

Chapter 4

IMITATIONS OF BUDDHIST STATECRAFT

The Patronage of Lao Buddhism and the Reconstruction of Relic Shrines and Temples in Colonial French Indochina

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When in 2004 I carried out fieldwork in the Lao capital of Vientiane, the temple to which I was assigned for my research and ordination as a monk was one that is located close to the That Luang, the largest and most important Buddhist relic shrine (*stūpa*) of Laos. None of the 60 monks and novices knew that this *stūpa*, and many other temples, had been rebuilt by the French colonial regime between 1893 and 1940. When I mentioned this one evening while we were having a chat on the balcony of the temple, some of the monks were utterly astonished. How could the That Luang, today the most sacred national symbol of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and some of the major temples of Vientiane be a 'product' of colonialism? What some of my friends and fellow monks knew was the fact that when Laos became a French colony in 1893, it

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was the last country to be added to an entity to be called Indochina. Functioning as a buffer state between the expanding British Empire and the Kingdom of Siam, it remained the most underdeveloped colony—a 'colonial backwater', as Geoffrey Gunn (1990) called it.[1] However, the Communist Revolution of 1975 and the socialist writing of history had already eradicated or rewritten other histories. Most Lao did not know that after the almost complete demolition of Vientiane in 1827 by the Siamese, many temples and Buddhist monuments were reconstructed under the supervision of colonial officials.

Although studies of colonialism have emphasized the heterogeneous, localized nature of colonialism (N. Thomas 1994: 51) and its fractured and at times rather limited impact on the colonized (Stoler 1989: 135), French colonial politics in Indochina did have a coherent agenda that produced clear effects, especially in the domains of architecture and religion. Cambodia and Laos were subject to quite similar colonial politics rooted, for example, in the fact that both had Theravāda Buddhist kingship and statecraft as forms of indigenous political organization. For French colonialism, indirect rule was considered a "unique form of rule far superior to the colonial regimes of Britain and other Western powers because of its supported basis in spirituality, and its supposed responsiveness to the culture and worldview of native peoples" (Bayly 2000: 595). By 1896, the French had succeeded in establishing regimes of indirect rule in both countries and started to sponsor and partially revive Buddhist kingship by restructuring and revitalizing monastic education and by renovating Buddhist temples and monuments. Creating knowledge about the Buddhist cultures of the dominant ethnic groups, the ethnic Lao and the Khmer,[2] was of crucial importance in this context, and the French School of the Far East—the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO)—had an important role in this field. Over several decades, its members collected, classified, and analyzed the histories, artistic productions, religions, literature, and architecture of Laos and Cambodia. From early on, the EFEO put a special emphasis on architecture and archaeology. Ideas about the built environment in general, especially in the form of Buddhist temples and monuments, remained a crucial focus of French colonial rule (Cooper 2001: 29). This was of primary importance for Vientiane—the colonial capital of Laos—because the city was rebuilt almost from the ground up after the 1827 attack by Siam.

This chapter examines the colonial politics of 'rebuilding' Buddhism in Laos in the period between 1893 and 1940. I will here explore the larger project of the colonial patronage of religion—visible in the textual, institutional, and educational aspects of Buddhism—by examining the material rebuilding of Buddhism and the revival and transformation of state rituals in these reconstructed places. Focusing on the reconstruction of major temples and that of the important Buddhist relic shrine of Laos—the That Luang in Vientiane—the chapter explores the motivations and strategies for this endeavor. I propose

that in the context of French colonialism, indirect rule lends itself to political strategies that are essentially of a mimetic and imitative nature. By employing (among others) Michael Taussig's (1993: xiii) account of mimesis, in which the "wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original," I propose that the French colonial system and its ideology of 'association' based its concepts of rule and power on imitative processes, or a variant of what in the introduction of this book is described as "mimetic governmentality" (see also Ladwig 2011; Roque 2015).[3] In contrast to some of the works on mimesis outlined in the introduction to this collection that emphasize the resistance aspects of mimesis, I suggest that French efforts to 're-materialize' Lao Buddhism, act as its protector, and revitalize its rites can be understood as a governmental strategy to stabilize rule. This established an "order of ceremonial government" (Roque 2009: 40), which in Foucault's (2009: 108) various approaches to governmentality is absent due to a stronger focus on modern techniques of governing through apparatuses of security, population management, and so forth. Finally, by discussing the fragmentary and partial nature of imitative processes (Lempert 2014), I want to argue that the 'magic' effects of mimetic procedures in colonial rule also become visible in what Ann Stoler (2004: 5) has called "fashioning techniques of affective control." By linking this to Danilyn Rutherford's (2009) discussion about sympathy and empire building, I argue that imitation can produce affective communities that—despite inequalities with regard to power relations—at least temporarily stabilize colonial rule.

The EFEO, French Colonialism, and the Built Environment

When Lao King Setthathilat officially established Vientiane as the capital of the Kingdom of Lan Xang in 1563, the city quickly became a regional center of religious learning, with a multitude of temples and Buddhist educational facilities (Askew 2007: 48–50). The Dutch merchant Gerrit van Wuysthoff, one of the first European visitors to Vientiane, included an impressive description of the city in his travel records of 1641 and 1642 (see Wuysthoff 1987). Vientiane became an independent kingdom in 1707, but in 1779 it was conquered by the Siamese and became a vassal state, paying tribute to Siam. A few decades later, in 1827, the Siamese completely devastated Vientiane in order to crush the uprising of the Lao vassal King Anouvong, who was to be the last king of Vientiane. Therefore, the first French missions between 1866 and 1868 found Vientiane in ruins (Garnier 1885: 286). Sophie Clément-Charpentier (2008: 288) states that "its political and administrative structures had in large part disappeared … Hence, the city of Vientiane was nothing but a field of ruins in 1828."[4] As a result of the Franco-Siamese treatise of 1893, the city and the

territory on the left bank side of the Mekong were put under the control of France, and due to strategic and commercial reasons, Vientiane was chosen as the capital of the Lao part of French Indochina. As opposed to Saigon, where in the 1860s spatial planning was driven by fears of uprisings and the old city was largely destroyed (Cooper 2001: 44), in Laos a 'new' city was built that was modern yet also 'traditional'.

