the valley (table 2, category 7). These questions included inquiries about what would happen if the river – which already juts into the forest and causes several trees to fall into the river every year – moved further into the forest? Answers included a number of solutions, such as digging a new path for the river to follow so as to protect the forest, or praying to the spirits of the forest to move the river. When asked what would happen if the government wanted to cut a road into the forest, respondents indicated that the villagers would form a line to protect the forest. In fact, local rumors indicated that protests in front of a neighboring forest had successfully protected the forest from a road construction crew.

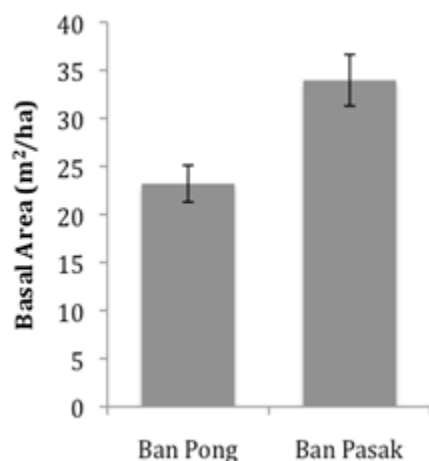
While most villagers are unaware of active forest management or the need for conservation, interviews revealed that the head of the village functions as the principal forest manager. In this capacity, he tries to ensure that the diversity of tree species is conserved. The village head of Ban Pong tracks tree species' populations and allows the harvesting of select trees with adequate representation in the forest. However, the village head of Ban Pasak does not actively pick which tree species seem to be abundant or in decline and, therefore, allows villagers to cut any "small" trees during a funeral ceremony. During a funeral ceremony, trees can be cut down to make the spirit house and cemetery plot for the deceased (see figure 1). With permission from the headman, medicinal and nutritional plants can also be collected during this time. Additionally, the cultural practice of only removing plants from the forests during a funeral ceremony limits harvesting. Thus, the historical conservation of funeral forests is determined by both direct management and cultural practices.

### ***Impact Study***

Data were analyzed using Welch analysis of variance (ANOVA) in order to compare the means of the two forests and compensate for the unequal standard deviations. Both the basal area ( $P=0.0047$ ) and the DBH ( $P=0.0237$ ) of Ban Pong and Ban Pasak were significantly different when  $\alpha<0.05$  (figures 2 and 3). These results support personal observations that the vegetation in the forests appeared to be quite diverse. The ground cover in the Ban Pong forest was approximately 1-2 meters tall and thick enough to prevent movement through the forest. In contrast, the Ban Pasak forest had almost no ground cover and lacked a distinct litter layer, possibly due to frequent flooding of the forest. Additionally, the Ban Pong forest appeared overall to have larger, taller trees, which is supported by the difference in DBH (table 3).



**Figure 2:** Average DBH of all plots in each forest. Error bars represent the standard error.



**Figure 3:** Average BA of all plots in each forest. Error bars represent the standard error.

**Table 3:** Summary of forest dynamics

Forest	n (# trees)	DBH (cm)	n (# plots)	BA (m <sup>2</sup> ha <sup>-1</sup> )
Ban Pong	40	47.04 ± 4.79	19	23.20 ± 1.91
Ban Pasak	27	33.74 ± 2.73	9	33.96 ± 2.672

*Note:* Averages of DBH and BA include ± 1 SE (standard error).

Based on DBH and BA results, the Ban Pong forest is less dense, with larger trees than the Ban Pasak forest. If these results can be attributed to active management, then they should be correlated with the duration of service. According to the villagers, each forest is used once every 1-3 month(s) for funerals. The frequency of usage depends on many health factors, such as the spread of disease and the age of the human population. There are no written records of when each ceremony is conducted. Although the date of death is written on the spirit house, these dates are lost with the decay and collapse of the house. While these management practices have not preserved all of the most

important trees used by the Tai Dam people in the Namtha valley, management has shaped a forest with a low density of larger trees.

## Conclusions

The differences in the distribution and size of trees in the two funeral forests considered in this study may be attributed, in part, to the management styles of each village head. The Ban Pong village head actively manages the funeral forest for declining populations of tree species, and this is reflected in the greater variation in tree diameter and the thinning of trees in the forest. Further research would need to be done to catalogue the tree species in both forests to determine if the active management practices used in Ban Pong maintain higher biodiversity than those used in Ban Pasak.

While limited in scope, the DBH and BA recorded for the funeral forests in the Namtha valley provide a historical reference to set a possible baseline for Laos. With the origin dates of these forest fragments established well beyond the 10-year mark usually used to set REDD baselines, the recorded composition of these forests can provide a historical baseline for tree diversity and density in the Namtha valley. In the years following completion of this study, the mountains surrounding this valley were severely deforested in order to establish rubber plantations. By using the observed composition of these two forested patches as the baseline for this location, conservation efforts can work towards restoring the surrounding forest. Hopefully, further work will continue in this area in order to adequately compare the ecology of the funeral forests.

Using pre-existing management practices incorporates local leaders into the conservation effort, which can strengthen the possibility of successful reforestation.<sup>10</sup> For both the remaining forest fragments in the Namtha valley, as well as for future restored forest in the surrounding areas, the culturally established management practices identified in this study can be incorporated into a larger, coordinated management effort within the region. Village heads who actively manage the funeral forests may be able to effectively train village heads who use a more limited management role. Additionally, incorporating local leaders and their management practices can help to maintain biodiversity as well as carbon stores, since local communities value the biodiversity of culturally and environmentally important plants.<sup>11</sup> Considering that poor forest regulation and deforestation have resulted in the global emission of 1.6 billion tons of carbon dioxide, it is clear that finding effective management strategies is essential to the success of REDD.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> International Union for Conservation of Nature, "REDD Opportunities."

<sup>11</sup> International Union for Conservation of Nature, "REDD Opportunities."

<sup>12</sup> Robert T. Watson, Ian R. Noble, Bert Bolin, N. H. Ravindranath, David J. Verardo, and David J. Dokken, eds. *Land Use, Land-Use Change, and Forestry: A Special Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).  
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# Comparative Tai Toponymic Analysis: Lao Village Names in Laos<sup>1</sup>

John Hartmann & Vinya Sysamouth<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

A few studies by Thai scholars have succeeded in demonstrating that village names in different regions in Thailand reflect features of the landscape. A preponderance of Isan toponyms with *ban* as head noun are followed by descriptives such as *nong*, *non*, *khok*, *na*, *don*, *huai*, *dong*, *hua*, *kham*, *tha*, *kut*, *wang*, *phon*, *ta*, *pa*, *law*, *nam*, and *thung*. All of these words describe local environments.<sup>3</sup> In a very real sense, the land is a map. The term *nong* (pond) is highest in frequency because many Isan villages are situated near ponds, sources of water supply, indicating scarcity of water in a notoriously dry region. Second in occurrence is *non* (mound), pointing to early settlement areas in which villages were built on elevations in the landscape but near ponds and streams.<sup>4</sup> In the western region of Thailand, a quarter of all village names involve references to water, a sign of a more watery milieu.<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to make a preliminary survey of Lao village place names in Laos and to compare the high-frequency descriptives there to those found in studies of other regions and countries settled by earlier Tai groups. Pranee Kullavanijaya, in her comparative study of place names in Guangxi province and northeastern parts of Thailand, found many references to natural features in the landscape shared by linguistically related speech groups.<sup>6</sup> Many place names are identical in both countries, further demonstrating the common cultural practice of naming a new place after the name of the old. The Lue who, generations ago, migrated from Sipsongpanna into Laos and northern Thailand followed this practice. In conducting a comparative toponymic analysis of Lao village place names, the history

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<sup>2</sup> John Hartmann (Board of Trustees Professor at Northern Illinois University; Ph.D. in linguistics, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor); Vinya Sysamouth (Executive Director of The Center for Lao Studies; Ph.D. in Development Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison).

<sup>3</sup> Phaithun Piyapakon, "Phuminam Kan Tang Thinthan Mu Baan Nai Phak Tawanok Chiangtai: Wikhro Ruup Baep Thang Phumisat Khong Nam Thuapai" [Place Names of Rural Village Settlements in Northeastern Region: Geographic Pattern Analysis of Generic Terms], *Journal of Language and Culture* 13, no. 2 (1994): 49-60.

<sup>4</sup> Srisakara Vallibhotama, "Traditional Thai Villages and Cities: An Overview" in *Culture and Environment in Thailand* (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1989): 359-71.

<sup>5</sup> Sujaritlak Deepadung, "Toponyms in the Western Region of Thailand," *Manusaya* 6, no. 2 (1998): 31-66.

<sup>6</sup> Pranee Kullavanijaya, "Village Names in Guangxi Province and the Northeastern Part of Thailand," in *Collection of Papers on the Relationship between the Zhuang and the Thai* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1996): 120-132.

and direction of migrations of earlier Tai groups into Laos and parts of Southeast Asia is clarified.

### Tai Languages: Cultural Practices in Naming Villages

At the level of the *ban* (village), the “pan-Tai” naming process has demonstrated remarkable continuity over time and space. A look at the land mass covered by villages named with *ban/man/wan* is quite amazing. Names given to villages have a democratic quality about them. They are not designed as statements of power; instead, they comment on natural surroundings: mountains, cliffs, hills, rivers, streams, ponds, marshes, flowers and fish, and so on. They encapsulate more of what might be considered older Tai vocabularies, spoken rather than written, and colored by the imagination of the peasants’ predilection for taking clues from the environment and creating a cognitive map of their immediate world. For a people who lived and moved in a semi-tropical world, what better way is there to understand navigate and that world than to mark it with features of the landscape? In a paper titled “Place Naming of the Thais and the Zhuangs,” Maneepin Phromsuthirak writes, “Similar place names are found to be used widely by the Thais and the Zhuang.”<sup>7</sup> The table below is taken from her study.

**Table 1:** Comparison of geomorphological features used in Thai and Zhuang Place Names. (Superscript numerals indicate tone levels and/or contours on a scale of 1-5, where 1 is low and 5 is high. Thus, 22 would be mid-level; 24 mid-rising; 41 high-falling.)

<u>English</u>	<u>Thai</u>	<u>Zhuang</u>
Field	na: <sup>33</sup>	na: <sup>31</sup>
Village	ba:n <sup>41</sup>	ba:n <sup>31</sup>
Pond	bO: <sup>22</sup>	bo: <sup>35</sup>
Mountain	pha: <sup>24</sup>	pla: <sup>24</sup>
<u>Mountain</u>	dO:yj <sup>33</sup>	do:i <sup>24</sup>

The catalog of head nouns used to name places in both Zhuang and Thai include:

- a mountain or a hill
- the regions near a mountain
- water resources (the preponderance of names)
- woods and forests
- settlements and occupations of the landowners
- the animals and plants commonly found in the region
- local legends or folktales

<sup>7</sup> Maneepin Phromsuthirak, “Place Names of the Thais and the Zhuangs” (paper presented at the Ninth International Conference on Thai Studies, Northern Illinois University, De Kalb, April 3-6, 2005), 1-14.

Some contrasting differences between Thai and Zhuang naming practices are the choices in naming a Zhuang village after a taste, such as sweet, bitter, or spicy. The Thai and the Lao, on the other hand, like to name or rename places using “elevated” Pali, Sanskrit and Mon-Khmer borrowings or the name of an important person. Zhuang place names, especially those higher than the village level have been replaced with Chinese designators. In these latter instances of renaming, the history encapsulated in the earlier name is obliterated

In concluding her article, Maneepin Phromsuthirak voices concern over the loss of place names and their history.

Place names in Zhuang may one day disappear since they are gradually replaced by Chinese names, whereas Thai place names denoting geographical characteristics of the place are gradually replaced by important people’s names and more and more Thai place names are replaced by Pali and Sanskrit words due to the lack of knowledge of Thai plants and animals; for example the “ba:n<sup>41</sup> soN<sup>24</sup> plhaj<sup>33</sup>” – the village where there are a lot of Song Pluei trees. People do not know the plant so they have changed the word “สง” to “สงฆ” – a monk. This can lead to the disappearance of Thai words denoting animals, plants and geographical characteristics in the future.<sup>8</sup>

Similar sentiments are expressed by others, including the people living in areas where age-old place names have been transformed from what once had deep meaning and bound up the identity of the local residents to something alien in sound and meaning.<sup>9</sup> Place name changes in Isan seem to have intensified under the reign of King Chulalongkorn. One illustration of renaming activities during that period came to the attention of the Thai public in mid-January of 2006 when their Prime Minister, Taksin Chinawat, visited Aat Samat District in Roi-Et Province in a series of meetings billed as a campaign to “solve the problem of poverty.” This “reality show,” as it was dubbed by the press, was broadcast on cable TV. The *Manager* newspaper provided interesting background on the history of the name changes of the district, much to the bemusement of readers. According to the *Manager*, Amphur Aat Samat was “established” in 1897, during the reign of King Chulalongkorn. The first provincial administrator was Prince Manthanaanukaan. From the beginning, it was called Amphur Sa-but (Pali-Sanskrit: lotus pond). It got its name from the large swamp filled with red lotuses behind the Amphur office. Nowadays, the swamp is called Hu-ling or “Monkey’s Ear” Swamp. Later on, in 1913, Um Phamarsut, the district chief at the time, held the view that the majority of the population lacked knowledge and ability in a variety of things. They did not show much desire to contribute to the well-being of the community or to cooperate in improving the economy in any way. So, in order to cultivate interest among the people and get them enthused about developing their own economy, he changed the name of the Amphur to Aat Samaat, which translates as “Might be Capable.” This anecdote illustrates perfectly the point made earlier about the historic Sanskritization of Tai

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> The American poet Angelou, in recounting the name change forced on her by the woman who hired her as her servant as the “horror” of being “called out” of one’s name, renaming as an act of “dominion.” Justin Kaplan and Anne Bernays, *The Language of Names* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 76.

names: the transformation of the extremely common Tai place name of *nong bua* (lotus pond) to its Sanskrit translation as *สระบัว* *sabu*, (lotus pond).<sup>10</sup>

In another study, Pranee Kullavanijaya reports that the four most common Zhuang village names had the following head nouns in their largely two-word place names: *naa* (field), *ban* (village), *rung/lung* (plain surrounded by hills), and *bak* (mouth, opening – of a river).<sup>11</sup> But even in Zhuang itself, a significantly higher number of villages with *rung/lung* in their place name were found in southern Zhuang as opposed to northern Zhuang dialects. The higher incidence of this particular term turned out to be a distinctive dialect marker that is probably directly related to the geomorphology of the region – namely, the higher prevalence of plains surrounded by mountains in the southern Zhuang region. In the four Thai provinces (Loei, Nongkhai, Nakhon Phanom, and Udon), the most frequent head nouns were *nong* (swamp), *naa* (rice field), and *non* (small hill). Again, these names are a reflection of the features of the landscape, which explains the predominance of *naa* (rice field) as a toponym and cultural marker of both the Thai and the Zhuang. Such findings demonstrate that the national border that separates southern China from the rest of Southeast Asia is an artificial boundary that functions as a barrier to understanding the commonalities of the cultures in the borderline areas and their shared history.

Several excellent studies on Thai toponyms have been published in the Thai language. One that stands out in particular for Isan, or Northeastern Thailand, is a paper by Phaithun Piyapakon titled “Phuminam Kan Tang Thinthan Mu Baan Nai Phak Tawanok Chiangtai: Wikhro Ruup Baep Thang Phumisat Khong Nam Thuapai” (Place Names of Rural Village Settlements in Northeastern Region: Geographic Pattern Analysis of Generic Terms). His conclusions were summarized in part as follows:

The generic names of rural village place names in the northeastern region which showed the highest frequency were Nong,<sup>12</sup> followed by Non, Khok, Na, Don, Huai, Dong, Hua, Kham, Tha, Kut, Wang, Phon, Ta, Pa, Law, Nam, Thung respectively... Apparent natural and cultural features in the area were employed in naming villages. Thus, generic names mainly indicated basic locational factors and the environment of particular rural settlements, such as water supply, dry land, farming land, topography, local flora and fauna, ancient settlement sites, and names of the persons who were important in forming the village.

<sup>10</sup> Somchai Sumniengngam reports in “Renaming in Thai Society” that the renaming of Thai people occurred at least as early as the Ayutthaya period and has continued up to the present. This phenomenon is based on the belief that the change to a new name spelled with auspicious letters can change the lives and fortunes of persons who find themselves in unhappy straits. In these cases, the power to rename is in the hands of those who command a knowledge of the auspicious spelling of names.

<sup>11</sup> Pranee Kullavanijaya “Village Names in Guangxi Province,” 123.

<sup>12</sup> It is important to note that the second most common village name head noun in the Northeast was *non* (mound), which is a common physiographic feature of that region. Srisakra Vallibhotama points out that human settlements in the Northeast were “all located on mounds near streams and swamps, which were used as water sources. Rice was cultivated in the surrounding fields. In the Sakon Nakorn basin, where there were invariably streams near settlements, there was no apparent attempt at irrigation.” “Traditional Thai Villages and Cities: An Overview,” in *Culture and Environment in Thailand* (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1989), p. 365. The Khmer style of agriculture and water management was taken up by the Lao who settled the northeastern part of Thailand. This is in stark contrast to the “ditch-dike” mode of agriculture of the Tai groups in the southern China, northern Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Burma.

Furthermore, generic names were meaningful and revealed various features which developed homogenously in the region, and they could be incorporated with geographical terminology.<sup>13</sup>

On the western side of Thailand, Sujaritlak Deepadung (1998) has carried out a sophisticated analysis of the semantics of place names in her paper titled “Toponyms in the Western Region of Thailand.” She does not provide a list of the most frequent head nouns appearing in the village names, but, under the category of “Geographical Features,” she reports that, of the 4,916 village names considered in the study, there are 1,941 names beginning with thirty different words that are related to water in some way.<sup>14</sup> This appears to be in stark contrast to place names in Isan.

### Lao Village Names in Laos

Now, using photographs of settlement patterns and data published in 1973 as our base point, we will take a preliminary look at Lao village names in Laos. Data for the study comes from *Lao Official Standard Names*, a gazetteer that contains approximately 21,000 entries for places and features in Laos. It includes the place names of other ethnic groups: Mon-Khmer, Vietnamese, and Chinese in particular. The basic name coverage corresponds to that of maps at the scale of 1:250,000. Entries include the names of first- and second-order administrative divisions, populated places of all sizes, various other cultural entities, and a variety of physical features. Most of the entities can be identified and located by the approved name or a recognizable variant of the approved name on one or more of the following sources:

1. *Joint Operations Graphic* (Ground), Series 1501, Army Map Service/U.S. Army Topographic Command, 1967-1969| scale 1:250,000
2. *Laos: 1:50,000* Series L7015, Army Map Service/U.S. Army Topographic Command, 1965-1969.

The quality of the names in this gazetteer varies widely since fewer than fifty percent of the names were available in Lao script on official source materials, and because many names derive from languages other than Lao. Normalization of the spellings of particular words has been minimal.

Below is a segment of the spreadsheet that is going to be used in a larger research project that will employ GIS software to map the points and assist in analytical tasks.

<sup>13</sup> Phaithun Piyapakon, “Phuminam Kan Tang Thinthan Mu Baan Nai Phak Tawanok Chiangtai,” 50.

<sup>14</sup> Sujaritlak Deepadung, “Toponyms in the Western Region of Thailand,” 35.

Name	Designation	Map Reference	Latitude ° , N	Longitude ° , E
BA, NAM	STM	46704	20 06	104 44
A, PHU SEE POU BO	MT	46704	20 08	104 41
BA BI, PHOU	HLL	46714	15 48	105 34
BAC, NAM	STMI	46703	19 52	102 35
BAC, NAM	STM	46703	20 35	102 35

The first column in the gazetteer lists the place names more or less in English alphabetical order. The second column contains designations or abbreviations of designations of the entities to which the names apply, as listed below. Because practically all geographic terms have varied meanings, the senses in which many of the designations are applied in this gazetteer were stated in the list to reduce ambiguity. The compilers of the gazetteer caution: "It should be noted also that the differentiations of terms that can be made in any gazetteer will vary with the quality of the maps of the area and with the nature of the entities that are named. In Laos some of the features do not fit precisely into the categories used to designate them and others could be designated in two or more ways."<sup>15</sup>

## Designations

ADMD	first-order administrative division (khwaeng); second order a.d. (muang)
CAVE	cave (underground cavity, usually in soluble rock)
CMPM	military camp
CULT	cultivated area (includes rice fields)
DAM	dam (barrier constructed across a stream to impound water)
FRST	forest
GLD	glade (natural opening in a forest or woods)
HLL	hill (landform with moderate relief, moderate to low elevation)
HLLS	hills
ISL	island
LCTY	locality (minor area of unspecified or mixed character, indef. boundaries)
LK	lake
LKI	intermittent lake (seasonal water body; dry to marsh or water hole)
MNQR	quarry
MRSH	marsh (wetland w. grasses, bushes, few or no trees)
MT	mountain (moderate to high elevation; small summit area)
MTS	mountains; mountain range
PASS	pass (way over or between mountains)
PCLI	independent political entity

<sup>15</sup> *Lao Official Standard Names*. Prepared by the Defense Mapping Agency Topographic Center, Washington, D.C. 1973, p. i.



PK	peak (separately named summit)
PLAT	plateau (elevated area of flat to rolling surface)
PLN	plane (low relief, slope and elevation)
PND	pond (small standing water body)
PNDI	intermittent pond
PPL	populated place (city, town, village, settlement)
PPLQ	abandoned village
PPLW	destroyed village
RDGE	ridge (elongated, narrow relief, fairly continuous crest)
RGN	region (united by history, people, landscape, or other conditions)
RH	rest house (for travelers)
ROAD	road
RPDS	rapids
RSV	reservoir (large impounded body of water)
RUIN	ruins (in a state of ruin; not of great antiquity or archeological interest)
SINK	sinkhole
SLP	slope (less steep than a cliff)
SPUR	spur (short sloping ridge extending laterally from mountain or other elevation)
STM	stream (river or other running fresh water body, perennial)
STMI	intermittent stream (seasonal)
STMX	section of stream (separately named part of stream, not delimited by confluences)
SWMMP	swamp (wetland, generally with trees)
TMPL	temple
TNL	natural tunnel
WTLD	wetland (marsh, swamp, poorly drained with mix of trees and grass veg.)

The geographic coordinates are listed in a separate column with longitude based on Greenwich. Coordinates were generally read to the nearest minute and are for finding purposes only. For precise location, large-scale maps will need to be used. Coordinates for populated places were read at the map symbol, and, for other entities occupying limited sites, at the mouths or lower ends of streams, at the summits of mountains and hills, and near the centers or midpoints of most other features.

### Area Number

The 5-digit number indicates the first-order administrative division (*khwaeng*/province) in which the place or feature is located (as listed below):

46700 Laos (general)	46709 Savannakhet
46701 Houakhong	46710 Saravan
46702 Phongsali	46711 Attapu
46703 Luang Phrabang	46712 Champasak
46704 Houaphan	46713 Borikhan
46705 Xaignabouri	46714 Vapikhamthong



46706 Vientiane	46715 Xédôn
46707 Xiangkhwang	46716 Sithandon
46708 Khammouan	

The general number (6700) is used for international features and for features in two or more first-order administrative divisions.

In the 1960s, the Pathet Lao redrew the border of the western area of Luang Prabang province to establish the new province of Oudomxai. In 1982, the new province of Bokeo was created around Houayxay. The gazetteer used in our study does not reflect those changes.

### Glossary of Generic Terms

According to the compilers of the gazette:

[T]he following terms appear in the generic parts of standard names in the gazetteer. The English term or terms which correspond to each local term were applied after objective study of cartographic and other source materials, and do not necessarily reflect dictionary or other normalized usages. The parenthetical abbreviations (Ch), (Fr), (Kh), (L), (Th), (UKh), (V), and (?) designate respectively, Chinese, French, Khmer, Laotian, Thai, Upland Mon-Khmer (which comprises a number of related languages and dialects), Vietnamese, and uncertain. Those not so designated are Lao.<sup>16</sup>

Bung	pond, marsh
Chaîne (Fr)	mountain range
Chang (Ch)	mountain
Ching (Ch?)	stream
Chong (Th)	pass
Co (UKh)	mountain (s), spur
Col (Fr)	pass
Dak (UKh)	stream
Dan (UKh)	hill
Dèo (V)	pass
Doi (Th)	hill, mountain
Doi phu (Th)	mountain
Don	island
Dông (UKh/L)	hill, mountain
Doy	hill, mountain
Hat	rapids
Ho, hô (Ch?)	stream

<sup>16</sup> Glossary terms labeled (Th) also have cognates in Lao, such as *doi* and *doy*; *houay* and *huai*. The first word in the list, *bung*, appears as a Lao word, when in fact has been borrowed from Khmer. *Lao Official Standard Names*, p. iii.

Hong (UKh?)	stream, intermittent stream
Hou	cave
Houay	stream, intermittent stream, stream section
Huai (Th)	stream
Kaeng (Th)	rapids
Kèng	rapids
Khao	mountain
Kho (Ch?)	stream
Khong (UKh?)	mountain, spur, hill
Khouèng	first-order administrative division
Kiou	pass
Ko (UKh)	mountain, spur, mountain range
Kông (UKh)	mountain
Kouan (Ukh)	hill, mountain
Lèng (Ch?)	mountain
Liang (Ch)	mountain
Massif (Fr)	mountain(s), mountain range
Mènam	stream
Môc, môk (UKh)	mountain, hill
Muang	second-order administrative division
Na	cultivated area
Nam	stream, intermittent stream, stream section
Ngoc, ngok (UK)	peak, mountain
Nong	lake, pond, intermittent lake, pond, marsh
Núi (V)	mountain
Ô (Kh)	stream
Pha	hill(s), mountain, peak, ridge
Phnom (Kh)	mountain
Phou	hill, mountain, peak, ridge, spur, slope, mountain range
Phu (Th)	hill, mountain
Plateau (Fr)	plateau
Sala	rest house
San	mountain, peak
Sayphou	ridge, mountain range
Song (V)	stream
Suôi (V)	stream
Tam (UKh)	stream
Tham	cave, natural tunnel
Thiu khao (Th)	mountain range
Thong	plain, wetland
Tom, tôm (UKh)	stream, intermittent stream
Tonlé (Kh)	stream
Vang	pond
Vat	temple
Xé	stream, intermittent stream

(Transliteration System (BGN/PCGN 1966 System adopted by the Commission Nationale de Toponymie (CNT))

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### Common Names for Lao Villages (with frequent occurrences)

The following list of village names is preliminary and partial. Names are ordered, as in the gazetteer, in English alphabetical order (which was not always strictly adhered to). No indications of tone were originally given (which added to the difficulty of recovering the Lao orthography), so we have provided them in the list. Transliterations in the gazetteer varied considerably, and future studies will necessitate major consultation with Lao maps. But even in Lao, orthography is not consistent (i.e., standardized) and reflects dialect differences that must be taken into account. Many names were not included because they seemed too few and insignificant or because they appeared as non-Lao at this stage of preliminary investigation (due to transliteration problems). The list of village names is presented in its current state for rough comparison with studies of place names in Thailand (the west and northeast, in particular) and China (the Zhuang of Guangxi, in particular).

The term **ban** (village) is the head noun. In this first look at the semantics of Lao toponyms, we are focusing only on the first (**bolded**) descriptive following the head noun because it is this second element in the village name that will most likely reveal the most prominent feature of the landscape chosen for naming purposes. By proceeding thus, we will be able to further test the hypothesis that speakers of Tai languages tended, by and large, to name their villages after features of the landscape. The land is a map, a cultural artifact. What this map should reflect is the ecological niche that the ethnic Lao people occupy in Laos.<sup>17</sup>

Ban **Ang** – 7 occurrences

**aaŋ B3:** 1) hollow/depression; 2) reservoir, basin/pool/pond; 3) wash basin; washtub.

Ban Ang (4)  
Ban Ang Kham  
Ban Ang Lang  
Ban Ang Noi

---

Ban **Bak/Pak** – 13 occurrences (Note: see Ban Pak – 170 occurrences)

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<sup>17</sup> The letter + number combinations (e.g., **B2**) that follow our IPA transcriptions indicate the tone of the syllable according to the William J. Gedney system for determining tones in modern dialects that have developed from a Proto-Tai tone system, which he outlined in his article, “A Checklist for Determining Tai Tones” published in: Robert Bickner, John Hartmann, Thomas Hudak, and Patcharin Peyasantiwong, eds. *Selected Papers on Comparative Tai Studies*, Michigan Papers on South and Southeast Asia 29, Ann Arbor: Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, 1989:191-207. Lao tones vary from north to south. For a picture of the shapes of the regional tones of spoken Lao, please visit: [www.seasite.niu.edu/lao](http://www.seasite.niu.edu/lao).

**paak DL2:** 1) mouth; jaws; beak/bill; 2) orifice/ opening; throat; 3) entry, mouth [of a river]; 4) muzzle; 5) to say, speak, converse; 6) to inform; 7) classifier for nets, seines.  
Lao orthography:

Ban Bak  
Ban Bak Ngai [Yai]  
Ban Bak Noi (2 occurrences)  
Ban Bakèng  
Ban Bakeu  
Ban Ba Kham  
Ban Bak Kuk/BakKut  
Ban Bak Mane  
Ban Bak Pong/Ban Phou Pakpong  
Ban Baktheung  
Ban Baktou  
Ban Bakxébangfai/Pakxébangfai

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Ban **Bo** – 32 occurrences

**boō B3:** 1) hole, hollow/depression, cavity; 2) source, spring, well; reservoir; 3) (fig.) source, origin, initial cause; 4) deposit, mine, shaft, pit, quarry; 5) oil well/bore hole.

Ban Bo (12)  
Ban Bo Nua  
Ban Bo Bon  
Ban Bo Dèng  
Ban Bo Hè  
Ban Bo Boi/Boy  
Ban Bo Léč  
Ban Bo Ma  
Ban Bo May  
Ban Bon Na  
Ban Bo Na Ngoua  
Ban Bo Pha  
Ban Bo Pha Teu  
Ban Bo Phou  
Ban Bo Sane  
Ban Bo Sao  
Ban Bo Tai  
Ban Bo Tay  
Ban Bo Tèn (a major salt mine in northwest Laos, near the Chinese border)  
Ban Bo Thun  
Ban Bo Nèng

---

Ban **Boua** – 8 occurrences (Note: *bua* often appears frequently as a secondary modifier

of other bodies of water, such as marshes and so forth.)

**bua A3:** (bot.) lotus (*Nelumbium speciosum*).

Ban Boua (7 occurrences)

Bou Loy/Loi

---

**Ban Bok/Bôk – 8 occurrences**

**bok/bOk DS3:** dry land, land; shore/bank; arid (barren) land.

Ban Bok/Bôk (8 occurrences)

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**Ban Bon/Bôn – 10 occurrences**

**bon/bOn A3:** place, space/expanse.

Ban Bon (5 occurrences)

Ban Bôn Phao

Ban Bôn Phouk

Ban Bôn Sien

Ban Bôn Tai (2 occurrences)

Ban Boun Tane/Poung Tan

---

**Ban Bong/BOnG/POnG – 20 occurrences**

**bong/bOn A3:** type of rattan (used for making light furniture).

**pOn A3:** a hole, opening/aperture/orifice; slit/slot/crack; passageway.

Ban Bong/BOnG (5 occurrences)

Ban Bong Het

Ban Bong Kasea/DongKasèn

Ban Bông-Nam

Ban Vang Boun

Ban Boun Bao

Ban Boun Bouy

Ban Boun Hao

Ban Boun Kè

Ban Boun Kha

Ban Boun Hè

Ban Boun Kho

Ban Boun Hoang/Dang

Ban Boun Mai

Ban Boun Nam/Nom

Ban Boun Pad

Ban Boun Phao

Ban Boun Quang/Dang



Ban Boung Sèng Heur/Hen  
Ban Boung Sôm Khôp

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Ban **Bouak** – 6 occurrences

**buakDL3**: man-made pond; reservoir; puddle/pool; hollow cavity/depression; excavation.

Ban Bouak  
Ban Bouak Bô  
Ban Bouak Hai  
Ban Bouak Hia  
Ban Bouak Meo  
Ban Bouak Seua/Sua

---

Ban **Buam** – 11 occurrences

**buamA3**: swamp, marsh; quagmire.

Ban Bouam  
Ban Bouam Dad Noi/Noy  
Ban Bouam Fay  
Ban Bouam Nong  
Ban Bouam Hèn  
Ban Bouam Phay/Fay  
Ban Bouam Phèk  
Ban Bouam Phou  
Ban Bouam Phouk  
Ban Bouam Phouok  
Ban Buam/Buôm Nghiou

---

Ban **Bung** – 25 occurrences

**bun/punA3**: swamp, marsh; place where wild animals gather (attracted by salt).

Ban Bung (2 occurrences)  
Ban Bung Buoc  
Ban Bung Chan/Chang  
Ban Bung Houa Ha/Houana Nua  
Ban Bung Houana Kang  
Ban Bung Houana Tai  
Ban Bung Kang (2 occurrences)  
Ban Bung Kham  
Ban Bung Kwang/Dang  
Ban Bung Man  
Ban Bung Na Di/ Na Dy

Ban Bung Phang/Phand  
 Ban Bung Sai/Xai  
 Ban Bung San  
 Ban Bung Savang Nua  
 Ban Bung Savan Tai/Tat  
 Ban Bung Souay/Souei  
 Ban Bung Talouong  
 Ban Bung Thalé  
 Ban Bung Va  
 Ban Bung Xai  
 Ban Bung Xang  
 Ban Bung Xé

From this point on, we shall list only the total occurrences of each toponym and not the full name of each village bearing it as first modifier because, at this point in our analysis, we are primarily interested in gross environmental features.

