The Ongoing Invention of a Multi-Ethnic Heritage in Laos [1]

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Abstract

The multi-ethnic nature of Laos has long been part of its official discourse. However, when referring to a national culture, it seemed until recently that Lao historical heritage was considered its only foundation. Local folklore, mostly song and dance, was showcased, but many aspects of ethnic minority social organization and belief were regarded as backward and superstitious. By contrast, Lao PDR currently pays special attention to "the fine cultures and traditions of all ethnic groups," with the clear objective of satisfying the desire for authenticity sought by tourists. About five hundred villages across the country have been awarded the status of "cultural villages," and several provincial museums devoted to local culture have been recently created. The article is concerned with this official exhibition of ethnic diversity, which is paradoxically taking place against a background of accelerated standardization of social and cultural diversity due to administrative pressures and resettlement processes. It discusses how the so-called ethnic cultures tend to be a negotiated mix of the villagers' self-presentation (with some ethnic groups better prepared for this than others), provincial cultural inventions and borrowed Lao norms which were strongly encouraged by state officials.

Introduction

How does one assert a 'national culture' and, within this national culture, what place should be given to different specific ethnicities? To a greater or lesser degree, almost every modern country faces this issue and its related choices in terms of management of a multi-ethnic society. But, depending on those choices, the issue may become either an asset or a liability. While some countries are willing to publicly debate this topic, others implement coercive policies that are not supposed to be discussed (see Brown 2004a; 2004b).

In this respect, Laos—officially a multi-ethnic nation (*paxaxon Lao banda phao* –'the multi-ethnic Lao people')—is in an experimental phase. Authorities face the difficult task of having to invent distinct cultural traditions for the 49 officially registered ethnic groups, almost 50 percent of which are 'ethnic minority,' and actively involve people in their assigned self-presentation. (Goudineau and Evrard 2006; Pholsena 2006).

Speaking of the invention of the social or the cultural is nothing new. Since the influential writings of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983) or Benedict Anderson (1983), there have been countless books, articles or projects beginning with titles such as 'The invention of,' 'The making of' or 'The fabric of,' or titles that use present participles such as 'Creating,' 'Imagining,' 'Building,' and 'Configuring.'[3]

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[3] See, for Southeast Asia among others, Horstmann and Wadley (2006); Michaud and Forsyth (2011); Ivarsson (2008); Harms (2011).

The main idea behind the titles involves process, an idea of social construction. Everything is 'in the making' and a multitude of actors and networks participate together in building, inventing or imagining the cultural and the social. Today, Laos seems particularly well suited to this kind of approach, as an attentive observer can observe, almost from month to month, the enactment of new policies, the emergence of new discourses or the invention of new cultural emblems, on a national level and in the provinces, districts and villages (Berliner 2010; Grabowsky 2011; Ladwig 2008).

On the other hand, common sense is generally resistant to this idea that culture is an 'invention' and would impulsively favor an 'essentialist' approach based on diverse forms of culturalism. There is an increasing desire among tourists today to encounter 'real, authentic cultures.' And Laos, a country whose borders were long closed to outsiders, appears to offer many travellers guarantees of the authenticity they seek among 'ethnic minorities' (Petit 2008; Tappe 2011). For a long period, this had not in fact been entirely false when compared with some neighbouring countries. Until fairly recently, some village cultures could survive in Laos better than elsewhere in the Mekong region.[4] In some cases anthropologists have found it challenging to try to understand the conditions under which certain social structures or certain 'patterns of thought' had been able to resist the ups and downs of history for so long.[5]

But the situation has changed dramatically over the past twenty years. The development policies that have been adopted, aimed at permanently erasing the most obvious signs of supposed archaisms, have gradually banished from the culture of "ethnic minorities" much of what remained of social organization and ancient systems of belief. And there is clearly a certain degree of misapprehension among visitors today who think they are seeing 'traditional villagers' as they ignore the dramatic changes these populations have generally experienced in their way of life. Over the past ten years in particular, the cultural landscape of entire regions has been transformed due to the massive displacement of villages across the country. As a result, in southern Laos, most of the villages where I had been able to work some fifteen or twenty years ago no longer exist.

It is against the background of these tremendous social and economic changes, which have affected all the provinces from north to south, that I consider the recent development of multiculturalism in Laos, one of the aims of which, paradoxically, is to satisfy the desire for authenticity sought by visitors.

From Archaism and Backwardness in the 1990s to the 'Opening Up' of Remote Areas in the 2000s

Mainly because of the political splits and war dislocations that Laos has experienced over a period of almost fifty years, few outside observers have been able to witness the full evolution process over the period. Most have observed just certain periods, and often in particular regions. Some have experienced the country before the war, others during the war, a few others in the years just following 1975, and many researchers and experts have only been able to work in Laos for the past ten or fifteen years. If not unique in the world, this situation of such fragmented knowledge, in time and space, of the contemporary history of a country, is nevertheless not very

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[4] On the politics of neighbouring states towards minorities, cf. McCaskil and Kampe (1997); Turton (2000); Duncan (2004); Masako (2013).
[5] See Goudineau (2008; 2009) about the resilience of a circular model among Austro-Asiatic villages.

common. The idea of 'Laos Studies' reflects this difficulty of making a whole picture from so many scattered points of view. In this respect, my knowledge of Laos is rooted in the 1990s and I will begin with a brief overview of my own experience, which will explain 'where I am coming from.'

The populations in the region of Upper Xekong, in the provinces of Saravan and Xekong, among whom I lived in the 1990s,[6] all belonged to the Austro-Asiatic (or Môn-Khmer) 'stock.' They were Ta Oi (Ta-Oih), Katang and Pacoh on the right bank of the Xekong River, and Alak (Arak), Ngé (Ngkriang) and Kantu/Katu on the left bank. They all spoke languages from the same Katuic family, and formed a sort of 'cultural continuum.'[7] Village life, with its intense ritual activity, seemed to have started up again at the end of the conflicts. In Samui District, the Pacoh villages were made up of two or three magnificent longhouses, each one housing, on occasion, more than one hundred people. In Kaleum, the Ngé or Kantu villages were circular, with a communal house in the center (Cf. Goudineau 2009). All these villages had remarkable architectural features. And the black and white photos that I took at that time gave the impression of a far distant past, as they were so similar to the very rare photographs of these almost inaccessible regions in the 1920s or 1930s.