Colonial authorities clearly articulated the political implications of this decision to rebuild Vientiane. The résident supérieur, Colonel Tourinier, stated in 1899: "I do not hesitate to affirm that the day Vientiane will become the new capital of Laos, we can count on the absolute fidelity of the Lao people" (cited in Clément-Charpentier 2008: 294). Rebuilding Vientiane and its monuments was therefore considered of prime importance. Ernst Outray, résident supérieur in Laos in 1911, informed Louis Finot, then the EFEO president, of a letter he had written to the gouverneur général of Indochina about "the unfortunate condition in which the most beautiful historical monuments are currently to be found."[5] Henri Parmentier, one of the first architects to work in Laos for the EFEO, created several reports on the general situation of the built environment of Vientiane. Parmentier (1912: 188) stated that, according to oral history accounts, the city had a multiplicity of monasteries (*vat*) before its destruction, but now only the ruins of about 20 to 25 temples could be discovered. Most of the work of the EFEO concentrated on Cambodia and the Angkor Wat temple complex. Replicas of the latter also featured prominently in various French colonial exhibitions and were thereby regarded as a part of French heritage (*patrimoine*).[6] Nevertheless, the interest in Angkor also fueled research on Laos, and the EFEO's missions led to a mapping of the architectural heritage of Lao Buddhist civilization. In 1912, Parmentier sent a report to the EFEO director, listing monuments to be renovated (see Lorrillard 2001: 2).[7]

The emphasis on the ruins of temples and other Buddhist architectural monuments is a recurrent theme of the reports and exchanges between colonial administrators and the staff of the EFEO. In order to pursue their active program of remaking the cultural heritage of Laos, the EFEO employed architects alongside Indologists and archaeologists. The Public Buildings Department and the EFEO primarily hired architects from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, where 15 of the 16 architects who worked for the EFEO had been trained (Singaravélou 1999: 115). Why this emphasis on the built environment in French colonialism, and why such an expertise of architectural knowledge combined with studies of history and culture? Wright (1987: 299) has argued that in French colonial governmentality "political problems were defined in cultural terms that gave urban planning and architectural design a central importance in consolidating political power." Metcalf (2002) has suggested something very similar for British colonialism in India, perhaps hinting at a pan-European desire to restore Oriental architecture in the context of colonial rule.[8] With this emphasis on

culture and architecture in the French colonial project, the EFEO became a key instrument in the pursuit of knowledge about the civilizations of Indochina.

Although members of the EFEO certainly had their own diverse agendas, and some—like Paul Mus—later revealed a strong engagement with anti-colonial sentiments (Bayly 2009; Chandler 2009), on an institutional level the EFEO closely cooperated with other units of the colonial administration,[9] paying employee salaries out of the colonial budget of French Indochina. Louis Finot's (1908) opening speech at the Collège de France exemplified this ambivalence. The long-time chief of EFEO Indochina lectured on 'native policy': "It is on the observation of those different facts, not on abstract principles, sentimental effusions, and humanitarian sentences, that a real native policy can be shaped, which must be firm, wise, and methodical, and can ensure the future of our colonies" (ibid.: 222). However, Finot also critiqued a colonial policy that was based on earlier ideas of 'assimilation' and demanded a shift to the doctrine of 'association'.

Imitating Buddhist Kings: The Revival and Patronage of Buddhism

This 'regeneration' and 'protection' of Indochinese civilization had not only a strong focus on archaeology and the reconstruction of religious monuments. In the context of the colonial politics of association, architecture was rarely seen in an isolated manner; more importantly, it was linked to the recreation and reinvention of institutions and rites that sustained traditional concepts of rule. French colonial politics were based on "the realization that a strong type of cooperation between colonial and native was imperative. This would be achieved … through the retention of native institutions" (Betts 1961: 107). Although the shift in colonial policy was rather tentative and linked to complex power games in the metropolis (M. Thomas 2005: 54–60), the move from assimilation to association in colonial rule "called for the preservation of distinctive local cultures. Including tribal councils and historic monuments, and they [colonial officials] believed that this respect, when combined with social services like schools and hospitals, could counter resistance far more effectively than military strength" (Wright 1987: 299).

Therefore, the colonial project to sponsor, sustain, and protect indigenous concepts of rule was also embedded in imitating and adapting rites of rule and statehood in Indochina. A good example is the renovation of Wat Si Saket, constructed from 1818 to 1824 under the reign of King Anouvong, where rites of statehood were performed before the city's destruction. In cooperation with Lao Prince Phetsarath, EFEO architects Charles Batteur and Léon Fombertaux oversaw the reconstruction of the temple and the impressive building of the Buddhist library (Lorrillard 2001: 4). The oath of allegiance to the Lao king,



Figure 4.1: Wat Si Saket during its renovation in 1929. Photograph by EFEO architect Charles Batteur. EFEO LAO22434, © École française d'Extrême-Orient

performed twice annually by Lao notables in a ceremony held at Wat Si Saket, was revived by the French, but now local rulers pledged alliance to France via the Buddhist King Sisavangvong (Evans 2002: 69).[10] The latter was a lifelong supporter of French rule, first as a king of Luang Prabang (1904–1946) and later as king of Laos (1946–1959). French indirect rule strongly relied on indigenous intermediaries for maintaining authority (M. Thomas 2005: 54), and what developed was a ceremonial form of governing that David Cannadine (2002: 122) describes for the British Empire: "Chivalry and ceremony, monarchy and majesty, were the means by which this vast world was brought together, interconnected, unified and sacralized."

This was by no means a unique phenomenon of colonialism in Indochina, but part and parcel of the colonial politics of association in most parts of the French Empire. Concerning the forms of political organization and colonial architecture in Morocco, the French résident supérieur in 1912 remarked that one of the tasks of the colonial regime was "reviving around the sultan the ancient traditions and old ceremonies of the court … as well as building and maintaining opulent palaces for the ruler" (see Wright 1987: 292). Exactly the same strategy was taken up in colonial Indochina. In addition to the oath of loyalty, the Khmer monarchy benefited from having a palace built in Phnom Penh (Chandler 1993: 150), and Lao King Sisavangvong moved into a new palace in Luang Prabang that mixed French Beaux-Art and Lao-style elements.

Some of the architects and archaeologists responsible for redesigning Vientiane and its religious monuments also worked in North Africa and were therefore acquainted with these policies in other parts of the French Empire.[11] In Laos, the colonial politics of association even tapped into the economy of Buddhist donations. Due to a shortage of resources, the Lao Buddhist believers were successfully animated to get involved in the renovation of Wat Si Saket: "The credit given for this restoration from the local budget was found to be insufficient; the religious community … was kindly contributing 1000 piastres" (Chronique 1930: 583).