Ban **Din** – 11 occurrences

**din A3**: earth/land/soil; ground.

Ban **Don/Dôn** – 150 occurrences

**dOOn A3**: island.

Ban **Dong/Dông** – 130 occurrences

**doŋ A3**: jungle; thick forest; thicket; undergrowth.

Ban **Ggang** – 18 occurrences

**ñaan A4**: (bot.) a tall, resin producing timber tree (*Dipterocarpus alatus*)

Ban **Hat** – 160 occurrences

**haat DL1**: sandbar, sand bank/shoal; island; sandy shore/bank; spit of land.

Ban **Hai** – 20 occurrences

**hay A1**: jug, pitcher, jar.

Ban **Hin** – 50 occurrences

**hin A1**: stone, rock.

Ban **Hua** – 94 occurrences

**hua A1**: head; source of a river.

Ban **Huay/Houei** – 1,080 occurrences

**huay C1**: small mountain river/torrent; brook/stream; gorge/canyon/ravine.

Ban **Keng/Kèng/Ken/Kang** – 155 occurrences

**keŋB2**: rapids; underwater rocks; reefs.

Ban **Khok** – 54 occurrences

**khook DL4**: waterhole.

Ban **Na** – 680 occurrences

**naa A4**: irrigated rice field; cultivated area.

Ban **Non** – 33 occurrences

**noon A4**: height; hill/knoll, embankment, mound; plateau, upland /elevation; mountainous, hilly terrain.

Ban **Nong** – 400 occurrences

**n00ŋ A1**: lake, pond; swamp/marsh/bog.

Ban **Pak** – 170 occurrences

**pak DS2**: mouth, jaws, beak/bill; orifice, opening; opening/mouth of a river.

Ban **Pha** – 200 occurrences

**phaa A1**: rock, cliff, mountain.

Ban **Phu** – 60 occurrences

**phuu A4**: mountain, hill/hillock/knoll.

Ban **Sala** – 13 occurrences

**saa A1 laa A4**: pavilion, closed veranda; hall in a temple; rest house.

Ban **San/Sang** – 67 occurrences

**san A1**: back; mountain chain/range/ridge.

Ban **Thông** – 87 occurrences

**th0ŋA4**: channel or a river or canal.

Ban **Vat** – 10 occurrences

**vatDS4**: temple.

Ban **Vang** – 36 occurrences

**vaŋ4**: pond.

## Discussion

Because Tai peoples have historically tended to follow agricultural practices related to rice irrigation, practices that require living on or near bodies of water, it comes as no surprise that the most frequent village names are associated with water sources, followed in frequency by the term *naa* (irrigated rice field). By far the most frequent Lao village name has *huay* (stream) as its chief modifier (1080 occurrences), which reflects the huge expanse of windward, rain-capturing and stream-drained mountains, especially in the north of Laos. Next in frequency are places with *naa* (rice field) as the first order descriptive (700 occurrences). In ranked order from high to low,

the major village toponyms (using the spelling conventions of the gazetteer) were approximated as follows:

Flowing bodies of water:

- 1080 – *huay* (small mountain streams, brooks, torrents, gorges)
- 240 – *nam* (river)
- 170 – *pak* (river mouth)
- 155 – *keng* (rapids)
- 94 – *hua* (head or source of water)
- 87 – *thong* (channel of a river, canal)

Contained bodies of water:

- 400 – *nong* (lake pond, swamp)
- 54 – *khok* (waterhole)
- 36 – *vang* (pond)
- 23 – *bung* (swamp)
- 11 – *buam* (swamp)
- 6 – *buak* (man-made pond)

Landforms associated with bodies of water, usually flowing:

- 160 – *hat* (sandy shore, beach)
- 150 – *don* (island)

Elevated areas:

- 33 – *non* (knoll, mound)

Cultivated areas:

- 700 – *na* (irrigated rice field)

Mountainous areas:

- 200 – *pha* (cliff)
- 60 – *phu* (mountain)
- 60 – *san/sang* (mountain top, mountain range)

Forested area:

- 130 – *dong* (jungle, forest)

From this frequency list, which is far from complete, we cannot determine directly where the majority of the ethnic Lao people had settled at the time the gazetteer was drawn up, i.e. the 1960-70s. However, with the high frequency of villages named with *naa* (rice field) as their first modifier, indications are that most had settled in lowland areas close to sizeable water resources that they could engineer for controlled paddy cultivation.

The toponymic naming practices of the Tai have not been based exclusively on environmental markers, as with most of the ones listed in this paper. Historical events

and changing cultural influences have also participated in the process. Before the emergence of the modern nation state, Tai villages were governed by petty chiefs (*jao*) in a *mandala* system of petty chiefdoms (*müang*) competing for control over human resources. The chief of one petty state would send out small armies of men to conduct “sweeps” of villages in a competing state and relocate their inhabitants, by force and sometimes in chains, if necessary, to augment the population of his own polity. The Tai Lue of Sipsongpanna seem to have been a convenient source for the rulers of Chiang Mai and Luang Prabang. Emerging Siam went as far afield as the Phuan area near Xieng Khwang in northern Laos and the Tai Dam villages in northwestern Vietnam in order to meet their manpower needs in building their new capital at Bangkok and to block Vietnamese control of the area’s population.<sup>18</sup> To cite just one seemingly benign example of the practice of relocating an entire village population, we might consider the case of Ban Lu (Lue Village) of Ban Phanom, located two and a half kilometers from the center of modern day Luang Prabang, and known for cotton and silk weaving. It is claimed that they were “invited” by King Kisarath to take up residence there. It is also the case that places change names over time. Luang Prabang underwent a process of deliberate name change in three historical stages. Starting with its original name, Muang Sva, it changed to Xieng Tong-Xieng Dong, and then changed again to Luang Prabang. Place names encapsulate histories.

## Future Directions

In the introduction to this paper it was noted that the Tai-Zhuang of Guangxi province tended to name their villages with the head noun *na* (rice field), *ban* (village), *bô* (pond), and *doi* or *pha* (mountain or cliff). These names have their counterparts in Lao village names too, indicating the geomorphologically narrow environmental niche and basic agricultural and village naming practices shared by Tai agriculturalists. The lands they settled were their map. The next step in this study of Tai village names will be to investigate the instances of Tai village names occurring beyond political borders and create a continuous mosaic that adequately illustrates the extent of their “village world” and the manner in which village names vary over space, reflecting many of the material features of the local environment. Many ethnic Lao settled the Isan (Northeast) region across the Mekong in present-day Thailand. Village names there are associated with water and rice fields too, but the geography and climate, especially the rainfall averages, differ considerably from the more mountainous environments of Laos. From an environmental standpoint, village names are a repository of local knowledge concerning flora, fauna, and geophysical phenomenon, a kind of oral commentary or testimony about their world as it was once seen by them. Those contrasts—and continuities—will present still more interesting discoveries to research and discuss.

The Zhuang practice of naming a village that designates a particular taste or memorializes an important person—a practice that has become common in Thailand—

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<sup>18</sup> Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 99; Kennon Braezeale and Sanit Samuckkarn, *A Culture in Search of Survival: The Phuan of Thailand and Laos*, Southern Asia Studies vol. 31 (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University South Asia Studies, 1988).



did not appear in the data. The practice of naming a new village after one from which a group split off (either voluntarily or as a result of forced migrations) can be documented among many Tai groups. Indeed, it is a common phenomenon. Personal names and place names are often evocations of past memories.

In the appendices to this paper, we show how GIS technology was used to study places named *pak* (river mouth) based on data obtained from *Gazetteer to Maps of Thailand*. The same GIS tools will be employed in a more extensive study of place names in Laos, which will include place names of other ethnic groups.

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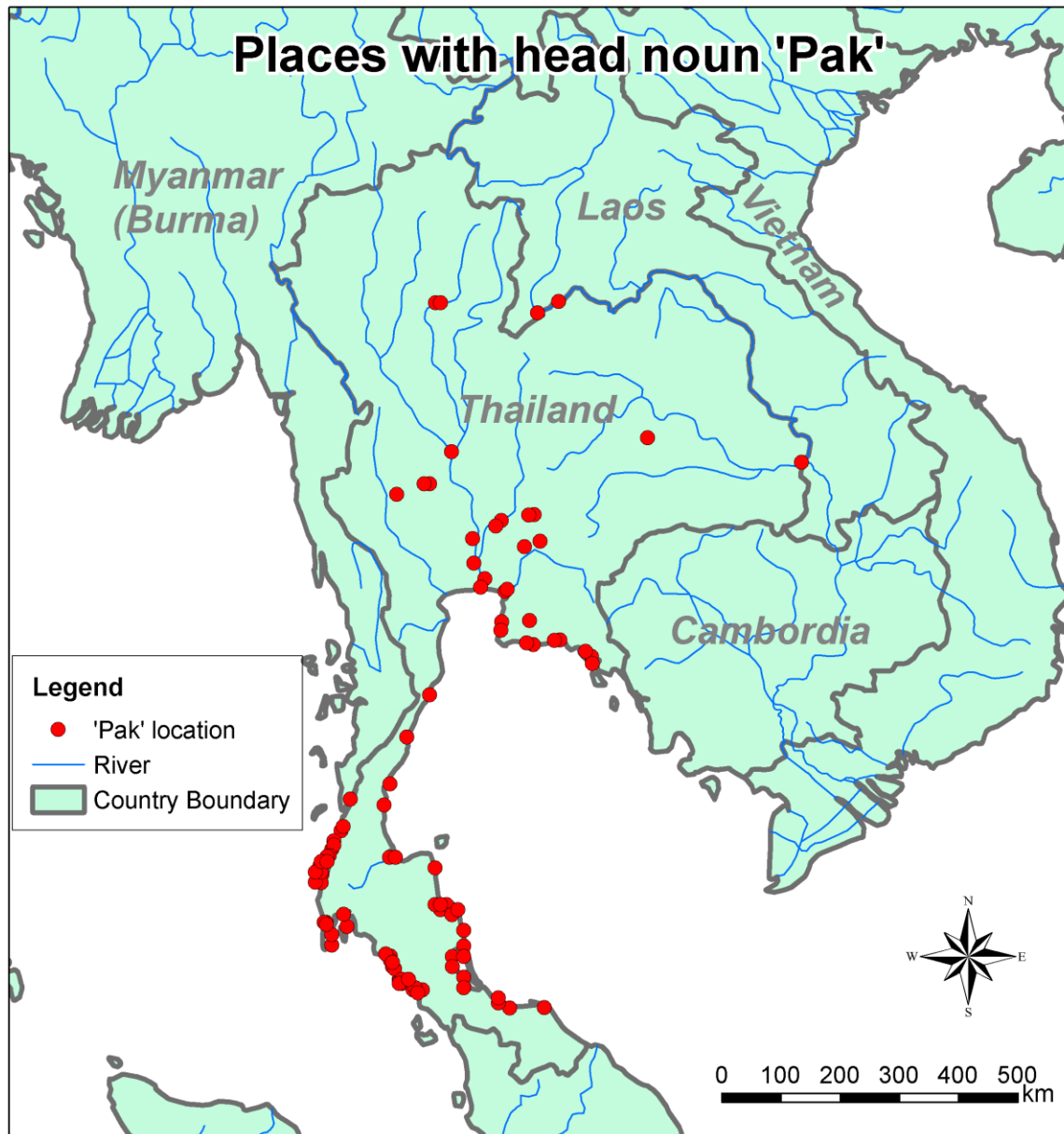
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## Appendix I: Map of Laos

### Provinces and districts



**Appendix II: GIS produced Map of Thai Places Named *pak* (mouth of a river)**

Map by Wei Luo 2007

### Appendix III: Data on Thai Place Names with *pak* as Head Noun

The uncorrelated names are preceded by an asterisk (\*) and are included in the gazetteer to serve as a complete finding list for all the English sources listed. Some items are repeats and should be removed from a final data set.

Name	Designation	Map Reference	Latitude	Longitude
			N ° ,	E ° ,
PAK AO BANG PAKONG	River Mouth	RSD/D47-17-6d	13 28	100 58
Pak Bang R. (see: KHLONG PAK BANG)	Stream	SI/D47-K	14 35	100 55
*Pak Bhanang	Town	BA/998	8 20	100 10
*Pak Bhrek	Stream	RSD/D47	13 00	101 20
PAK BHRIEW STA. (see: BAN PAK PHRIO [CHANGWAT SARA BURI])	Railroad Station	RSD/D47	14 30	100 50
Pak Chan River (see: MAE NAM KRA)	River	BA/216b	10 10	98 40
PAK CHAN TAO DUAN	Bay	RSD/C47-21-1	8 58	98 16
Pak Chaung Noi (see: PAK CHONG NOI)	Pass (Mt.)	SI/D47-D	15 10	99 50
Pak Chaung Yai (see: PAK CHONG YAI)	Pass (Mt.)	SI/D47-D	15 10	99 45
PAK CHONG NOI	Pass (Mt.)	RSD/D47-4	15 10	99 50
Pak Chong Sta. (see: SATHANI PAK CHONG)	Railroad Station	SI/D47-L	14 40	101 25
PAK CHONG YAI	Pass (Mt.)	RSD/D47-4	15 10	99 45
*Pak Glohng	Village	SI/C47-D	11 50	99 50
Pak Goh (see: KHLONG PAK KO)	Stream	BA/216b	8 50	98 15
Pak Goh (Bangri) (see: KHLONG PAK KO)	Stream	HO/1594	8 50	98 10
PAK HAN	Stream	RSD/C47-15-7	9 06	98 14
Pak Hngao (see: BAN PAK NGAO)	Village	RSD/E47	18 00	101 50
PAK JOHNG STA. (see: SATHANIN	Railroad	RSD/D47	14 40	101 20

PAK CHONG)	Station			
PAK KHLONG BO	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-4	7 28	99 20
PAK KHLONG CHAO KO	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-8	7 14	99 24
PAK KHLONG CHAO MAI	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-8	7 18	99 24
PAK KHLONG DUHUN	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-4	7 36	99 16
PAK KHLONG KALASE NOI	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-4	7 40	99 16
PAK KHLONG KALASE YAI	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-4	7 36	99 16
PAK KHLONG KAMPHOM	River Mouth	RSD/C47-15-5	9 22	98 24
PAK KHLONG LAK KHAN	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-9	7 08	99 42
PAK KHLONG LAO NON	River Mouth	RSD/C47-15-2	9 40	98 32
PAK KHLONG MAI KAE0	River Mouth	RSD/C47-15-5	9 30	98 26
PAK KHLONG MENG	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-4	7 30	99 18
PAK KHLONG NA KLUA	River Mouth	RSD/D47-23-3b	12 59	100 55
PAK KHLONG NAM MAO	River Mouth	RSD/D47-23-3b	12 51	100 54
PAK KHLONG NOK NGANG	River Mouth	RSD/C47-15-2	9 44	98 34
PAK KHLONG PHANGKA LUK SON	River Mouth	RSD/C47-15-5	9 26	98 26
PAK KHLONG PHRAO	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-8	7 16	99 24
PAK KHLONG PORA	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-8	7 14	99 26
PAK KHLONG RAE	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-9	7 08	99 44
PAK KHLONG RAET	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-1	7 42	99 12
PAK KHLONG SA	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-4	7 28	99 20
PAK KHLONG SAI	River Mouth	RSD/C47-21-8	8 08	98 38
PAK KHLONG SAM DOK	River Mouth	RSD/B47-3	8 00	98 25
PAK KHLONG SAP NOI	River Mouth	RSD/D47-24-5a	12 37	101 23
PAK KHLONG SUNGAI BATU	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-8	7 18	99 26
PAK KHLONG TASAE	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-8	7 08	99 36
PAK KHLONG THA CHANG	River Mouth	RSD/C47-16	9 15	99 15
PAK KHLONG THA CHIN	River Mouth	RSD/B47-3	7 50	98 25
PAK KHLONG THUNG YANG	River Mouth	RSD/C47-16	9 05	99 55
PAK KHLONG TO BAN	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-4	7 34	99 18
PAK KHLONG TO KHUN	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-8	7 14	99 24
PAK KHLONG TRIAM	River Mouth	RSD/C47-15-8	9 16	98 22
PAK KHLONG U PHAO YAI	River Mouth	RSD/C47-21-7	8 12	98 20
PAK KHLONG WAI KHON	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-8	7 10	99 38
PAK KHLONG YIK	River Mouth	RSD/C47-21-7	8 12	98 20



Pak Klong (see: BAN PAK KHLONG)	Village	SI/C47-D	11 10	99 30
Pak Klong Bang Pak Bie H (see: KHAO PAK KHLONG BANG PHAK BIA)	Hill	SI/C47-O	9 00	98 15
Pak Klong Sam Kok (see: PAK KHLONG SAM DOK)	River Mouth	SI/B47-C	8 00	98 25
*Pak Klong Te	River Mouth	BA/842	7 05	99 40
PAK KRET	Collective Village	RSD/D47-17-2a	13 55	100 30
Pak Kret (see: BAN PAK KRET)	Collective Village	SI/D47-Q	13 55	100 30
*Pak Krop	Sandbar	BA/2721	12 25	102 15
*Pak Kruen	River Mouth	BA/216b	9 00	98 10
*Pak Kruen	River Mouth	HO/1594	9 00	98 10
*Pak Kura	Channel	BA/216b	9 15	98 20
Pak Moun (see: BAN PAK MUN)	Village	SGI/D48	15 20	105 30
PAK MUN	River Mouth	RSD/D48-4	15 20	105 30
*Pak Nakon	River Mouth	SI/C47-W	8 30	100 05
*PAK NAKON R	River	SI/C47-W	8 25	100 00
Pak Nam (see: BAN PAK NAM)	Village	SI/B47-K	6 50	101 00
Pak Nam (see: BAN PAK NAM)	Village	SI/C47-J	10 25	99 15
Pak-nam (see: M Samudh Prakarn)	Town	RSD/D47	13 40	100 40
Pak Nam (see: BAN PAK NAM)	Village	SGI/D48	12 30	102 10
PAK NAM CHAO PHRAYA	River Mouth	RSD/D47-17-5b & d	13 32	100 36
PAK NAM HUANG	River Mouth	RSD/E47-18	17 50	101 30
PAK NAM HU CHIP	River Mouth	RSD/D47-11-8a	14 18	100 29
PAK NAM LANG SUAN.	River Mouth	RSD/C47-16	9 55	9 10
PAK NAM MUANG PHANGNGA	River Mouth	RSD/C47-21	8 20	98 35
PAK NAM MUANG PHUKET	River Mouth	RSD/B47-3	7 50	98 25
PAK NAM PHAK CHUT	River Mouth	RSD/B47-3	8 00	98 25
PAK NAM PHANG RAT	River Mouth	RSD/D47-24-3c	12 41	101 47
PAK NAM PHAU (see: BAN PAK NAM PHO)	Collective Village	SI/D47-E	15 40	100 10
Pak Nam Phau RS (see: SATHANI PAK NAM PHO)	Railroad Station	SI/D47-E	15 40	100 10

PAK NAM PRALIAN	River Mouth	RSD/B47-4-8	7 18	99 32
PAK NAM PRASAE	River Mouth	RSD/D47-24-3c	12 41	101 42
Pak Nam R (see: KHLONG PHAK NAM)	Stream	SI/D47-L	14 15	101 30
PAK NAM RAYONG	River Mouth	RSD/D47-24-1d	12 39	101 17
Pak nam reang (see: KHLONG NANG RIAM)	River Mouth	BA/998	7 40	100 10
Pak nam Reang (see: KHLONG NANG RIAM)	River Mouth	HO/3133	7 40	100 10
Pak Nam Skon (see: BAN PAK NAM SAKOM)	Village	SI/B47-K	6 55	100 50
Pak Nam Tako (see: BAN PAK NAM TAKO)	Village	SI/C47-J	10 05	99 10
PAK NAM WELU	River Mouth	RSD/D48-19-7b	12 18	102 16
Pak Narek (see: BAN PANARE)	Village	SI/B47/L	6 50	101 30
Pak Niad R (see: KHLONG PAK NIAT)	Stream	SI/B47-E	7 30	100 10
*Pak Ouan	Village	SGI/D48	15 50	103 10
*PAK PAN	Railroad Station	RSR	18 00	99 55
*Pak Panang	Village	HO/3133	8 20	100 10
*PAK PANANG	Village	RSR	8 25	100 15
Pak Pan RS (see: SATHANI PAK PAN)	Railroad Station	SI/E47-Q	18 00	100 00
Pak Paya (see: KHLONG YING)	Stream	BA/989	8 30	99 55
Pak Paya (see: KHLONG YING)	Stream	HO/3134	8 30	99 55
Pak Paya (see: BAN PAK PHAYUN)	Village	SI/B47-E	7 20	100 20
*PAK PENANG R.	River	SI/C47-W	8 05	100 20
PAK PHAN KHUHA	Bay	RSD/C47-16	9 15	99 20
PAK PHLI (AMPHOE) (see: BAN KO WAI [AMPHOE PAK PHILI])	Village	RSD/D47-12-7d	14 10	101 16
PAK PHRA	River Mouth	RSD/C47-21-7	8 12	98 18
Pak Phra Channel (see: AO TO NONG)	Bay	SI/C47-U	8 10	98 20
PAK PHRA or (PAPRA) ST (see: AO TO NONG)	Bay	SI/C47-U	8 10	98 20
*PAK PHRA R	River	SI/C47-W	8 30	100 00

Pak Pun Kuha (see: PAK PHAN KHUHA)	Bay	Si/C47-P	15	99 20
*Pak Ranot	Stream	HO/3133	7 40	100 20
*Pak Ranot	River Mouth	HO/3133	7 50	100 20
*Pak Ranote	Stream	BA/998	7 40	100 20
*Pak Rat Poo-m	River Mouth	BA/998	7 10	100 20
*Pak-Sak kuwan	River Mouth	BA/998	7 00	100 50
*Pak Sak kuwan	River Mouth	HO/3133	7 00	100 50
*Pak Ta Kong	Stream	BA/2720	13 30	101 00
*Pak Tjik	Channel	BA/216b	9 10	98 15
*Pak Tjik	Channel	HO/1594	9 10	98 20

# **The Prabang Myths: The Sacred Narratives and their Cultural Meaning<sup>1</sup>**

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**Key words:** The Prabang, Myths, Symbol, Sacredness, Cultural interpretation

## **Abstract**

The Prabang is a sacred Buddha image that is revered nationally by the people of Laos. The image is now located in Luang Prabang city. The Prabang plays an important part in the social, political, and cultural matters of Lao society. The Prabang is also held as a sacred symbol that expresses many of the characteristics and beliefs of the Lao people. This article aims to analyze and interpret the myths and rituals while probing their ideological basis by using a framework of symbolic and cultural interpretations.

The analysis shows that the myths and rituals associated with the Prabang image signify specific social ideologies of the Lao people. These can be divided into four points: 1) the symbol of politics and the power of the monarchy system of the Lao Kingdom; 2) the place of origin of the Prabang, which refers to the ethnic relationships of the people in Southeast Asia; 3) the characteristics and posture of the Prabang statue, which signify the power of the Kingdom's ruler; and 4) the roles related to the ideas of prosperity and fertility. This paper seeks to understand the significance of the Prabang as a symbol of sacredness, and which, in its myths and rituals, possesses hidden elements of social ideology.

## **Introduction**

A myth can be defined as a traditional story concerning the religious beliefs of a group of people who want to explain their history as well as the relationship between humans and the supernatural. Myths are capable of satisfying people's physical and spiritual needs. Meanings derived from the interpretation of a myth also involve the relationship between a social context and the culture that influences the way of life in a given society. Myths in all cultures also evince a sacred narrative – involving religious beliefs and rituals – in which different characters (e.g., God, a divinity, or supernatural beings) participate in defining the origin of things or rituals.<sup>2</sup> The myths of the Prabang form a sacred narrative – which has long been told to the people of Laos by their ancestors – in which the Prabang functions as a symbol that represents the Lord Buddha and, as a sacred Buddha image, gives spiritual value to Lao people. It also reflects some meanings associated with the supernatural and Buddhist beliefs as they relate to Lao society and culture.

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<sup>1</sup>This article is a part of the dissertation entitled “Myths of Buddha Image in Thai-Laos Bordering Communities : Conveying of Cultural Meaning and the Role of Enhancing Social Relationship,” Which is a partial fulfillment of requirements of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Thai at Mahasarakham University, Thailand. The authors are all associated with Mahasarakham University.

<sup>2</sup>Siraporn Na Thalang, “Tale, Myth, Fantasy, Truth,” *Journal of Arts* 35, no. 2 (2006), 1

The Prabang myths that have been passed down from ancestors are aimed at expressing cultural meanings through a symbolism that binds the history of the Lao people, via a religious dialogue, to an ideological content, which, nevertheless, inspires a cultural awareness in Laos. Clifford Geertz defined a symbol as the verbal expression and action of people in a society that has been constructed for communication.<sup>3</sup> In other words, there is a hidden meaning in the symbol, which may be complex and may imply an expression of opinions of people in the society. On the other hand, Claude Lévi-Strauss pointed out that in interpreting and reading mythical texts, the reader must think beyond what is presented in the written text.<sup>4</sup> That is, one must analyze the complex elements of the language used because such language employs special expressions that cannot be simply interpreted as if they were part of common, everyday language. Thus, the content from the myths of Prabang can be seen as a message that expresses the ancestors' aim to inform later generations about rituals in relation to the Prabang. The myths surrounding the Prabang reflect social thought in symbolic forms, thereby conveying the thoughts, beliefs, and social emotions of Lao Buddhism. As such, they form a tool that imaginatively conveys the thoughts, beliefs, and faith of the people of Laos as well as those of Southeast Asia.

### **The Prabang: A symbol that associates the sacred with the profane**

Luang Prabang is an area rich in memories of traditional rituals, tales and myths that describe the relationships between the various social groups found there. As a result of this rich cultural history, the city has been described as a city of ghosts, evil spirits, cruel giants and *nagas*. In earlier times, the people of Luang Prabang believed in *Phi Than* or *Phi Fa* (the spirits of the sky), a belief that was based on an earlier belief in sky divinities, who, with powers far superior to those of human beings, could positively or negatively affect the lives of the human beings, animals, and plants on earth. The people therefore had to do whatever was necessary in order to satisfy the needs of the *Phi Than* or *Phi Fa* (the spirits of the sky) and *Phi Dam* (the ancestral spirits). They also believed in *Phi Pu Yur Ya Yur*, *Pu Ngam Ya Ngam*, *Pu Lai Ya Lai*. In addition, *Phi Nak*, *Phi Mahesak* or city guardian spirits, were believed to lurk in areas associated with sites of the city's early establishment, a fact designated and signaled by the city pillar.<sup>5</sup> People believed that these spirits would help protect the city and its dwellers. Such a belief was shared among the common people, the bureaucrats, and the kings. Luang Prabang continued to be the city where rituals were practiced (i.e., a ritual space). The rituals practiced here expressed and enacted a belief in the connections between spirits and human beings, or between human beings and *Than* (gods), for it was believed that spirits could be representatives of human beings to communicate with *Than*.

The Prabang, a sacred image as well as a symbol of Buddhism, was brought into the city by the request of King Fa Ngum's wife, Queen Keaw Keng Ya who was a princess from the Khmer Kingdom. Because she lived in Khmer as a Buddhist, she could not accept the killing of animals. Witnessing the people in Luang Prabang

<sup>3</sup>Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 7-9.

<sup>4</sup>Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2001), 211.

<sup>5</sup>Charuwan Thammawat, *Annals of Laos include Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Muang Puan, and Champasak* (MahaSarakham: The Research Institute of Northeast Art and Culture, Srinakarinwirot University, 1985), 86-87.



killing elephants and water-buffaloes as offerings to spirits made her feel miserable. She therefore asked King Fa Ngum to introduce the Buddhism of Khmer to Laos.<sup>6</sup> Adopting Buddhism and bringing the Prabang image to the city of Luang Prabang in deference to the request of Queen Kaew Keng Ya indicates that the role of women in Laos was crucial and powerful in Lao society, especially on account of Buddhism. The impact of Buddhism's ascendancy over the traditional local beliefs is reflected in the transformation of Luang Prabang's identity, for Luang Prabang effectively became a Buddhist land. The traditional practice of offering worship to various spirits was reconciled with Buddhist rituals. As such, the people of Luang Prabang were able to maintain their long-cherished traditional beliefs while simultaneously accepting the new concepts introduced through Buddhism. Transformational processes occurred when symbolic representations of the sky spirits were re-imagined as Buddhist deities. The traditional practice of building spirit houses to connect people with spirits was paralleled and overlaid by the practice of building of temples. That is why many old spirit houses can still be seen to this day in temple boundaries, having been transformed into Buddhist script houses (*Hor Trai*), drum towers, or hermitage houses. Indeed, at the Chiangthong temple, one can find a god house with a hermit image on the top triangle of its roof. This is called a *Hor Rasior*, a hermitage house, and it represents the devotees' respect to the sky divinities for their assistance in protecting the temple area.<sup>7</sup>

Though the belief in spirits still exists in the memories of the people of Luang Prabang, a definite shift from the belief in animism to the new of set beliefs introduced by Buddhism took place. This was the period of the completion as well as negotiation between Buddhism and animism. The harmonious intersection of these two belief systems in Luang Prabang demonstrates the need for a predominant power to maintain the complementary co-existence of different world views. As Siraporn Na Thalang has noted, in Tai societies, there were conflicts between the traditional beliefs in animism and the Buddhist beliefs that were adopted by the rulers and disseminated among the people (for whom dependence on the supernatural power described and articulated through animism continued to play an important role).<sup>8</sup> As a result of this encounter, there arose question regarding the efficacy of each system. In other words, which belief system was capable of producing greater virtue – Buddhism or animism? People were faced with a choice. Eventually, what occurred in Tai societies was that there emerged a blend between these two beliefs, but a blend that came to predominantly support Buddhist beliefs. Consequently, Luang Prabang, which had hitherto been called the land of holiness, grew flexible and became a Buddhist land that managed to successfully blend Buddhism with the traditional beliefs of the indigenous people. In this way, ancestral spirits and Buddhism became a regular part of life among the people of Luang Prabang.

The blending of these two belief systems is exemplified by people's paying respect to the sacred symbol of the Prabang image, which symbolizes Lord Buddha, who is believed to bring happiness and prosperity to the land. Gaining popularity

<sup>6</sup>Mahakham Champakaewmani and Others. *Lao History*, trans. Suvit Theerasatsawat (KhonKaen: Department of History and Archaeology, KhonKaen University, 1996), 25–26.

<sup>7</sup>Woralan Boonyasurat, *Architecture Appreciation: The Temples in Luang Prabang* (Bangkok: Muang Boran, 2005), 33.