Yet, if a traditional way of life had resumed that followed some old patterns in terms of social structure and religious practices, this was largely an illusion of archaism. Even if they looked ancient, these villages were recent; most were less than eight years old. They were already, in fact, the result of a preliminary phase of reorganization of territory after the war, but with different policies depending on the province. In Saravan, before 1990, a proactive policy had already favoured certain groupings of multi-ethnic villages, while in Xekong, the policy had been different. Xekong was established in 1984 and has long been considered a 'Lao Theung'[8] province because 98 percent of the population is from ethnic Austro-Asiatic groups. In gratitude for their contribution during the war, many villagers in Xekong were allowed to return to their ancient sites and rebuild villages in the style of their 'ancestors' after 1985.

At that time, any anthropologist attached to a foreign research institution was highly suspect (except for the Vietnamese), so I was officially 'labelled' an 'ethnic minorities expert' (*xiaoxan sonphao* in Lao), and I worked as such, first as a consultant to medical non-governmental organizations (NGOs),[9] and then with the United National Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), working on informal education projects. As a consultant for UNESCO and UNDP, I also carried out several specific missions in the north of the country, namely in Oudomxay and Luang Namtha, which

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[6] I spent two years in Saravan in 1993–1994 where I carried out an extensive ethnography in the remote districts of Toumlan, Ta Oi and Samui—at that time extremely difficult to access. Because local authorities would not allow me to spend more than two nights in the same village at first, I had to walk from village to village for many weeks. But it gave me an overview of the whole region that was crossed by one of the junctions of the Hô Chi-Minh trail during the war. Then, in Xekong, after 1995, I progressively gained the confidence of the provincial Governor who, after several missions spent in different ethnic villages, let me settle down for eight months in a remote Kantu village in Kaleum District.

[7] See, on the 'cultural continuum' in southern Laos: Goudineau (2008).

[8] "Lao of the mountain slopes," a generic term referring to ethnic minorities speaking Austro-Asiatic (Mon-Khmer) languages. About the common—but nonofficial—ternary classification: "Lao Loum," "Lao Theung" and "Lao Soung," see, for instance: Stuart-Fox and Kooyman (1992).

[9] Notably MSF (*Médecins sans frontières / Doctors without borders*) in Saravan and ACF (*Action contre la Faim*) in Xekong.

enabled me to compare the situations of minorities in the south with those in northern Laos. I was therefore confronted very early on with the issue of 'multi-ethnicity' and cultural diversity, and I became particularly disturbed by the obvious contempt shown by many officials in the provinces toward ethnic minorities, who were generally regarded as embodying different types or degrees of social and cultural backwardness.

In 1996, with the moral support of the late Professor Georges Condominas, and in cooperation with the Institute of Research on Culture (IRC), I agreed to coordinate an International UNESCO Conference on 'The Intangible Heritage of Ethnic Minorities' in Vientiane (Goudineau 2003). The conference was more political than scientific, and the Lao government had been diplomatically pressured to recognize the need to promote and preserve 'minority heritages'; it also opened the way for foreign researchers to study non-Lao-Tai ethnic groups, however, which had hitherto (at least since 1970) been almost impossible. Moreover, I also witnessed, with some concern —almost at the outset, in 1994 and 1995—the unexpected and sudden relocation of several ethnic minority villages in Xekong and Muang Sing where I was working—and I decided to note the economic and cultural effects of displacement and regrouping of villages during the first months of relocation. In 1997, upon understanding that the relocation was the consequence of an unspoken policy of general rural planning, coordinated at the central level, I initiated the first survey research on the resettlement of villages on a national scale. The survey took place in 6 provinces in 22 districts and involved over 1,000 families. I was able to carry out this enquiry with the support of UNDP and UNESCO and with the help of a young team of researchers and local education officials. When published, the survey report came as a shock, both for some foreign donors and stakeholders, who had financed and developed projects in relocated villages, and for the provincial authorities, who often reluctantly admitted that they were facing many difficulties in applying the resettlement scheme (Goudineau 1997, 2000; Goudineau and Evrard 2004).

I left Laos in late 1999 and returned at the end of 2011 (with only short trips in between). Upon my return, I found a very different country from the one I had left nearly twelve years earlier, and I was stunned by the changes, especially in the districts in the south where I had previously worked. In Ta Oi district, a huge road had been constructed, and long lorries loaded with logs now drive directly toward Vietnam. Electricity had been installed in Samui. And the district town of Kaleum— just a few shacks and small houses on stilts in 1999—had become a real, small town with a market, schools and brick houses.

The political challenge of 'opening up' remote areas may appear to have been won, but the reason behind it has often been the implementation of national or provincial 'plans' involving dams, infrastructure or mining projects. These changes have led to a profound territorial transformation—with a wide redistribution of populations and new type of village organization. The questions asked by the 1996 UNESCO conference, and even more so, the concerns expressed in the Report on 'resettlement' (Goudineau, 1997) remain completely valid some fifteen years later, and in both cases, the issue of multi-ethnicity is central.

The Promoted Heritage of Laos

The national discourse on the 'Lao multi-ethnic heritage' (*paxaxon Lao banda phao moladok* in Lao) has developed considerably over the past 20 years. I will discuss

this point, then mention some state innovations in the 'presentation' of multi-ethnicity, and finally, I will discuss some recent initiatives in the provinces, such as 'cultural villages' (*ban vatthanatam* in Lao), which attempt to combine 'development and heritage.'