Knowing that the *saṅgha* (monastic order) had a crucial role in legitimizing the power of Buddhist rulers, EFEO scholars more oriented toward historical and textual studies of Buddhism also got heavily involved in reviving Buddhism beyond the narrow field of architecture and restoration. In order to build an Indochinese Buddhism and counter Siamese dominance, these measures primarily focused on the educational facilities of the Lao and Khmer Buddhist *saṅgha*. In order to put the colonial politics of association into practice and contribute to a retention of native institutions, it was deemed necessary to set up new institutions of training for Buddhist monks in both Cambodia and Laos, a process that has been well documented by recent research.[12] On 24 November 1914, the Ecole de Pali was founded by royal decree in Phnom Penh and renamed Ecole Supérieure de Pali in 1922. Its aim was to develop "the theological studies of Buddhism through a rational teaching of the sacred languages Pali and Sanskrit" (Anon. 1922: 424). This language training was given to the monks personally by none other than Louis Finot (ibid.: 440). Lao branches of this institute were to be officially founded in 1931, reflecting the peripheral position of Laos in the colonial project. The French introduced new curricula based on the study of selected and appropriate texts, awarded certificates to monks, and printed Buddhist books.[13] Moreover, future Lao intellectuals and nationalists like Maha Sila Viravong got part of their training in these institutes and worked there under the auspices of important figures such as Prince Phetsarath.[14] These efforts were directed at a general revitalization of Buddhism, mixing the local rulers' traditional patronage of Buddhism with practical considerations deriving from colonial governmentality. An anonymous note from 1928 concerning the resurgence of Buddhism in Laos states that "this regulation has the aim of revitalizing the cults that have fallen out of use, to control monks and novices, to conserve temples, and to develop temple schools that are the basis of primary education for the natives."[15] The control of persons and the recreation of rites, architectural conservation, schooling, and teaching were thereby integrated into a larger project of reviving Buddhist culture and local patterns of rule under the auspices of the French colonial regime.

The French were also acutely aware of the fact that Buddhism had anti-colonial and radical potential. Although the cooperation between the EFEO, local

elites, and Buddhist monks in the implementation of these new religious policies was generally successful, the Buddhist Institute, opened in 1931 in Phnom Penh, nevertheless became the site of anti-colonial activities. Lao monks such as Maha Buakham Voraphet (1909–1996) and Maha Khamphan Virachit (1914–1995) participated in those activities, but their influence in the Lao monastic order became stronger only after the end of the colonial regime. Perhaps more importantly, in the south of Laos, messianic Buddhist movements led by charismatic 'men of merit' troubled the French for almost 30 years (Ladwig 2014).[16]

I think what we are encountering here is essentially a modern, colonial version of two interrelated processes that have been of prime importance throughout the history of Theravāda Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia. First, in Theravāda theories of statecraft, rulers are always dependent on the monastic order and vice versa. The power of Buddhist kings is in need of legitimation, and worldly power is sanctified or sanctioned by the *saṅgha*. Ideal kings therefore sponsor the *saṅgha* (or certain sections of it), for instance, by promoting monastic education or by building and renovating monastic properties. Studies of Theravāda Buddhism have extensively discussed this theme.[17] Suksamran (1993: 103) neatly summarizes this interdependence between ruler and *saṅgha*:

> The state, represented by the ruler, upholds Buddhism by providing support and protection for the sangha, in effect acts as a law enforcement officer with regard to the monastic code of discipline, the vinaya. The sangha, in co-operation with the ruler and sometimes advising him, provides a symbol of morality, integrity and legitimacy for the state. In their relationship with the people, sangha members act as teachers, religious guides, and mentors, and provide the model of moral conduct which the people regard as an ideal to be striven for.

Secondly, Buddhist rulers are often involved in what has been called the 'purification of the *saṅgha*'. This usually entails a variety of measures that are meant to secure the purity of Buddhist teachings, including redacting and copying manuscripts and more strictly enforcing the code of conduct for monks (Pali: *vinaya*), activities that are inextricably linked to each other. The goal of these purifications is also to secure the *saṅgha*'s loyalty toward the ruler.[18] One could say that the Buddhist Institute engaged in the simultaneous sponsorship and control of Buddhism by taking over most of the tasks described above, and that in this process EFEO specialists of Buddhism, like Louis Finot, directly supervised Lao and Khmer monks.

What becomes apparent here is the fact that concepts of indirect rule lend themselves to processes of mimesis. Mimesis is viewed by Iain Walker (2005: 195) as "the appropriation of the power of the other and as a mechanism for social change"; in this sense, it is a mediating process that involves "innovative social adaptation at its most efficient." However, appropriating the power

to support and purify Buddhism without completely eliminating the role of Buddhist kings can only ever be a selective and partial process. Although the selection of what is to be imitated has to resonate with local understandings of power, it is not necessary to imitate an object or process in full in order to make it efficacious: pieces and fragments can be sufficient "to get hold of something by means of its likeness" (Taussig 1993: 21).[19] While Western theorizations of mimesis often represent it as a mere act of imitation,[20] some recent anthropological (Walker 2005: 192) and older sociological (Tarde 1903) approaches stress the incorporation of new influences through processes of imitation.[21] Consequently, the French not only copied the patronage of Buddhist rulers, but also introduced new elements: the subjects taught in monasteries were to be changed, monks were to receive passports, and a 'scientific' study of Buddhism was supposed to be advanced.

The Power of Buddhist Relics: The Renovation of the That Luang

Throughout the history of Buddhism, Buddhist kings have exemplified their power through acts of construction. Large relic shrines, often said to contain relics of the Buddha himself, were among the most important monuments that kings either built or enlarged during their reigns. The That Luang in Vientiane is just such a relic shrine, and it was also the object of extensive French renovations during the same phase in which the Buddhist Institute was opened in Laos. What Louis Finot and many other EFEO researchers did for the history, textual traditions, and monastic instruction of Lao Buddhism[22] was also applied to a specific part of the architectural heritage of Laos, namely, Buddhist relic shrines. As mentioned before, in French Orientalist discourse, the architectural monuments of Buddhism were intricately linked to the civilizational traditions and forms of social life. For scholars such as Paul Mus and many other EFEO employees, "everything in the built environment, from the most rudimentary stone altar-shrines to the region's great stone-built monuments, was to be understood as a living and accessible materialization of the social" (Bayly 2000: 607). Paul Mus, who published the first in-depth analysis of Borobudur, a large *stūpa* in Indonesia, actually took indigenous concepts seriously. Accordingly, Mus (1935: 248) described the Borobudur *stūpa* as "a materialization of the cosmic law" and as an architectural monument that "makes the *dhamma* visible." Ahead of his time, Mus understood that according to emic conceptions throughout the Buddhist world, relics emanate the teachings of the Buddha (*dhamma*): they have magical properties (*saksit* in Thai and Lao) and are considered to be 'living beings' that are essential for governing through ritual.[23]

While Mus was writing his massive study on Borobudur, the EFEO in Vientiane made plans to renovate the most important *stūpa* of Laos, the That Luang.