<sup>8</sup>Siraporn Na Thalang, *Theory of Folklore Methodology in Analyzing the Myths – Legend* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 2009), 349-50.

among worshippers, the Prabang assumed an important part in rituals, such as the supplication for rain. In similar fashion, elements of traditional animistic belief were influenced by Buddhism. For example, various spirits were re-imagined as the Prabang's guards, while others came to assume various functions in minor rituals. One such species of spirit is that of the *Phi Pu Yer Ya Yer*, spirits or ancestor spirits responsible for establishing and protecting the city of Luang Prabang. These spirits eventually came to be regarded as royal gods and assumed the new role of *Than*. Responsible for driving evil away, these and other gods still protect Buddhism up to the present day.<sup>9</sup> In some rituals like the traditional New Year ceremony, *Phi Pu Yer Ya Yer* spirits still take part as leaders who pour holy water over the Prabang image. This indicates the degree to which the people of Luang Prabang have adopted Buddhist beliefs. At the same time, it illustrates the powerful influence of Buddhism has had on traditional beliefs via the Prabang, which is regarded as a symbolic nexus point between spirits and human beings as well as that between spirits and the Lord Buddha (Buddhism). The Prabang Buddha image is thus seen as a concrete representation of Buddhism. This supports Emile Durkheim's notion that rituals and symbols of the sacred world form a concrete representation of a society.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the Prabang is seen as the symbol representing the supernaturally powerful and miraculous Lord Buddha, who can create peace and prosperity for all people and their communities. Thus, the Prabang image plays a role in linking the sacred world of the spiritual and traditional beliefs of animism with the world of material reality which people perform toward the Prabang. It also plays a role in combining the spiritual and traditional animistic beliefs with practices in the real world of Buddhism.

### **The Prabang: A symbol of politics and power of the monarchy system**

In the past, Buddhism had a close relationship with the monarchy system. Religious institutions played a role in setting qualifications for anyone who would become a ruler or whose duty was to maintain and strengthen the stability of the social structure. Buddhism is one of the symbolic mechanisms used by the king as a framework of moral support aimed at bringing benefits to the nation. There are indications that it also functioned as a means of maintaining political stability as well as celebrating the glory and power of the monarch at the time. Powers and duties in ruling the country were related to patronizing Buddhism as well. As Ammara Pongsapich has noted, the monarch applied the belief in religion to the system of ruling the nation; thus, the people could not separate their religious beliefs from the ruling system of the monarch.<sup>11</sup> This is how the peace of the nation was maintained. It is logical to conclude that Buddhist beliefs and ideology were symbolically coupled with the prestige of the monarchy.

The Prabang myths also had an important role in reflecting the idea of power creation in the regime and the propagation of Buddhism in Lao society. The myths

<sup>9</sup> Martin Stuart-Fox, *Naga Cities of the Mekong* (Singapore: Media Masters, 2006), 12.

<sup>10</sup> Paritta Chalermphao Koranantakool, "The Sacred World and the Profane World of the Social Life" In *Chao Mae, Khun Poo, Chang So, Chang Faon and other Stories of Ritual and Drama*. Paritta Chalermphao Koranantakool (Editor). (Bangkok: The Center of Manusayawittaya Sirinthorn (Organization Public), 2003), 4.

<sup>11</sup> Ammara Pongsapich, *Culture, Religion and Ethnicity: An Anthropological Analysis of Thai Society*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1994), 71.

clearly manifested the prosperity and power of the monarchy system in Laos as shown through the Prabang image's sacred symbol which was set to represent the Lord Buddha who had supernatural powers and miracles. The seating of the Prabang image in the country was thus a mechanism for generating power and prestige for the monarchy; as such, the Prabang image can be seen to possess a hidden latent significance in relation to political stability. This has resulted in a belief in the sanctity of the Prabang image, specifically the belief that the enshrinement of the Prabang image in the city as the national Buddha image will bring happiness to the people of the city. This is why the Kings in the past occasionally moved the Prabang image to different locations, claiming to bring peace, happiness and prosperity to their people in the process. The content of some of the myths suggests that another reason for moving the Prabang image to different sites of enshrinement lies in the people's faith in the power of the Buddha image. But another reason for moving the Prabang image is its ability to bring people of ethnic diversity together, as with the case of the statue's relocation to the city of Luang Prabang. For example, Phraya Fa-Ngum asked to enshrine the Prabang in Srisattana Khanahut Lan Chang Rom Khao (Luang Prabang). But while traveling through the city of Wiangkham, Phraya Wiangkham, the ruler of the city, requested that the Prabang remain there for the sake of worship. The Prabang was thus located in Wiangkham. In 789 A.D. (1970 B.E.), Phrachao Srisattana Khanahut Lan Chang Rom Khao summoned a ship to carry the Prabang from Vientiane. The ship was wrecked at Gang Chan, the river in the south of Chiang Khan city causing the Prabang to sink and disappear into the water. It was soon discovered that the Prabang had been found and was enshrined in the city of Chan. Later in 838 A.D. (2019 B.E.), during the reign of Phraya La Num Saen Thai Poowanat, the Prabang was taken to be enshrined in Chiang Thong temple, which is located in the city of Sri Sattana Khanahut Lan Chang Rom Khao (Luang Prabang). He then ordered the temple of Wat Manorom to be built and placed the Prabang there. During the reign of Phraya Wichool Raj Thibodee, in 921 A.D. (2112 B.E.), Phrachao Chai Chettathiraj founded the new capital city of Vientiane and named the city Chantaburi Sri Sattana Khanahut Lan Chang Rom Khao. The Prabang, as well as the Pra Kaew Morakot and the Pra Saek Kham, were still enshrined in Wat Wichoolarajsattharam (in the old city) and its name was changed to Muang Prabang Rachathanee Sri Sattana Khanahut Lan Chang Rom Khao later.<sup>12</sup> Phraya La Num Saen Thai Poowanat then handed over the city of Chiang Thong to the monks so that they could look after the Prabang while he brought the Pra Kaew Morakot and the Pra Saek Kham down to Vientiane. He dubbed the city of Vientiane "Phra Nakorn Chantaburi Srisattana Khanahut Utamaratchathanee." The city of Chiang Thong, in which the Prabang was then located, had been called "Phra Nakorn Luang Prabang" ever since the time of its enshrinement there.<sup>13</sup> The relocation of the Prabang to different places reflected the people's belief that the power of the Prabang could protect the city.

The Prabang plays an important role in naming the city and establishing the power of the ruling system, which serves to indicate not only the remarkable power of the monarchy but the spread of Buddhism in Lao society. In the legend of Khun Borom, the historical background relating to the establishment of Luang Prabang is mentioned, stating that the city was originally called Muang Chawa. When Khun Lo,

<sup>12</sup>Ministry of Education, Religious Department, *The History of the Important Buddha Images* (Bangkok, 1981), 207-211.

<sup>13</sup>Mahakham Champakeawmani, *Lao History*, 40-41.

Khun Borom's eldest son, established Muang Chawa (Sua) as the capital of Lan Chang around the 13<sup>th</sup> century (757 A.D. or 1300 B.E.), the city was renamed "Muang Chiang Thong."<sup>14</sup> During the reign of Praya Suwankhamphong, in 1316 A.D (1859 B.E.), it was changed to "Muang Luang."<sup>15</sup> During the reign of Prachao Chaichetthathiraj, in 1560 A.D. (2103 B.E.), a royal proclamation was announced to move the capital city of Laos to Vientiane for the purpose of balancing governmental control in the remote regions with regard to population, economy, and strategic planning. That resulted in a change in Lao's political systems. The Prabang image, however, was to remain in Chiang Thong, which was subsequently renamed "Luang Prabang". The monarch's decision to keep the Prabang image in Chiang Thong was considered a clever political strategy with regard to religion.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Prabang: The place of origin and aspects of ethnic relations in Southeast Asia**

Buddhism and numerous important Buddha images that are found in mainland Southeast Asia originated in India and Sri Lanka. Buddhism spread through the territories of Southeast Asia with the entry of the gold Buddha image, which had been made in Sri Lanka. The Prabang is the Buddhist symbol that entered the Khmer empire during a period of prosperity. At that time, the Prabang myth mentioned that King Supinaraj of Lanka (Sri Lanka today) had made the Prabang of gold, forming it in a posture that was meant to express the tranquility of the conflicts among his relatives,' and gave it to the Khmer king, who was his close friend. The Buddha image had been worshipped in Lanka for 963 years before it was given to the Khmer king. In Cambodia, the image was located in the city of Inthapattha for 502 years until the reign of Chao Fa Ngum, a king of the Lao Kingdom, who asked for the image to be relocated to the city of Lan Chang. During the imperialistic era of the Siam Kingdom, the Prabang was brought to Siam twice before returning to Luang Prabang. The delivery of the Prabang to different places throughout Southeast Asia instilled a common belief among the people in the region in the divine power of the Prabang. This reflects a common disposition among people of Southeast Asia.

Various myths of the Prabang are recounted from memory by the people of Luang Prabang. Mr. Thongpan Sawatdee of Ban Songtai Village, Jompet District, Luang Prabang gave an account on the route of the Prabang before being enshrined in Luang Prabang:

The Prabang belonged to Cambodia. Chao Fa Ngum took away the son of the Khmer King. He brought the Prabang on a raft to the city of Xieng Thong along the Huang River in Thailand. He went past the city of Pak Lai in Xaiburi region, Thadua, Khong River until arrived at Baan Saluan and Baan Lueng. Then he went through Chiang Maen, crossing Khong River, and seated in Chawa, then in the city of Xieng Dong, and later in Xieng Thong, which the name was changed to be Luang Prabang during the reign of Chao Fa Ngum. The Prabang belonged to

<sup>14</sup>Thongsueb Supamark, *History of Laos* (Bangkok: Office of the Welfare Promotion Commission for Teachers and Educational Personnel, 1982), 36.

<sup>15</sup>Term Wipakpanakit, *History of Laos* (Bangkok: Thammasat University Printing, 1997), 19.

<sup>16</sup>Martin Stuart-Fox, *History of Laos*, trans. Chiraporn Vinyarath (Bangkok: Toyota Foundation, 2010), 15-16.

Chao Fa Ngum and was located in the palace. Common people had no chance to witness it; only aristocrats and scholars had access to it. The Prabang in the museum was the reproduction. The original is not to be seen.<sup>17</sup>

73 year-old grandmother Tee of Sang Hai Village, Pak Ou District, Luang Prabang, shared some of her memories, inflected with a bitter tone, about the Prabang, “The original Prabang is not in Luang Prabang anymore; it was taken back to Thailand. The current Prabang is an imitation. The original is in Thailand. They took the Prabang; Thais took away the Prabang.”<sup>18</sup>

An elderly woman named Kaenjan Jantapasert, a 105 year-old villager of Ban Wiang Kaew, also shared her thoughts: “The Prabang is meaningful to Lao people because it is a sacred image that people spiritually rely on. It is unknown as to where the genuine image is kept, despite a rumor that it is in Thailand. However, we now worship the local image, which is believed as sacred as the original one.”<sup>19</sup> Boonpeng Seeudomjan shared her memories of the Prabang, stating: “The Prabang is an important Buddha image that has been with the nation since ancient times, being highly respected by Lao people. There is a rumor that the genuine image is presently stationed in Vientiane.”<sup>20</sup> Some groups of Lao people have not paid careful attention to stories of the past; nevertheless, they have positive memories of the image. For instance, Seejan Hinpaphan, a villager from Phonhuong, and Toomnewong Kattiphalad, a villager from Phonphaeng, who shared similar memories, reported the following: The Prabang is very sacred. When people who have problems make a wish and ask for blessings, they become satisfied and receive good things for their lives. The Prabang is very important to Lao people and it is an essential part of their lives. They have paid respect to this image since the olden days.<sup>21</sup>

Stories about the Prabang from the past remain in the memories of the people of Luang Prabang. The myths of the Prabang show how the ethnic races have been formed. Widespread reverence for the Prabang not only shows the shared beliefs and ritual practices surrounding the Buddha image among the Lao and Thai people, it also reflects the recognition of a mutually shared spiritual space. Despite political conflict in some matters, this shared belief can be regarded as an integral element in the “network of the Buddhist culture” or “Buddhism network.”<sup>22</sup> Typically, the people of Southeast Asia do not deny or scorn a Buddha image or a god from other places, and this degree of acceptance serves to confirm the commonality shared among a people who also share the same ideology. The myths of the Prabang

<sup>17</sup>Thongpan Sawatdee, interviewed by Channipha Doungwilai, SongTaiVillage, JomPetch District, Luang Prabang Province, LaoPDR, February 7, 2010.

<sup>18</sup>Tee, interviewed by Channipha Doungwilai, Sang Hai Village, Pak Ou District, Luang Prabang Province, Lao PDR, February 6, 2010.

<sup>19</sup>Kaenjan Jantapasert, interviewed by Channipha Doungwilai, Wiang Kaew Village, Luang Prabang Province, Lao PDR, July 24, 2011.

<sup>20</sup>Boonpeng Seeudomjan, interviewed by Channipha Doungwilai, Phonhuong Village, Luang Prabang Province, Lao PDR, July 22, 2011.

<sup>21</sup>Seejan Hinpaphan, interviewed by Channipha Doungwilai, Phonhuong Village, Luang Prabang Province, Lao PDR, July 22, 2011; Toomnewong Kattiphalad, interviewed by Channipha Doungwilai, Phonphaeng Village, Luang Prabang Province, Lao PDR, July 23, 2011.

<sup>22</sup>Pathom Hongsuwan, “The Myths of Lan Na Buddha Images: The Problematic Beliefs and Local Relations” (MahaSarakham: Mahasarakham University, 2009): 184.



also provide evidence for the political and cultural implications of belief in a Buddha image, and these implications are reflected in the way in which physical and spiritual spaces are used and imagined.

### **The Prabang: The meaning reflecting through the posture and the hidden force**

The Prabang is a statue of the Buddha in a posture that signifies “calming the relatives” or “calming the ocean” – the full name of this posture translates as “stopping the relatives from fighting over the water in the ocean.”<sup>23</sup> The Buddha is in a standing position, with both of his hands raised to the level of his chest, palms facing forward, in a gesture of prohibition and cessation. This depiction of the Buddha also signifies the Prabang’s role in bestowing the message of Buddhism on the Lao people, inviting them to commit themselves to Buddhism. The Buddha’s posture shows that there is supernatural power of which can influence the people’s lifestyle. Lao people pay great respect to the image, and it is believed that the sacred power of shared faith can successfully unite the various ethnic peoples of Laos, as well as generate positive mental states that can aid and strengthen the people when dangerous incidents or civil unrest occur.



Figures 1 and 2: The Prabang Buddha Image. Photographs by Supawan; courtesy of oknation.net

The Prabang, which signifies the presence of the Buddha, represents a mode of communication between Lord Buddha and man. For example, at the traditional New Year or Songkran Festival, the people of Luang Prabang used to bring the image out and pour water over the image. The ancestral spirits of *Phi Pu Yur Ya Yur* changed their role, becoming angels charged with the protection of the Prabang and leading the water-pouring ceremony. This demonstrates the power of the Prabang (representing Buddhism) had over other beliefs.

<sup>23</sup>PraThammakosachan Unuchari, *The Myths of Various Buddha Images* (Bangkok: The Institute of Religious Promotion, 1976), 269.



In that period of Lao history, though the king tried his best to foster unity among the people of Luang Prabang, there emerged problems associated with the expansion of territory and the control of those territories among the king's many sons. The establishment of major cities in the kingdom of Lan Xang incited royals to compete for the crown. The country was invaded, and people suffered. The Lan Xang kingdom had its share of internal fighting, and the land was eventually divided into two parts, namely Luang Prabang and Vientiane.<sup>24</sup> The Prabang played an important part in the monarchy's rule over the country, for it was strategically used by the kings to reunify the Luang Prabang people under its power and holiness.

The relocation and enshrinement of the Prabang image in Luang Prabang signified the need for unity among the relatives, noblemen, and people of Luang Prabang. Considering the posture of the Prabang image, it is almost as if the Prabang represented the descent of Lord Buddha to earth in order to stop the quarrelling among the people, which, if left unchecked, could result in chaos and damage to the nation. The posture of the Prabang underscores the latent power of this unifying symbol, for, in the two raised hands, we not only see a prohibitory gesture, but we also observe a gesture of integrity, equality, and equity. Therefore, it is likely that the Prabang myths are accurate, and King Fa Ngum enshrined the Prabang image in Luang Prabang in order to keep the country calm and peaceful.

The Prabang is a sacred symbolic image that is necessary for the prevention of conflict in the nation, and its protective function is clearly evidenced by the collapse of the Lan Xang Kingdom. That is, within a period of two decades, the kingdom was divided into three sub-kingdoms.<sup>25</sup> The ensuing conflicts along with the weakness of the three sub-kingdoms resulted in their falling into Siam's political control in 1779 A.D.<sup>26</sup> A number of sacred Buddha images were taken to Thonburi, including the Prabang and the emerald Buddha image.<sup>27</sup> In 1780 A.D., the king of Thonburi appointed Chao Nanthasen as ruler of Vientiane until Siam changed its capital from Thonburi to Rattanakosin. His Majesty King Prah Buddha Yodfa Chulalok (King Rama I) then graciously permitted King Nanthasen to take the Prabang back to Vientiane. The following statement appears in the legend of the Emerald Buddha:

In the reign of King Rama I, the King of Vientiane paid a visit to present silver and gold flowers along with tributes. Before returning, the King of Lao requested permission to take the standing Buddha image, namely Prabang back to Laos, stating that the Emerald Buddha and Prabang could not share the same shelter because that would bring about droughts and famine. The Siamese King thus graciously granted permission to take the requested image back.<sup>28</sup>

The event mentioned describes King Nanthasen's request for permission to take the Prabang back to Laos so that the image would not be stationed at the same place with the Emerald Buddha, but it might have been due to the Lao people's lack

<sup>24</sup>Mahakham Champakaewmani, *Lao History*, 38.

<sup>25</sup> Grant Evans, *Brief History of Laos: Country in the Central Part of Southeast Asia* (Bangkok: O. S. Printing House, 2006), 25.

<sup>26</sup>Sila Weerawong, "Three Kingdoms of Lan Xang Land," in *History of Laos* (KhonKaen: Department of History and Archaeology, KhonKaen University, 1996): 71.

<sup>27</sup>Stuart-Fox, *History of Laos*, 19.

<sup>28</sup>Term Wipakpotjanakit, *History of Laos*, 104.

of peace and happiness as well as their fear and suspicion while living in a state with a dependent status. The people needed a spiritual center that they could grasp and rely on. The Prabang in the memories of the Lao people still played a significant role, for it was regarded as a Buddha image with the power to protect and provide peace and happiness. Indeed, the Prabang was regarded by the people of Laos as so powerful that it had the ability to summon rain. Owing to the common perception of its miraculous powers, the people wished to have the Prabang stationed in their home country so that they could worship it forever.

The return and enshrinement of the Prabang held the promise of harmony among relatives, honesty and loyalty among the bureaucrats, and unity among the people. In addition, the latent power expressed in the posture of the Buddha image's hands, according to the beliefs of the Lao people, was related to fertility, especially with regards to the sky, rain, and agriculture. As such, it is believed that the Prabang Buddha image is a catalyst for seasonal rain. This is why most people in Lao, in reference to this hidden power, call the Prabang Buddha image the "Begging for Rain Buddha image." Muen-on Panfongkham, a 78 year-old man, reported the following:

"The Prabang is a sacred Buddha image that our ancestors have taught us to worship since ancient times. The image is very important for Lao people, for it is capable of making the rain fall in the right season. A ceremony is thus held each year, during which a large crowd of people gather to join the procession of the Prabang."<sup>29</sup>

In conclusion, the meaning of the Prabang according to the belief in terms of people's ways of life is that it brings happiness and prosperity to the society. For the meaning in terms of the political system through the king's power, it brings happiness and harmony. The power of the Prabang is shown through the Prabang image and its posture. It is the power that brings peace, happiness, and prosperity to the nation and its people.

### **The Prabang: The role of bringing prosperity and fertility**

The sacredness of the Prabang is illustrated by supernatural miracles associated with fertility and the bringing of rain in the rainy season. Rainfall is a fundamental concern in Luang Prabang, an agricultural society. The practice of ceremonially pouring water over the Prabang, which is believed to bring good fortune to the people of Luang Prabang, has been performed for many generations and is still done today. In the traditional New Year ceremony, the people of Luang Prabang bring the Prabang Buddha image out for people to bathe. This is called the "Hod Song Festival," and it occurs in the fifth Lunar month or April. The act of pouring water signifies the removal of dirt as well as purification from any negativity of the preceding year. In the ceremony, people bring flowers, traditional perfume, incense, and candles in order to properly worship the Prabang image. At the same time, the people request seasonal rain from various angels and gods so that everyone might benefit and be happy.<sup>30</sup> It has been said that, during the people's New Year parade, experts and monks and novices celebrate the ceremony by bringing the Prabang from the museum to the temple of Wat Mai Suwannapoom Alam in order to enshrine it there for three days so that people may pay their respect and pour water

<sup>29</sup>Muen-on Panfongkham, interviewed by Channipha Doungwilai, Komkawang Village, Luang Prabang Province, Lao PDR, July 20, 2011.

<sup>30</sup>Somsamuk Meesai, *Kobjai tee liewbung* (Vientiane: Ministry of Education, 1988), 3.

over it. At the same time, ancestral spirits like *Phi Pu Yur Ya Yur*, which represent the older traditional beliefs, are invited to attend the ceremony. The practice is that people pour water over the Prabang for the sake of fertility as it is true that in the agricultural society, crops need water from natural rainfall. In addition, bathing the Prabang during the New Year celebrations symbolizes the washing away of the inauspicious elements that complicate life. The people of Luang Prabang believe that if they treat the Prabang correctly, they will be rewarded with security, peacefulness, and fertility. At the same time, ancestral spirits like *Phi Pu Yur Ya Yur* were also invited to participate in the ceremony as representatives of traditional beliefs. The participation of *Phi Pu Yur Ya Yur* demonstrates that the conflict between the older beliefs in ancestral and local spirits and the people's commitment to Buddhism has diminished. The parade of the Prabang is an evidence of the association between man and the gods. It shows the connection between the ancestral spirits and the people of Luang Prabang trying to glorify Buddhism and treat the Prabang as a living image. However, the ritual ceremony also celebrates the *Phi Fa Phi Than* (spirits of the sky) and signals the belief that the world and the universe were created by the *Than* or great *Than*. Apart from the belief that the creator of the universe and the world is God, Lao people also believe that *Than* is the creator of human and can give them fertility as well.



**Figures 3 (above) and 4 (next page):** The Parade of the Prabang in traditional New Year Ceremony. Photo by Channipha Doungwilai April 17, 2010





The Prabang is a symbol that combines the beliefs in Buddhism with traditional beliefs. When Buddhism entered the land, causing conflicts between human and supernatural powers, the angels, spirits, and giants of the older, local belief systems were reduced to a secondary role, effectively becoming ghosts who guard the Prabang and, occasionally, leading participants in certain Buddhist ritual practices. The roles of the Prabang slowed down when the monarchy power rose. The Prabang's role as it relates to the ruling monarch has since disappeared. This illustrates the shifting meaning and role of the Prabang as it relates to defusing potential conflict between local supernatural beliefs and the Buddhist beliefs of the people of Luang Prabang. However, the status of the Prabang as a sacred Buddha image has persisted in the hearts and beliefs of the Lao people from past to the present. Paying proper respect and treating the Prabang accordance with the beliefs of the people of Luang Prabang is believed to bring fertility and prosperity to the country.

## Conclusion

The myths of the Prabang are sacred narratives conveying a meaning of togetherness in the community and reflecting the power hidden in the thoughts, beliefs and emotions of Laotian Buddhists. With the introduction of Buddhism, the ritual space of Luang Prabang was usurped, resulting in a negotiation between Buddhism and traditional beliefs and a compromise between ancestral spirits and Buddhism. When the Prabang image assumed its role as the symbolic nexus point of these two belief systems and came to be regarded as a protector, authority, and

bringer of happiness and peace to a unified people, Buddhism became the mechanism that reflected the power relations between the state, the people, and the traditional beliefs. The Prabang conveys these meanings by informing the very name of the capital city that enshrines it, thereby associating the ruling powers with the holiness, prosperity, fertility, and stability that it signifies, as well as endorsing the authority of the king who managed to overcome the internal conflicts born of religious and cultural difference. The posture of the Prabang image symbolizes its capacity to engender the Lao people with a spiritual status, bestowing upon them a strong life of morality, honesty, loyalty, and harmonious unity. Finally, the Prabang also illustrates its own shifting meaning and its role in defusing the conflict between earlier beliefs in supernatural powers and Buddhism. Ultimately, it is seen to bring peace, abundance, and prosperity to the country.

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# The Lao Matri-System, Empowerment, and Globalisation

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*There is a vital need for research and investigation of gender roles among the various ethnic groups that is based upon solid anthropological investigation and the provision of good ethnographic description. This would in turn provide a foundation for gender studies and action plans in the multicultural context.*

- Participatory Poverty Assessment Lao PDR, 2001<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The spotlight in this article is on the strength and vitality of the Lao matri-system and its institutions, dynamics, and capacity to counteract the negative gender impact of the processes that attend globalisation. It will be shown that the world-wide historical trend to displace or to defeat matrilineal and matrilineal societies has not yet undermined the Lao matri-system and cultural heritage upholding the relatively high value and status of Lao women and girls.

The main findings of a small snowball study, conducted in 2009 in Vientiane, will be presented in an effort to discover the impact of globalisation on the matri-cultural heritage. Case studies will be described that show the impact globalisation had on ethnic minority women from communities with a firm patriarchal tradition. The adoption of aspects of the matri-system seems to be attractive to them. Attention will be paid to the unique and precious value of the matrilineal marriage as a means of protection for girls and women in the broader context of imbalanced sex-ratios in China and domestic violence in Laos. A brief conclusion is drawn and offers suggestions to highlight the importance of the social matri-system as a precious cultural heritage, not only for Laos, but also as an example for the worrying number of societies that are characterized by son-preference and far too many “missing” girls.

## 1. Introduction

Laos is one of the very few countries left in the world in which matrilineal residence, matrilineal inheritance, and bilineal descent and kinship still exist for a large group of Lao women.<sup>2</sup> Eminent women anthropologists such as Kathleen Gough, Mona Etienne and Eleanor Leacock and Bina Agarwal have claimed that matrilineal and bilateral societies all over the world have disintegrated due to the undermining

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<sup>1</sup> Asian Development Bank (ADB), State Planning Committee, National Statistic Centre. *Participatory Poverty Assessment Lao PDR*, (2001): 120.

<sup>2</sup> Harriet Evans, *The Subject of Gender: Daughters and Mothers in Urban China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 124-25; Carol Ireson-Doolittle and Geraldine Moreno-Black, *The Lao: Gender, Power, and Livelihood*, Westview Case Studies in Anthropology (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004), 56; Asian Development Bank (ADB), Country Gender Strategy, *Lao PDR, Gender, Poverty and the Millennium Development Goals* (Mekong Department and Regional and Sustainable Development Department, 2004), 6; Arne Kislenko, *Culture and Customs of Laos* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009), 132.

intrusion of patriarchal ideologies and practices, and as a consequence of colonization, modernisation, liberalisation and globalisation.<sup>3</sup> What is the situation in Laos?

Since the implementation of the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) policy in 1986, globalisation has accelerated processes of profound change with obvious negative gender consequences. In studies we conducted in Laos in 1995 and 1998, we found a gradual undermining of the matrilineal Lao Lum tradition,<sup>4</sup> in particular as a result of land legislation and the male dominated adjudication of land titling.<sup>5</sup> We envisaged that Lao Lum women could stand to lose one of the most basic and vital power resources at their disposal: the land they have inherited from their parents.<sup>6</sup>

Can we trace the continuous, on-going erosion and undermining of the matrilineal and matrilineal social system over the past years?<sup>7</sup> In a small snowball study, conducted in Vientiane in 2009, I had discussions with old Lao friends – women (mostly) and men – with whom I had worked as a gender specialist in various development cooperation projects over a time span of almost twenty years. The focus was on their perception of the positive and negative impacts of globalisation on the matrilineal and matrilineal life in which they had been raised. It will be argued in this article that for Lao Lum women who belong to the urban elite and middle class in Vientiane, the very reverse of a process of erosion and undermining of the matri-system seems to happen. It would appear that the matri-tradition has transformed itself into a modern, attractive, strong and booming lifestyle<sup>8</sup>. The enormous global and local economic and social transformation processes, particularly during the past ten years, have, in combination with the matri-system, greatly empowered and protected my friends in Vientiane.

Resettlement policies, forest land legislation, better roads and transportation facilities, smart phones and other means of communication have drastically increased the awareness of ethnic minority women and girls concerning lifestyles, customs, and habits different from the patrilineal tradition and patriarchal social environment in which they are embedded. Are they attracted by the matri-lifestyle?

<sup>3</sup> Mona Etienne and Eleanor Leacock, eds., *Women and Colonization: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Praeger, 1980), passim; Bina Agarwal, *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*, Cambridge South Asian Studies 58 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 153-197; Also see in this respect the brilliant analysis of Gough. David M. Schneider and Kathleen Gough, *Matrilineal Kinship* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), 631-52.

<sup>4</sup> The tripartite system of classifying ethnic groups according to Lao Lum, Lao Thung and Lao Sung was commonly used at that time. See Charles Zuckerman, 2010, for the critique on this classification. 13-17.

<sup>5</sup> Loes Schenk-Sandbergen and Outhaki Chalamany-Khampoui, *Women in Rice Fields and Offices: Irrigation in Laos: Gender Specific Case Studies in Four Villages* (Heiloo: Empowerment, 1995), 20-21, 80, 100.; Loes Schenk-Sandbergen, *Gender, Culture and Land Rights in Rural Lao PDR*, Gender Studies, Monograph 7, Gender and Development Program, School of Environmental Resources and Development (Bangkok: Asian Institute of Technology, 1998), passim. The western concept of ownership of land is not applicable in Laos as the State remains the formal owner. Land-use rights have been allocated to the holders of land title documents.

<sup>6</sup> Loes Schenk-Sandbergen, "Gender, Land Rights and Culture in Laos: A Study in Vientiane, Districts, Villages and Households," in *Contemporary Lao Studies: Research on Development, Language and Culture, and Traditional Medicine*, ed. Carol J. Compton, John Ferdinand Hartmann, and Vinya Sysamouth (San Francisco: Center for Lao Studies, 2009), 3-41.

<sup>7</sup> In order to avoid boring repetition in this paper, I use the prefix matri- in words as matri-system, matri-culture, matri-women, matri-lifestyle, etc., referring to the three crucial aspects of the Lao-lum social organisation and tradition, namely: matrilineal post-marital residence system, matrilineal kinship, descent, and matrilineal customary inheritance patterns.

<sup>8</sup> I use the concept matri-lifestyle to emphasize a more holistic view on the matri-system, including the way of dressing, looking good, soft talking, relaxing, merit making, attending life-cycle ceremonies, taste in home furniture, food, and many other aspects of the Lao way of living.

Illustrations will be given of Khamu and Hmong women who want to empower themselves by adopting aspects of the Lao Lum matri-lifestyle. The noticed growing trend of “matri-sation” points to the possibility of reducing poverty and gender inequality through the expansion of the influence of the matri-system. This also contradicts the predicted undermining of matrilineal social systems by the eminent anthropologists as mentioned in this paper.

Globalisation has accelerated a number of negative gender effects worldwide: sex-specific abortions, domestic violence, sex-trade, forced prostitution, illegal labour migration, HIV/Aids, and the trafficking of women and children. In neighbouring China son-preference is dominant. Sex ratios show dramatic imbalances mainly as a result of sex-specific abortions. To address this alarming gender inequality and discrimination against daughters, China has initiated a population policy – the Care for Girls Campaign (since 2003). One of the core elements in the campaign is to advocate the uxirolocal (matrilocal) marriage.<sup>9</sup> In view of this, the gains and the protective capacity of the matrilocal marriage will be highlighted as a counter balance, addressing the tragic realities of “missing girls” in Asia and domestic violence in Laos. Recent NGO studies show a considerable increase in domestic violence in Laos despite its deeply rooted matrilocal marriage tradition. This violence seems to be almost endemic. The question is whether such a high incidence of domestic violence is likely to occur in matri-system environments.