What Does Heritage Mean in a Multi-Ethnic Country?

In a statement to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in Geneva in February 2012, the Minister of Justice of Laos, Dr. Chaleun Yiapaoheu, who is ethnic Hmong himself, outlined what 'a multi-ethnic nation' was believed to be in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR).[10] He noted that: "In the Lao PDR all Lao people regardless of their ethnicity hold Lao citizenship." He added that, "the preservation of the culture of all ethnic groups, large and small, is recognized by the government as a driving force for the development and preservation of national identity in the country." But before acknowledging this, he also stated that national development is the priority and that "the relocation policy is...a crucial component in poverty reduction programmes," even if the government "is well aware that the establishment of development villages and cluster villages in the rural areas affects the traditional livelihoods of the people in the mountainous areas" (p. 4).

Actually, this speech about multi-ethnicity and the priority given to national development could apply to all the neighbouring countries of Laos, except for the recognition of citizenship, which must still be negotiated in countries such as Thailand.[11] However, the speech and its implications do not carry the same weight in Laos as they do elsewhere, because Laos has the distinction that roughly two-fifths of its population are ethnically and culturally non-Lao-Tai.[12] This puts the Lao cultural majority in a very different position from the Kinh (Viêt) in Vietnam, the Han in China[13] or the Khmer in Cambodia, where minorities represent a relatively small or very low percentage of the population. Laos has another distinctive feature specificity, which is that there is a population living in north-east Thailand, typically known as 'Isan,' which is linguistically and culturally Lao, and is three times greater than the population of Laos itself. In a way the Lao majority is in an uncertain cultural space,

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[10] 'Opening Statement by H.E. Dr. Chaleun Yiapoaheu, Minister of Justice, Head of the Lao Delegation, at the Eightieth Session of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination,' February 28, 2012, Geneva, Switzerland.

[11] See McCaskill and Kampe (1997); Turton (2000); Tanabe (2008); King and Wilder (2003 cf. chapter 6, 'Ethnicity, Identity and Nationalism'); Masako (2013).

[12] Any calculation remains largely arbitrary, given the lack of systematic and reliable ethno-linguistic surveys carried out nationwide. But if we accept the now official classification of four major ethno-linguistic families, according to the latest census, the Lao-Tai family that includes Lao but also Tai Nua, Tai Dam, Tai Deng, Lue, Phouan, etc. accounts for less than 50% of the population (so the actual 'Lao' only represent a much lower percentage). For their part, the Austro-Asiatics, the oldest and most diverse language family, comprise approximately 35% of the population, Yao and Miao (Hmong) almost 10%, and the Tibeto-Burmans around 5%. For this classification to be complete, we must add urban minorities, mainly Vietnamese and Chinese, plus many populations belonging to ethno-linguistic 'minority' families mentioned above who migrated to the city after leaving their villages.

[13] I include China here, even though it is not considered to be part of Southeast Asia, partly because many minority ethnic groups present in the Indochinese Peninsula (Yao, Hmong, Tibeto-Burmese, Tai, etc.) originate directly from China and occupy large areas in Yunnan, Guangxi and Guizhou, and partly because a relevant comparison can be made with the Lao situation in terms of a political model regarding ethnicity.

in between cultures. As a nation, before envisaging a 'multi-ethnic' culture, Laos first had to invent a 'Lao' culture.

Several researchers have shown to what extent the Lao PDR continues to reinforce a national identity largely based on Lao history and on Lao Buddhism, in other words on the culture of what is considered the majority group.[14] The École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO – French School of Asian Studies), which is the oldest research institution in Laos, was at the heart of this fabrication of a Lao culture during the colonial period. Since 1901, its scholars have been actively involved in the reconstruction of the monumental emblems of Vientiane, particularly That Luang and Vat Phra Keo. They also wanted—in opposition to the long-term Siamese influence—to identify a 'Lao' literature and a 'Lao' art, and they created a Buddhist institute to train monks in 'Lao' Buddhism.[15] It should be noted, however, that outside of the colonial context, their work, which was generally based on quality research, also served as a scientific guarantee to the emergence of Lao nationalism and is still the basis of some current research in Laos itself.

The most amazing contribution, in this respect, is that of Charles Archaimbault, also previously affiliated with EFEO. He was a philologist and ethnologist who did research in Laos in the 1950s, particularly in Xieng Khouang and Champassak. A former resistance fighter against the Nazis during World War II, and an anti-colonial activist, he worked deliberately toward promoting Lao nationalism after independence. His very extensive research aims to demonstrate—on a historical, religious and social level—the existence and coherence of original structures that would be specifically 'Lao,' and he provided a considerable amount of information to this end. He carried out investigations in many villages across the country to study Lao traditions and legends, but he also translated local chronicles and compared cycles of rituals in several Lao towns along the Mekong.[16] Yet, perhaps because he is rather difficult to read—his writings mix very detailed ethnography with a structuralist perspective and some psychoanalytical interpretations—it is striking to see that Archaimbault has never been very influential locally, although the aim of his work was precisely to contribute to the project of constructing a national and essentially Lao culture. This may have been because he chose to work in places that were not central to the social construction of the Lao national, Xieng Khouang and Champassak.

It must be kept in mind that 'the invention of a national culture' is not a continuous process that relies on a gradually collated corpus of knowledge. This invention has contradictory moments, and it is usually political power that decides on the selection of the emblematic items it wants to use. This is particularly acute in Laos where there are few local researchers and, for the most part, they are poorly informed about international research and have a very limited capacity for critical intervention regarding state policy formation. Although there are other actors, the State is principally responsible for the 'presentation' of what must be the national culture. In this regard, some fundamental research projects currently being conducted in the field of culture in Laos are not considered very helpful by the State in the presentation of its meta-narrative regarding Lao culture. Sometimes, they may even be considered quite disturbing.

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[14] See, for instance, Evans (1998; 1999); Pholsena (2006).
[15] See Finot (1917); Parmentier (1954); Evans (1999).
[16] See, for instance, Archaimbault (1967, 1971a, 1971b, 1973).