Parmentier (1912: 190) recalled its similitude to Borobudur, the *stūpa* studied later by Mus in Indonesia: "About five kilometers from the city center there is the That Luang, a building with real character, which, through its layout and concentric galleries, bears some resemblance to Borobudur." After a number of surveys had been conducted in the late 1920s, it was "found to be the only important monument of this type in the region of Vientiane."[24] The large relic shrine, surrounded by a number of temples and having a square base about 70 meters wide, is labeled *lokacūḷāmaṇi stūpa* in chronicles and epigraphic sources, which signifies 'the *stūpa* of the diadem'. Although epigraphic sources analyzed by Michel Lorrillard (2003: 316–317) describe it as a *jinaguyhadhātu* (hidden or secret relic), it is widely believed that it is a relic of the Buddha himself. Moreover, the mythical history of the relic—traveling from Sri Lanka to the Lao kingdom—builds a bridge to King Asoka, the ideal Buddhist king who used relics to spread the *dhamma*.[25]

Partial restorations of the tower of the *stūpa* had been carried out earlier, but they were later criticized by several EFEO scholars.[26] As the monument was a ruin, there was actually no 'original' that could be faithfully restored and thereby copied. The EFEO relied largely on the rather fantastic images of a landscape painter, Louis Delaporte (1842–1925), who made a sketch of a more complete That Luang during the first Mekong expedition from 1866 to 1868.[27] Before the new restorations were started, Parmentier made a visit to the That Luang in 1928 in order to examine the situation and the possible renovation of the cloister. Beyond the technical details, the revitalization of cults around the monument was also being considered. As Parmentier put it: "This undertaking perhaps goes beyond the limits of the capacities of the institute, but could be justified by local necessities. The monument is the center of important festivals and pilgrimages … Undertaking this work would be a good move in indigenous politics [*bonne politique indigène*] and presents no archaeological difficulties."[28]

Like his colleague Paul Mus, Parmentier was certainly aware of the significance that this *stūpa* held for the Lao. But what did Parmentier really mean by the phrase *bonne politique indigène*? *Stūpas* have been at the center of Buddhist kingdoms, presenting an *axis mundi* and a cosmology in stone essential for claiming political power. Describing the cult of relics in South and Southeast Asia, Anne Blackburn (2010: 318–319) argues that "relic monuments were at the heart of local moves to employ centers of rituals and remembrance within a highly charged cosmic and regional map … In the formation of new polities and/or new dynasties, relics were drawn into the physical landscape." It thus comes as no surprise that quite quickly after the decision to make Vientiane the capital of the Lao protectorate, the aforementioned renovation of the That Luang was first begun. The old and new capital needed a ritual relic center.

Progress was slow until more concerted renovation work on the That Luang was undertaken. This finally started on 1 June 1930, five days after the arrival

of Léon Fombertaux (1871–1936), who supervised the restoration of the *stūpa* until 1935. The extensive archaeological documentation exemplifies how the That Luang was systematically taken apart, photographed, and analyzed. During this process, Fombertaux discovered a 'primitive *stūpa*' inside the construction, revealing the original form of the pagoda hidden under the present one.[29]

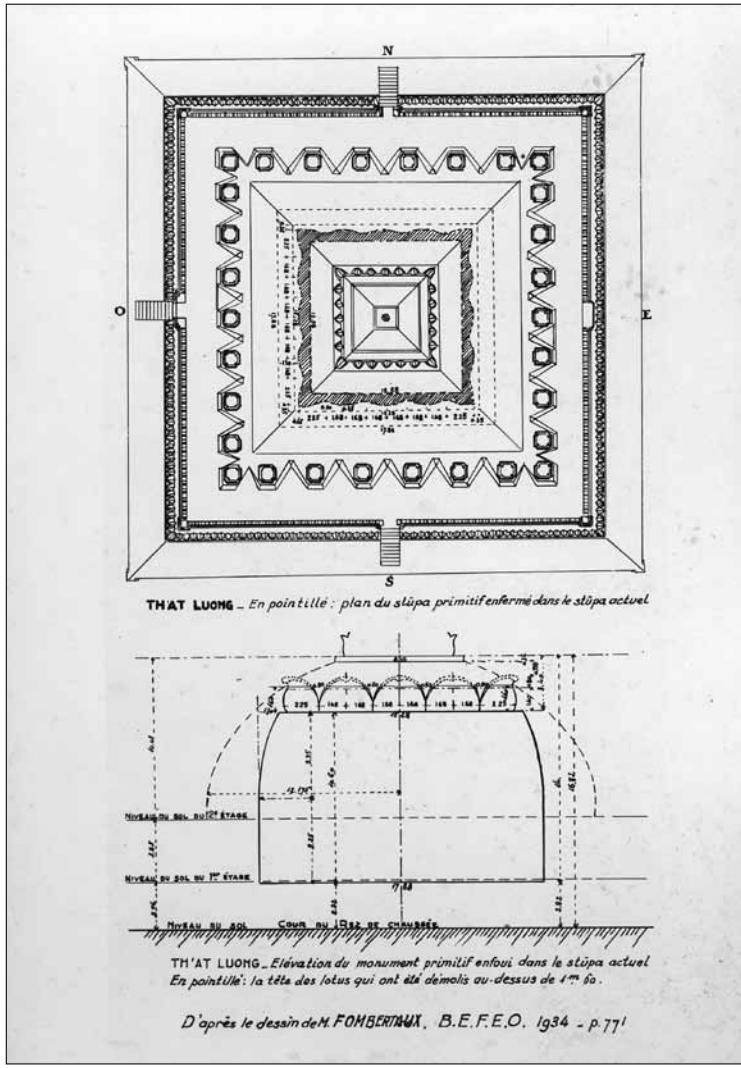


Figure 4.2: Plan of the That Luang *stūpa* originally drawn by Léon Fombertaux. The image shows the smaller, 'hidden' *stūpa* that was discovered during excavation work, but also reveals the 'cosmological layout' typical for many *stūpas*. EFEO LAO21998 © École française d'Extrême-Orient

In historical terms, the aim was to archaeologically approach the original as closely as possible. Although the renovation projects seemed to have run smoothly, the ruin presented some challenges, judging from the available archival material: the vegetation had already sunk its roots into some of the walls of the *stūpa*, and the temples that are close to the That Luang were also in ruins. The résident supérieur, Prince Phetsarath, and the highest monk of Vientiane agreed that a partial demolition was necessary in order to rescue them.[30] Nevertheless, most of the work in progress satisfied the officials, and when the résident supérieur of Laos, Yves Chatel, made an official visit to the site on 22 May 1931, his comments were noted: "He is very interested in the already undertaken works and on this occasion also gave expression to his wish that the other archaeological works of the EFEO continue."[31]

EFEO employees and colonial administrators not only cared about the aesthetics of the monument, but also sought to recreate its religious character in order to enhance its attractiveness as a site of ritual worship.[32] In a 1935 report by the chief of the archaeological service, we find a positive review of the work that had been accomplished, but the overall design of the area was yet to be finished, as the *stūpa* now stood among the ruins of the temples close by: "We have to bring the ensemble [of temples and ruins] into order for creating a religious character around the *that* in order to avoid the newly renovated monument looking disparate and almost like an anomaly in the