Unfortunately, there are also immanently negative potentialities inherent to the matri-system, and they are brought forward by globalisation. Girls and women feel responsible for investment in the house and land of the maternal family. This sense of responsibility can easily result in their being lured to the sex-trade. There is a stunning lack of awareness in the methodology of NGO studies on this subject concerning the need to carefully collect disaggregated data about ethnic and social background of women and girls as will be shown in my paper in section 6.

The spotlight in this essay is on the strength and vitality of the Lao matri-system and its institutions, dynamics, and capacity to counteract the negative gender impact of the processes that attend globalisation. It will be shown that the world-wide historical trend to displace or to defeat “women-friendly” or “women-centred” societies has not yet undermined the Lao matri-system and cultural heritage upholding the relatively high value and status of Lao women and girls.

This article comprises seven sections. It begins with an introductory section and is followed by a section that sketches the background and some of the characteristics of the Lao social matri-system. The third section presents the main findings of the small snowball study that I conducted in 2009 in Vientiane in an effort to discover the impact of globalisation on the matri- cultural heritage. Section four

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<sup>9</sup> Lisa Eklund, “‘Good citizens prefer daughters’: Gender, Rurality and the Care for Girls Campaign,” in *Women, Gender and Rural Development in China*, ed. Jacka Tamara and Sally Sargeson (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, Inc., 2011), 124. As Lisa Eklund states in her thesis, “[W]hereas patrilocal refers to the fact that the husband’s family constitutes a lineage, virilocal implies that there is no lineage to consider. The corresponding terms, to denote that residence after marriage is in or close by the home of the wife’s parents, are matrilocal and uxorilocal, where matrilocal indicates a lineage and uxorilocal the absence of a lineage. Another form of residence after marriage is neolocality, which denotes that the newlywed couple settles in a place different from both the bride’s and the groom’s family.” In my essay I will use the term matrilocal and uxorilocal as they both underline daughter preference even though uxorilocal may be more correct in the Lao situation as the belonging to a lineage is not relevant.” Lisa Eklund, *Rethinking Son Preference* (Lund dissertation, 2011), 38, n16.

describes case studies that show the impact globalisation has had on ethnic minority women from communities with a firm patriarchal tradition. The adoption of aspects of the matri-system seems to be attractive to them. Section five pays attention to the unique and precious value of the matrilocal marriage as a means of protection for girls and women in the broader context of imbalanced sex-ratios and domestic violence. Section six deals with the immanently negative potentialities that are inherent to the matri-system and might easily attract Lao girls and young women to become victims of sexual exploitation. The seventh and final section draws a brief conclusion and offers suggestions to highlight the importance of the social matri-system as a precious cultural heritage, not only for Laos, but also as an example for the worrying number of societies that are characterized by son-preference and far too many “missing” girls.

## 2. Background of the Lao Matri-Tradition: Characteristics and Causes

Laos is a country where we find a matrilineal and a patrilineal social organization and many bilateral shades (bilateral means that the family name and property can be transferred through the father to the son, or the mother to the daughter) in between.<sup>10</sup> Gender ideology and relations are more equal in matri- and bi- than in patri social systems.<sup>11</sup> The matrilocal residence and matrilineal kinship pattern is characteristic of the Tai-Kadai in particular of the Lao<sup>12</sup> ethnic majority living mainly in Vientiane and along the Mekong. Although many ethnic minorities living in hilly and mountainous areas follow patri-social kinship patterns, some ethnic minorities also follow a matri-system. Such matri-social minorities include the Brao or Lavé, Ta Oi (Oy), Kathang, Ong, Suay,<sup>13</sup> and Sou<sup>14</sup> in the south; and the Nyouane, Lahu<sup>15</sup> and Pray in the north of Laos.<sup>16</sup>

I want to point to the excellent study of GTZ, a German NGO, by Elisabeth Mann and Ny Luangkhot,<sup>17</sup> which shows that nowadays social systems are changing in line with the context, and that the categorization of ethnic minority groups as either matri- or patri- or bilocal and bilineal has become more and more complicated, in particular as a result of resettlement policies.<sup>18</sup> Mann and Luangkhot show that the

<sup>10</sup> Grant Evans, *Lao Peasants under Socialism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Carol J. Ireson, *Field, Forest, and Family: Women's Work and Power in Rural Laos* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996); Carol Ireson-Doolittle, “Gender and Changing Property Rights in Laos,” in *Women's Rights to House and Land: China, Laos, Vietnam*, ed. Irene Tinker and Gale Summerfield (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999), 145-52.

<sup>11</sup> Du Shanshan, *Chopsticks Only Work in Pairs: Gender Unity and Gender Equality among the Lahu of Southwest China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Peggy Reeves Sanday, “Matriarchy as a Sociocultural Form: An Old Debate in a New Light” (Paper presented at the 16<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association, Melaka, Malaysia, July 1-7, 1998); Peggy Reeves Sanday, *Women at the Center: Life in a Modern Matriarchy* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2002); W. J. Karim, *Male and Female in Developing Southeast Asia* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> This includes some Lue and Phu-Thai communities. Other subgroups of the Lao-Kadai, such as the Tai Dam and Tai Deng, are predominantly patrilocal and patrilineal.

<sup>13</sup> Elisabeth Mann and Ny Luangkhot, *Study on Women's Land and Property Rights under Customary or Traditional Tenure Systems in Five Ethnic Groups in Lao PDR*, May 2008; Schenk-Sandbergen, *Gender, Culture and Land Rights in Rural Lao PDR*.

<sup>14</sup> ADB 2001, p.122

<sup>15</sup> Du Shanshan has documented the remarkably egalitarian gender ideology among the Lahu community in Southwestern China. Du Shanshan, *Chopsticks only Work in Pairs*.

<sup>16</sup> See: Laurent Chazée, *Atlas des Ethnies et des sous- Ethnies du Laos* (1995), 40, 199.

<sup>17</sup> Mann and Luangkhot, *Study on Women's Land and Property Rights*.

<sup>18</sup> Even in the Atlas of Laos (2000) the data processed are based on approximately thirty variables

Brao are bilocal and bilineal in their traditional villages, but are matrilocal and matrilineal in resettled villages, and again bilocal and bilineal in merged villages.<sup>19</sup> Also, in the Trieng ethnic community, there is a shift from bilocal and bilineal in the traditional village to patrilineal and bilocal in the resettled villages. The study shows that the Hmong Khao and Tai Dam are consistently remain patrilocal and patrilineal in traditional, resettled, and merged villages. The Khmu Lue and Rok community shows also a consistent pattern of patrilocal and bilineal patterns.

There are no real anthropological studies with a “thick description” of the matri-system in Laos,<sup>20</sup> let alone an academic study of the rapid changes in the matri-system due to the effects of globalisation over the past twenty years.<sup>21</sup> Carol Ireson-Doolittle and Geraldine Moreno-Black’s book is the only one to come close to my subject, as it makes an effort to tell the unknown and unique story of the changes in social relations (with a historical perspective) as well as the changes on what the authors call “patterned gender inequalities.”<sup>22</sup> They examine how the power of women (relative to that of men) and the resulting inequalities between women and men have changed due to alterations in the social institutions and culture. The authors focus on the twenty-year period stretching from 1975 to 1995. In almost each chapter they describe the pre-1975 conditions in order to better provide an historical context, and they follow this up with a study of the changes made during the period of socialism and socialist reorganization (1975-1988) and the period of early economic liberalization (1988-1995). However, the study does not explicitly address changes in the Lao matri-system.

Grant Evans has described the typical domestic cycle of a Lao peasant family in the past.<sup>23</sup> The daughters remain living in (or near) their mothers’ (parents’) house until the youngest settles there permanently with her husband. Sons usually marry out and live with their in-laws. Nowadays, we might expect changes in this system given the smaller size of families and increased migration and education.

In the matrilocal system, where the husband moves in with the wife’s family after marriage, the relatively high status of women is derived from the fact that the house, land, homestead, and paddy fields belong to her family, and she knows the networks and context. The daughter who lives with and takes care of the aging parents and, thus, inherits or receives the house and the land from her parents is typically the youngest daughter (ultimogeniture). The remaining siblings will also inherit.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, such a family welcomes the birth of female children, for those children will likely serve as the successors who own, care for, and manage the family property.

Lao matrilocal marriage means permanent matrilocal residence. After the marriage, the groom will live in the bride’s parents’ home until he dies. That is the

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extracted from the population and housing census from 1995, but there are no maps to show the specific cultural tradition of matrilineal descent and inheritance, or matrilocal residence patterns which would have contributed to a better understanding of the unique characteristics of the country.

<sup>19</sup> Mann and Luangkhot, , *Study on Women’s Land and Property Rights*, 22, table 4.

<sup>20</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture” in *The Interpretations of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

<sup>21</sup> ADB, *Lao PDR: Gender, Poverty and the Millennium Development Goals*, 9.

<sup>22</sup> Carol Ireson-Doolittle and Geraldine Moreno-Black, *The Lao: Gender, Power, and Livelihood*, Westview Case Studies in Anthropology (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004).

<sup>23</sup> Evans, *Lao Peasants under Socialism*, 124.

<sup>24</sup> Gender Resource Information and Development (GRID) Center, *Lao PDR Gender Profile* (The Gender Resource Information and Development Center of the Lao Women’s Union, in collaboration with the World Bank, Washington DC, 2005), 20.



standard practice. Matrilocal marriage is certainly not considered a temporary solution, lasting only one generation, in the event that a family only produces daughters and needs a son for heavy labour, or requires a male heir for the continuation of the clan/lineage (as may occur in China or Vietnam).<sup>25</sup>

“Why should daughters stay with their mother and father?”<sup>26</sup> When asking this question in the villages during my field visits in 1995, people looked at me with a compassionate gaze. Then, they said laughingly, “Do you not realize that women are more at risk than men because they give birth?” In the past, prior to the use of professional mid-wife assistance, it was tacitly understood that it was the mother of the pregnant daughter who could best care and look after her, especially during delivery.<sup>27</sup> There is a strong opinion in the Lao Lum community that women should have their own kin and “blood” relatives around in times of crises such as illness, death, and problems related to food because it is believed that the close proximity of family members guarantees greater protection and concern. This is believed to be especially true during pregnancy, deliveries, and, in particular, the period after giving birth.<sup>28</sup> The second argument is that women see “small things”, *magnic ma guoy*, “very, very small things,” and that can create tension in the case of mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relations. Between mother and daughter, these problems do not occur, for the daughter knows the daily ritual in the house. The third argument is that it is known that mothers-in-law are often jealous of the attention the son gives to his wife, and this exacerbates and accelerates the phenomenon of seeing “small, small things.” It is better to avoid this tension. The last reason given is, not surprisingly, that daughters will look after their aging biological parents with more affection and love than “outside daughters.”

Lao tradition recognises the role of the carer, and that role is more often taken by the daughter. The division of labour between men and women – seeing women as the carers – works to women's advantage in traditional Lao customs. The daughter looks after the aging parents, the mother looks after the children, and the mother provides care when her daughter is in the process of giving birth. These roles are not neglected or ignored; rather, they are acknowledged and given prominence in the

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<sup>25</sup> Li, Feldman et al discuss uxoriocal marriage patterns and suggest that there are two different types: the “contingent type” caused by demographic factors, e.g. that there is no son in the family to form a virilocal marriage, and the “institutional type” caused by practical economic factors. See: S. Li, Marcus W. Feldman, and N. Li, “Acceptance of Two Types of Uxoriocal Marriage in Contemporary Rural China: The Case of Lueyang.” *Journal of Family History* 28, no. 2 (2003): 314-33.

<sup>26</sup> R. J. Chadwick, “Matrilineal Inheritance and Migration in a Minangkabau Community,” *Indonesia* 51 (1991): 70n26. Chadwick elaborates on the causes and background of matrilocality in anthropological theory. He shows that the division of labour by gender, and the relation between contribution to subsistence and residence, seems to be an important determinant to explain why societies are matri or patri oriented. Other authors could not confirm the predicted relationship in cross-cultural anthropological research and suggested that the patri- or matri marriage dominance depends on the internal- or external warfare of communities. Gough states that, “matrilocality is characteristic of societies in which women’s work, of whatever kind, is done in or near the home, while men’s pursuits periodically take them far from home.” Schneider and Gough, *Matrilineal Kinship*, 553. Gough continues: “While men are hunting, fishing, trading or migrant labourers, it is ‘congenial’ for women to reside uxoriocally rather than with affines.” Schneider and Gough, *Matrilineal Kinship*, 556.

<sup>27</sup> Claire Escoffier-Fauveau, Kopkeo Souphanthong, and Phonethep Pholsena, *Women and Reproductive Health in the Lao PDR: An Anthropological Study of Reproduction and Contraception in Four Provinces* (Mother and Child Health Institute, Save the Children Fund/UK, UNDP, Vientiane, Lao PDR, 1994).

<sup>28</sup> The same reasons for the strong mother-daughter relations are also mentioned for Cambodia in the article by Annuska Derks, “Over Perfecte Vrouwen en willige Olifanten- Gender in Cambodja.” *Derde Wereld* 16, no. 2 (1997): 155-64.



customary land use rights of women.<sup>29</sup> In the traditional system the women who remain in the family home to look after their elderly parents are usually rewarded by being given the land and property by their parents. Entitlement to land is contingent on the daughter's fulfilment of her care-giving role. It is the common perception that when the son functions as the primary care-giver of the aging parents, he is the one who should inherit the house and the land. However, in practice, daughters fill the role of care-giver far more often than sons.

It is likely that, with the intrusion of the market economy, the value of caring might quickly erode, as it is hard to express the value of caring in monetary terms. Cases are reported in which daughters living abroad have sent money to their parents. They then return to Laos to claim a share of the parental land as remuneration for their economic contribution. This makes the economic and psychological position of the caring daughter uncertain. She is not sure any more if she will inherit the land or if other family members will claim it. Therefore, there is a danger that the application of the State Inheritance Law – stipulating equal division of land use rights among brothers and sisters – might undermine and erode the traditional value placed on the act of caring for the aging parents. This might eclipse the visibility of caring, resulting in a number of social and economic consequences for society in the future, such as investments in nursing and rest homes and the increase of psychological problems among isolated elderly people.

A slight cynical tendency resounds in literature on matrilineity insofar as belittling the meaning of matriarchy is concerned.<sup>30</sup> This might be the result of the general assumption that, ultimately, males (husbands, village male authorities, mothers' brothers) always have the decision making power "behind closed doors," and while that may be true in India (Kerala) and Indonesia (Minangkabau), it is hardly true in Laos.<sup>31</sup> The Lao matri-system can be characterised as "women-centered."<sup>32</sup> However, the position of sons, fathers, and in-married husbands is not considered peripheral in any way, nor does it cause stress that compels them to out-migrate and detach from their natal environment. In the past, rural women's economic contribution was substantially supplemented by the hunting and fishing activities of men. The Lao matri-system gives authority and leadership to men. Therefore, it is not a matriarchal system in the sense that women dominate men.<sup>33</sup> In interviews during field visits, men often identified themselves as an "assistant" to their wife. The gender relations can be characterised by partnership and complementary roles.

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<sup>29</sup> A survey of the Lao Women's Union (LWU) of April 2008 shows that 37% of land titles have been issued in women's names, 23% in men's names, and 26% in the names of the husband and wife. The remaining land is classified as community, state, and collective land. The figures show the strengthening of the matri-system by the mechanism of the land titling process. These data are shown in a graph on p.40 in a small Lao language booklet which is used as the 'Land right Manual of the Lao Women's Union', 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Judy L. Ledgerwood, "Khmer Kinship: The Matriline/Matriarchy Myth," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 51 (1995) p. 247; Sanday, "Matriarchy as a Sociocultural Form, an Old Debate in a New Light", 1998.

<sup>31</sup> The Lao matrilineal system is also not clan- or lineage-centred like, for instance, the matrilineal Minangkabau society in west Sumatra in Indonesia.

<sup>32</sup> Chadwick, "Matrilineal Inheritance," 72.

<sup>33</sup> Sanday retains the term "matriarchy" out of respect and courtesy for the Minangkabau usage. See: Sanday, *Women at the Center: Life in a Modern Matriarchy*. (2002), preface, xi.

### 3. Blooming Matri-Lifestyles in Vientiane: Almost Twenty Years Later

In the past twenty years, globalisation<sup>34</sup> has accelerated processes of profound change that are very visible in Vientiane<sup>35</sup> (e.g., the influx of boutiques, bakeries, pizzerias, bookshops, internet cafés, new shopping areas, evening markets, massage and beauty parlours, beer gardens, restaurants, foreign banks, hotels, travel agencies, yellow taxis, city buses, etc.) The city's "facelift" (with the fountain at Patu Xay and the "light-and-sound" show in the evening) and the surroundings of That Luang are some of the recent attractions for tourists. The polarisation between poor and rich has become quite visible; at the same time, the shadowy side of globalization – forced labour migration, sexual and economic exploitation, and the trafficking of women and children – has remained hidden.

I spoke with some women, whom I had met during my first irrigation project in Laos in 1994, concerning their matri experience over the past twenty years. In 1994, they already belonged to the elite of Vientiane, functioning as office workers in a government department but earning very low salaries.<sup>36</sup> They were poor and did all kinds of side-jobs in addition to their government work in order to survive – sewing, weaving, and raising turkeys and chickens were popular ways of making a living. Because it is the responsibility of the women in a matri-culture to provide for the daily needs of the household, they were very ambitious and motivated to develop themselves and better their families. A new world of development opened up for them with the influx of foreign donors, foreign counterparts, TORS, manuals, checklists, log-frames, DSA, gender workshops, gender mainstreaming and study-tours. I admired the capacity of my Lao women colleagues and friends to learn English and acquire computer, translation, and other social and professional skills. They embraced every opportunity and chance of obtaining academic degrees abroad. But what is their situation nearly 20 years later? First, it is necessary to provide a brief profile of my respondents.

The urban matri-women in Vientiane that I talked with in 2009 are now in the age-group of forty to seventy-five-plus years. All are married and have a husband and children. Most have small families. They have very busy lives, combining long working hours in the offices with care for their children and grand-children, family duties, and the fulfilment of numerous social and religious obligations. Others have a fulltime job in managing the family land and houses, fulfilling their traditional social and spiritual obligations, and attending life-cycle ceremonies as part of their Lao identity.

Most of them belong to the elite families of Vientiane and have very good assignments in donor projects, working as consultants in ADB, UNDP, and UNIFEM, mining companies, NGO's and AusAid projects. Others work as financial experts in the offices of the Lao government (e.g., the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), or they work for private companies and banks. Some are restaurant owners, managers, or entrepreneurs. In 1995, I made an irrigation study tour to Khamouan with some of them. It was the first time that they had travelled outside Vientiane. These days,

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<sup>34</sup> For the context and impact of globalisation in Laos, see: Jonathan Rigg, *Living with Transition in Laos: Market Integration in Southeast Asia* (London: Routledge, 2005); Boike Rehbein, *Globalization, Culture and Society in Laos* (London: Routledge, 2007)

<sup>35</sup> For a description of Vientiane in 1959, see: Joel M. Halpern, *Economy and Society of Laos: A Brief Survey*, Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, Monograph Series, vol. 5 (New Haven: Yale University, 1964).

<sup>36</sup> Salaries of only 15.000 to 25.000 kip were mentioned in 1994/1995.

however, they are very mobile and frequently travel throughout Lao PDR on project-related field visits, or to conduct training or workshops in other provinces. They also visit family in France and the USA and take holidays in Paris and at seaside resorts in Thailand. They have replaced their bicycles and motor cycles with new cars and big SUVs and Chinese BYDs (Buy Your Dream limousines). They are keen to “look good” and proud of their identity, a fact that is reflected in their frequent wearing of beautiful and costly Lao Sins in public places – even at Phimphone Market and JoMa in Setthathirath Road.

Some of my older friends were educated at the Lycée Pavie in Vientiane and spoke French fluently. One friend told me that, as a child, she was educated in France. Her family owned a house there, and she and the other children were sent there, in rotation, in order to study. No discriminatory distinction was made between sons and daughters. Other friends obtained degrees in medicine and engineering in Vietnam, Ukraine, Eastern Germany and other eastern European countries in the sixties and seventies. One woman emphasized that she was raised and brought up with the view that you had to study as much as possible. She told me in 2009 that she was totally unaware as a girl and young woman that she would inherit land and houses. Education for girls is, and was, a crucial aspect of the matri-lifestyle. It was only at the time of her marriage, when she received land and a beautiful house from her parents and grandmother as a wedding gift, that she became aware of her strong economic position as the youngest daughter in a well-to-do matri-family. For two respondents, a Master’s degree in Gender and Development from the Asian Institute of Technology in Bangkok paved the way to good positions in NGOs and multilateral agencies. One of my good friends expressed it as follows: “Knowledge with some economic help is power.”

### ***Globalisation: Does the bridegroom still come to the house of the bride?***

What about the keystone of the matri-system, namely the matrilocal post-marriage residence? Is the bridegroom still coming to the house of the bride like he did in the past? In 2009, the majority of the women stated that their husband relocated to their family house, especially when they were the youngest daughter in the family.<sup>37</sup> However, there have been some changes. A young couple reported the following: “There is a tendency among modern, young people like us to follow a “modern” lifestyle. We prefer to construct our own house, not in the wife’s parents’ compound, but somewhere else, and live there immediately after the marriage.” They have friends who, like them, chose to live in their own house due to the fact that, as the eldest children, they knew they would have to move out anyway. Here we can see that position in sibling birth order is important when it comes to changes in the traditional matrilocal pattern. The man of the young couple is working in a new bank while the woman is working for a foreign NGO; they have a good income. The young couple’s decision to construct their own house and buy garden land in a village near Vientiane is interesting. They have a plan to build a big house along the

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<sup>37</sup> Schenk-Sandbergen, *Gender, Culture and Land Rights in Rural Lao PDR*. In our land right study we collected data on the dominant residence pattern of 128 women informants. Of the 128 women 43 (34%) said that they went to their husband's house after marriage, but 84 women (66%) have stated that their husband came to their house. The data from the women's focus groups showed that, in ten villages of the total twenty investigated, there is a matrilocal tradition, and in the other ten, a patrilocal tradition. 53-54.

river as a nursing home for old people, for they anticipate that children, younger daughters in particular, are no longer willing to care for their parents. They stated that in the past “the not so smart kid generally looked after the parents.” It was their opinion that the incompatibility of pursuing a career with caring for parents is increasing nowadays for younger, intelligent daughters. I asked the couple: “What will you do when you are old? Will you stay in your own nursing home?” She would prefer her son to look after them, but he would like his daughter to take care of them, although he plans to construct a nursing house for old people. “The matrilocal tradition is very strong,” he said with a big smile. This case seems to be more the exception than the rule, but it shows that the tradition of matrilocal residence remains strong despite some exceptions.

A recently married couple’s choice of place of residence also depends, of course, on economic conditions. The perception of one woman respondent was as follows: “When the wealth of the families is the same, the husband comes to the wife’s house; if the family of the girl is poorer, then she goes to the bridegroom’s house.” In three cases, Lao women married foreigners. These husbands stayed in Laos and either lived in the house of their parents-in-law or in a house of their own.

Of course, there were also a few cases of women who, after marriage, relocated to the husband’s house. One woman told me that her parents-in-law asked her to live with them because there were no young adult women in the house. In her house, her mother had died when she was 16 and her father had remarried. She herself has three daughters and one son. The husband of her youngest daughter came to live with them again according to the matrilocal tradition. But, her son’s wife also lives in her house because, at the time her son married, they were abroad and nobody took care of the house. She also told me that her husband was kind enough to transfer the property rights of the big house, homestead land, and paddy fields to her while he was still alive so as to avoid paper work after his death.

The above findings pertaining to the continuation of the matrilocal marriage tradition are confirmed by a survey on “Marriage and Family in the Lao PDR” conducted in 1998.<sup>38</sup> In 2399 matri-households (Lao, Phu Tai and Leu), the most common pattern is that the husband moves in with the wife’s family.<sup>39</sup> The analysis shows that over a time span of forty years, the residence pattern has stayed basically the same. The study even shows that matrilocal patterns are slightly stronger in the current younger generation (15-24 years).<sup>40</sup>

### ***Globalisation: From rice field to economic commodity***

In earlier studies, in 1998, we found, that kinship and descent are mainly bilateral, with a firm tendency to give the surname of the father to the children. It was asked whether this might predict a more patrilineal kinship pattern in the future. We are not sure, as we are missing base-line data from some years ago. But what is known from the literature is that the data seem to reflect the continuance of the overall existing trends of the past. The hypothesis was put forth that residence patterns are

<sup>38</sup> Lao Women’s Union, GRID Center, *Marriage and Family in the Lao PDR: Data from the Pilot Survey on the Situation of Lao Women (Vientiane Municipality, Sayaboury, Xieng Khouang, Savannakhet)* (Vientiane: Lao Women’s Union, GRID Center, 2000).

<sup>39</sup> A very interesting point in the study was that in Xieng Khouang all ethnic groups, including the Lao, live at their husband’s house after marriage.

<sup>40</sup> Lao Women’s Union, GRID, *Marriage and Family in the Lao PDR*, 19.

less bilineal and more matri-oriented than descent lines. Moreover, we can justifiably hypothesize that, in practice, post-marriage residence patterns are more crucial and important for the maintenance of the power basis of women in inheriting land and house than descent or kinship.<sup>41</sup> My snowball study of 2009 does not reveal that there was a disintegration of matrilineal descent groups. Some women in my small snowball study decided to keep their own surname, particularly when they married a foreigner, but others stated that “men like it when women take their surname.” Most women have frequent contact with their relatives, especially their brothers and sisters. The networks are continuously strengthened by attending life cycle ceremonies and other social and religious gatherings. In social networking, the mobile phone, Facebook, internet, and email are all very powerful tools that facilitate contact and help maintain the kin-networks – especially with sisters living abroad in Vancouver, New York and Paris.

Perhaps one of the more striking discoveries I made in 2009 was that my formerly poor counterparts of 1994 had become very rich. I was very impressed by their big, beautiful houses, large gardens, and beautiful interiors with wooden floors and furniture, and modern, comfortable bathrooms and kitchens. Almost all of them had maids and nannies from other communities, or a poorer relative to look after the daily domestic chores (e.g., cooking, shopping, cleaning, washing, and ironing). How did they become so rich? Naturally, they earned high incomes from their employment, or by marrying either prominent Lao men with good professions or foreign men who earned according to international salary scales. But the main cause for their riches has much less to do with their husbands and is more directly related to their inheritance of land and property from their grandmother, parents, or parents-in-law. Indeed, the land titling documents of the homestead and paddy land have their names on them. The adjudication of the land rights gives them tremendous security and wealth. Almost every one of them told me that they inherited houses from their mother, grandmother or parents, and that they either live in them or collect a good income from renting them out. It seemed a kind of obligation for parents of the past generation to construct houses for their daughters – even before marriage. One good friend told me:

My parents built five houses, one for each daughter, even before we were married, and still at school. Not for the sons. They have to find their own way. They are strong and have to find their own livelihood in life. But girls need assistance. Only my eldest sister lives with her husband in the house built by my parents. The others are not settled yet. They have rented out their houses. (*Field notes: snowball study Vientiane, 2009*)

In some rich families, the daughters not Lao only got houses, they also received cars. All thirteen children in the family got a car from their parents. No distinction was made between boys and girls. It was self-evident that girls should also learn to drive.

It seemed that the better-off families who formerly, in the fifties, lived in the core of the city around Vat Inpeng, Ong Teu and Mi Xai pagoda, bought rice fields in the (then) rural surrounding of Ban Paleb or That Luang. Already at that time, land documents were written in the name of mothers and grandmothers. One woman told

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<sup>41</sup> Schenk-Sandbergen, *Gender, Culture and Land Rights in Rural Lao PDR*, 77.



me that she inherited, together with two other siblings, ten hectares of rice land from her father's mother. Now she gets so many bags of rice from the land that all the families have enough throughout the year, and they sell numerous bags, which nets a high income. The value of these former rice fields has skyrocketed, with investors and estate developers eager to buy the land. Prices of \$500 for one square meter were mentioned – very close to Western prices for land. Former gardeners and servants who received a piece of land in compensation for their services to a family are now growing very rich from selling their plots of land.

My formerly poor girlfriends, who were so sad when their chickens were stolen (yet again) in 1994, have become very wealthy. Thanks to the Lao parents' perpetuation of the crucial pillars of the matri-system, the sources of power for Lao daughters have very much supported and empowered them over the past twenty years. All my respondents said that they would perpetuate the matri-values of their parents; there was a clear preference that their daughters inherit their land and real-estate property in the future.

### ***Globalization, changing role of the son-in-law***

How do the husbands feel about their wife's success? Some stories indicated that the women have become workaholics and hardly ever see their husband and children, who feel lonely and neglected. In some cases, a divorce could be avoided by reducing the aspirations and ambitions of the wife and finding a useful way for the husband to spend his time. However, there are traces of curtailment of the autonomy and decision-making power of the women in matters related to land, as is reflected in the following story: A Lao woman needed money and thought about selling some of her land. She inherited the land from her mother, and the land-title was in her name. However, her husband said, "No, I don't agree to sell the land." As a consequence, she decided not to sell it, for "disharmony with her husband is against the culture." Also illustrative of this tendency is the following change in the process of making decisions. It used to be the case that inheritance land matters were discussed in family meetings with only the parents and their children. The in-laws did not attend. The principle of "limits of the need" was an important criterion in the division of the land. Nowadays, however, women marry well-educated men who also want to participate in family meetings regarding the land matters of their in-law family. According to my respondents, "the more education the husbands have, the greedier they are, and the more family problems they create."

## **4. Ethnic Minority, Patri-Women, and Empowerment: Matri-sation?**

Women of patrilocal and patrilineal ethnic minorities living in remote mountainous areas in the north of Laos suffer the brunt of gender inequality and poverty. The social organization of the two largest ethnic minorities – the Lao Sung and Lao Thung – is based on male dominance through the ownership of the means of production, patrilocal residence patterns, and patrilineal descent and inheritance patterns. Polygyny is practiced among some of the Hmong (in the villages we visited only 10 to 15 per cent of Hmong men had more than one wife). Women of those groups have less access to economic resources but have to do almost all the productive and household labour.

Nevertheless, we found in earlier studies in 1995 that, despite the dominance



of patriarchal relations, the social atmosphere of these patrilineal ethnic groups was coloured by what we might call a “women’s sense of solidarity.” The social structure may offer men the position of authority, but the women’s sense of solidarity and their socio-economic power often counteract socially-sanctioned male domination. These power bases spring from a collective spirit among women and from the options available to them for economic autonomy, both based on accepted Lao values concerning women’s economic role and identity. We found that being a woman in a patriarchal context in Laos implies a potential for economic autonomy and self-reliance because crucial economic sectors and activities are monopolised by women due to the acceptance of the gender division of labour.

Since we made our observations in 1995, we have found more preliminary evidence that suggests that some women in patri-ethnic minorities are adopting aspects of the matri- lifestyle of the Lao women in order to empower themselves. Resettlement policies, better roads, and increased means of transportation have drastically increased the opportunities for ethnic minority women and girls to move around, allowing them to become aware of other lifestyles, customs and habits. The 2004 ADB Country Gender Strategy Report states that ethnic minority societies in Lao PDR are dynamic and constantly changing. Rapid social change is especially evident in upland villages that are relocated closer to roads and markets or are being merged with other villages that include other ethnic groups. The report states:

A recent study of relocated ethnic minority villages in Luang Namtha and Sekong found numerous changes in cultural patterns, including the adoption of lowland-style housing, dress, marriage practices, and technologies. However, the gender division of labour in resettled households remains essentially unchanged, with women and girls continuing to carry out most of the household work in addition to livelihood activities. Traditional norms and practices are also changing quickly as young people of ethnic minorities migrate to urban centres, and to Thailand, to work part of the year.<sup>42</sup>

In what follows, I will give two examples of my experience with ethnic minority women who have adopted aspects of matri-lifestyles in an effort to increase their quality of life and to empower themselves.<sup>43</sup>

Case 1: During my visit to Champasak for an evaluation of a UNICEF project, I came across a group of Lao Theung women. An overwhelming majority stated that the bridegroom comes to live with the bride. This was surprising since, by tradition, they were mainly patrilocal. It seemed that the women had good reasons for resisting patrilocal residence. They told me that they no longer accept the custom that, in the event of their husband’s death, they have to marry their father-in-law or brother-in-law. It is a known fact that in some Lao Theung communities, as with the Khamu (who are generally poor), the men stay in the house of their wife for a few years following the marriage so that they can pay off the high bride-price with labour. Therefore, I searched for more evidence to see if the matrilocality trend could be found in other villages in Champassak. The data showed an overwhelming matrilocality pattern of men

<sup>42</sup> ADB, *Lao PDR: Gender, Poverty and the Millenium Development Goals*, 7.