Some scholars have regretted that the Lao authorities have shown little interest in the work on manuscripts or archaic inscriptions, principally led by international experts.[17] Even if these studies concern an ancient Lao cultural heritage, the fact is that they can hardly be staged to a wide audience. Moreover, they often show evidence of external influences—from Lanna, Khmer or even Môn cultures—and for this reason they are of little use in the context of national ideology. This is less true of some famous archaeological sites such as Vat Phou or the Plain of Jars. Even if these two sites cannot really be linked to Lao culture itself—as one is proto-Khmer and the origin of the other remains obscure and controversial—spectacular 'presentations' are organized by the State and the provinces, such as the Vat Phou festival in Champassak, which is attended by thousands of participants every year.[18]

The State and Discourses on Multi-Cultural Heritage

It is, in fact, in its relationship to 'Lao history' that the State shows a particular capacity for innovations. Martin Stuart-Fox, Grant Evans, Vatthana Pholsena, Oliver Tappe and Volker Grabowsky have already shown how the Lao PDR both indulged itself with the reputation of being a protector of Buddhism by reinstating certain ceremonies and fabricated a historical legitimacy by appearing to follow in the footsteps of the great defender kings of the nation, whose statues are now located in the four corners of Vientiane.[19]

One of the latest inventions that is highly visible in Vientiane is the *Lak Muang* city pillar of the capital, also called the *Ho Lak Muang*, city pillar sanctuary. Located near the Vat Si Muang, it was officially opened in October 2012 and consecrated during an impressive ceremony, which was led by dozens of monks and attended by a huge audience.[20] However, for the population of Vientiane, the nearby Vat Si Muang has housed the town's Lak Muang since the time of King Setthathirath, in the 16th century. Vat Si Muang is known to be a special, popular shrine, and this has been reinforced by the legend concerning its origin, when a pregnant woman was said to have been sacrificed and placed at the base of the stone post that became the central pillar of the city. Why then are the State authorities building the new 'Ho Lak Muang'?

With this monument, the State seeks to somehow regain symbolic control of the former 'Muang' city pillar, a symbolically important space. It is not pretending to replace the Lak Muang, which is still located in the Vat Si Muang. Instead, the monument is presented as a sanctuary and a museum that contains relics of the ancient history of Laos. "It must be a vital cultural reference for future generations," stated the Minister of Information and Culture during its inauguration.[21]

Its construction was decreed on the occasion of the 450th anniversary of the city of Vientiane, and it houses hundreds of different stones extracted from archaeological excavations. Some come from the ancient wall of Vientiane, which was constructed in the 16th century, but others are from proto-historic sites around the

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[17] Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient (1999). Still, some projects in this field have been successfully developed, like the German led 'Preservation of Lao Manuscripts Program' that could thrive in cooperation with the National Library over a 10-year period (1994-2004).

[18] Global Heritage Fund. Wat Phu. http://www.globalheritagefund.org/news/publications/ghr_2011_vol1.html, Global Heritage Review 2011, 'Champassak prépare la fête du Vat Phou', *Le Rénovateur*, 4 février 2013.

[19] See Stuart-Fox (1996); Evans (1998); Pholsena (2006); Tappe, (2012); Grabowsky (2011).

[20] 'Inauguration du pavillon-musée du pilier de la ville à la mi-novembre', *Le Rénovateur*, 8 octobre 2012.

[21] 'Fin des travaux du Musée du pilier de Vientiane' *Le Rénovateur*, 15 octobre 2012.

city.[22] In any event, the State is willing to establish its current patronage on the city's Lak Muang, as well as its place in history, with the support of ancient and indisputable emblems—far more ancient than those in Vat Si Muang. The State is responsible for this 'cultural innovation,' but through the selection of archaeological evidence, is attempting to show that it also relies on scientific expertise.

In addition, it was widely rumored that the monument had been largely financed by private funds, suggesting that the entire Lao society had supported this project. In fact, it turns out that the funds provided by the State were supplemented primarily by large national companies and some foreign firms. And now, a few months after its inauguration, popular fervor is still concentrated at Vat Si Muang, while the new Ho Lak Muang seems deserted.

This example allows us to see the three primary types of actors involved in the invention of the national culture. First, the State, which is usually the main player or actor in Laos today. By 'the State,' I mean the government that embodies it and the *ad hoc* committees of officials and party members at the central level and in the provinces and districts. The second type of actor is the 'expert' who represents a very broad and varied category—including national and international researchers and consultants, as well as some NGOs or associations whose work or discourse can be exploited but who also have the ability to intervene, often through contacts outside the country, and especially via international networks and the media. Finally, a third crucial actor is the 'Lao people' or 'Lao society' in the broad sense, whose 'agency'— the capacity to propose, react or resist—is obviously not the same in large cities like Vientiane or Pakse as it is in remote village districts.[23] Society also makes choices among proposals. In Vientiane, we can see that the That Luang festival is growing more every year and is attended by hundreds of thousands of people. In the same way, observers have been surprised by the rapid nationalist and popular devotion expressed about the rather recent statue of Chao Anou in Vientiane, with constant offerings of flowers, while at the same time other royal statues or famous presidential busts are virtually ignored.[24]

The role of models should also be emphasized in order to understand the sources of official cultural innovation in Laos. Regarding the new Ho Lak Muang in Vientiane, one is struck by the similarity of the building with comparable monuments found in Thai cities. As Vientiane is the capital, one would assume the San Lak Muang in Bangkok as a possible source of inspiration. But even closer, one can see that several major cities in Isan have built—long before Vientiane—a monument similar to Lak Muang. In this fabrication of a Lao culture, it is particularly important to note all the new exchanges of cultural symbols now developing between the two banks of the Mekong.