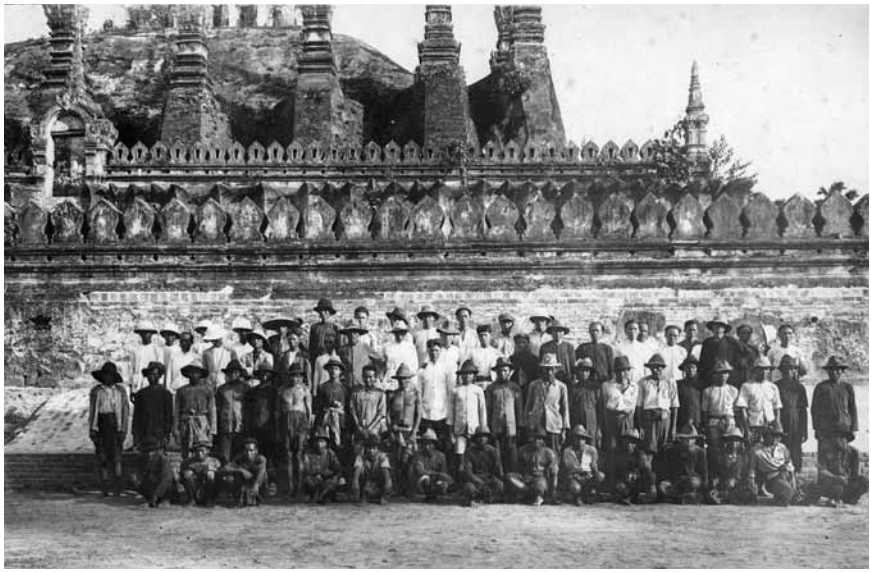


Figure 4.3: Workers employed for the renovation of the That Luang relic shrine, 1931. EFEO LAO22743 © École française d'Extrême-Orient

milieu of the pagodas, which are more or less abandoned and covered by the vegetation around them."[33] In 1935, the governor of Vientiane ordered that another 1,000 piastres should go toward "the consolidation and restoration of the *that*."[34] Restoration work was nearly complete. The That Luang was not the only shrine to be renovated. A number of other carefully chosen monuments that once housed other important libraries or statues became building sites. After the completion of the That Luang project, Henri Marchal, who had previously worked at Angkor, took over the restoration of Wat Phra Kaew. Before being destroyed by the Siamese in 1828, this particular temple had housed the Emerald Buddha, the palladium of the kingdom of Vientiane, which was taken to Bangkok as the spoils of war, never to return to Laos.[35]

As in the case of monastic education and the renewal of kingly rites, I think what we are dealing with here is another layer of mimetic processes that imitate and re-enact activities usually performed by Buddhist rulers. Apart from the fact that renovating and extending already existing *stūpas* was a very common means for rulers to add to their prestige, the cosmological underpinnings inherent in the construction and worship of *stūpas* such as the That Luang are also of interest. The beginnings of Buddhist kingship are linked to relics,[36] and in general Buddhist rulers try to recall Asoka's policy toward Buddhism, reflected in the sponsorship and building of temples and *stūpas*. As outlined in the previous section, this also includes efforts to purify Buddhism and regulate the life of monks through patronage and control. Donald Swearer (2010: 82) neatly traces these measures back to the rule of a renowned ancient Buddhist king: "According to the Theravada chronicles of Southeast Asia, successful rulers … were those who emulated King Asoka. This suggests that the Asokan model had a mimetic potency: to imitate King Asoka legitimated a ruler as a *dhammaraja*. In particular, Buddhist monarchs built edifices, especially stupas, and purified the dhamma and the sangha in self-conscious imitation of King Asoka. By such mimetic repetition, peace and prosperity would be guaranteed in the realm and enable the king to rule as a universal monarch."

Hence, in yearly rites Lao kings also meditated close to the *stūpa*, identifying with King Asoka in order to fill themselves with Buddhist *dhamma* and bring about fertility and prosperity (Reynolds 1969: 82). From this perspective, Buddhist kings have long been engaged in a sort of mimetic repetition of Asoka's pious acts. In the Lao case, one must add another level of repetition, namely, the colonial project of rebuilding and enlarging a relic shrine. To explore this level of interpretation, let us once again return to Swearer's (2010) presentation of *stūpa* worship. He elaborates: "Sponsoring stupa construction was a major activity of these Buddhist monarchs … the cult of relics became a primary expression of Buddhist piety as well as part of Asoka's policy of *using Buddhism as a unifying instrument of imperial power*" (ibid.: 77; emphasis added). The patronage of Buddhism and the restoration of the That Luang can in this

light also be seen as a French colonial strategy to cement imperial rule through Buddhism via the indirect rule of Buddhist kings and rites of statecraft.

In this interpretation, Vientiane was the new capital of Laos as a protectorate, and the French had renovated the *stūpa* and the temples surrounding it in order to create a religious atmosphere, which essentially is another element of Buddhist statecraft and a way of sanctifying a new center of power. Blackburn (2010: 336) maintains that "the installation of such potent traces in a new space, and the construction of royal monastic centers near existing relic or burial sites, drew blessings and magical power into human lives." Renovating the That Luang was a way to rematerialize a small 'Buddhist empire', or a "galactic polity" as Tambiah (1976: 102) has called it. In local cosmology, the rites taking place there produced fertility and prosperity (or 'life') and thereby integrated smaller peripheral polities. Yet at the same time, these polities were integrated into the French Empire. Although French colonial governmentality became much more scientific in the inter-war period by focusing on typical Foucauldian topics such as population, health, and schooling (Dimier 2002), this ritual governing of life through relics is reminiscent of Arthur Hocart's work. Hocart (1970: 35) proposed that ritual is a primordial form of government without offices that aims at the revitalization of life, and that kingship and ritual already constitute "a governing body before there is any governing to do."[37] One could say that in Laos, the poorest and most understaffed colony in Indochina, "colonial government was … the government of ceremonial," as Roque (2009: 68) has said of Timor Leste, another peripheral colony.

However, these interventions also implied changes. Although French colonial rule created an 'overlap' that allowed for mimetic processes to take place and to mediate between different orders, it is evident that differences and modifications (as in the measures discussed above) had to be integrated into these mimetic procedures. The French could not entirely emulate the relic patronage of kings. They introduced their own forms of mimesis, for example, through scientific archaeological studies. The 'raw material' of mimetic processes (buildings, symbols, rites, institutions) undergo transformations since "in passing from one ethnical environment to another the radiation of imitation is refracted … this refraction may be enormous without it leading to any consequence" (Tarde 1903: xxi). One important refraction was the introduction of nationalism and nation building with regard to monuments such as That Luang (Tappe 2008). Søren Ivarsson (2008) has rightly remarked that these renovations played an important role in the formation of Lao nationalism, cutting Lao Buddhism off from Siam and 'nationalizing' in terms of style and history, thereby shaping a novel state imaginary.[38] The question of the original versus the copy might be too restrictive to account for the creativity of imitative acts, as these processes do not "come from just two things called original and copy, but rather from a highly distributed assemblage of signs" (Lempert 2014: 386).