<sup>43</sup> In *Gender, Culture and Land Rights in Rural Lao PDR* (1998), I call this process “Lao Lumisation.” However, this terminology is no longer correct, for the Lao PDR has officially recognized 49 ethnic groups, classified in four ethno-linguistic families, since 2000. Therefore, we might call the process “Lao matri-sation.”

of all ages and not the just married ones. In Ban Mag Ngeo, families of Lao Lum, Ong, and Phu Tai communities were matrilineal and matrilocal with the exception of a few cases in which the wife lived with the parents of the husband because they had no daughter of their own at home. They told me that they follow the Lao Lum customs because girls have to be protected.<sup>44</sup> In Ban Hovay Pheun, the majority of the villagers belonged to the Laven, a sub-group of the Lao Theung. But there are also Ong, Souy, Alak, and Lao Lum families. In this village as well all the families were matrilocal. Even one Lao Sung man from the patri Hmong community had come to the house of his Laven bride to live with her parents.

Case 2: My experience in a livestock project in Houaphanh provides other examples of the impact of the matri-lifestyle on ethnic minority women. In view of the critical “new poverty” debate, which is seen as a consequence of resettlement and allocation of land and forest policies,<sup>45</sup> we spoke in 2005 with several Hmong women in Baan Nakhao (a resettled village since 1996), and later with Khmu women, in Viengphan village (resettled since 1987), to learn of their experiences with, and opinions of, the impact of resettlement on their livelihood, livestock situation, poverty level, needs, and interests. The Hmong members came from a village in a remote forest area in the southeast. We found that the women in particular were insistent on moving, even though they were aware that livestock diseases are more common along the roadside and near markets. It seemed, in view of the division of labor, that ethnic minority women had more reasons to move than men. One of the more striking insights gleaned from our discussions was that women were fed up with doing the hard swidden labour. They also wanted a small garden and some paddy land and an easier life, much like the Lao women have. In Viengphan village, the Khmu women told us about their unbearable muscular and nerve pains due to the hard swidden labour. They cannot afford to buy medicines to relieve the pain. They simply do not want this kind of hardship any longer. They are also fed up with having to walk long distances – through difficult and dangerous forest terrain, with heavy baskets on their back while, on top of it all, often carrying a baby – just to reach the market. Hmong and Khmu women are traders, and they want good roads for transportation to nearby markets.

Hmong and Khmu women perceived resettlement as an opportunity to change their hard and difficult life. Coming out of their isolated habitats and seeing how Lao Lum women live, they became aware of their suffering and began looking for alternatives. Thus, we can say that highland women were trying to empower themselves by creating more convenient conditions to carry out the many tasks allotted to them by their culture and society. It seemed that Khmu women, in particular, were eager to be resettled in villages with a Lao Lum population and learn how to improve their systems of livelihood. In several of these mixed villages, Khmu women started to learn weaving skills from the Lao Lum women.<sup>46</sup> And, of

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<sup>44</sup> Schenk-Sandbergen, et al, 1997, *Children, food, Income and Empowerment*. UNICEF, unpublished manuscript.

<sup>45</sup> ADB, *Participatory Poverty Assessment*, 120- 131; Bruce P. Shoemaker and Ian G. Baird. “Aiding or Abetting? Internal Resettlement and International Donors in the Lao PDR” (Paper for the First International Conference on Lao Studies, Northern Illinois University, May 20-22, 2005), 1-25; Bernard Moizo, “Land Allocation and Titling in Laos: Origins, Problems and Impacts on Minority Groups,” in *Challenging the Limits, Indigenous Peoples of the Mekong Region*, ed. Leepreecha Prasit, Don McCaskill, and Kwanchewan Buadaeng (Chiang Mai: Mekong Press, 2008), 107.

<sup>46</sup> For the meaning of weaving for Lao women, see: Kristin Vivian Lundberg, “Women Weaving Well-Being: The Social Reproduction of Health in Laos” (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2008).

course, mothers and fathers also wanted their children to be educated and have a better future. Many women we talked with went through the traumatic experience of losing one or more children and wanted ready and nearby access to medical assistance.

Another positive feature associated with matri-influences on the social organisation and cultural patterns of patrilocal groups is the acceptance of intermarriage between ethnic groups. For example, our visit to Muang Kham village revealed that four Lao Lum women married Khamu men; the other way round, Khamu men marrying Lao Lum women, there are also five to six cases, and the Khamu men followed the matrilocal custom of their brides, and went to their parents-in-law houses.

Moreover, the empowerment potential of equity in land legislation and land titling for women of ethnic patri-minorities appears to be important. The second phase of the land titling project has been mainly implemented so far in urban, peri-urban, and lowland situations dominated by the matrilocal Lao population. It will be much more difficult in the third phase of the land titling project to integrate gender equity in rural areas and among ethnic minorities.<sup>47</sup> The land titling process depends on inheritance rights, which hardly exist for women among most of Lao PDR's rural ethnic minorities.<sup>48</sup> In a very interesting discussion I had with the German team leader of the Land Management and Registration Project, he pointed to the fact that migration and compulsory resettlement sometimes affect women's rights to land and property positively and, at other times, negatively.<sup>49</sup> "New" land is considered outside inherited land and may be titled as conjugal. But others view it as an opportunity to reinforce patrilineal and patriarchal ownership rights. The author Moizo observes that the impact of the land reforms for ethnic minority women is that they have become marginalized in their access to land and "prostitutes have started appearing on the main road and in local shops."<sup>50</sup>

It will be difficult for ethnic minority patri-women to obtain gender equity rights under the land titling project; however, during our snowball study in 2009, we noticed that the so-called "Radio Broadcasts and Training" of the Lao Women's Union (LWU), instructing that all land titles should be in the names of both husband and wife, had a positive impact. A very nice Hmong woman told us during our field visits that the land title was initially in her husband's name only. In the training from the LWU and from radio broadcasts,<sup>51</sup> she learned that the land titling should be in both names. She told her husband that she wanted her name on the land title document. He said, "Okay, if you are happy, leave it, but, if you are not happy, we can change it and put both names on the document." She chose the latter option.

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<sup>47</sup> Hermien Rodenburg, Loes Schenk-Sandbergen, and Chansamone Phenkhay, "Suggestions for Training, CRS and Decision Making in the Land Titling Project," in *Land, Gender, and Social Issues in Lao PDR: Towards Gender Sensitive Land Titling*, ed Loes Schenk-Sandbergen, Hermien Rodenburg and Chansamone Phenkhay (Vientiane: AusAid, 1997), 107-34. The "gender awareness training" of the Lao Women's Union in phase 2 of the land titling project was funded by the Worldbank, GTZ and AusAid, but the funds for the project have stopped already with the end of the second phase of the land right project (June 2009). To ensure the land rights of women in patri ethnic minority communities, the gender training will be a necessity in phase 3.

<sup>48</sup> Mann and Luangkhot, *Study on Women's Land and Property Rights*.

<sup>49</sup> I am very grateful to Mr Florian Rock of GTZ for sharing his experience on gender equity and land rights with me.

<sup>50</sup> Moizo, "Land Allocation and Titling in Laos," 110.

<sup>51</sup> The LWU radio communication seems to make use of Hmong and Khamu media languages.

These cases are a confirmation of my earlier experience in Laos, and they suggest that the matri-system has a positive effect on the social environment of women living in a patri-, subordinated position. The trends described above imply an expansion of the matri-sphere of influence and serve to contradict the undermining of matrilineal social systems predicted by eminent anthropologists. The above findings demonstrate the vitality and strength of the matri-system.

## 5. Missing Girls in China, Matrilocal Marriage, and Domestic Violence

Ample evidence shows that discrimination and violence against women and girls in Asia has increased.<sup>52</sup> This happened despite better and increasing education, smaller families, changing social attitudes, and rapid development. Millions of women are “missing” from the population totals of many Asian Countries.<sup>53</sup> Nowadays the term “gendercide” is used to characterise these gender-selective atrocities.<sup>54</sup> It is no secret that the countries with the “missing” women are the ones with “son-preference,” patrilocal residence, and patrilineal kinship and inheritance systems. In the past two decades, with the introduction of new ultra-sound technologies, it has become easy to avoid having daughters by aborting female fetuses. In this way, parents in China and India have replaced the old practices of neglecting the female child and female infanticide with sex-specific abortions of the female foetus.<sup>55</sup> Technological inventions are not the only causal factors in the increase in gender discrimination – demographic factors have also made significant contributions. Elisabeth Croll shows that the tragic result of the promotion of the one child family policy, or the small family, is that when the first child is a girl, the second or third female foetus is placed in real danger due to the couple’s quest for a son.<sup>56</sup>

In the effort to enhance the value of girls and promote daughter preference, the matrilocal marriage has been identified by Chinese authorities as the fundamental institution capable of achieving the necessary changes in gender attitudes and relations. It is striking that, in China, matrilocal marriage has been encouraged by the government in an attempt to counter the problem of high sex ratios caused by female infanticide, sex-selective abortion, and the abandonment of infant girls. Because girls traditionally marry into patrilocal marriages, they have been seen as “mouths from another family” or a waste of resources.<sup>57</sup> The interesting point, in view of the main theme of this essay, is that, in China, birth control planners have assumed that uxorilocal marriage will improve women’s status, and that this improvement in status will ultimately help to reduce the

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<sup>52</sup> Elisabeth Croll, *Endangered Daughters: Discrimination and Development in Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2000), passim.; Laurel Bossen, *Chinese Women and Rural Development: Sixty Years of Change in Lu Village, Yunnan* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 303-305.; Karin Kapadia, ed., *The Violence of Development: The Politics of Identity, Gender and Social Inequalities in India* (London: ZED Books, 2002), 1-40, 182-291.

<sup>53</sup> Amartya Sen, “More Than 100 Million Women Are Missing,” *New York Times*, December 20, 1990; Leela Visaria, “Improving the Child Sex Ratio: Role of Policy and Advocacy,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 22, 2008. 34-37.

<sup>54</sup> See <http://www.gendercide.org/>

<sup>55</sup> Barbara Miller, *The Endangered Sex: Neglect of Female Children in Rural North India* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).

<sup>56</sup> Croll, *Endangered Daughters*, 182.

<sup>57</sup> M. Wolf, *Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), 196-98.

growing imbalance in the sex ratio at birth. The skewed sex ratio is believed “to increase violence against women, including sexual exploitation and the trafficking of women and girls, as well as the likelihood that tens of millions of men will be unable to find a marriage partner.”<sup>58</sup> Though the state began to promote uxrilocal marriages as early as the 1950s, these attempts became especially vigorous during political and family planning campaigns.<sup>59</sup> The Chinese authorities also legally affirmed uxrilocal marriage in the revised marriage law (1980) in order to enhance its social acceptability. Eklund mentions that in Anhui, for example, the local population policy regulations give preferential treatment to couples who marry matrilocally, entitling them to two children, regardless of whether the first-born is a boy or a girl.<sup>60</sup> However, if a family has two daughters, only one daughter can benefit from this rule. According to Eklund the “Care for Girls Campaign” launched in 2003 in China is the outcome of a political process responding to the one-child policy and the demographic imbalance in favour of new-born boys. According to her, the raising of awareness about the value of girls should challenge prevailing gender norms. One of the reasons why the Campaign was not very successful, according to Eklund, was the lack of a systematic approach that addressed the virilocal (patrilocal) marriage pattern as a factor contributing to son preference.<sup>61</sup>

Evidence from Laos suggests that women and girls living in a matri-environment are more protected and better equipped to resist these evils. In 2009, none of the matri-women in my small snowball study in Vientiane had ever heard of abortion of female fetuses, malnourishment of girls, rapes, dowries, bride burning, discrimination in the labour market, extreme female poverty, severe exploitation, wife beating, or domestic violence in their own Lao community. These evils were almost unknown in their Vientiane matri-lifestyle. They emphasized that girls are very welcome and that their tradition of matrilocality is protecting their daughter against the possible violence of their daughter’s husband.

In view of the above, I was surprised to find many internet sites with NGO reports claiming that domestic violence is a significant problem in Laos, almost endemic. It seemed that the decision to open a shelter for women to seek refuge from domestic violence was made on the basis of field research conducted by the LWU and the Gender and Development Group (an affiliation of about 20 NGOs) in 2003. The project conducted a study of the prevalence, cause, and impact of domestic violence in the Lao PDR. According to the internet website, data were collected through interviews with almost 1,000 villagers from thirty-five communities, in five provinces of the Lao PDR: Bokeo, Luangprabang, Savannakhet,

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<sup>58</sup> Eklund, “Good citizens prefer daughters,” 124.

<sup>59</sup> Weiguo Zhang, “State, Gender and Uxorilocal Marriage in Contemporary Rural North China,” *The China Journal* 60 (2008), 111. Patrilocal marriage predominates in rural China but uxrilocal marriage, in which the husband moves to live with his wife’s family following marriage, has a long history. Weiguo Zhang has analysed how the uxrilocal marriage has evolved in relation to state policies, particularly the birth control policy and the initiation of market reforms.

<sup>60</sup> Eklund, 2011, Good citizens prefer daughters, 135.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 141. It is remarkable that in India, a highly patriarchal society, an increase in uxrilocal (matrilocal) marriages has been reported as a result of globalisation. Shifting patterns of post-marital residence were found in villages where women weavers were employed by the multinational company IKEA. Men were willing to move to their wife’s family village. See: Geert de Neve, “Weaving for IKEA in South India: Subcontracting, Labour Markets and Gender Relations in a Global Value Chain,” in *Globalizing India: Perspectives from Below*, ed. Jackie Assayag and John Fuller (London: Anthem South Asian Studies, 2005), 110.



Salavan Provinces and Vientiane Prefecture.<sup>62</sup> The report states: “In Lao PDR, culture and traditions are the mainstay of the Lao lifestyle.” A number of traditional sayings follow this claim: “Men are the net, women are the basket.” “The husband should lead, the wife should follow.” “The man is the boss and women are the labour.”<sup>63</sup> The writers of the report conclude that, “these views, and many others, reinforce gender inequality and create disparity between the sexes, allowing men to have culturally accepted control over women.”<sup>64</sup> The report states that it was hoped that the information gathered during this project would provide the evidence and support needed to urge the governmental and non-governmental organizations to contribute to the creation of services to address the problems related to gender-based violence.

Obviously, these findings in the report do not apply to the aforementioned women living in the modern, blooming matri-lifestyle in Vientiane. As I mentioned earlier, women told me in 2009 that the point of having the son-in-law live in the house of his in-laws is “to know the character of the man; to see if he is rude to her, speaks softly and works well.” They want to protect their daughter. This tradition and attitude is likely to be a protective asset which will possibly reduce the incidence of domestic violence. My findings indicate that domestic violence is not a major problem in the matri-communities. Is it possible that NGOs, which depend on western and international money, have to make domestic violence a problem?

Even the Report of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women mentions some surveys reporting domestic violence, but the context and origin of the victims cannot be identified.<sup>65</sup> The report states that, in research terms, the topics of domestic violence and rape were addressed nationally for the first time in a survey conducted by the Gender Resource Information and Development Centre in 1998. The results show that twenty-nine women out of the sample of 2,399 households had experienced sexual violence in the previous twelve months. Twenty-two of those reported incidents took place at home. The report states that, among the younger generation, the violent behaviour between spouses is perceived as fairly normal. The CEDAW also mentions a survey (Listening to the Voice of Young People, 1998) conducted among young people: 53.4% of the young people agreed with the following sentence: “It is all right for a man to hit his wife if she makes some mistakes.” The survey shows that stereotyping starts early since 63% of the girls agreed with this statement whereas “only” 45 percent of the boys agreed. Again no ethnic-specific or matri-/patri- specific data are provided in any of these surveys, so we are left to guess who these girls and boys are. The website of The Asia Foundation is a little more specific:

An assessment survey of violence against women conducted by the Lao Women’s Union (LWU) and The Asia Foundation recently revealed that due to a lack of knowledge about their rights, Lao women, *especially ethnic minorities*, suffer from high levels of violence in both domestic and public spheres. The same survey highlights a report by the civil court that spousal violence has become a major

<sup>62</sup> <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/vaw/ngocontribute/CUSO.pdf>

<sup>63</sup> CUSO/GDG, *Report on Rural Domestic Violence and Gender Research: Lao PDR*, 1.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>65</sup> Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), *Report of the Combined Initial, Second, Third, Fourth and Fifth Periodic Reports of States Parties*, 2003.



cause of divorce. Domestic violence ranked third in the frequency of cases brought before the courts between 1996 and 2000. It moved up to second during 2001-2002. The criminal court, representing all provinces in Laos, reported that sexual violence offences rank fourth in the frequency of cases (the first, second and third being drug, robbery and road accident cases).<sup>66</sup>

This information tends to support my assumption that the Lao matri-system is most likely protecting women against domestic violence. It is my belief that when data on Laos is carefully disaggregated, it will reveal that domestic violence is largely a factor in patri- societies or ethnic minorities with a patrilineal and patrilocal social organisation. I know that differentiation according to ethnic origin and type of social organization is a sensitive issue, but totally denying this basic fact will obstruct us from finding an effective way of reaching the target groups of victimized women who suffer the most.

## 6. Matri-culture, Globalisation, and Sexual Exploitation

In recent years, many studies on trafficking and sexual exploitation of women and children in Laos have been published on the internet.<sup>67</sup> There are numerous studies but, again, almost no information on the ethnic community or matri-/patri-social organization background of the women and girls involved. My point in this section is that, contrary to the reports about domestic violence in the preceding section, it might be possible that the exploited sex workers in Laos or Thailand most likely have a matri-, urban, or rural background. The matri-system instils a sense of responsibility in girls and young women, placing the burden on them, as inheritors, to invest in the land and house of the family. In reports and studies, there is a stunning lack of carefully disaggregated data on ethnicity and social organisation system with regard to sexual exploitation. Therefore, it is difficult to draw any evidence-based conclusion.<sup>68</sup> A few studies, however, provide some information to help substantiate my position.

A UNICEF study of child trafficking in Lao PDR, titled “Broken Promises, Shattered Dreams”<sup>69</sup> – based on interviews with 253 victims of human trafficking, the victims’ families, and key informants – shows that a significant proportion of victims *belong to non-Lao ethnic groups*. The UNICEF study states (p.18): “Fewer ethnic Lao victims of trafficking were identified than might have been expected on the basis of national population data (18% compared to 30% of total population).” However, Tai-Thay, Mon-Khmer and Tibeto-Burman are “considerably overrepresented and clearly at risk.” The most vulnerable group in the study are girls between the ages of 12 and 18, making up 60% of the surveyed cases. This study might indicate that Lao matri-women and girls are less involved in the trafficking.

<sup>66</sup> Website Give2Asia.org. *Safe Shelter Services for Women Victims of Violence and Trafficking in Laos A Give2Asia Project*, March 2004, 1.

[http://citizenshift.org/blogs/mmlib/blog\\_BleuRouge/LaosSafeShelte.pdf](http://citizenshift.org/blogs/mmlib/blog_BleuRouge/LaosSafeShelte.pdf)

<sup>67</sup> See [http://www.no-trafficking.org/content/Reading\\_Rooms/lao\\_pdr.htm](http://www.no-trafficking.org/content/Reading_Rooms/lao_pdr.htm)

<sup>68</sup> Allan Beesey, “From Lao PDR to Thailand and Home Again: The Repatriation of Trafficking Victims and other Exploited Women and Girl Workers: A Study of 124 Cases” (Bangkok: International Organization for Migration, 2004).

<sup>69</sup> UNICEF 1. <http://www.unicef.org/media/files/BrokenPromisesFULLREPORT.pdf>.

However, another UNICEF study on commercial sexual exploitation of children in Lao PDR gives information on the ethnic origin of the 133 victims interviewed. It was found that *68% of the survey respondents were Lao Lum*, 26% Lao Theung and 6% Lao Sung, which is in relative proportion to the ethnic breakdown of the general population.<sup>70</sup> These findings indicate that the matri-system has not prevented girls from getting involved in sex work. How can we explain this situation? Claire Escoffier-Fauveau notes that most of the Lao Lum women she interviewed thought that the power to control their family size was in their hands and that contraception was very much a woman's affair. She states that "the husbands interviewed said they agreed with their wife's decision, and seemed content to let their wife be the controller of their own fertility.... and their own sexuality."<sup>71</sup>

This suggests that Lao Lum women enjoy a certain autonomy which allows them to make personal decisions concerning their own fertility and sexuality. James Haughton in his undated study on the situational aspects of human trafficking in Laos writes:

[T]he matrilineal pattern of inheritance also means that the culture is less concerned with the control of female sexuality or the preservation of virginity than many others, as paternity is not an important aspect of inheritance; hence less stigma is attached to sex workers than is the case in other areas..... It is reasonable to assume that this cultural pattern, which also occurs in northern Thailand (Taylor 2005) occurs in southern Laos as well; however most anti-trafficking projects seem unaware of it, and often criticise migrants for "abandoning" Lao culture, or assume that women are more likely to send remittances due to some female universal quality of responsibility, without realising that migrants are in fact fulfilling Lao cultural imperatives.<sup>72</sup>

Haughton is referring to the very interesting study of Lisa Rende Taylor. She states that daughters from matri-households in Thailand have an additional incentive to invest in better houses and goods. Because property is traditionally passed through the female line in ethnic Lao communities, and the house goes to the youngest daughter, daughters can expect that they will inherit a share of the improved property, while sons will migrate permanently from the village to live with their wife; hence, they have much less incentive to send remittances.<sup>73</sup> Taylor provides an analysis in her article "Dangerous Trade-Offs" that shows that poverty and low educational attainment, often cited as the key root causes of trafficking in women and girls, are not the characteristics of girls who are at risk of ending up in the sex industry.<sup>74</sup> Which girls, then, are at risk? Taylor conducted a fourteen-month study in two northern Thai villages, investigating parental investment and familial roles in

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<sup>70</sup> UNICEF and Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, *How I got here: Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Lao PDR* (Vientiane: Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare and UNICEF, 2003), 11.

<sup>71</sup> Escoffier-Fauveau et al, *Women and Reproductive Health in the Lao PDR*, 51.

<sup>72</sup> James Haughton, "Situational Analysis of Human Trafficking in the Lao PDR, with Emphasis on Savannakhet: A Literature Based Study Undertaken for World Vision Lao PDR" (internet Word document), 16.

<sup>73</sup> Lisa Rende Taylor, "Dangerous Trade-Offs: The Behavioral Ecology of Child Labor and Prostitution in Rural Northern Thailand," *Current Anthropology* 46, no. 3 (2005): 411-31.

<sup>74</sup> Taylor, "Dangerous Trade-Offs."

relation to child labour, prostitution, and trafficking. The findings of her study show that birth position, parental marital instability, and educational attainment (which *increases* risk) were found to predict the odds of a girl's entrance into dangerous labour and the age at which this occurs. In particular, on the birth position of the daughters and the chances of becoming a sex worker, she presents interesting findings.<sup>75</sup> Her analyses suggest that first-born and middle-born daughters have the following roles in rural matri-families. First-borns act more as home helpers, and this important role reduces their risk of being exploited as child labour outside their home. Middle-born daughters act more as financial helpers, perhaps reflecting the tradition of using children to pay family debts. Middle-born daughters receive the least educational investment, start working the earliest, and migrate or work in the commercial sex market in the highest numbers. Last-borns, despite receiving high levels of investment and education, are entered into harmful labor situations at the youngest ages. It is noteworthy, according to Taylor, that after being in school up to the ninth or even twelfth grade, these girls do not know how to farm, and elder sisters, after investing so much in their younger sisters, do not want to see their younger sisters back on the farm or in the local market. The "at-risk" girls and young women happen to be the most educated in the rural villages, receiving more education than the older generation and even their brothers. Parental wealth was not a significant factor, revealing neither poverty nor lack of education as the driving forces behind the harmful labour and trafficking of northern Thai children. Taylor suggests that the hazardous labour may be driven by a concern for providing status assets for the matri-line and the compensation for the costs of education; some families expect high returns on their investment in daughters who have spent most of their childhood in school.

The above findings suggest that globalization instantiates negative possibilities inherent in the matrilineal and matrilineal culture and social system, increasing the chances of younger daughters to get involved in the sex-trade or become victims of sexual exploitation and trafficking. How far the aforementioned processes are profoundly changing by for instance demographic changes, which imply small families and less daughters to take responsibility for the matri-line status, needs further study.

## 7. Conclusions

Despite the warnings of eminent women anthropologists that matrilineal, matrilineal and bilateral societies all over the world will disintegrate and be undermined by patriarchal ideologies and practices as a result of liberalisation and globalisation, the reverse seems to have happened in Vientiane. My small snow-ball study of 2009 in Vientiane showed that globalisation has contributed greatly to a booming, strong, and modern matri-lifestyle for a group of elite urban Lao women. The "opening-up of the market," in combination with the matri-culture and social system, has generated many opportunities for these women to develop skills and talents, enabling them to obtain high positions and a sizable income in the "free market." In 1994 they were poor, but many have since become very rich, as the paddy fields they inherited from their parents and grandmothers under matrilineal customary inheritance rights have increased in value. City developers eagerly bought the paddy fields to convert them to commercial and estate areas. The trends

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<sup>75</sup> Taylor, "Dangerous Trade-Offs," 417.

described above contradict the predictions made by eminent anthropologists about the undermining of matrilineal social systems. Moreover, there are indications that the matri-system is expanding its influence among women of ethnic minorities living traditionally in a patriarchal social system. A continuing process of adopting aspects of the matri-lifestyle – the matrilocal marriage in particular – by women of patri-, ethnic minority groups is noticed. We can refer to this trend as “matri-sation.” It might contribute to processes of empowerment, gender equality in land legislation and land right adjudication, and overall greater gender equality for certain groups of ethnic minority women.

The matri-system has shown itself to be an important protective system for daughters, particularly in the prevention of sex-specific abortions, female infanticide, neglect, and discrimination against daughters in times of propagating small families. The interesting point is that, in China, birth control planners are promoting matrilocal marriages in order to improve women’s status, assuming that this improvement in status will ultimately help reduce the growing imbalance in the sex ratio at birth. The Lao matri-system can be considered as a model for “son-preference” cultures, for it has demonstrated its ability to uphold the relatively high value and status of Lao women and girls. NGO studies show a dramatic increase of domestic violence in Laos despite its deeply-rooted matrilocal marriage tradition. This violence seems to be almost endemic. It is argued that it is not likely that the reported domestic violence will be much of a problem in matri-system environments. Globalisation has augmented the inherent negative potential of the matri-lifestyle, the results of which could end up endangering younger daughters of matri-families by placing them in positions that make them vulnerable to the lure of the sex trade. Potential inheritors of the maternal house and land, these younger daughters feel a responsibility to invest in the assets of the family. A stunning lack of awareness was noticed in the methodology of studies on domestic violence and sexual exploitation to disaggregate data according to gender, ethnicity, and matri-/patri-origin. For this reason, it was difficult to draw conclusions.

The Lao matri-system has proved to be strong, sustainable, and capable of counteracting the negative gender impact of globalisation. The world-wide historical trend to defeat “women-friendly” or “women-centred” societies is not yet undermined.

What suggestions can be made to support, protect and empower the Lao matri-system as a precious cultural heritage? My suggestion is to support the funding of the gender equity training in order to increase the gender awareness of land rights for women as developed in the pilot, first, and second phase of the land titling projects, and implemented by the Lao Women’s Union. Straight transfer of land will ignore both the inheritance and statutory rights of women. Moreover, the methodology of studies concerning domestic violence, the trafficking of women and children, and child labour should no longer ignore the ethnic community and the related matri- or patri- context of the social system of the respondents. Carefully disaggregated data are necessary to reach the right target groups. Another suggestion is to support income-generating activities and to initiate micro-credit projects for middle-born and youngest-born daughters of matri- households in rural and urban areas. They are most at risk to become victims of sexual exploitation.

A beautiful book, published by UNESCO, aims to generate awareness in order to preserve the cultural heritage (e.g., languages, literatures, weaving, music and architecture, etc.) of ethnic minorities, particularly the ones that rely on memory to

safeguard the ethnic identity and diversity.<sup>76</sup> My suggestion is to invite UNESCO, or any other organization, to initiate studies on the important meaning of the Lao matrilineal and matrilineal social system in order to safeguard the cultural heritage which empowers and protects so many women (and men) in this time of increasing globalisation.

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<sup>76</sup> Yves Goudineau, *Laos and Ethnic Minority Cultures: Promoting Heritage*, Memories of Peoples Series (Paris: UNESCO, 2003).



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# The Art of Dissent: The Wall Paintings<sup>1</sup> at Wat Thung Sri Muang in Ubon Ratchathani.<sup>2</sup>

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## Abstract

As King Taksin's conquering armies pushed across the Khorat Plateau late in the seventeenth century they swept away more than just the traditional independent kingdoms, the conquest ended forever the old world of the plateau. The ultimate impact of this change was confirmed one hundred years later with the all but complete removal of the old ruling elites and the imposition of direct external political, economic and social control by Bangkok's Ministry of the Interior under Prince Damrong. Force of arms rendered the victors narrative of "the emerging nation" all powerful.

Excluded from political power the traditional leaders were still able to find recognition at the Wat, always the centre of intellectual and social life for the plateau's communities. Beginning from such perspective this paper attempts to historically re-contextualize the wall paintings at Wat Thung Sri Muang in Ubon Ratchathani, a place at the centre of the first wave of this change, in an attempt to adopt the viewpoint of the dispossessed, to rediscover their awareness of their world and look for their attempts to write back against the dominant narrative. Brush strokes that reflected, and still do, the dissenting voice of subalterns reminding us that they have not consented to dominance.

## Article

The *wat* is a place of religion, and although the paintings which enliven their walls are celebrated today for their beauty, the initiator's intent was not primarily aesthetic; they were lessons, and, as David Wyatt has noted, they were public lessons.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, in the traditional society on the Khorat Plateau,<sup>4</sup> the *wat* was also the center

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<sup>1</sup> This is a direct naming from the local vernacular, *hoop tam* (wall painting), of the Khorat Plateau, or *pap jitrakam* (wall painting) in central Thai. They are most often referred to as murals in international scholarship, and this paper will follow that convention.

<sup>2</sup> All photographs, maps and schematic drawings are by the author unless otherwise credited.

<sup>3</sup> David K. Wyatt, *Reading Thai Murals* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2004), 1.

<sup>4</sup> I use the term Khorat Plateau throughout this paper rather than an ethnically- or nationally-based description. The plateau is a large topographically-determined box that includes many people. Within it are contained many smaller boxes. The physical space contains and integrates different people within the box in a manner consistent with Georges Condominas' concept of emboisement. Georges Condominas, *L'espace social à propos de l'Asie du Sud-Est* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980). For its interpretation and extension, see: Richard A. O'Connor, *A Theory of Indigenous Southeast Asian Urbanism* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1983); Richard A. O'Connor, "Agricultural Change and Ethnic Succession in Southeast Asian States: A Case for Regional Anthropology," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 54, no. 4 (1995): 968-996; Richard A. O'Connor, "Place, Power and People: Southeast Asia's Temple Tradition," *Ars Asiatique*, 64 (2009): 116-23.

of intellectual, social, and civic life and, as such, was uniquely situated in the processes of creation, preservation, and transmission of culture.<sup>5</sup>

The murals were also large scale public art creations, the product of skilled artisans working, in many cases, over long periods of time. With significant costs to be met, another group of people would have had a part in shaping the content of the murals, those with control over individual or community resources needed to fund the creation of public art.