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[22] More than a dozen of articles in the Lao newspapers as well as in the *Vientiane Times* or the *Rénovateur* were devoted in 2012 to the 450th anniversary of Vientiane and to these archaeological findings.

[23] Social control in Laos is generally stronger in villages than in cities, tending to prevent strong local reaction from rural populations. The same may not be true elsewhere in the region, notably in Cambodia or Thailand, where rural associations or local NGOs can efficiently support the diffusion of villagers' claims.

[24] Tappe (2012). On Lao nationalism, see also Creak (2011).

A Multi-Ethnic National Culture Underlined by a Majority Culture

The creation of a multi-ethnic national culture is heavily determined by the fabrication of this so-called 'majority culture.' In contrast to this Lao cultural domination, we refer to 'non-Lao-Tai' groups as 'minorities' or 'ethnic minorities' here, for it is always and above all a political reality in the context of the Lao nation state, even if this designation is debatable from an anthropological point of view.[25]

Since 1975, the issue of the management of ethnic diversity has been officially addressed, beginning at the point when the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, the Pathet Lao, came to power with the help of the Vietnamese army, and established a communist-type regime. Under the previous Royal Lao Government (RLG), there had been a committee of inter-ethnic relations, but the division of the country by almost thirty years of war moved this concern into the realm of military matters, with each side trying to get the support of minorities who occupied mountainous positions that were considered to be strategically important.

After 1975, it was a question of reuniting the country and making its polyethnicity viable. The formulation of the ethnic question in Laos is based, with some variations, on the Vietnamese model, which was dependent on the Soviet and Chinese experience. Two major issues came to the fore: first, whether or not to grant a form of autonomy to certain regions on the basis of ethnic criteria; and second, a positivist concern, representative of a way of socialist scientism regarding the designation and classification of ethnic groups.[26]

However, the government of Kaysone Phomvihane, Secretary General of the Pathet Lao, made it clear upon taking power that he would make the unity of the country a priority. He promised that every minority could retain its 'ancestral customs' and that the Party would ensure that all ethnic groups were treated equally. But unlike the early revolutionary positions of the Chinese or Vietnamese, he refused any recognition of nationality or regional autonomy, and defended a polyethnic solidarity in the context of a single and indissoluble Lao nation.[27]

Instead, national unity was proposed, supported by a national culture, the latter being modelled on the Lao-Tai cultural norms (Trankell 1998). This, Kaysone recognized, was only partly because the Lao-Tai formed a majority, but was mostly because they had the highest level of 'cultural development.' "The Lao culture," he said during a speech in 1981 specifically devoted to the ethnic problem, "must be the basic culture shared by all ethnic groups, and it must be a culture that will facilitate exchanges between different groups. The Lao language, written and spoken, must be the common language of the nation and Lao script (the only one accepted) the link between all ethnic groups" (Evans 1999).

But it is not just ethnicity or history that defines the minority status of a group (or defines who are 'indigenous peoples') but also its economic and social condition. However, in the 1990s, when Laos began to develop, all indicators showed that the economic and social gap was widening between lowlanders and highlander minorities (Pholsena 2005). Recognizing this, the Lao government has tried to include ethnic minorities in national development. It was initially a case of economic integration: while wanting to drastically reduce the practice of shifting cultivation, they also tried to move the villagers from a subsistence economy to a market

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[25] In this regard, some non-Buddhist Tai groups can be seen also as "ethnic minorities."
[26] Goudineau (2000). On the politics of ethnic classification in Vietnam, see Masako (2013).
[27] See "Ethnic Affairs" in Stuart-Fox (1986: 130–136).

economy. It was also a project of territorial and social integration: they wanted to reduce the isolation of some villages and give them access to services (health, education, etc.), and they thought they could achieve this through the displacement and relocation of villages to the plains.

It was finally decided to concentrate on cultural integration, with the promotion of a national culture. As I mentioned earlier, it was first a question of promoting the common language, Lao, which was poorly spoken by many mountain peoples (the use of minority languages in education is not allowed by the Ministry of Education) and then, encouraging the creation of a national or regional ethnic folklore (e.g., dancing, singing and crafts). At the same time, many specific cultural practices, essential identity markers for certain ethnic minorities, were openly disparaged, to the point where some villagers gave them up of their own accord; this included religious practices (such as domestic animal sacrifices) or material culture (such as architecture and statues).

Recent Changes in Multi-Ethnicity Discourse

The discourse on multi-ethnicity has not fundamentally changed, but its form has evolved over recent years in Laos. Never before has so much importance been officially given to the cultural heritage of minority groups. Local officials are required to 'present' their local traditions. In addition, increasing numbers of villagers are mobilized to show their own 'ethnic characteristics' in new festivals or on new 'stages,' and foreign experts—who were mistrusted before—are now invited to provide their knowledge of specific groups or to participate in the creation of museums in the provinces.[28]

All the actors I mentioned above—mainly the Lao government, its local officials, the experts and populations involved—are invited to participate in the 'presentation' of the fine traditions of different ethnic minority groups. There is a strong demand for innovation, but in this undertaking, two kinds of paradox emerge.

The first is that the official will to display 'ethnic traditions' is taking place while the livelihoods of many minorities have been suddenly and drastically transformed. The second paradox is that the cultures of different ethnic groups are always presented as a kind of juxtaposition, as if they existed side-by-side—as seen on certain Lao banknotes. However, the reality corresponds less and less to this image due to the territorial reorganization that increases the regrouping of villages and results in completely new situations of inter-ethnic relations everywhere.