Mimesis, Sympathy, and Colonial Rule

According to the reports and communications, the revitalization of Buddhist cults that was supposed to be brought about by the reconstruction of the That Luang was indeed accomplished. In December 1934, it was reported that "the That Luang festival took place with success from 20–22 November. One particularly had to notice the crowds of monks who came from the bordering provinces and from Siam."[39] The *bonne politique indigène*—mentioned by Henri Parmentier before the building works began—was in this case successful and was ritually enacted. But what were the effects of these colonial building politics and the patronage of Lao Buddhism on a broader level, and what do they reveal about the nature of mimetic processes in the context of colonial rule?

I have already alluded to the ideas and agendas that stood behind this *politique indigène*. The EFEO enacted architectural and cultural projects that were in line with the politics of association. Joseph Marrast (1935: 24) commented on the role of indigenous Indochinese arts in the construction of buildings: "The sympathies of the natives [*indigènes*] are affirmed in our respect for their works and their association with our works. Hence, step by step, one wins the heart of the natives and conquers their sympathy. It is the role of the colonizers to achieve this." How should we understand 'winning hearts' and 'sympathy' in the colonial politics of mimesis?



Figure 4.4: The That Luang festival in 2011. After the colonial period, the top was covered with golden paint. The festival linked to the Buddha's relic has remained the most important Buddhist rite in Laos (photograph © Patrice Ladwig)

Approaches to the anthropology of colonialism and empire have emphasized not only the 'rational' agendas of colonial governmentality à la Foucault, such as population screenings, schooling, and the economy, but also the role played by sentiments and emotions. In this 'anthropology of affect', sentiments are conceptualized as the very "substance" of governing projects (Stoler 2004: 5). Rutherford (2009: 4–5) has recently advanced that empire building also has to be based in a "materialist concept of sympathy" that "tracks the intricate pathways through which encounters with objects and others gives rise to feelings and thoughts." The rematerialization ('objects') and the patronage of Buddhism in the encounter with the French ('others') indeed gave rise to feelings and thoughts, at least on the level of ritual enactment and public discourse. It does not seem unreasonable to speculate that the French scholars and architects of EFEO deliberately played on the link between 'sacredness', the built environment (or what Rutherford calls 'objects'), and sympathy. In archival documents, one often finds estimations of the 'emotional impact' that certain construction projects might have on the Lao, along with an outline of the strategic value of these measures.

The construction of the residence of the résident supérieur on the old grounds of the Chao Anouvong palace of Vientiane in 1902 was already understood to be taking place on 'sacred terrain'. A French colonial officer reported that when talking to Lao officials, they "assured me that the *feelings of the population are with us*" (cited in Clément-Charpentier 2008: 304; emphasis added). After the renovation of the That Luang and of Wat Si Saket and the creation of the Buddhist Institute, these politics of sympathy and empire building became even clearer with respect to the 'emotional impact' they could make on the population. When planning the renovations, Henri Marchal wrote that "the Phra Kaew pagoda is actually connected to the glorious past of the Vientiane kingdom and its period of prosperity. Its reconstruction will make a *profound impression* on the Lao people, and the prestige of France can only be enhanced by this."[40] Concerning the opening of the Buddhist Institute and the library of Wat Si Saket in February 1931, the résident supérieur of Laos reported to the gouverneur généneral of Indochina and the director of political affairs that the rite was attended by several hundred monks, Prince Phetsarath, and a delegate of the king of Luang Prabang, Sisavangvong. He continued: "This ceremony was a considerable event that will *make history in the spirit of the population* of this country … The creation of the Buddhist Institute cannot help but have positive effects for our authority and moral influence in this part of Indochina."[41] The most open statement was made in the same letter by another observer:

> The inauguration of the new Buddhist Institute has drawn a lot of attention among the Lao on both sides of the Mekong river. They have been

> visibly satisfied to participate in these rites, which are for them something new; they were quite surprised that we take such great interest in the free practice of Buddhist cults, in the intellectual education of monks, and in the restoration of old temples ruined by time or the hands of man … It is beyond doubt that these actions have really touched the spirit of the population … On the other hand, we will also draw benefits from this for our authority and our prestige among religious groups. This will also ensure the impact of our political and moral actions. It is in the Buddhist clergy that we find our best allies in the fight against Soviet propaganda and the threats posed by the Communists.[42]

This is probably a very good example of Ann Stoler's notion of 'fashioning techniques of affective control'. Rational colonial governmentality can indeed be based in the emotional effects of rule. In this perspective, "sympathy with the native was more than a symptom or a means of coping with the contradictions of colonial identity; rather, it was an indispensable component of colonial rule" (Rutherford 2009: 21). Moreover, the reference to security questions demonstrates that the politics of association were also driven by the "underlying need to limit popular dissent while keeping administrative costs down" (M. Thomas 2005: 82).

Conclusion

Nicholas Thomas (1994: 195) has critiqued homogenizing accounts of colonialism and has explored the "multiplicity of colonizing projects and the plurality of potential subversions of them." In direct line with this emphasis on subversion and partiality under colonial rule are interpretations of mimesis or mimicry that stress their resistance aspects. Taussig (1993) and Bhabha (1997), among others, have emphasized the potential of mimesis to subvert colonial rule by becoming a means of native empowerment against colonial violence and oppression. Due to the scarcity of Lao historical sources in the cases I have described, I cannot say to what extent the mimesis of colonial rule was subject to critique among the Lao.[43] I do not wish to suggest that all Lao were content with these policies of imitation. Buddhism, its institutions, and its actors were not simply passive recipients in these imitative exchanges, as is clear in the example of the monks who became involved in rebellions and anti-colonial activities, to which I briefly alluded above. Yet seen from a broad perspective, resistance appears to have been the exception rather than the rule.

From a theoretical standpoint, Huggan (1997) has questioned the subversive potential of mimetic processes, and Sherry Ortner (1995: 181) has critically examined the notion of "religiosity as an authentic dimension of subaltern culture," advanced in the resistance studies boom of the 1990s. With regard to colonialism, I think that there is indeed a multiplicity of projects of varying

impacts, as Nicholas Thomas suggests, but I have argued that some of these projects involving imitation are not necessarily subversive, but can actually enhance colonial rule. By simple inversion, I have argued that the colonizers could draw on the power of native conceptions of rule in their institutional, architectural, and cosmological dimensions. Colonial rule could be enhanced through the construction of buildings, monastic schooling, and practices of ceremonial government and mimetic governmentality. The emotional dimension of colonialism, the "strange forms of sympathy that these actions entail" between colonizers and colonized (Rutherford 2009: 4–5), played an important role in creating the mimetic processes I have outlined in this chapter.