This combination of requirements suggests that murals were usually the products of intellectual, economic, or political elites operating at a level that was reflected in the significance of the location. The murals were created with a clear intent to document the feelings of a group of people – in a specific place, at a specific time – that had the authority and the resources to create public statements for their own time, statements that would last well into the future.

While this can clearly be seen in the great royal centers of coastal trading polities, it is less obvious on the Khorat Plateau, where most murals are usually simply attributed to “the people,” folk art grouped under the damming reverence of local wisdom. This was partly David Wyatt’s concern when he wrote, “Historians of Thailand regularly have used mural paintings to illustrate their works, to show scenes of everyday life or warfare, and even to illustrate analysis of religious and folk belief”<sup>6</sup> He continues, suggesting that we can actually move beyond this, “to argue that, in some cases and under some circumstances, temple murals may be used to explore the feelings and sentiments of real people in real historical situations, both generally and quite specifically.”<sup>7</sup> To make this argument, Wyatt regarded several preconditions as necessary. First, it is essential to situate the murals in a spatial context. Second, we need to know what the murals are about. They are illustrated stories, so it is necessary to place them in a literary context. Third, we need to examine the question of when the murals were painted and see them in the context of a past moment before we can attempt to answer the question of how mural paintings might be used as historical sources.<sup>9</sup>

Taking up Wyatt’s challenge to use murals as historical documents, “to explore the feelings and sentiments of real people in real historical situations”, this paper focuses on the murals of specific place – Wat Thung Sri Muang in Ubon Ratchathani – and on the lives of several significant members of the local elites who would have been involved in shaping the content of the murals.

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<sup>5</sup> Ishii Yoneo, *Sangha, State, and Society: Thai Buddhism in History*, trans. Peter Hawkes (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1986), 24.

<sup>6</sup> Wyatt, *Temple Murals as an Historical Source*, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Wyatt, *Temple Murals as an Historical Source*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Associating this paper with David Wyatt’s methodology gives rise to some concern. His thinking was first laid out in a small book, *Temple Murals as an Historical Source: The Case of Wat Phumin, Nan* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1993), written for the Chulalongkorn Mahawithayalai Thai Studies Section. In this book he seems to be searching for a theoretical starting point in his own explorations, and it is the methodology laid out in this book that I have adopted as my starting point. The problem, however, is that his own use of this methodology later resulted in an unfortunately flawed book, *Reading Thai Murals* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999). Wyatt regarded several preconditions as necessary, including the need to know what the murals are about, but, unfortunately, in this book some of his identifications were simply wrong.

<sup>9</sup> Wyatt, *Temple Murals as an Historical Source*, 2.



## I. Establishing the spatial context - time and place: a) dating the murals

Most of the murals at Wat Thung Sri Muang date to the time of the first abbot, Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn (a.1840s -1881). The construction of what would become the *sim*<sup>10</sup> was begun in the early 1850s, and the murals, by necessity, must have been one of the last projects completed. We also know from studies of other places that it would have taken a long time to create them, usually many years. It is unlikely that the murals were produced after the founder's death in 1881 because we know that the second abbot, Phra Khru Wirottratanobon (a.1881 – 1942) installed the large wooden frame inside the *sim* in an attempt to stabilise the building, a repair that took priority over decoration.



**Figure 1:** Evidence for dating, the post completely obscures the palace and the central action of the story, the prince leaving the palace.

<sup>10</sup> The first definitive works on the religious art and architecture of Khorat Plateau were done by Wirot Sisuro and Phairot Samoson. Wirot Sisuro, *Sim Isan = Isan Sim: Northeast Buddhist Holy Temples* (Krung Thep: Munnithi Toyata, 1993); Phairot Samoson, *Chittrakam faphanang Isan E-sarn Mural Paintings* (Khon Kaen: E-sarn Cultural Center, Khon Kaen University, 1989). Following their original work this paper also adopts their “fundamental agreement to retain some vernacular architectural vocabulary... to call names by local original words.

On the Khorat Plateau		in Central Thailand
Sim	for	Ubosot (Ordination Hall)
Ho Jak	for	Sala Kan Parian (Congregation Hall)
Ngo	for	Cho fa
Hung Pung	for	Ruang Pung
Si Na	for	Naban or Jua (Pediment)
Ao- kan	for	Aew-kan (base)
Bok-kwam Bok-ngay	for	Bua-kwam Bua-ngay
Bue	for	Lak or Sadu (Pillar)”

Wirot Sisuro, *Isan Sim: Northeast Buddhist Holy Temples*, k15.

The mural paintings are not configured around the wooden posts of this frame; rather, they are clumsily obscured in a way no artist would consider reasonable. As well as this we can see that the crossbeams across the top of the frame hides the faces of the *thewada*, and, as these beams are very close to the wall, it would have been too difficult for an artist to paint behind them.

## **b) the place at that time**

The location that would become Ubon Ratchathani enters into the Lao historical narrative around 1710 due to the actions of Phra Khru Luang Phon Samek,<sup>11</sup> the Viang Chan (Vientiane) monk who is credited with establishing the Champasak dynasty and even with founding Phnom Penh.<sup>12</sup> After he had established a Viang Chan prince as the ruler of Champasak, he also dispatched rulers to eight surrounding centers, including the land around the confluence of the Chi and Mun Rivers that would eventually become Ubon Ratchathani. Thus, we can see that it was already a significant place and a shared space because the new rulers retained the name Khlong Chiang, which derived from the language of the Suie people already living there.<sup>13</sup>

We have an outsider's very detailed description of Ubon Ratchathani from 1883, at the very moment when rule by the last of the old Lao elite was swept away. Etienne Aymonier writes:

The city of Oubon, ... was built on the northern bank of the Moun, which rose in a gentle slope to form a rather high knoll, clear from the highest rises of the water. This fortunate location, on the deep and tranquil reach that the Moun formed from the confluence of the Si up to Phimoun, had rapidly transformed Oubon into the most important center of the whole of northeast [translator's error] Laos. The city, built in a rectangle and surrounded by an insignificant moat on the three sides... measured about 2,500 meters lengthwise by 500-600 meters in width.

Three longitudinal streets, parallel to the Moun, and a host of small transversal streets divided the city into small quarters, which were

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<sup>11</sup> "Phra Khru Nyot Kaeo, (known as Khru Phon Samek.) Abbot of Vat Phon Samek in Viang Chan during the reign of King Surinyavongsa in the late 17th century. When the king died without an heir, Phra Khru gave refuge to Princess Sumangkhalā. As the succession struggle intensified, however, he and his followers fled the capital for the south. Sumangkhalā was pregnant at the time and in fear of her life. Phra Khru settled first at Nakhon Phanom (where Sumangkhalā gave birth to her second son, Nokasat), and then in northern Cambodia, probably in the region of Xiang Taeng (Stung Treng). From there he was invited to settle at Khong by the elderly local ruler, Nang Phan. With the support of the queen's illegitimate daughter, Phra Khru became regent (1708-13). Only when his position was challenged after the death of Nang Phau did Phra Khru present Nokasat to be crowned first king of Champasak, taking the throne name of Soysisamut Phutthangkiin. Phra Khru came to be credited with possessing magical powers. He is revered as instrumental in founding an independent kingdom in southern Laos, free of the suzerainty of Viang Chan." Martin Stuart-Fox, *Historical Dictionary of Laos*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 158.

<sup>12</sup> Phra Thep Rattanamoli and J. B. Pruess, *The That Phanom Chronicle: A Shrine History and its Interpretation* (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Dept. Of Asian Studies, Cornell University, 1976), 66-67.

<sup>13</sup> Toem Wiphakpotjanakit, *History of Isaan*, 43.

further subdivided by walls or by clusters of houses. The *mæuong*, or *khum*, or residence of the *chau*, more or less in the center of the city, was surrounded by a brick wall. Opposite this wall, several Chinese shops had their displays of fabrics, crockery, *dok kham*, and other items. There were 1,000 houses in Oubon and eighteen pagodas, several of which had brick walls coated with lime and roofs covered with planks, which was a luxury in a country where thatch, wood, and bamboo generally constitute all materials used for house construction.<sup>14</sup>



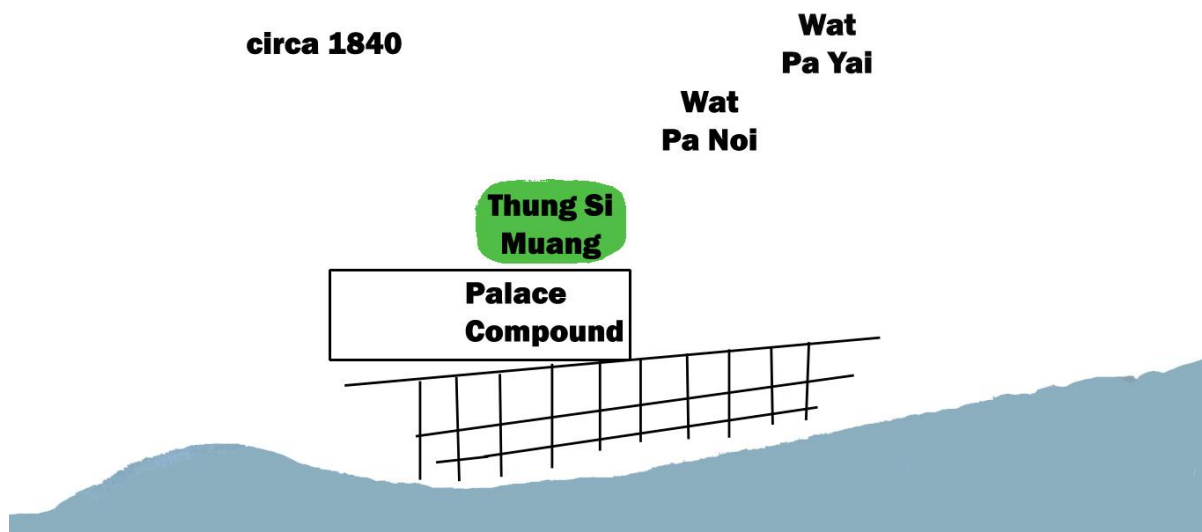
**Map 1:** Taking the measurements from Etienne Aymonier's 1883 description (shown here as red dots and white lines) and superimposing them on a Google Earth image of Ubon Ratchathani as it is now, we can see an outline of the town then defined by the moat as it was in the late nineteenth century.

Using this report and what we know of the history of Ubon Ratchathani, we can construct several maps to show the town as it would have appeared in the past, and then by contextualising events recorded in its history, chart, to some degree, the progress of the town.

First, Map 2 depicts Ubon Ratchathani circa 1840, as it would have been in the time of the second ruler, Phra Prom Worarat Suriyawong, just prior to the arrival of Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn the founder of Wat Thung Sri Muang.

<sup>14</sup> Etienne Aymonier and Walter E. J. Tips, *Isan Travels: Northeast Thailand's Economy in 1883-1884* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2000), 44.





**Map 2:** Ubon Ratchathani circa 1840

Maps however show us only part of the picture, for here was a town with a plan and pretensions. Louis de Carné, who visited the town as a member of the Mekong Exploration Commission in 1867, writes:

“As to the town, it was the largest we had yet met. The streets are broad, and pretty well laid out, parallel or perpendicular to the river. In the more important, there are even wooden pavements, which are of the greatest use to the people when the rains have soaked the thick coat of sand with which the ways are covered.”<sup>15</sup>

This confidence seems to be something shared by the people who lived there; Aymonier recounts:

The girls in Oubon still wore their hair in a bun, like the Laotian girls of the east. The women rubbed themselves with turmeric and applied perfumed wax to their lips. The men, who often tailored their hair with pork fat, more happily adopted Siamese fashion, and they had pretensions in the way of elegance, as a popular saying expressed: ‘One sees ant hills in Sisakêt, unfortunates in Mœuong Dêt, and elegant idlers in Mœuong Oubon.’<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Louis de Carné, *Travels on the Mekong: Cambodia, Laos, and Yunnan; The Political and Trade Reports of the Mekong Exploration Commission, June 1866-June 1868* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1995), 95.

<sup>16</sup> Aymonier and Tips, *Isan Travels*, 45.

## II. Establishing the human context - people who could influence the form and content: a) the people who had the authority.

Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn Yannawimol (Sui Lakhm)<sup>17</sup> returned to Ubon late in the third reign of the Chakri dynasty. He had been born in Ampoe Khueang Nai about thirty kilometres northwest of the city along the Chi River. While we know little of his early life, beyond the fact that he went to Bangkok to study at Wat Saket, his age tells us that he must have left Ubon Ratchathani around the time the second of the great Siamese wars devastated the plateau (1828).<sup>18</sup>

Phra Ariyawongsajarn (latter Chao Khun) was fortunate to arrive at Wat Saket at the most exciting time in its history. The *wat* was the place which Rama III (r.1824-1851) had chosen for his most ambitious projects, the enormous undertaking of raising the man made mountain we see there today, the Golden Mount. Rama III would have spent a significant amount of time at Wat Saket because as well as making the mountain he also built the main *wihan* and renovated almost all of the buildings including the *hor trai*, the library.<sup>19</sup>

This library, in which Phra Ariyawongsajarn would have spent a lot of time while he was a student, had been constructed of wood and built over a pond in the time of Rama I.<sup>20</sup> Phra Ariyawongsajarn, a young monk of simple rural origins from one of the furthest regions, now found himself involved with the lives of the greatest men in the land. Yet, he must have been exceptional, for it was at that time that he was commissioned to go back to Ubon Ratchathani as Chao Kana Muang, a position that granted him the power to govern all the monks in the region, a promotion that added the honorific Chao Khun to his title. He brought back to Ubon Ratchathani a copy of Wat Saket's Buddha footprint, and, in so doing, he seems to be seeking to connect the local people who honoured it to the greater world that had recreated him. In all of his work in Ubon Ratchathani, we see that he remained a true and loyal agent of that greater world.

He came to live at Wat Pa Noi,<sup>21</sup> then still a forest *wat* just north of the *thung*, the large grassland at the back of the palace complex.<sup>22</sup> Wat Pa Noi had just been raised from a monastic residence to a full *wat* by Ubon's second ruler, Phra Prom Worarat Suriyawong (r.1795-1840), and it was regarded as his personal *wat*.

<sup>17</sup> The abbots of Wat Thung Sri Muang for the period of the study: Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn Yannawimol (Sui Lakhm), founder, (mid 1840s – 1881); Phra Khru Wirotratanobon (Bun Nan Taro), (1881 – 1942).

<sup>18</sup> The first invasion by the Siamese was in the reign of King Taksin, who had conquered Viang Chan by 1779. The campaigns to subdue the other kingdoms of the Khorat Plateau were still under way in 1782, led by Chao Phraya Chakri, who came back from this campaign in order to depose King Taksin and assume the throne as the first ruler of the Chakri Dynasty. The second and most devastating war was during the third Bangkok reign, in response to the Chao Anuvong rebellion in 1827.

<sup>19</sup> Phra Debgunabhorn, *Prawat Wat Saket Ratchaworamawihan* [A History of Wat Srakesa Rajavaramahavihara] (Bangkok: Wat Srakesa Rajavaramahavihara, 1991), 11.

<sup>20</sup> Phra Debgunabhorn, *Prawat Wat Saket Ratchaworamahawihan*, 17 and plate 22.

<sup>21</sup> This is now known as Wat Maneewanaram. Yutthanawarakorn Saengaram, "The Local Characteristics of the Mural Painting in the Upasatha Hall of Wat Thung Sri Muang, Ubon Ratchathani Province" (masters thesis, Silpakorn University, 2008), 6.

<sup>22</sup> This is now the large public park called Thung Sri Muang in the center of the town.



Every morning, Phra Ariyawongsajarn would go to the edge of the *thung* to meditate. The temple history tells us that he came to believe that the place where he meditated was good, so he decided to build the Ho Phra Bat to house the footprint of the Buddha that he had brought from Wat Saket.

He was a scholar and meditation master, not a builder; thus, in order to build his *wat*, he recruited another monk, Phra Khru Chang, a skilled builder and artist from Viang Chan, who had come to Wat Pa Noi to study meditation with him.<sup>23</sup> Current scholarship regards what they created as a reflection of the two traditions that these men represented – Siamese and Lao – but, as we shall see, this does not seem to be the case.

Francis Garnier, another member of the Mekong Exploration Commission, who visited Oubon in 1867, commented: “Oubon ....has one or two pagodas built of bricks in the Chinese style...”<sup>24</sup> His comment is perceptive because he is not referring to the design or decoration but, rather, to the method of building’s construction, compressive architecture, where the brick walls are load bearing. That this would be cause for

comment indicates that locally Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn must have been seen to be doing something different.

Even today on the Khorat Plateau, a builder approaches the construction of a building by first erecting a post and rail frame, then infilling the walls; this is tensile architecture. Most of the great *sims* of the plateau hide a supporting wooden frame within their masonry. Rama III was a great admirer of all things Chinese, and this passion is reflected in his great building works in Bangkok. However, in order to achieve this, he had to have access to Chinese artisans skilled in this compressive style of construction. Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn had seen how it was done, but, now back in Ubon, he did not have the advantage of having these skilled craftsmen. Still, in defiance of conventional wisdom and local gossip, he built the *Ho Phra Bat* with 110 centimeter thick load-bearing brick walls, which is, as



**Figure 2:** The front view of the sim at Wat Thung Sri Muang.

<sup>23</sup> Yutthanawarakorn Saengaram, “Local Characteristics of the Mural Painting in the Uposatha Hall,” 7.

<sup>24</sup> Francis Garnier, *Travels in Cambodia and Part of Laos* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1996), 133.

Garnier noted, Chinese style compressive architecture.<sup>25</sup> Such defiance of local wisdom would have been difficult and could only have come from an insistence on the need to demonstrate change and transcend the local.

This wishful description of a partnership between the Siamese and Lao traditions would seem to be more adequately characterized as the collaboration of an instigator and artisan. Even allowing for multiple renovations, the *sim* is in classic Ratanakosin style. The design elements most often referred to as evidence of Lao influence are the decoration and motif within the gable board. Here, Phra Khru Chang is credited with recreating significant elements from the gable board design from Wat Sisaket in Viang Chan.<sup>26</sup>

This can be seen in the shape and forms of the foliage that surround the central image,<sup>27</sup> but at Wat Sisaket the framed image of the deity is sitting alone, holding a sword vertically in his right hand while his left hand is on his chest holding flowers.<sup>28</sup>



**Figure 3:** The gable at Wat Sisaket Viang Chan.

<sup>25</sup> Yutthanawarakorn Saengaram, “Local Characteristics of the Mural Painting in the Uposatha Hall,” 9.

<sup>26</sup> The notion of Lao and Siamese partnership fits very well with the desire of the writers of the Bangkok historical narrative to stress successful integration. This theme is central to Yutthanawarakorn Saengaram’s analysis of all of the buildings constructed by Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn and Phra Khru Chang, title of the whole inquiry is “local characteristics” Yutthanawarakorn Saengaram, “Local Characteristics of the Mural Painting in the Uposatha Hall.” Such an analysis forms the basis of all tourist promotion and innumerable websites dealing with or promoting Ubon Rachatani.

<sup>27</sup> Yutthanawarakorn Saengaram, “Local Characteristics of the Mural Painting in the Uposatha Hall,” 125.

<sup>28</sup> Thongmy Duansakda, Vet Masenay, Khamphao Phonekeo, Hoang Vankhoan, eds., *Vat Sisaket in Vietiane: Story, Art, and Architecture Lao Cultural Heritage*, trans. Kiao Kangphachanpheng (Vientiane, 2009), 57.





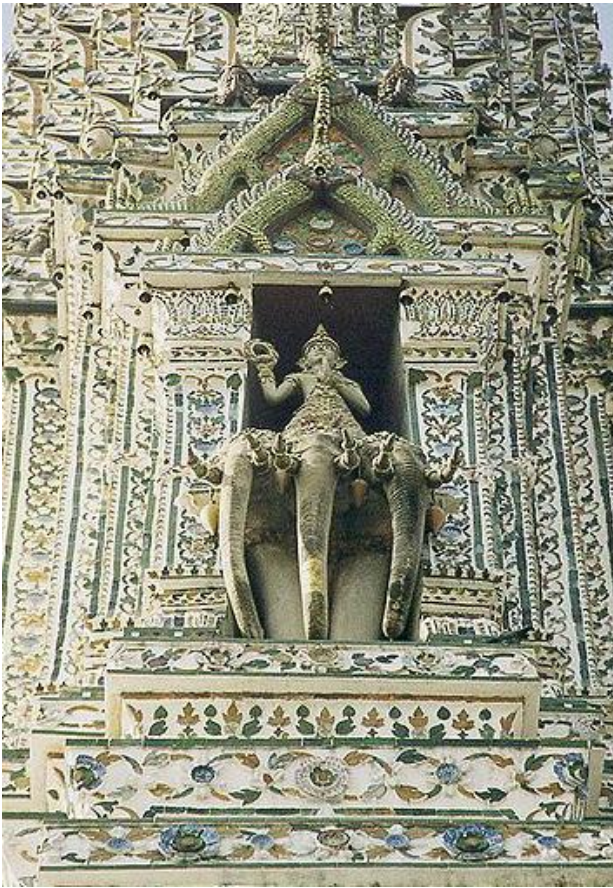
**Figure 4:** Detail of the gable at Wat Thung Sri Muang.

At Wat Thung Sri Muang the framed deity is a simpler figure; his hands on his knees, and he is riding on a three headed elephant. Clearly, this is Indra (known locally as Sakka) riding on Airavata (known locally as Erawan). This image of Sakka on Erawan is recognised as a significant Lao image, one which Mayoury and Pheuipanh Ngaosyvathn further associate with Chao Anuvong, whose followers swore by Sakka. What is more, it forms the central decorative element seen on the famous candle bearer that Chao Anuvong placed in Wat Sisaket.<sup>29</sup> However, it was also a very common image in Bangkok; for example, it is the central image of the main *prang* at Wat Arun, which was being finished during the time Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn was in Bangkok. Sakka is the ruler of Trayastrimsa heaven and was charged with the defence of Buddhism, a responsibility that is extended to, and thus legitimates royal power on this earth.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Mayoury Ngaosivat and Pheuipanh Ngaosyvathn, *Chao Anou, (1767-1892), The Lao People, and Southeast Asia* (Vientiane: Lao PDR Printing Agency, 2010), 71.

<sup>30</sup> Ishii Yoneo, *Sangha, State, and Society*, 42-43.





**Figure 5:** Indra riding Erawan at Wat Arun in Bangkok. Photo:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bangkok\\_Wat\\_Arun\\_Phra\\_Prang\\_Indra\\_Erawan.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bangkok_Wat_Arun_Phra_Prang_Indra_Erawan.jpg) accessed 21/5/2009.

Running counter to this simple ethnic duality are the equally powerful and specifically Ubon Ratchathani localizing images, the two magnificent crocodile guardians flanking the stairs at the front of the *sim*.



**Figure 6:** The original crocodile guardians at Wat Thung Sri Muang capped with the more generic naga that were added later.

At that time, the local rivers – the Mun, the Chi, and their minor tributaries, the place where Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn had grown up – were still teeming with crocodiles, and, indeed, they feature in many local stories, such as *The Biggest Crocodile in the World*.<sup>31</sup> These images were sufficiently contentious that later renovators felt the need to overwrite them with much more generic images of *naga*.

The place where Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn and Phra Khru Chang chose to build was prone to flooding, so, as they raised the land above the flood level to build the Ho Phra Bat, they created a pond, just to the north, which became known as Nong Mak Saw – named after the big tree that grew near it.<sup>32</sup> They subsequently took advantage of this pond to build one of Ubon's greatest treasures, the Ho Trai Klang Nam, the library in the center of the pond just to the north of the Ho Phra Bat. This library is also described as an integration of Lao, Siamese, and even Burmese motifs, but I believe it was more likely a re-creation of the library from his youth – the library at Wat Saket, as it was before Rama III renovated it and filled in the pond in which it which had stood when Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn was a student there.<sup>33</sup> This grouping of new buildings became known as Wat Thung Chai Muang signifying it was at the edge of the *thung* but as the city developed the name was changed to Wat Thung Sri Muang, which remains its name today.<sup>34</sup>

In a similar way, as a loyal agent of Bangkok, Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn founded a language school to teach Siamese and Pali.<sup>35</sup> Local educational practices had always been based in Lao and Khmer scripts, which meant that in many places only the Chao Muang and a few of his officials were capable of reading and writing in Siamese. The school attracted many people from Ubon Ratchathani and from across the greater region, especially the children of the elite who recognised that a knowledge of central Thai, now the language of power, was a necessity. For monks, however, effective Pali skills were regarded by the modernisers a crucial requirement for a proper understanding of Buddhism's intellectual corpus, and a means of moving beyond the local vernacular tradition.

Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn was a loyal agent for Bangkok, he was virtue of his birth a part of the local world, yet through his education he had become a part of the greater world beyond. He was the type of person who could offer a pluralist solution, one in which the local world could become an active partner in the new Siamese Kingdom. He was also a man with the authority to determine what could be painted on the walls of his temple.

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<sup>31</sup> Kermit Krueger, *The Serpent Prince: Folktales from Northeastern Thailand* (New York: World Publishing Co., 1969), 75-89.

<sup>32</sup> Yutthanawarakorn Saengaram, "Local Characteristics of the Mural Painting in the Uposatha Hall," 7.

<sup>33</sup> Phra Debgunabhorn, *Prawat Wat Saket Ratchaworamahawihan*, 17.

<sup>34</sup> Yutthanawarakorn Saengaram, "Local Characteristics of the Mural Painting in the Uposatha Hall," 7.

<sup>35</sup> Paitoon Mikusol, "Social and Cultural History of Northeastern Thailand from 1868 – 1910: A Case Study of the Huamuang Khamen Padong (Surin, Sangkha and Khukhan)" (PhD diss, University of Washington, Seattle, 1984), 165.



## b) the people with the civil power and resources.

Establishing who had the civil power and control of resources to create the murals is a more complicated task. The chronicle story of the ruling elite of Ubon Ratchathani<sup>36</sup> begins with the coming to power of Chao Siribunyasarn (r.1760-1779),<sup>37</sup> the last independent king of Viang Chan. Having supported Siribunyasarn's succession, two brothers – Phra Vorarat and Phra Ta – were offended because they felt that their efforts were not adequately recognised or rewarded, and so, with extraordinary determination, they initiated a series of events that would ultimately provide the justification for the Siamese to overrun and destroy the many smaller kingdoms of the Khorat Plateau.

Offended and in dispute with the king they had previously championed Phra Vorarat and Phra Ta now refused to consent to his authority, and with their supporters, followed the usual practice of withdrawing. Leaving Viang Chan, they first tried to establish an independent kingdom in Nong Bua Lamphu, where, from behind a very secure wall, they were able to hold off the attacking forces of the Viang Chan Kingdom for three years.<sup>38</sup> However, with the threat of Burmese intervention on Siribunyasarn's side and Phra Ta's death in battle, Phra Vorarat realised that their situation was impossible, so he led the people out again, this time down the Mekong to Champasak, where they were afforded the protection of Chao Sayakoummane (1738-1791),<sup>39</sup> the second King of Champasak. This refuge also proved temporary, as after a quarrel with Sayakoummane; the chroniclers imaginatively tell us was about the city walls, Phra Vorarat once again – albeit for the last time – led his people out, retreating to Don Mod Daeng, located on the Mun River between what is now Ubon Ratchathani and Phibun Mangsahan.

<sup>36</sup> Sources on the story of this conflict come from Wiphakpotjanakit, *History of Isaan*, 29-58; Phra Thep Rattanamolli and Pruess, *The That Phanom Chronicle*, 55-68; Charles Archaimbault, "Le Histoire de Campasak," *Journal Asiatique* 294 (1961): 523-34.

<sup>37</sup> Kings of Viang Chan (chronicled Lao rulers):

Setthathirat II (Sai Ong Ve)	1707-1735	Nephew of Suriyavongsa (Luang Prabang)
Ong Long	1735-1760	Half-brother of Sai Ong Ve
Siribunyasarn	1760-1779	Son of Ong Long
Nanthasen	1779-1794	Son of Siribunyasarn
Inthavong	1794-1804	Son of Siribunyasarn
Anuvong	1804-1828	Son of Siribunyasarn

See: Peter Simms and Sanda Simms, *The Kingdoms of Laos: Six Hundred Years of History* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1999); Souneth Phothisane, *The Nidan Khun Borom: Annotated Translation and Analysis* (University of Queensland, 1996); Martin Stuart-Fox, *Historical Dictionary of Laos*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2001).

<sup>38</sup> The construction of the town and its walls took six years. Toem Wiphakpotjanakit, *History of Isaan*, 49.

<sup>39</sup> Kings of Champasak (chronicled Lao rulers):

Soysisamout	1713-1737	Grandson of Suriyavongsa (Luang Prabang)
Sayakoummane	1738-1791	Son of Soysisamout
Fay Na	1791-1811	Son of Phra Vorarat; not of royal descent
Interregnum	1811-1813	
Phom Manoy	1813-1819	Nephew of Sayakoummane

See: Simms and Simms, *The Kingdoms of Laos*; Souneth Phothisane, *The Nidan Khun Borom*.



**Figure 7:** Showing the changing locations of the settlement. First to Don Mot Daeng (far right), and then after the war, moving further across to Chae Ramae (far left). Finally, as the population grew settling on the larger higher ground of what is today Ampoe Muang Ubon Ratchathani (centre). Image Google Earth, notations by the author.

Beyond the chronicler's explanation however we can see other good reasons why Phra Vorarat would have chosen Don Mod Daeng. His people were not farmers; they were entrepreneurs and adventurers and would have been assessing potential opportunities for independent economic survival. Just as their earlier settlement at Nong Bua Lamphu had given them control of a trade route into Viang Chan, Don Mod Daeng also sat on a trading route, in this case from the salt works of the lower Mun and Chi river basins across to Champasak. It probably would have appeared to be a profitable place from which to control passing trade and a relatively safe location as it would not critically threaten Champasak's economic viability. The primacy of this kind of economic reasoning in the selection of this site seems to be confirmed by what happened after the great Siamese invasions their actions initiated were successfully completed.

Having abandoned Champasak's protection, Phra Vorarat and his followers were once again attacked by Siribunyasarn the king of Viang Chan. Phra Vorarat was killed in a subsequent battle, but not before his appeal for vassalage, and thus the protection of King Taksin of the resurgent Thonburi kingdom had been accepted. This right to protection set in motion the Siamese invasion of the whole Khorat Plateau, which swept away all the independent kingdoms, including those of both Siribunyasarn and Sayakoummame, and left their capitals in ruins.

When the war was over, Phra Ta's son, Phra Pathum Worarat Suriyawong (Khamphong) (r. 1786- 1795) <sup>40</sup> claimed from the Siamese victors, as reward for his

<sup>40</sup> The rulers of Ubon Ratchathani;

Phra Pathum Worarat Suriyawong (usually referred to as Khamphong)	1786- 1795 (son of Phra Ta)
Phra Prom Worarat Suriyawong (usually referred to as Phrom)	1795-1840 (brother of Khamphong)
Phra Prom Worarat Suriyawong (usually referred to as Kuthong)	1840-1863 (son of Phrom)
Chao Phrom Thewanukhro (Nokom) grandson of Chua Anuvong	1863-1886
	( recalled to Bangkok 1883 still nominally king till his death 1886)

active support, the right to settle at Bo Chae Ramae,<sup>41</sup> the salt-producing locality on the Huey Chae Ramae, five kilometres northwest of what would become the town of Ubon Ratchathani. The salt industry in this place was not the same as the small scale-extraction by farmers in the non-rice growing season that was common in many places on the plateau. Rather, it was a permanent industrial facility producing a commercial commodity. Being on the winning side in the war meant that Phra Pathum Worarat Suriyawong and his followers were finally in a position to expect more than to simply extract passing surpluses; now they could take possession of the space and rule. This request, and its acceptance by the Siamese, is what lead the Thai historical narrative to identify Phra Pathum Worarat Suriyawong as the founder of Ubon Ratchathani.

Through the turbulent first half of the nineteenth century the succession went as local tradition would have expected, though now it required Bangkok's approval. Upon Khampong's death, his younger brother, Phra Prom Worarat Suriyawong (Phrom) (r.1795-1840), followed as the second governor, who was then succeeded in turn by his son, Phra Prom Worarat Suriyawong (Kuthong), in 1845, around the time Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn returned to Ubon.