It must therefore be recognized that the former basis for the cultural practices of many minorities has largely disappeared. In the past, distinct village cultures could be observed between one group and another, but this has largely been erased over the past fifteen years, in terms of architecture and religious and social organization. Without going into detail, province by province, there is now a standardization in types of habitat, with an incentive to build Lao-type houses. One can also see a reduction in collective rituals in non-Buddhist villages, notably a decline in sacrificial rituals and shamanism.[29] The promotion of the nuclear family as the norm has significantly reduced the multiplicity of forms of social organization that existed in

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[28] See, for instance, *Posters on Ethnic Groups* (2012), within the permanent exhibition of the Phongsaly provincial museum, by Grégoire Schlemmer (IRD) and Karine Pin (GIZ); see also some private initiatives allowed by the government, such as the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Center (TAEC) in Luang Phrabang.
[29] See Sprenger (2006; 2009); Bouté (2011).

the past. This has resulted in the disappearance, in both the north and south, of the longhouses that sheltered extended families or lineages.

In brief, the official exhibition of ethnic diversity is taking place, paradoxically, against a background of accelerated standardization of social and cultural diversity. Of course, in recent years, Lao society as a whole has rapidly evolved as a result of modernization and the growth fuelled by foreign investment. The Lao-Tai groups also experienced significant economic and social change (see Rehbein 2011), but they have not seen their livelihoods and their cultural or religious practices disrupted to the same extent as other groups. Above all, they were not subjected to the same development and resettlement policies that have been implemented for 'ethnic minority' villages, especially in upland areas, which account for about two-thirds of the territory of Laos.

Resettlements and Induced Changes among Inter-Ethnic Groups

Ironically, after surviving the vicissitudes of history for centuries, including contemporary wars, many ethnic groups in Laos now appear to be in an extremely precarious situation, at a time when the country is opening up to faster economic development. In addition, the mountain areas, which are the most familiar places for many of them, are increasingly becoming an important factor in development, as it is here that the two main sources of the country's wealth are located: forests and hydroelectric power. The construction of large dams and the protection of forests, or the control of their exploitation, regularly led to conflicts with ethnic minorities over the occupation of space, especially for those still practicing shifting cultivation in the uplands. Since the beginning of the 1990s, a solution has been adopted that calls for the permanent resettlement of mountain minorities in the plains, or close to main roads, recalling both some former migration dynamics and the forced displacement that occurred during the war years (cf. Barber 1979; Taillard 1989).

The Minister of Justice, quoted earlier, acknowledged that, "the relocation policy could affect the traditional livelihoods," but it was nevertheless, "a crucial component of the poverty reduction programmes." Unfortunately, since 1997, and the publication of the collective report I led and edited (see *supra*) (Cf. Goudineau 1997), there has been no new and systematic national survey on the social and cultural impact of the resettlements of displaced villages. Still, many studies have largely confirmed the findings and concerns of this first report, notably studies on some district resettlements or provincial internal migrations by Olivier Évrard, Steve Daviau, Ian Baird and Bruce Shoemaker, and Peter Vandergeest.[30] At that time, my aim, with the help of my team, had been to document the significant wave of relocations that had occurred in the mid-1990s from mountain villages into valleys. Although it was a vast project, it seemed to be poorly organized and did not correspond to any 'resettlement policy' recognized so far by the government. The only ideological justification was a comprehensive sedentarization of the upland communities through the establishment of so-called permanent occupations (*axip khong thi* in Lao).

However, the initial silence at the publication of the report was later followed by the explicit creation of several plans for the reorganization of mountain territories.

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[30] See, after 1997, some localized reports or summarized papers on this issue: Goudineau (2000); Goudineau and Évrard (2004); Vandergeest (2003); Baird and Shoemaker (2007).

First, there were 'focal sites' measures (*Khet choutsoum phatthana* in Lao), and then 'village consolidation' and 'development of village clusters' plans (*Khum phatthana* and *Khum ban phatthana* in Lao). All these village relocation measures were, in principle, dictated by poverty reduction plans as well as by rural development policy. Resettlement had several objectives, mainly concerning increasing access to public education and healthcare facilities, but also aimed at shifting and stabilizing cultivation—and opium eradication in the northern part of the country. Similar relocation measures were also used to move massive numbers of villages in the name of larger provincial or national projects. This is currently the case, for example, in Saravan with road infrastructure projects in Ta Oi District and extensive planting projects in other districts. It is also happening in Xekong Province, where mining and especially the planned Xekong 4 Dam are making it necessary for the Kaleum District town to be moved even now.

Overall, these resettlement and relocation measures have completely reorganized the map of villages in a large part of the country. It is not possible to obtain exact figures, but we can estimate that in many mountainous districts, more than 70 percent of the population has been relocated over the last 15 years, to which must be added the many families who chose to move elsewhere in anticipation of their planned relocation into village clusters. These movements and regroupings of villages have resulted in complicated and sometimes conflicting neighborhood situations, and have created new configurations of inter-ethnic relations in all provinces. To guide the organization of these new 'village clusters,' a large number of civil servants were specifically assigned in the districts. It is therefore a true example of 'social engineering' that was deployed by the Lao government, in the name of economic development for ethnic minorities. This time, the model behind these initiatives is quite clearly a Vietnamese model. Vietnam offers assistance to the Lao PDR through their considerable expertise in the integration of ethnic minorities, particularly in the field of education, with college funding in several provinces reserved for children from families of mountain minorities.

From Ethnic Minorities to Cultural Villages

A Vietnamese model is also the basis for one of the government innovations in the field of social engineering, dealing directly with the issue of a national multi-ethnic culture: that is the 'cultural villages' (*ban vatthanatham* in Lao). This measure has existed since 1994 and, in principle, covers all ethnic groups, including the Lao-Tai, but it has mainly been in the past five years that the State has strongly encouraged the creation of these villages and has particularly targeted districts of mountainous provinces where many ethnic minorities have been displaced and relocated.