Gebauer and Wulf (1995: 315) have suggested that mimesis opens up a communication between different symbolic orders: mimetic processes are not closed systems, but a priori have to make reference to another world. Buddhist patronage and the imitation of Buddhist kings possessed an emotional appeal for the Lao, opening up the possibility of shared systems of signification, especially with regard to concepts of Buddhist statecraft. Winning the sympathy of the colonized through mimetic processes was a means of entering a relationship that demands—to use the words of Robert Foster (2001: 66)—an "imaginary identification." In the cases I have discussed, this identification was produced through acts of imitation and mimesis. Mimetic processes can, when following a similar aim, create what Rosenwein (2002: 844) has called "emotional communities." Colonial knowledge and the capacity to achieve an imaginary identification are preconditions for the success of such a community.

Mimesis can generate new capacities to shape and be shaped within the colonial encounter. Drawing on the powers associated with Buddhist kingship, its patronage of Buddhism and the power of relic shrines, imitation creates an 'overlap' in symbolic reference: a common horizon, a common point on which emotions can crystallize. However, these imitations create only temporary, fragile, and partial common horizons that are subject to continuous change. Mimesis always works on itself by employing its own central principle—by partially imitating what has already been subject to partial imitation.

Acknowledgments

This chapter is based on research that began at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. Thanks go to Oliver Tappe, Dittmar Schorkowitz, Chris Hann, and many other colleagues there for fruitful discussions and inspiration. Further research and meetings took place in the context of the DAAD/CRUP Exchange Grant A-07/2011, whose support is gratefully acknowledged. Draft versions of this chapter were presented at conferences in Hamburg, Lisbon, Paris, and Chicago. I thank all colleagues who participated for their feedback

and ideas, and especially Yves Goudineau for his spirited defense of the École française d'Extrême-Orient during our heated discussions on French colonialism in Wisconsin. I also extend thanks to the editors of *Social Analysis* and the anonymous reviewers and to the staff at the Archives l'École française d'Extrême-Orient (Cristina Cramerotti and Christophe Caudron) and at the Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer. I want to express my gratitude to Oliver, Christoph, Ricardo, and Cristiana for having marvelous times and exchanges in Lisbon, Berlin, and Halle. Finally, thanks to Michel Lorrillard and all others at EFEO Vientiane for hosting me over many years while working in Laos.

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Notes

1. For studies of colonialism in Laos, see Stuart-Fox (1995) and the relevant sections in the general histories of Laos by Evans (1998, 2002). For a larger overview of the position of Laos in Indochina, see Brocheux and Hémery's (2009) seminal study.
2. The 'savage' and 'tribal' populations were subject to a different kind of politics, especially in Laos. In this chapter I will focus only on colonialism at large in Vientiane and other urban areas, mostly occupied by ethnic Lao adhering to Buddhism. For the highlands of Vietnam and French colonial rule of minorities, see, for example, Salemink (2003). See also Pels (1997) and Scott (1995) on the ethnography and genealogy of Western and colonial governmentality.
3. See the introduction of this issue for an explication of the concept of (mimetic) governmentality and further details on various theories of mimesis and imitation. I partially focus on Taussig's (1993) use of the concept and his idea of the powers that can be drawn from such processes. For more on Taussig's theory, see Stoller (1994); for a critical view, see Jay (1993). Tarde's (1903) theory of imitation has usually not been subsumed under the field of mimesis, but I think it offers interesting angles that I will explore in some parts of the chapter.

4. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.
5. Ernst Outray, Résident Supérieur au Laos à Monsieur le Directeur d l'École française d'Extrême-Orient. A.S. de la restauration des monuments historiques de Vientiane, 3 Février 1911. Archives l'École française d'Extrême-Orient (hereafter AEFEO).
6. EFEO member Victor Goloubew undertook major travels and works for getting the data needed to produce a replica for the exhibition in Paris in 1931. According to Kostova (2011: 187) "this was a major investment on behalf of the Exposition." See also Norindr (1996: 25–28) on Angkor Wat as architectural patrimony in the context of colonial exhibitions.
7. However, it was not until 1926 that the first official list of historical monuments of Laos was compiled (Lorrillard 2001: 4), representing a kind of archaeological heritage mapping.
8. Metcalf (2002: xv) suggests that in British India "political authority took shape in stone" and concludes that "to study colonial architecture is therefore to study the allocation of power, and the relationships of knowledge and power, that made up the colonial order."
9. See Singaravélou (1999) on the EFEO's general colonial entanglements. This is also visible in the cooperation between various branches of the Indochinese administration. A good example of the integration of the EFEO into wider fields are the works in Angkor that were effective "due to the harmonious cooperation between EFEO, public works, and the Forestry Department" (Anon. 1922: 426).
10. For Laos, see Marcel Zago's (1972: 332–338) very good overview of this rite, which took place not only in Vientiane but also in smaller provincial capitals. During my research in the French colonial archives, the numerous references to the rite over several decades confirm the central position this imitation ritual held in French indirect rule. Commenting on the same rite under the Buddhist king in Siam, Quaritch-Wales (1931: 193) attests that it was "one of the most important State Ceremonies from the point of view of the upkeep of the established form of government."
11. Henri Parmentier (1871–1949) worked for a brief spell in Tunisia and arrived in Indochina in 1900. After several decades of research, he produced a monumental work on art and architecture in Laos (see Parmentier 1954). Léon Fomberteaux (1871–1936) had gathered work experience in Morocco where he was responsible for the renovation of the palace of the sultan of Rabat. He arrived in Indochina in 1925 and worked at Angkor, but later also in Laos where he led the restoration of several Buddhist temples in Vientiane.
12. See Penny Edwards (2007: chap. 8) and Anne Hansen (2007) on the Cambodian case, and Gregory Kourilsky (2006) and Søren Ivarsson (2008: 93–95) on the creation and restructuring of Buddhist education under French colonialism in Laos.
13. For a discussion about the Lao curricula and certificates at the Buddhist Institute, see Kourilsky's (2006: 30–63) excellent analysis. For a broader elaboration of monastic learning in Lao Buddhism, see McDaniel (2008).