It was during the reign of the third governor, Kuthong (r.1845-1863), that the power of the Ubon ruling family began to increase. At the beginning of his reign, Kuthong had only the three relatively insignificant satellites of Songkhon, Lamnao, and Senang on the left bank,<sup>42</sup> but years of relatively peaceful progress meant that population pressure pushed the Ubon peasantry out through the lower Mun valley and up the Chi River towards Yasothon. Shortly before Kuthong died, Bangkok approved the creation of three widely separated satellite towns – Phimun, Trakanphutphon, and Mahachanachai – on the right bank of the Mekong. Three of Kuthong's sons were appointed as governors of the new towns as Ubon confirmed its claim to the extensive and rich lands of the entire lower Mun basin.<sup>43</sup>

By the time the third reign of the Chakri dynasty was drawing to a close, the ruling Suriyawong family had expanded their capital city into the significant town the French would later visit and describe so enthusiastically. From their original position at Chae Ramae, Phra Pathum Worarat Suriyawong and his followers developed the center of the town where we find it today, on a knoll above the high water levels. They had reason to feel confident about the future, for, shortly after his coronation in 1852, Rama IV (1851-1868), who had visited Ubon as a monk, presented his good and faithful governor Kuthong with a set of gold regalia – an honor usually reserved for princes.<sup>44</sup>

When we look at the period in which the murals were created, we can see that Ubon and its elite had thrived as active agents of Bangkok; nevertheless, they had a difficult heritage. The blood of so much of the old Lao world was on their hands, and yet, as they were to discover, they remained very much a part of it. Although they

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Phraya Srisinghatep (That) Commissioner in Ubon

Effectively takes control from 1882

See: Fine Arts Department, *Muong Ubon Rachathani*, Bangkok: The Fine Arts Department / Ministry of Education, (1989), 35.

<sup>41</sup> Toem Wiphakpotjanakit, *History of Isaan*, 56.

<sup>42</sup> Kennon Breazeale, "The Integration of the Lao State into the Thai Kingdom" (PhD diss., Oxford University, Oxford, 1975), 80.

<sup>43</sup> Breazeale, "The Integration of the Lao State into the Thai Kingdom," 81.

<sup>44</sup> Breazeale, "The Integration of the Lao State into the Thai Kingdom," 81.



functioned as willing tools of Bangkok, they would never be its children. These were the people who would have had the power to shape and direct the form and content of the murals under consideration here.

### Establishing the literary context:

The murals are inside the *sim*, the domain of monks. There is no teaching portico in front with images for public instruction, a typical feature of the *wat* on the plains to the north and south of Viang Chan, nor are there murals on the outside walls, as is common further up along the Chi River. At first glance the murals seem to present an almost complete text book for the practising monk, providing a visual representation of all the stories necessary for the monk to functioning of a local religious system that was generally understood to be Buddhism.<sup>45</sup> Three of the four walls are devoted to episodes from the life of the historical Buddha, with the third carrying a completed rendition of the Vessantara Jataka – the story of the Lord Buddha's penultimate life as Prince Vessantara (known locally and hereafter referred to as Phra Wet). This was an essential text for the working monk, as it was, and still is, the centrepiece of local *wat* life and finance.



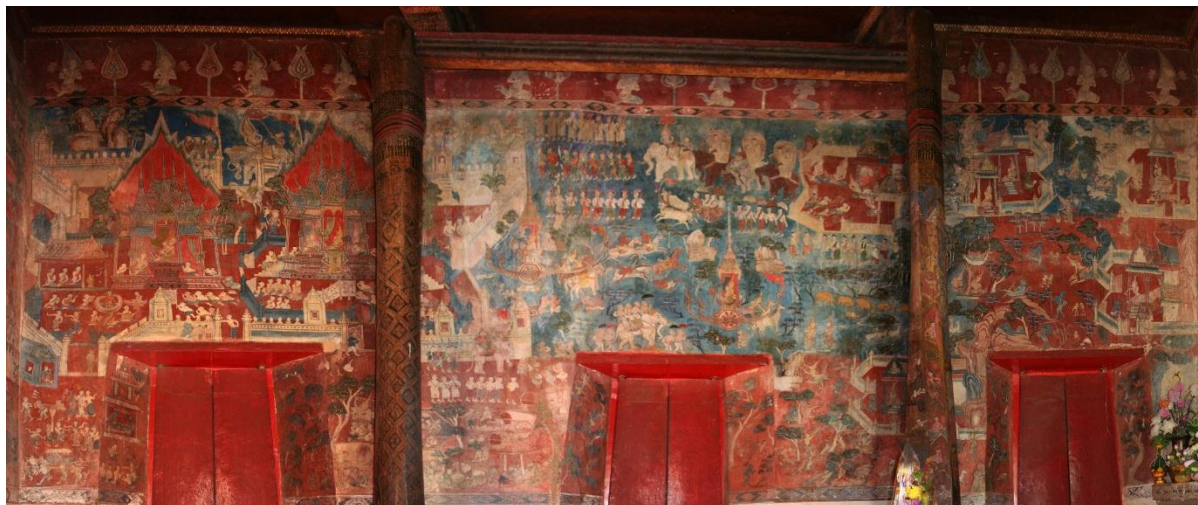
**Figure 8:** The wall behind the Buddha image, the victory over Mara.

The wall behind the Buddha image carries a complete rendition of his victory over Mara. This is one of the most commonly depicted images in Thai Buddhism, especially in central Thailand. It is similar to the one at Wat Saket, although there it is on the rear wall, facing the Buddha image. The original Wat Saket ordination hall murals were painted in the time of Rama III; thus, they were either completed or in the process of being completed when Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn was there. The

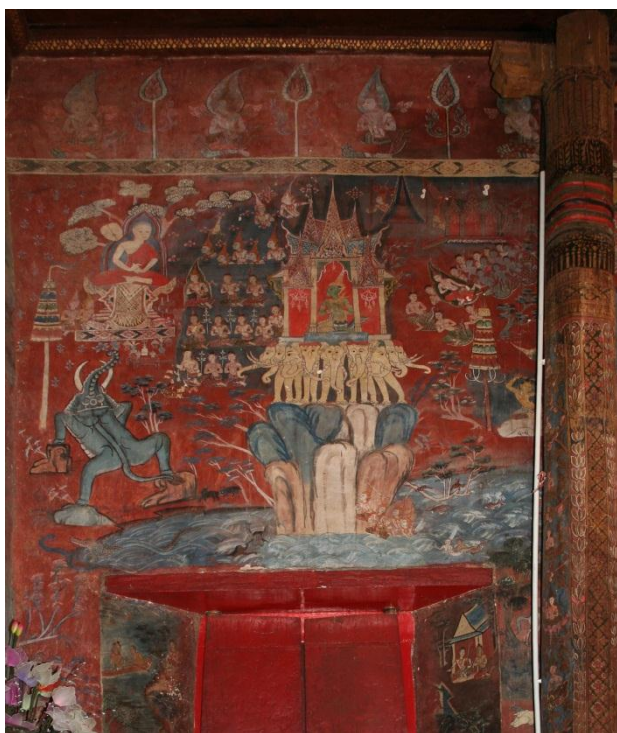
<sup>45</sup> Following Hayashi Yukio's concept of practical Buddhism, I have tried to see these stories not as part of a world religion but rather as parts of world religious thought that people found useful to employ in a local context. Hayashi Yukio, *Practical Buddhism among the Thai-Lao: Religion in the Making of Region* (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2003). This understanding is also informed by the work of Ian Harris, who draws a distinction between the Buddhism of the literary tradition (usually of the great centers where Pali and Sanskrit were known) and the Buddhism of the cult tradition that unified diverse sources into a practical local religion. Ian Charles Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005). We have with Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn a person who would have known both worlds but who we know felt a need to bring those he was responsible for to a closer understanding of the Buddhist literary tradition that he had become part of at Wat Saket.

original murals, however, were repainted in the reign of Rama VII, so it is not possible to confidently compare them.<sup>46</sup>

The full length of the wall to the right of the Buddha image carries the complete Phra Wet cycle.



**Figure 9:** The full wall to the left of the Buddha image, the complete Phra Wet cycle.



To the immediate left of the Buddha image is a scene from of Phra Malai.<sup>47</sup> In this image, the monk is depicted ascending to meet Buddha Metteyya in Trayastrimsa heaven.<sup>48</sup> This particular depiction is different from other mural detailing this story as it has no representation of earth or hell (with its gory images of the punishments of the damned). Its presence here raises some extremely important questions that go beyond the scope of this paper.

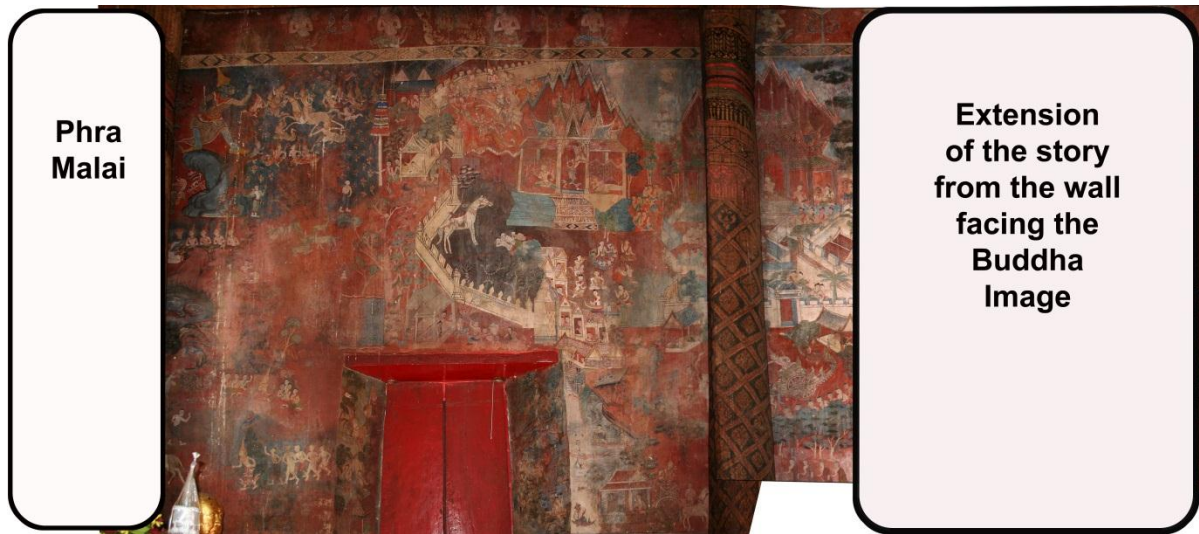
**Figure 10:** To the right of the Buddha image, Phra Malai.

<sup>46</sup> Phra Debgunabhorn, *Prawat Wat Saket Ratchaworamahawihan*, 15.

<sup>47</sup> Yutthanawarakorn Saengaram, "Local Characteristics of the Mural Painting in the Uposatha Hall," 30.

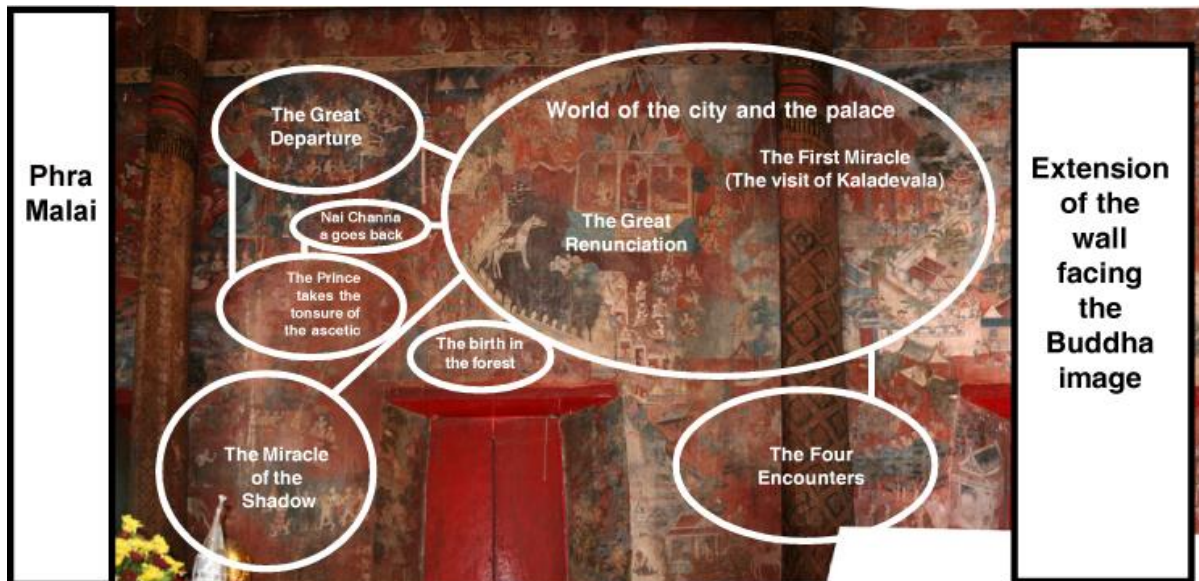
<sup>48</sup> This tells the story of the compassionate monk, Phra Malai, who first visits hell and carries back messages from those who are suffering to their relatives, exhorting them to make merit on their behalf. He then travels up to Trayastrimsa heaven to meet the Buddha to come, Metteyya, and learn the promise of the future. Bonnie Pacala Brereton, *Thai Tellings of Phra Malai: Texts and Rituals Concerning a Popular Buddhist Saint* (Tempe, AZ.: Arizona State University, Program for Southeast Asian Studies, 1995), 7-13.





**Figure 11:** Centre of the wall to the right of the Buddha image, the early life of the Buddha.

The middle of the wall to the right of the Buddha image presents the complete early life of the Buddha, his life as Prince Siddhartha. Here, with these images, the creators have produced an almost perfect mental map of the events of the Buddha early life – a “graphic text book” of sorts.



**Figure 12:** Schematic overlay for the centre of the wall to the right of the Buddha image, the early life of the Buddha.

At the centre of the image is the world of the city and the palace, with the essential events of the Buddha’s life radiating out in smaller cameos. These scenes are set out in a way that would be easy to remember for the local monks and lay people who were likely unable to read Pali and would have known little of the great corpus of Buddhist teaching.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Ishii Yoneo, *Sangha, State, and Society*, 86.



However, stories are never immutable, and the mural's depiction of the city and the palace is revealing. Even though the narratives are supposed to be set in India, the architecture is inescapably Tai. This is not unusual; religious pictures usually reflect the values and cultural forms of the communities that erect them.<sup>50</sup> But there is more here, for in these murals, the images and cultural values depicted are not actually from the community which created it.



**Figure 13:** Detail, the setting for the early life of the Buddha.

<sup>50</sup> Wyatt, *Reading Thai Murals*, 1.

At the gate of the palace in the lowest register, we see Prince Siddhartha setting out on the journey that will evolve into the story of his four famous revelatory encounters. In this depiction, we see life lived at the edge of a waterway. Just outside of the city wall, at the top of this detail, amorous couples are looking out of upper story windows over the ceramic tiled roofs of the single story houses below, built on the ground at the water's edge. At the end of the landing that extends from these houses, three small boys play happily in the water. In the foreground, a Chinese merchant paddles a small boat, selling bottled goods to a woman who looks out across the river from the window of her waterside parlour just as the prince passes by the rear of her house. This is a picture that is instantly recognisable even today – a picture of life on a Bangkok *klong*.

Such riverside scenes were never possible in Ubon; here the people could not live on the river banks and establish their villages on *dons*, small knolls that were safe from the capriciousness of the river. Also in Ubon, the houses would have been constructed from wood and thatch, raised on stilts much like the ones we see in other parts of these murals, in the places depicting the edges of the wild world of the forest. Nevertheless, on the walls of this *sim*, here in Ubon Ratchathani, the place where the life of the Buddha is being lived is unmistakably Bangkok.



**Figure 14:** Detail, the dead man.

There is something even more distinctive in locating and personalising these images. When we look at the prince's encounters right at the gates of the city, we see the dead man, depicted as a portly man surrounded by vultures, one of which is pecking at the man's head while others eagerly wait nearby to consume the flesh.





**Figure 15:** Photograph of a corpse and vultures at Wat Saket. Here the undertaker is using a stick to hold back the vultures. (Phra Debgunabhorn 1991 figure 58.)



**Figure 16:** Detail, The miracle of the shadow.

The thing that made Wat Saket notorious in Bangkok and an unlikely pleasure trip destination was its function as the place where excarnation was practised. The trees and the courtyards were black with vultures waiting to feed on the flesh of the deceased devout. This is a scene that the young Phra Ariyawongsajarn would have seen every day of his time at the *wat*.

Similarly, in another scene, painted on the other side of the *sim*'s window from the klong scene, the miracle of the shadow is about to happen. Here, at the royal ploughing ceremony, we have a Siamese king and the infant Buddha in the arms of a Siamese queen. The authority of Buddhism

and that of the invader are combined in artistic harmony.

The most remarkable achievement among all of the murals at Wat Thung Sri Muang, however, is the enormous scene on the rear wall, so large, in fact, that it could not be contained on the rear wall alone and had to be continued on the final third of the north wall, thereby squeezing the depiction of the life of the Buddha into to the middle section.



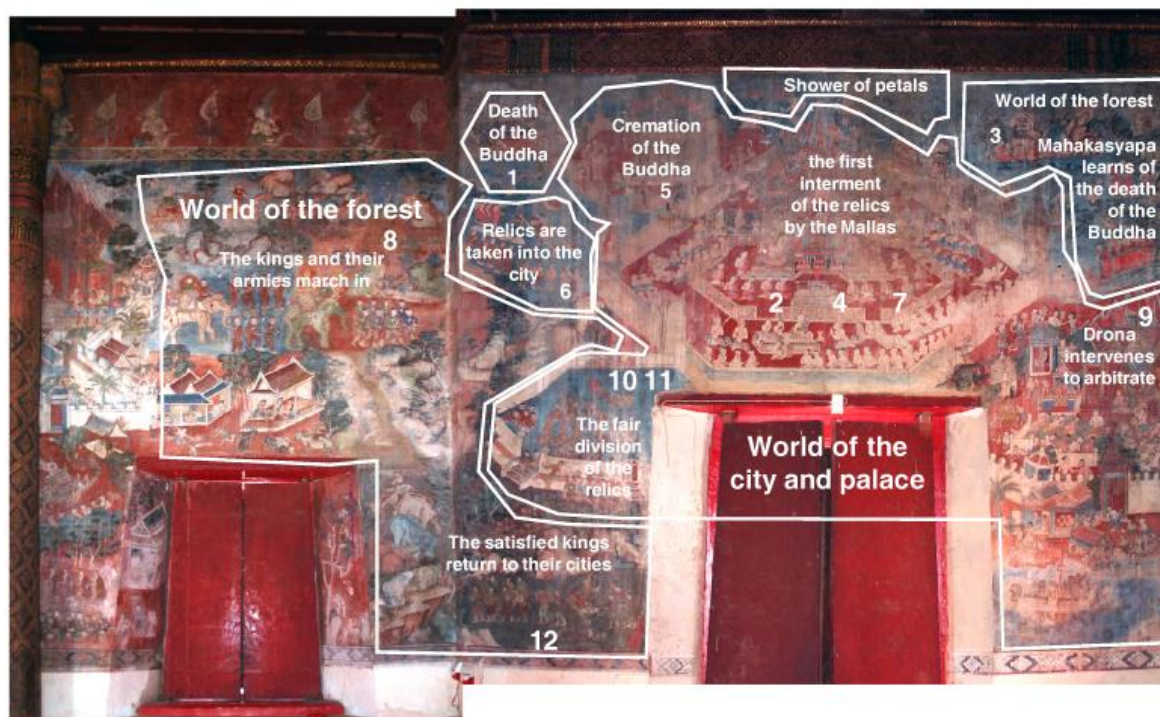
**Figure 17:** The Battle for the Relics, filling the entire rear wall and one third of the wall to the right of the Buddha image.

This grand scene runs more than 14 linear meters and is nearly a 100 square meters of densely packed images. Known as the War of the Relics, it is a story about which we usually only get a fragment.

Our first glance here is captured by the inescapable central image: the enormous, glowing city with the diamond motif of the *wat* at its heart. Covering most of the rear wall, it is formed, orderly, and concentric, luxuriating in a palette of reds, yellows and gold. It is a place where, even in a time of death and threatening war, pleasure is still glimpsed through every open window. Beyond the city, the colors reverse into the cooler detachment of blues which dissolve into foreboding greens and blacks. Across, on the north wall, the partial order of the straight country road and the lines of the marching armies yield at the bottom, deep in the corner, to a forest where, heavily outlined in black, grotesque misshapen rocks and hills emerge from the tangle of the wild, dark olive green vegetation. This is the wild world, the world of dangerous men,



hunters, thieves and wild animals. This is the story of two conflicts between elites – elites both sacred and profane.



**Figure 18:** The Battle for the Relics. Images from the rear wall and one third of the wall to the right of the Buddha have been joined and digitally manipulated to create a single flat image of both walls. It has then been overlaid with a schematic diagram of the narrative.

The story, as it is presented on the walls, begins in the top left corner of the rear wall.<sup>51</sup> Here, in what is possibly the smallest tableau of all, the Lord Buddha passes away near the city of Kusinagari in the land of the Mallas (figure 18, frame 1).

Under the supervision of Ananda (usually called Anone by local people), the Mallas bring the Buddha's body, enshrouded in a thousand layers of cloth, to the center of their city and place it in the coffin (figure 18, frame 2). They would have proceeded with the cremation, but they found they were unable to light the cremation pyre. This is explained as the result of the restraining hands of the gods, who do not want the fire to be lit until the coming of Mahakasyapa, another of the Buddha's leading followers who, in a previous life, had promised the Buddha that he would come to pay his respects at his *parinirvana*. A promise made must be honored. Mahakasyapa, who is often characterized as a rival to Ananda, was later to play the presiding role in the first council, effectively making him leader of the majority of the followers.

<sup>51</sup>In retelling the story I am combining a number of summaries: Yutthanawarakorn Saengaram, "Local Characteristics of the Mural Painting in the Uposatha Hall," 32-35; John Strong, *Relics of the Buddha* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 99-124; Parakrama Pandita, *The History of the Buddha's Relic Shrine: A Translation of the Sinhala Thupavams*, trans. Stephen C. Berkwitz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 112-33.

Mahakasyapa is shown outside the city, in the forest in the upper right corner (figure 18, frame 3), where he hears of the great teacher's death a week after it had happened. He comes quickly, hoping to be able to see the body of the Buddha and to venerate him one last time. Sources vary as to what happens next, but central to the narrative is the tension between Mahakasyapa and Ananda.<sup>52</sup> Mahakasyapa asks Ananda for permission to view the Buddha's body, but Ananda refuses, saying that to do so would be too difficult, for not only is the corpse wrapped in thousands of shrouds, but the iron sarcophagus housing the body is already closed and on top of the pyre. Here the conflict is justly resolved by the miraculous intervention of the Buddha himself. As Mahakasyapa approaches, the feet miraculously escape from the thousand layers of sheathe and emerge from the coffin, enabling him to look upon the body and venerate it for the last time (figure 18, frame 4). Strong comments:

[T]he miracle of the feet, moving of their own accord after the Buddha's death, is significant because it is the first graphic example of the Buddha's ongoing magical powers.... As such, it foreshadows similar magical movements, ... commonly .. exhibited by the Buddha's relics. In fact, it may be argued that the Buddha's feet here, though attached to his body, are relics, and that Mahakasyapa's action is a precursor to the cult of the Buddha's footprints, which, .. was an important and early form of relic worship in Buddhism.<sup>53</sup>

With the resolution of this conflict it is possible to move to the cremation (figure 20, frame 5), an event that led to the second conflict under consideration here, that between the secular elites – the War of the Relics.

After the embers had cooled, the Mallas collected the Buddha's relics, put them in a golden casket, and placed it on a litter in order to transport it to the center of their city (figure 20, frame 6). There they enshrined the relics in a place that is variously described as a great building, a high tower, or their own assembly hall (figure 18, frame 7). Strong comments in detail on Commenting on the defensive nature of this entombment (especially as it is described in the Pali sources), Strong writes:

[T]hey were surrounded by "a lattice-work of spears," and encircled by a "wall of bows" ... Later texts were to elaborate on these defenses and specify that the relics were surrounded by concentric circles of elephants (standing so close together that their heads touched), horses (whose necks touched), chariots (whose axle heads touched), soldiers (whose arms touched), and archers (whose bows touched)<sup>54</sup>

The news of the death quickly spread to the other kingdoms, and the reaction was immediate and angry. In the murals, in the upper part of the last section of the north wall, we see the immediate reaction of King Ajatasatru, ruler of Magadha. Initially

<sup>52</sup> Strong, *Relics of the Buddha*, 113.

<sup>53</sup> Strong, *Relics of the Buddha*, 113.

<sup>54</sup> Strong, *Relics of the Buddha*, 117.



shocked, he soon recovers and sends a demand that the relics be turned over to him so that they may be interred in a stupa that he will build. Aware words alone will not be enough, he equips a fourfold army and immediately marches on Kusinagari (figure 18, frame 8). However, it is not just King Ajatasatru who objects; six other kings also take up arms or threaten to do so.

The Mallas resist the demands with an argument that is based on the notion that possession is tantamount to ownership, and they prepare for war. The situation is resolved by the intervention (figure 18, frame 9) and arbitration of the Brahmin Dhumrasagotra (most commonly referred to locally as Donna Bhram, which is often shortened to Donna), who argues for fairness and equality. Successful in persuading the kings of their equal rights, the Brahmin goes about his task in an apparently equitable and satisfactory fashion, dividing the relics of the Buddha into eight equal shares, each one of which will be taken away to be enshrined in a *stupa* in the recipient's home country (figure 18, frame 10). For this service, he asks for and receives the vessel used in the division of the relics, which he will take back to enshrine in a *stupa* he plans to build.



**Figure 19:** Detail, the Brahmin attempts to steal the eye tooth, but Sakka intervenes.



The rendition here at Wat Thung Sri Muang seems also to carry with it a later addition to the story which discredits the Brahmin, charging that this fair broker was less than fair and honest himself.<sup>55</sup> As he was dividing the relics, some versions add, he took the right eye-tooth of the Buddha and secreted it in his hair where it went unnoticed in the tension of the moment. The action did not go unnoticed in heaven, however, for Sakka descended to earth, stole the tooth from the thief, and took it back to enshrine in Trayastrimsa heaven (figure 18, frame 11). Finally satisfied, the other kings returned to their countries with their share of the relics (figure 18, frame 12).

Inescapably, this story is not about the individual pursuit of salvation; rather, it is a message concerning appropriate behavior here in this world, a tale about public morality and civil behavior. When we look at this painting, this story, in this place,



**Figure 20:** Detail, the Brahmin addressing the king.

previously so dedicated and practical in its teaching we must ask why this story was chosen and why it was afforded such prominence. Clearly, there was a change in the perceived audience and, with it, a different message.

With any story that exists in common knowledge, it is the parts that the teller chooses and how they present it that shapes the meaning.

As has already been suggested, murals are public lessons, and it is fair to say they are looked upon as such. The viewer looks at the mural in order to find the initiators intent. In the preceding case, the lesson certainly involves an assertion that nothing can be owned by mere possession. At the heart of civil behavior there must be fairness and equality; without it there will be discord, chaos and – ultimately – war. Regarding the conflict between Ananda and Mahakasyapa, this assertion is endorsed by none other than the Lord Buddha himself and his “miracle of the feet.”

<sup>55</sup> Strong, *The Relics of the Buddha*, 120.



For the rulers, it is the necessary lesson to be learned if they are to avoid the death and destruction that war would visit upon them all. Rulers may have the power to control and possess, but they are still bound by the universal laws. Fairness and equality is a duty even to the highest ranking individual.

Even if the message is open to interpretation, there can be little doubt concerning the intended audience of this lesson. As we look into the palace, we can see the Brahmin addressing the king.

Right in front of the palace gate is a broad river with children playing in the shallows while, just beyond them, a mother bathes her child. In the middle of the river, a Chinese junk announces its departure, and, as a crewman is hauling up a sail, it passes by what was then the most common and distinctive style of Bangkok living – a house built upon pontoons of bundled bamboo, moored to the river bank. A viewer cannot avoid seeing that this town is Bangkok and the king being chastised is the king in Bangkok.

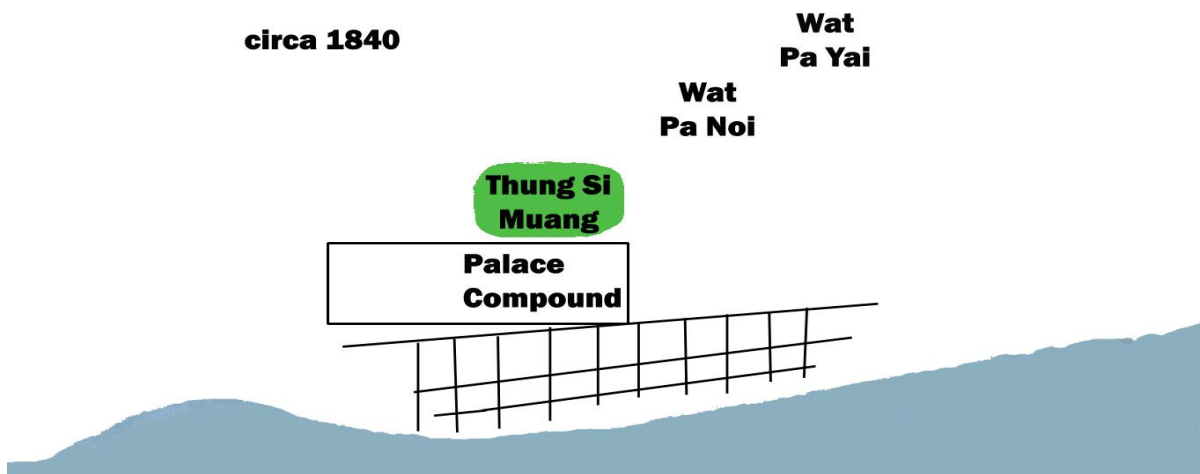


**Figure 21:** Detail, the water gate of the palace and a junk on the river.

## The changing context - Ubon Ratchathani as the murals were being painted:

### a) Changes to ecclesiastic power

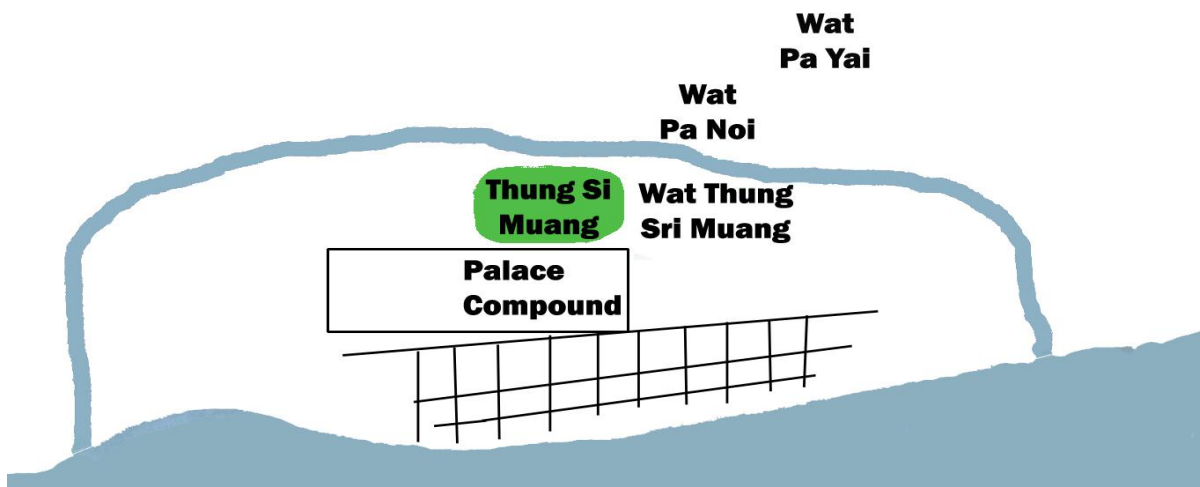
When Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn arrived back in the place of his birth, he carried with him the royally-granted authority to govern all the monks in the region. At that time, as we have seen, he had come to live at Wat Pa Noi which had only relatively recently been raised to the status of a full *wat*, the personal *wat* of the second ruler, Phra Prom Worarat Suriyawong (r.1795-1840), thereby making it the principal *wat* of the *muang*.