The Ministry of Culture, which is also the Ministry of Information and Tourism, stated in 2011 that there were more than 300,000 families and more than 1,500 villages that had received the title of 'models of culture.' The minister announced a target for the period 2012–2014 of naming more than 160 villages and over 30 cluster towns 'models of culture,' and he stated that this should affect more than 120,000 families.[31] Following these instructions, the Xekong provincial government, which has

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[31] *Vientiane Times*, November 9, 2011.

completed the creation of 18 'cultural villages' since 2009, plans to create 24 new villages by 2014.[32]

A brochure was published in 2009 that defines the rules that have to be respected in order to be named a 'cultural village' by district and provincial officials (Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism 2009). It first states that the village does not become 'cultural' unless at least 70 percent of the families in the village can be considered 'cultural families' (*khop khoua vatthanatham* in Lao). To do so, families must comply with the 'five rules,' which are that: they respect the law and the instructions of the village committee; they live in a settled home; they have stable resources; their children must go to school; and that they 'have to reject irrational beliefs' (*tong loplang kan seua theu ngom ngoua sin seung* in Lao).[33] The village itself must meet five conditions and follow five steps to be promoted to a 'cultural village.' Alongside the standards of cleanliness and education, and criteria for well-planned economic development, civic and political conditions are also stipulated, especially the strong leadership of the Party and the ability to provide accurate statistics on the village. Rules to promote and consolidate a proper 'village heritage' are also issued. Among these rules: the village must undertake the eradication of irrational beliefs; it must set up 'an information room' (*ho khao* in Lao) with posters in which the story of the 'liberation' of the country is recounted and the good customs of the community as passed down by the elders are promoted; it should also, if possible, have an artistic action group deciding, among other things, the costumes and traditional dances of the community.

The criteria for attaining model cultural village status relate to the fulfilment of a wide variety of conditions: employment, healthcare, access to education, family unity, legal livelihood, political awareness and community solidarity. But the importance of the cultural transmission of the "good and beautiful traditions" of the community to the family and the village is also stressed, with the capacity to provide visitors with a self-presentation of the genuine culture of the group. The cultural villages are key intermediaries of the State for the normalization and standardization of cultural events across the country.

Many collective rituals are thus abandoned in these model villages and are replaced by village festivals inspired by Lao culture. This is particularly the case for the New Year, where alongside Phimai Lao or the Hmong New Year, each ethnic group is encouraged to organize its own equivalent New Year festival to replace various ancient rituals. Hence, there is 'Boun Greh' for the Khmu, or 'Boun Vel' (literally 'village festival' in a mix of Lao and Katuic language) for the Kantu/Katu and the Ngé (Ngkriang), but buffalo sacrifices that were previously at the heart of rituals are banned.[34]

Model villages are to be an example to other surrounding villages, but they do more than that: they establish new standards that will be disseminated within the ethnic group to which they belong as 'true' tradition. Fifteen years ago, no Kantu/Katu or Ngé could say what a 'Boun Vel' was, and many Khmu did not practice 'Boun Greh,' but today people who are not aware of them are regarded as not knowing 'their'

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[32] *Le Rénovateur*, April 2, 2012.

[33] See also the Governor of Xekong province's statement, according to which one of the obstacles to the development of the province is the continuing influence of ancient beliefs on uneducated populations (*Le Rénovateur*, April 2, 2012).

[34] On Boun Greh, see Petit (2013). Katu and Ngé (Ngkriang) examples are from my own observations on the field.

traditions. In today's Laos, the 'cultural villages' are definitely at the heart of the reinvention of tradition, and villagers belonging to them are involved in the staging of multi-ethnic culture that takes place in the provinces for tourists or during major national festivals.

Representations of the multi-ethnic Lao are organized and 'folklorized' by committees of civil servants from the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism, from the central level to the districts. For a long time, these civil servants have chiefly organized singing and dancing competitions between ethnic groups at the local level. They were also largely responsible for the creation of texts and choreographies that were supposed to be representative of a particular group. On television, or when entertaining foreign VIPs, it was often the dancers from the National School who were performing these so-called ethnic dances, whatever their ethnicity. However—as in the field of Lao culture—in recent years the State has dramatically increased 'multi-ethnic' cultural innovations, and it relies primarily on members of artistic committees in cultural villages.

These innovations have become necessary as it has become clear that the competitions or performances of songs and dances bored both local people and tourists, especially tourists from neighbouring countries, particularly the Thai and Chinese, who all have similar 'ethnic' entertainment. Now, new presentations of multi-ethnicity can be seen everywhere in Laos, especially during major festivals; for example, at the That Luang parade, the Vat Phou festival or at the Elephant festival in Xayaboury, which also became "The festival of the eight ethnic groups" in 2013: Lao, Tai Dam, Lue, Hmong, Khmu, Phrai, Nyuan and Iu Mien.[35]

Figure 1: Image of Xekong Post (*photo: Y. Goudineau*)

In these multi-ethnic presentations, each group must appear perfectly unique, and there has been an escalation in the 'folklorization' and exoticism of the supposed ethnic traditions to reinforce this distinctiveness. In the Vat Phou festival, southern minorities are each presented wearing different ethnic clothes or headdresses, some of which are highly improbable and have attributes that are more or less warrior-like, depending on the group. The Ta Oi, Katu, Alak and Ngé are therefore highly differentiated, whereas, as I have mentioned, they are in a kind of cultural continuum, making this dissimilarity of clothing or anything else a product of pure fantasy. However, the reality was that their villages had quite different characteristics in terms of social organization—that was their real difference—and these differences have largely been erased due to the village relocations.

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[35] *Le Rénovateur*, February 18, 2013.

The Lak Muang of Xekong (cf. Figure 1) is an impressive illustration of the positioning of national multi-ethnic culture under the guidance of the Lao culture, which is especially impressive in a province historically devoted to Austro-Asiatic minorities where ethnic Lao account for less than 2 percent of the population.

The bizarre monument installed at the town entrance is called the '*Xouan Lak Muang Xekong*'—the garden of the Lak Muang of Xekong. At the end of the garden is the new central pillar of Xekong, and all the ethnic groups are lined up on each side—as if they are a guard of honour at the Lak Muang, and as a sign of respect and submission. Each group is represented by a couple, who have distinctive differences in their costumes and, for some, warrior-like accessories. On the sides, assorted sculptures are intended to depict the specific ways of life of the different ethnic groups.

Figures 2 and 3: Line of ethnic groups and a couple, in this case the Talieng (Triang) (*photo: Y. Goudineau*)

A small booklet has been published by the provincial government to explain the significance of the monument.[36] It says that the Lak Muang is the center of the city and the territory, and that it unites all ethnic groups and that at the same time it is a concentration of all the sacrificial posts that can be found in the villages. As such, it is more powerful than all the posts put together. The implication seems to be that it protects all the villagers who no longer need to practice sacrifices and bad customs. The three circles at the top of the Lak Muang represent the *Tripitaka*, while the three baskets (Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha), and the three stripes at the base represent weaving, which is one of the good customs of ethnic groups. The new Lak Muang, like the one in Vientiane, was consecrated by monks at its inauguration.

Conclusions

If the State appears to be primarily responsible for this invention of a multi-ethnic national culture, we must nevertheless consider whether alternatives to its initiatives exist, and what means of expression they may have in Lao PDR. There are

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[36] *Xouan Lak Muang, khweng Xekong*, 2012. I thank Vatthana Pholsena for passing it on to me.

two issues we have to address in this regard: what is the margin of agency or self-presentation of the ethnic groups themselves, and what role can experts play, especially those of us who are here today, even if we represent very different approaches?

Regarding the ethnic groups themselves, they certainly do not all have the same capacity for self-presentation. Some groups have the means to offer alternative discourses to the presentation of their culture initiated by the State, while others do not. For a long time, the populations of a few thousand people among whom I worked in Saravan or Xekong had no specific discourse as to what their tradition as an ethnic group would be. Their culture essentially remains a 'village culture.' They can explain what has changed in recent years; they can approve it or bitterly regret it. Some villages or families may try to refuse certain changes in their livelihood, or even decide to continue to practice 'bad customs' such as sacrificial rituals. Some may therefore operate locally and have some agency, but it is very limited.

They do not have a 'set' of standards or values to hold up against those of 'cultural villages'—especially since their only links to the outside are relatives in the army or in local government, who are therefore part of the State apparatus and generally defend the official line of thought. Moreover, many of the villages in which I worked in the 1990s did not have a sense of 'ethnic' community. People were first and foremost from a particular village. 'We were taught that we were Katu,' some villagers told me with amazement, who thought that the Katu were people living in Vietnam. Given these conditions, until recently, the villagers had no clear discourse of the self-presentation of their supposed ethnic group.

In contrast, if one considers the Hmong, the picture is completely different. I am not an expert on Hmong culture, and there are many with greater knowledge on this subject, but it is clear that the ability of self-presentation and discourse as an alternative to the presentation of the Lao government on Hmong culture is almost limitless. The Hmong are a large ethnic group in Laos that has the political means to negotiate, even to be controversial. In addition, they have powerful communication links abroad, in the media and in academic circles. They can therefore challenge, at least to some degree, the Lao State discourse with strong addresses regarding their community values, and they have many experts to produce articulate speeches about their culture. The two cases serve to demonstrate that groups have more room to negotiate with the State about the presentation or invention of their culture if they are less remote and involved in cross-border relationships, or are linked to diasporas.

But what about the experts who are also involved in the invention of multi-ethnic culture through their work? What use that can be made of them? Again, the range of experts is wide, even if some Christian organizations or indigenous NGOs, very instrumental elsewhere in the making of cultural communities, are not allowed to work in Lao PDR, or are under strict control. Still—generally speaking—the experts are divided between the two sides, or two aspects of multi-ethnicity: those interested in ethnic diversity as cultural multiplicity, and those who are mainly concerned with the actual management of inter-ethnicity in Laos, and its social and economic effects.

These are the two main approaches among researchers. On the one hand, an approach that can be called 'culturalist': an approach that seeks to highlight the cultural specificities of particular ethnic groups, either by studying certain musical, literary or artistic traditions, or by asking what it means to be Khmu, Hmong, Pacoh, etc., sometimes at the risk of essentializing ethnic cultures. There is another approach, which could be called 'localist,' which focuses on 'situations' and their history. It

includes, for example, analyzing how certain projects, policies or territorial dynamics affect populations, and therefore have consequences on ethnicity and inter-ethnicity. These two approaches can, moreover, be complementary, as both sides of the multi-ethnicity interact with each other. The State presentation of multi-ethnic culture tends to favor, but only to a certain extent, the culturalist approach, and to be wary of localist approaches.

Things are currently changing, as many provinces or districts wish to assert their identities and want to exhibit local multi-ethnic cultures that could be identified as their own. Here, we are dealing with a kind of 'localist' perspective from different provinces that is often linked to the building of new museums, or the renovation of old ones. The idea is usually to illustrate the culture and the history of the province as a whole. Foreign experts are increasingly invited to participate in this staging. Sometimes they successfully enlarge the perspective and add information on the cultural history of the minorities and local inter-ethnic relationships. But the question of who these local museums are actually intended for remains. Tourists? Local civil servants? Schoolchildren? And an even more crucial issue is whether the villagers themselves will be able to take them over at one point—either to criticize them if they do not think they relate to them in an appropriate way—or on the contrary, to find elements of their past history there—elements of memory for themselves.

In 1995, when the village of Kandon, today a preeminent 'cultural village' in Xekong, moved from Kaleum District to a new location three days away on foot, I followed the villagers to their new site. I then came back a little later to distribute photos of the move and of their old village. They immediately posted these pictures at the entrance to the new site. They were strongly reprimanded for this by the local officials from the Department of Culture, who maintained that it was not good to cultivate a 'negative nostalgia' that would be anti-progressive in the new village. To this day, the villagers have to hide the pictures I gave them.

Today, these same authorities from the Department of Information, Culture and Tourism are asking me to give them the photos for the New Provincial Museum in Xekong. For the time being, I have not refused, but I have not received any answer to my only question: For what?

Acknowledgements

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