Map 3: Map of the town circa 1840.

We can assume at that stage that the moat described by Aymonier would have been dug, or was in the process of being dug. The latter is more likely because it is recorded Wat Thung Sri Muang was built just inside it, serving to distinguish it from Wat Pa Noi and Wat Pa Yai, which were so named because they remained in the forest.

### approximately 1850



Map 4: Map of the town showing changes by 1850.

Even before Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn had begun to build his new *wat*, the world he had come from had changed. On April 2, 1851, Rama III died and was succeeded by the new king, Rama IV (Mongkut).

As a monk, Mongkut had been disdainfully tolerated by his rather devout but orthodox uncle, Rama III. A rationalist and a modernizer, Mongkut was a controversial figure. A reformer who lacked power beyond his immediate circle, he found the only path open to him as a monk was that of separation. Thus, with the assistance of six monks sympathetic to his ideas, he created a new community, the Thammayut. This act, explicitly ridiculed by Rama III and the leaders of the *sangha* on account of its adoption of Mon practice, was all the more confrontational because the required re-ordination implicitly suggested that the old Thai *sangha* was corrupt.<sup>56</sup> The effects of such zealous activity could have easily been absorbed by the inertia of the main body of the *sangha* if not for the sudden elevation of Mongkut, its founder to the position of supreme secular and ecclesiastical power. This community and its separate hierarchy of governance yielded a legacy of sectarian discord for the next hundred years, because, due to royal favor, the much smaller Thammayut community exercised power and influence well in excess of their numbers.<sup>57</sup>

The succession had an immediate effect in Ubon. Rama IV, in one of his earliest acts as king (1853), financially supported the establishment of a new *wat* in Ubon Ratchathani. This was the first temple of Thammayut on the Khorat Plateau, and its Bangkok monks brought with them the Thammayut's new anti-superstitious, academic-based curriculum. The new *wat* was located inside the town, on the bank of the river – a place the Rama IV remembered from his tour. It was named Wat Suphatanaram in accordance with the king's decree, meaning “temple at an appropriate location, a good harbor.” It was, therefore, a royal *wat*, its community of Thammayut monks were not under the local *sangha* authorities, and, perhaps most importantly, the first abbot, Phra Tawatammee (Mao), was a royal relative.



**Map 5:** Map of the town by 1855 showing rapid change after the accession of Rama IV in 1851 and the arrival of the Thammayut.

<sup>56</sup> Ishii Yoneo, *Sangha, State, and Society*, 155.

<sup>57</sup> Ishii Yoneo, *Sangha, State, and Society*, 106-7.



The effect on civil power was just as immediate. Kuthong, so recently honoured, suddenly needed to accommodate the new situation.

From within the walls of the palace compound, a plot of twenty five *rai* of the garden grounds belonging to the Uparat was donated for the purpose of building a new *wat*, which would become the principal *wat* of the *muang*. Phra Tawatammee came from Wat Suphatanaram to be the abbot of the new Wat Sri Tong and immediately initiated an energetic building program.<sup>58</sup> From that point, any man wishing to be ordained had to have the permission of the Chao in the palace and the abbot at Wat Si Tong. Ecclesiastic authority and power had been taken from Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn and given to a Bangkok-born Siamese lord.

### **b) Changes to civil and political power**

For the local people, far worse was to come. Rama IV had awarded Kuthong princely regalia, thereby officially recognizing the place and the person; however, he did not upgrade his rank. On Kuthong's death, for reasons external to the local politics of Ubon, Bangkok decided to pass over his sons and relatives and appoint a Bangkok-educated, Viang Chang prince, Chao Phrom Thewanukhro (Nokom) (r.1863-1886), as the first king of Ubon Ratchathani.<sup>59</sup> It was the first time that Bangkok had arbitrarily asserted its prerogative not to follow local recommendation; in doing so, it abandoned local consent. The decision ended the century-long rise of the loyal and successful ruling Ubon family, and imposed on the town a ruler they bitterly denounced as a foreign prince.<sup>60</sup>

Bangkok may have seen him as a Lao prince ruling a Lao state, but this assumption of common ethnic identity is a centralist imagining, and it highlights the difference between the great trading kingdoms of the coast and the principalities of the Khorat Plateau.<sup>61</sup> These *muang* were territorially defined entities that integrated all who lived in the physical space into a common local identity.<sup>62</sup> The accepted mechanism to express disfavor was to abandon the space, and it was not an unusual event.

This process of defiance and withdrawal, with its implicit territoriality, had been the very mechanism that had brought this family to Ubon. In its creation, the blood of their forbears had been spilt across the breadth of the plateau. However in this place they were no longer a non-consenting minority but, rather, a violated majority withdrawing their consent.

<sup>58</sup> Phra Kaew Busarakham *Wat Sri Ubon Rattanam Ubon Ratchathani*. (Wat Sri Ubon Rattanam Ubon Ratchathani), 2010.

<sup>59</sup> Breazeale, "The Integration of the Lao States into the Thai Kingdom," 81.

<sup>60</sup> Breazeale, "The Integration of the Lao States into the Thai Kingdom," 115.

<sup>61</sup> Rama V justified the Siamese claims to the lands of the Khorat Plateau on ethnic grounds stressing the Lao as a cognate of the Thai race. See Rama V's speeches cited in Breazeale, "The Integration of the Lao States into the Thai Kingdom," 114.

<sup>62</sup> Richard A. O'Connor, review of *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* by Thongchai Winichakul, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 54, no. 4 (1997): 280; Richard A. O'Connor, "Who are the Tai? A Discourse on Place, Activity, and Person" in *Dynamics of Ethnic Cultures across National Boundaries in Southwestern China and Mainland Southeast Asia*, eds. Yukio Hayashi and Yang Guangyuan (Chiang Mai: Lanna Cultural Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, 2000), 35-50.



Without consent, Chao Phrom was unwelcome. His legitimacy rested entirely on Bangkok's whim, and, because his appointers saw him as one of the others – i.e., a potential rebel – he was also denied military support, which is, perhaps, ironic given it was the capricious exercise of violence that had legitimated Bangkok's own assumption of power.

As the people's refusal to cooperate became an increasingly serious problem, Bangkok's first responses were legalistic, demanding obedience, but even when the *ratchawong* and *ratchabut* – high officials and leading members of the displaced ruling family – were imprisoned in Bangkok, they still refused to order their supporters in Ubon to cooperate. In 1882, when Chao Phrom tried again to exert his authority over the peasants of the old family, he was met with armed resistance.<sup>63</sup>

Bangkok finally decided that Chao Phrom would never be able to govern effectively and recalled him, but in concluding Phrom was unable to rule without local consent implied Bangkok's sovereignty there was also contingent upon that very consent.

This crisis, together with the international situation, set the stage for what Breazeale terms the “occupation stage” in which “[t]he presence of Bangkok officials who were resident (as opposed to ‘temporary, special’) commissioners was required as a demonstration of Thai control. With the exception of That [Phraya Srisinghatep Commissioner in Ubon], they were not prepared to undertake internal reforms.”<sup>64</sup>

The commissioner arrived in Ubon in April 1883, accompanied by twenty four soldiers – in case he encountered any resistance – and within a month the soldiers had become involved in brawls with the local people.<sup>65</sup> This commissioner-ship in Ubon Ratchathani led the way, establishing the process whereby the local elites were eliminated. Power went to a Siamese lord answerable only to Bangkok and whose authority was enforced by Bangkok's professional military capability.

Within a year the commissioner in Ubon introduced commutation tax, the first new tax to be imposed upon the province since 1791, establishing the precedent that the central government could introduce a new tax in the outer provinces. In the following year, 1885, he introduced an import tax on the entire province. He sent 90% of the revenue to Bangkok and retaining only 10% for local administration.<sup>66</sup> Economic control had now also passed into the hands of a Bangkok lord, effectively removing the last remaining lever of regional autonomy.

### **The changing social space:**

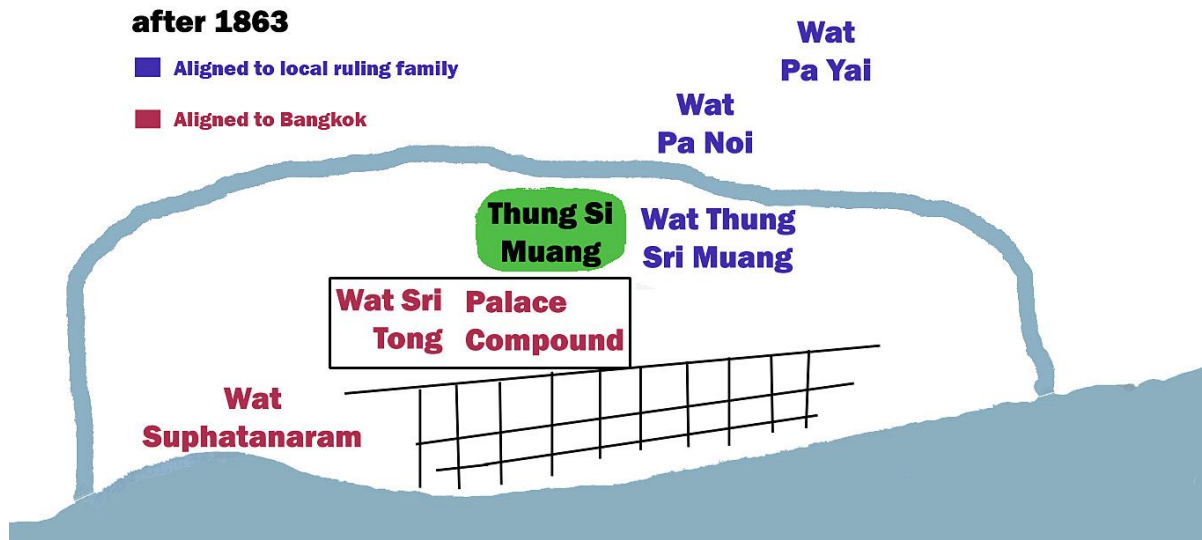
What had happened to these people must have seemed inexplicable. Neither the religious nor secular authorities had given Bangkok any reason to doubt their loyalty or efficiency, and yet here, in their own place, both the religious and secular bodies of power found themselves capriciously cast aside for entirely external, non-local reasons.

<sup>63</sup> Breazeale, “The Integration of the Lao States into the Thai Kingdom,” 116.

<sup>64</sup> Breazeale, “The Integration of the Lao States into the Thai Kingdom,” 130.

<sup>65</sup> Breazeale, “The Integration of the Lao States into the Thai Kingdom,” 117.

<sup>66</sup> Tej Bunnag, *The Provincial Administration of Siam 1892-1915: The Ministry of Interior under Prince Damrong Rajanubhab* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1977), 71.



**Map 6:** Map of the town at the time of the arrival of Chao Phrom Thewanukhro in 1863.

Looking at a mid-nineteenth century map, we can see that the contestation of power had evolved into a spatial dichotomy. The *wat* to the southwest of the *thung* were aligned with Bangkok, and those to the northeast were aligned with and had always been recognized as those of the Suriyawong family and the local people. With Chao Phrom's appointment control of the palace tipped, uncertainly at first, but then with the commissioner's appointment irreversibly into Bangkok's hands and thus into the orbit of those to the southwest, those initiated by, and answerable to Bangkok.

### The changing content:

Though exiled from the palace, the local elite would still find welcome recognition at the *wat*; thus, it is to the walls of these *wat* to the northwest that we must look in order to discover the feelings of these excluded others. It should come as no surprise that they would choose to prominently depict a story such as this, a story of conflicts both sacred and profane; rendering with it a defiant judgment of an unjust ruler and the condemnation of a possessor who imagined himself owner.

### Postscript: The conversation.

A statement produces a response, and on other walls nearby we can see a conversation emerging in reaction to the murals at Wat Thung Sri Muang. The first response is that of a gentle critic, working at Wat Na Khwai less than an hour's walk to the north, who seeks only to dissent on locality. The *sim* is very small and was built in 1879 in the Viang Chan style, while Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn was still alive, and the murals are dated to that similar time by Yutthanawarakorn Saengaram.

The artist is obviously an admirer and student of the Wat Thung Sri Muang murals, for he replicates the composition and the colors. Furthermore, much like the originals, the entire body of work in the *sim* is inflected with themes and stories from the body of thought recognized locally as Buddhism.



**Figure 22: Left:** Mural from Wat Thung Sri Muang



**Right:** Murals from Wat Na Khwai.

Even though it is laterally reversed, there is no mistaking that the painter at Wat Na Khwai has studied and reproduced parts of the original murals; however, in a striking assertion of locality, the artist now depicts the birth in Ubon Ratchathani. As Phra Wet is born at the gate of the palace, a Kula trader has just finished loading the pack saddles on his oxen and is about to set out on the 1000 kilometer trek back to his home in the Shan states of eastern Burma.



**Figure 23:** Detail, from the murals at Wat Na Khwai, showing the Kula trader at the gate of the palace.



It is not surprising that this *wat*, located on a grassland north of the town, was the site where the issue of locality was asserted. It would have been a rather wealthy place, and the Kula (referred to as “Burmese peddlers” by the French) were a vital part of that good fortune. The real wealth of Ubon Ratchathani was here on the grasslands (the *thungs*), where buffalo and oxen were raised. In the second half of the nineteenth century, with the opening up of the rice growing lands of the Mekong delta Chao Phraya valley and the central plains of Burma traders from all three of these regions scoured the plateau buying the livestock to provide the draught animals needed for these new rice growing lands. It was not until they established a permanent presence in the town that the Siamese understood this and learnt how to tap into it by changing the structure of taxation.

Following the death of Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn in 1881, a second voice joins the conversation. This voice will do more than simply assert locality it will contest the very heart of legitimacy. When Phra Khru Wirotratanobon (Bun Nan Taro) became the abbot of Wat Thung Sri Muang in 1881, at the age of 31 he would have had few illusions as to his position. If Phra Ariyawongsajarn’s potential held the possibility of pluralist integration, no such path remained open to his successor, for whom circumstances already seemed to have banished impotent localism.

Born in 1850, Phra Khru Wirotratanobon was educated in Ubon Ratchathani, where he studied Thai Noi, Thai Yai, and Khom script. His further education was in painting, construction, carving, and sculpting. He was ordained in 1874 at the age of 24 at Wat Pa Noi.<sup>67</sup> On becoming abbot of Wat Thung Sri Muang, he found himself responsible for the Ho Phra Bat, which, having been built without adequate foundations was now subsiding and cracking. In order to save the building, on the outside, against the back wall he added a meter thick masonry block to stabilize the rear section, while inside the *sim* he wedged in a structural wooden frame in an effort to support the roof and remove the load from the walls – a wooden frame that local voices would have said needed to be there in the first place.

A skilled painter, he brings the only touch of local narrative and landscape to the walls of the *sim*. On the posts of the frame and the surfaces inside a window alcove, the unneeded space at the edge of the Bangkok *klong* scene, he added a fantastically mystical rendition of the iconic Lao story Sin Sai, paeon to the ultimate triumph of the excluded and dispossessed.

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<sup>67</sup> Phairot Samoson, *E-sarn mural paintings*, 140; Phra Thep Rattanamoli and Pruess, *The Thai Phanom Chronicle*, 74; Yutthanawarakorn Saengaram, “The Local Characteristics of the Mural Painting in the Upasatha Hall,” 8.





**Figure 24:** Phra Khru Wirotratanobon's Sin Sai mural in dramatic juxtaposition with the staid scenes of the Bangkok klong (see figure 13).

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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Bouté, Vanina. *En miroir du pouvoir. Les Phounoy du Nord Laos: ethnogenèse et dynamiques d'intégration*. Paris, École française d'Extrême-Orient, Monographie no. 194, 2011. 328 pp. + 23 illustrations + 5 schémas + 9 cartes.

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Until recently, few foreigners had succeeded in getting long-term access to Laos' countryside following the communist victory in 1975. In the mid- to late 1990s, the situation began (very gradually) to improve as the country opened up to foreign investors, tourists, NGOs, and, on a smaller scale, scholars. Though it was no longer near-impossible to obtain research authorization, political surveillance, mixed with suspicion bordering on paranoia in some villages, was still very much prevalent when Vanina Bouté began her doctoral fieldwork in Phongsaly (Laos' northernmost province) in 1999. Her highly readable and fascinating study of the Phunoy, a Tibeto-Burmese group inhabiting the upland district also named Phongsaly, draws on 32 months of field research conducted over six years (including one year in a village) and covering over a hundred villages. This is an impressive feat.

In strong disagreement with studies that have portrayed an antagonistic and rigid representation of the relationship between, on the one hand, a 'predatory' state and, on the other, "marginalized" or "distant" ethnic groups, Bouté argues on the contrary that the construction and transformation of Phunoy identities are intimately linked with the interactions the Phunoy-speaking populations have had with the successive dominant powers in the region: the Lao-Tai kingdom of Luang Prabang (in the eighteenth-nineteenth century), then the French colonial administration (from the late nineteenth century until 1954), and finally, the Lao revolutionary movement (1954-1975) that took power nationwide in 1975. In other words, in pursuit of its own survival over the past two centuries, the Phunoy group has constantly adapted to the dominant power's rule – to the point of mirroring (to some extent) the latter's cultural and political system.

Bouté develops her argument in three parts, applying a dual approach that combines historical investigation and synchronic analysis: the first section traces back the ethnogenesis of the Phunoy group to the pre-colonial times leading up to the French period; the middle part discusses the changes in Phunoy religious beliefs and practices, partly as a consequence of the communist administration in Phongsaly Province from 1954 onwards; the final section focuses on today's impacts on Phunoy society and identity as a result of a rural development policy engineered by the current regime, that is, the resettlement of upland populations to lowland areas, particularly from the early



1990s. In each section, three fundamental and intertwined aspects of the Phunoy society are examined – its socio-political structure, religious organization, and territorial configuration – for all three have changed under the actions of successive dominant powers and the concomitant responses of the Phunoy to these actions.

The Phunoy officially numbered about 40, 000 individuals in 2005. On the ground, however, the ethnic boundaries of the Phunoy population are not clear-cut; for instance, several smaller neighboring groups, though linguistically and culturally similar to them, bear another name. In the first three chapters, Bouté deftly shows the political and territorial dynamics behind the creation of the Phunoy as a distinct ethnic group in the late nineteenth century. Until the mid-nineteenth century, Phunoy-speaking groups, who had settled in the uplands of today's Phongsaly Province around the eighteenth century, did not form a homogenous population; rather, a person identified himself or herself with a clan or a village. What initiated the first process of differentiation among the scattered Phunoy-speaking groups was the act of an external power, i.e. the king of Luang Prabang. The latter bequeathed the status of border guards to some members of these groups in the second half of the nineteenth century. They received a "Book of Land" (*peum kongdin*) and the title of "Master of the Land" (*Chao ti din*), as well as political and land rights in return for defending the kingdom's realm; they were also named after *Phay* or *Kha Pay* (meaning "free man", therefore stressing their special status distinct from the other upland peoples in the vicinity). A second factor of differentiation occurred among these *Phay*: those located on the right bank of the River Ou (one of the main rivers in northern Laos) enjoyed relative autonomy compared to the other border guards settled on the left bank of the river, who were more dependent upon their Lao neighbors. Most importantly, their political system and territorial organization resembled those of their Tai neighbors (i.e. bounded, hierarchical and led by ennobled leaders) to such an extent that their domain acquired the name (among the Tai) of *Muang Phunoy* ("the territory of small (or low-status) people" in Lao). The French colonial administration later heightened the Tai-like features of the *Muang Phunoy* by strengthening its hierarchical and centralized structure and by keeping the Phunoy in their privileged role of intermediary between the ruling authority and the other upland populations (Akha, Khmu, etc.). Progressively, the *Phay* on the right bank of the river adopted the name Phunoy, which originally referred to a social status and a territory. The descendants of the Phunoy-speaking border guards on the left bank of the river, however, despite claiming to be Phunoy as well, are only known today as *Phay* by the rest of the population in the Phongsaly district.

The second part of the book focuses on the continuing changes in the Phunoy religious system, which are explained, in part, as the Phunoy's adaptation to the dominant power's policies and as a consequence of the group's own internal political and territorial transformations. Among the upland peoples that were targeted by the Pathet Lao's religious purges in the 1960s (spirit cults, practiced by Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, were deemed "superstitious" and "wasteful" by the Lao revolutionary movement), the Phunoy – who are Buddhists – were the most responsive of all to the Communists' cleansing campaign, and, as such, kept in line with their close (or closer) relationship with the dominant power while aiming to project an image of a "modern" ethnic group distinct from the other "backward" highland populations. However, Bouté

shows that the weakening of spirit cults (or ancestor cults) among the Phunoy was already taking place before the 1960s, and, as such, it was a trend that the communist purges only succeeded in hastening. Indeed, the possession of a Book of Land among the Phunoy, especially those living on the right bank of the River Ou, led to a process of political consolidation and territorialization that gradually ascribed to the Master of the Land – ruling over a supra-village domain – greater prominence than that ascribed to members of the villages' founding clans (whose traditional authority subsequently diminished). The further the Phunoy's political (and ritual) territory expanded, the weaker the ritual legitimacy of the ancestral figure of one village's founding clan became.

Nonetheless, spirit cults have not completely disappeared from the Phunoy religious system and its associated practices. In Chapter Four, Bouté describes in minute detail the ways Buddhist monks, lay heads of pagodas, and officiants in charge of spirit cults conjointly perform different rites in order to fend off misfortune of all kinds (poor harvest, illness, natural disasters, accidents, mental disorder, etc.). Though Buddhist officiants have been playing a more visible role in these rites in recent years, their power is insufficient to communicate with spirits; therefore, non-Buddhist spirit specialists are still called upon, mainly to prevent or to eliminate disorders. The next chapter further demonstrates the continuing complementarity between Buddhism and spirit cults both in doctrine and practice in today's Phunoy religious system. Following the 1960s religious purges, it is said that spirits (including villagers' ancestors) have not been eliminated but displaced to the forest, i.e. non-human space. However, as Bouté demonstrates, both spaces – the village and the forest – overlap on some occasions, such as during the New Year's celebrations, when the village is "open" to outer spirits and ancestors (who also receive offerings from villagers in the forest and the fields) in order to foster land fertility and, more generally, to improve the village's wealth.

The third and last section examines the latest systemic transformations that Phunoy society and identity have endured. These changes were initially government-induced. In the 1990s, the Lao authorities introduced a relocation policy throughout the country that has moved thousands of shifting cultivator households, mostly of ethnic minority origins, from upland to lowland areas over the past two decades. Resettlement has been promoted as a means for rural development and is also used (though not acknowledged) as a mechanism for the control of politically suspect minority groups. There is thus a general characterization of the highlands by the Lao government as areas embodying a range of "problems" that can be solved by encouraging (with variable degrees of coercion) upland peoples to relocate to lowland areas and by engendering drastic changes in these populations' livelihoods. This rural development policy has hit the Phunoy hard: in the mid-1990s, 350 households were resettled (i.e. 20% of the total population of the district of Phongsaly); another 135 families were relocated between 1998 and 2004; entire Phunoy villages have disappeared, etc. These displacements have had serious effects on the Phunoy's social, territorial, and kinship organization. It has, for instance, become increasingly difficult for remaining villagers to rely on the collective support of one's lineage or village community for agricultural or household works following the departure of (the often younger) members of the village, or to perform rituals that require the presence of one's lineage's members, many of whom have left. And yet, in the last decade or so, an important number of Phunoy have

voluntarily settled in lowland areas and growing urban centers, turning a seemingly authoritarian policy of forced relocation into a strategy of social mobility and integration by sending their children to schools and, for the adults, by entering the state administration or the army in town. In Bouté's words, "since their appointment as border guards, to be Phunoy means, in their view, serving the State. And now serving the State is to be a civil servant" (p. 240). At the present time, the Phunoy dominate Phongsaly Capital's administration (80% of the local officials are Phunoy) and represent the largest ethnic group in the capital, where Phunoy language is the lingua franca.

The Phounoy's privileged position (as far as Phongsaly Province is concerned) between the ruling power and neighboring upland populations is not unique and can be found among other upland groups, such as (formerly) the Kasak in Luang Prabang Province or the Khouen in Nan principality (today a Thai province). As Bouté points out in her conclusion, all these groups came about and developed because of their relationship with a regional political power. In arguing this, she acknowledges her intellectual debt to classic anthropological works, such as those of Edmund R. Leach or Georges Condominas<sup>1</sup>, who pioneered studies of the peripheral regions of Mainland Southeast Asia from the perspective of their populations and the latter's relations with lowland (Tai) regional powers. What is, however, remarkable about the Phunoy, and persuasively shown by Bouté, is the *longue durée* of their status as the state's servants: from pre-colonial times to post-socialist era they have complied with and adapted to (albeit more or less consciously) the ruling authority's policies and ideology. But their ability to negotiate change and, more extraordinarily, to use it for their own ends may come at the expense of their own ethnic identity in a context of ever-accelerating economic development in Laos and the region. No longer territorially bound and cut off from their lineages, Phunoy individuals and families, who are now scattered all over northern Laos, may be gradually losing their ethnic markers. Bouté rightly leaves the question of the future of the Phunoy society and identity open, as any answers to it for now would be highly speculative. Her fine book, rich in its ethnographic materials, sophisticated in its claims, and compelling in its arguments, is essential reading for anyone interested in the ethno-history of the peoples of northern Laos, the political and religious anthropology of hill societies, and socio-cultural change in upland Southeast Asia.

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund R. Leach, *Les systèmes politiques des hautes terres de Birmanie*, Paris : Maspero, 1972. [*Political Systems of Highland Burma: a Study of Kachin Social Structure*, London: Bell & sons, 1954]; Georges Condominas, *L'espace social. A propos de l'Asie du Sud Est*, Paris : Flammarion, 1980.

Hall, Derek, Philip Hirsch, and Tania Murray Li. *Powers of Exclusion: Land Dilemmas in Southeast Asia*. Singapore, NUS Press, 2011. 266 pp. ISBN: 978-9971-69-541-5.

Reviewed by

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In this insightful, wide-ranging, and empirically detailed book, Derek Hall, Philip Hirsch, and Tania Murray Li show that all land dilemmas are, at root, defined by the basic fact of exclusion. Studiously avoiding moralizing arguments about what position readers should take about the various land dilemmas animating contemporary Southeast Asia, the authors focus instead on developing analytic tools. The tools they develop are elegant, ready for application in a wide range of situations, and will surely inform the next generation of writing about land in Southeast Asia. The authors begin by offering a clear, unambiguous argument that guides the book and informs the title: “all land use and access requires exclusion of some kind. Even the poorest people, farming collectively and sustainably, cannot make use of land without some assurance that other people will not seize their farms or steal their crops” (4). In other words, land is an increasingly scarce resource. If one person has it, another person does not. Inclusion implies exclusion, which is always a “double edge.” Granting access for some typically implies limiting access for others (8). This approach is purposefully apolitical: “Nowhere in this book do we reduce the problem of access to a dichotomy in which exclusion (bad) can be counterposed to inclusion (good)—indeed, the very terms of such a dichotomy are incoherent, since the inclusion of some land uses, and some land users, necessarily means the exclusion of others” (13). Rather than forcing readers to take sides, this book demands that readers take all sides into account, a position that will appeal to many readers and also frustrate others. Regardless of one’s position, however, this calm analytic detachment is no small accomplishment in the politically fraught world of Southeast Asian “land dilemmas,” where fortunes rise and fall, accumulation and dispossession run wild, and people from Sulawesi to Vietnam’s Central Highlands seem increasingly able to cite the current market value of their land off the top of their head.

If all land use is, for better or for worse, exclusive, the real challenge lies in understanding how exclusions play out in different contexts. In response to this challenge, the book develops a robust analytic framework which focuses on how exclusion operates through various “powers,” which include, but are not limited to, powers of *regulation*, *force*, *the market* and *legitimization* (4). The *power of regulation* can be summed up by the simple phrase: “It’s not allowed” (15). Regulation excludes by setting up rules and delineating land use, and by demarcating and limiting boundaries, ownership, and use-rights under the rubric of zoning. Regulation can be carried out by states, customary groups, and even transnational groups (16). The *power of the market* excludes by telling some people that they simply “can’t afford” land. Focusing on the market indicates how important land prices, speculation, and real estate are to understanding dynamics of exclusion. And prices, of course, are tied in with other factors, especially, but not only, regulation (18). The *power of force* excludes by asserting that harm will come to those who attempt to gain access to certain kinds of land.



Force, of course, can work in tandem with powers of regulation, but it also extends beyond them. Force can work top-down, but it also operates in other directions. Force also can work through implicit rather than explicit means (17). The *power of legitimation* appeals to morals and ideas of what “should be.” It tells people whether it is “right or wrong” to use certain kinds of land in certain ways (18). Because of their directness and explanatory force, the four powers described in the book recall the elegance and analytic clarity of Weberian ideal types. If Max Weber had spent his career researching land in Southeast Asia, he may well have written a book like this.

But Weber didn’t know much about Southeast Asia. These authors do. Like Clifford Geertz or Charles Keyes before them, Hall, Hirsch, and Li combine Weberian precision and theoretical clarity with the kinds of on-the-ground examples needed for an adequate explanation of the complexity of the Southeast Asian context. Specifically, they bring their combined expertise into comparative relief by carefully analyzing how the four different powers of exclusion map onto six different kinds (or “processes”) of exclusion that they describe as particularly important in contemporary Southeast Asia. The six processes, each the focus of a separate chapter, are: the rise of licensing regimes; the permeation of discourses of environmentalism; the expansion of boom crops; the rise of post-agrarian land-uses requiring land conversion; the fracturing and realignment of intimate relations among villagers; and the mobilization of groups agitating against exclusion. Each of these processes is discussed in terms of the ways the four different powers—of regulation, the market, force, and legitimation—combine and recombine in different ways depending on the context.

The breadth and range of examples used to illustrate these processes is impressive. The chapter on exclusion through licensing regimes, which they also call land formalization and allocation, is illustrated through land titling in Thailand and Laos, as well as the campaign for land redistribution in the Philippines. The chapter on exclusion through conservation and environmentalism is explored through the study of a protected area in Sulawesi, a community-based natural resource management in Cambodia, and a mitigation project associated with a dam in Laos. Exclusion through the rise of boom crops is illustrated through the study of oil palm production in Sarawak, shrimp farming in Thailand, and coffee crops in Vietnam’s Central Highlands. Exclusion through “land conversion,” where formerly agricultural land is converted to other uses, is analyzed through the example of urbanization in Cavite in the Philippines, tourism in Bali and Angkor, as well as displacements associated with the Hoa Binh dam in Vietnam. The chapter on exclusion via kin and neighbors is illustrated with examples from village Java, highland Sulawesi, and upland Vietnam, where unequal land access is reemerging in villages. Finally, the last body chapter describes what the authors call “counter exclusions” or movements of people trying to reclaim land in Indonesia and Vietnam, and mobilizations against evictions like those seen in Thailand.

All of these case studies are clearly described and offer compelling examples of how the four powers of exclusion combine and recombine in complex yet eminently observable ways. When the authors describe how different powers overlap with different processes, they offer a logical framework that is rigid enough to enable clear comparison while retaining the flexibility to account for the complexities of different social, political, and cultural contexts. The book may overwhelm some readers with its scope, but it is especially illuminating for the way it combines empirical attention to detail with a clear comparative framework that self-consciously recombines and pushes the limits of ideal types in order to show how they blur into, and overlap with, each other. As the authors note, the four powers they identify are

not meant to be understood as the only powers at play, and the powers are rarely independent. They often operate together or are sometimes even “inextricably fused.” The delineation of four powers is meant as “an analytical and heuristic move” (197). It is a very good move indeed, for this is one of those rare collaborative volumes in which the whole exceeds the sum of its parts. Much credit, it seems, is due to the methodology they have developed.