14. Maha Sila Viravong probably had the largest impact on Buddhism in Laos in the twentieth century. He compiled many books, taught, and was the personal secretary of Prince Phetsarath. For the career of Viravong and his ideas about Buddhism, see Kourilsky (2008). For Phetsarath's influential career as an engineer, a nationalist, and the Lao head of the Buddhist Institute, see Ivarsson and Goscha (2007).
15. Le Résident Supérieur aus Laos à Messieurs les Commissaires du Gouvernement au Laos et le Commandant du 5e Territoire Militaire, Phongsali. Vientiane, le 12 mars 1928. AEFEO.
16. These rebellions, which also integrated various ethnic minorities, had their first peak in 1900–1901, but outbreaks lasted until the 1930s. See Ladwig and Shields (2014) for a general overview of the research on Buddhist-inspired rebellions and millenarian movements in Buddhism.
17. For Thailand, often cited studies in this field are Ishii (1986) and Tambiah (1976). For Burma, see Mendelson (1975).
18. See Tambiah (1976: 84, 170) for further elaborations on *saṅgha* purifications in Thailand and their link to (aspiring) political power-holders.
19. See also Lempert (2014: 386–387) for an illuminating analysis of partiality across a range of examples. See also the extensive discussion about the fragmentary nature of mimetic processes in the introduction of this volume.
20. See our introduction and Ladwig (2017) regarding the shifts of meaning of mimesis that occurred during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.
21. This more dynamic and processual view also resonates with Gabriel Tarde's (1903: vii) complex theory of imitation, in which the repetition of imitation exists "for the sake of variation," leading not to a one-to-one scale of imitation, but to a transformation in the very act of appropriation.
22. Finot's (1917) extensive study of Lao literature and Buddhist manuscripts remains one of the best works on this topic.
23. For the living qualities of relics in early Indian Buddhism, see Schopen (1987). The concept of relics as living beings that bring the Buddha and the *dhamma* to life again has remained remarkably stable in the Theravāda world (Trainor 1997). For Laos and the qualities of relics as being *saksit*, see Ladwig (2015)
24. L'inspecteur du service archéologique de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient en mission à Vientiane, Laos. Rapport sur le That Luong—monument classé de la region Vientiane, Vientiane le 16 septembre 1929. AEFEO.
25. King Asoka did this by erecting 84,000 *stūpas* with relics of the Buddha. On Asoka as a paradigmatic Buddhist ruler, see Tambiah (1976: 54–72). Ladwig (2000) gives a sketch of the historical background of the That Luang and other Lao *stūpas*. For a wider contextualization of the link between Asoka, relics, and political centralization, see the excellent study by John Strong (2004: 127–144).
26. See L'inspecteur du service archéologique de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient en mission à Vientiane, Laos. Rapport sur le That Luong—monument classé de la region Vientiane, Vientiane le 16 septembre 1929. Signed Parmentier. AEFEO. See also the comments on the That Luang by Lajonquiere (1901: 112).

27. Delaporte's depictions, which were not aiming at realistic reproduction, included a number of imaginative features that actually influenced the rebuilding of the That Luang (Lorrillard 2010: 52).
28. Le chef de service archéologique de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient à Monsieur le Directeur d l'Ecole, Phnom Penh le 5 Janvier 1928. AEFEO.
29. On 18 January 1932, Parmentier visited the construction site and examined the primitive *stūpa*. It was extensively documented before being overbuilt again. See L'inspecteur du service archéologique de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient. Rapport sur le travaux de restoration du That-Luang à Vientiane en 1932. Vientiane 10 Avril 1932. AEFEO.
30. See L'inspecteur archéologique à Monsieur le Directeur d l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient. Rapport sur le travaux éxecutes à Vientiane (Laos) pendant le mois de juillet 1930. Vientiane le 7 Aout 1930. AEFEO.
31. L'inspecteur archéologique à Monsieur le Directeur de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient en mission au Laos. Rapport sur le travaux de restauration du That Luong à Vientiane, Laos. 1. Juin 1931. AEFEO.
32. It is also mentioned that this work could be done with the free help of Lao Buddhist believers, but it seems to be preferable for the EFEO to direct it "in order to avoid the horrors that will befall the monks whose numbers will increase there." Extrait d'un rapport de M. le Chef du Service archéologique de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient sur sa tournée aus Laos (février 1935). No date. AEFEO.
33. Extrait d'un rapport de M. le Chef du Service archéologique de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient sur sa tournée aus Laos (février 1935). No date. AEFEO.
34. L'inspecteur archéologique à Monsieur le Directeur de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, Vientiane 7 Janvier 1935. AEFEO.
35. On the significance of palladia in Lao Buddhism and their continuing significance under socialist rule, see Ladwig (2014).
36. As reported in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, after the Buddha's cremation at Kusinārā, the king of Magadha, five aristocratic clans, and the Malla tribe claimed the relics. It was only through the intervention of a Brahmin that a war could be prevented.
37. See Needham's (1970) excellent introduction to Hocart's *Kings and Councillors* and Schnepel's (1988) insightful discussion about ritual and government with respect to Hocart's notion of 'life'. Marshall Sahlins (2016) recently presented the Inaugural Hocart Lecture, titled "The Original Political Society," in which he highlighted Hocart's original approach by connecting it, for example, to Foucauldian notions of governmentality—concepts that relate well to the notion of mimetic governmentality proposed in the introduction to this issue.
38. See the introduction to this issue for more details on state imaginaries and their role in colonial orders.
39. L'inspecteur archéologique à Monsieur le Directeur de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient. Rapport sur le travaux de restauration du That Luong à Vientiane. Exercise 1934, mois de Novembre, Vientiane le 6 Décembre 1934.

40. Extrait d'un rapport de M. le Chef du Service archéologique de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient sur sa tournée aus Laos (février 1935). No date. AEFEO.
41. Le Résident Supérieur au Laos à Monsieur le Gouverneur Généneral de l'Indochine (Direction des affaires politiques), Hanoi. Object: Inauguration de l'Institut Bouddique, Vientiane, le 23 février 1931. AEFEO (emphasis added).
42. Le Résident Supérieur au Laos à Monsieur le Gouverneur Généneral de l'Indochine (Direction des affaires politiques), Hanoi. Object: Inauguration de l'Institut Bouddique, Vientiane, le 23 février 1931. AEFEO
43. Lao voices are unfortunately mostly absent in the archives. Only the highest monk of Vientiane, who gave a speech on 19 February 1931 at the opening of the Buddhist Institute, is quoted in a letter. He emphasized that a "new era of renovation and conservation has begun for Buddhism" and thanked the French for the renovation of the library, a "heritage of the last sovereign of Laos, which has been rescued from falling into ruins." He concluded: "Please accept, Monsieur Résident Supérieur, the thanks and gratitude of our Lao for the restoration of this library, and also for the high interest you have always taken in the remains of our past, as for example Wat Si Saket and the That Luang." Le Résident Supérieur au Laos à Monsieur le Gouverneur Généneral de l'Indochine (Direction des affaires politiques), Hanoi. Object: Inauguration de l'Institut Bouddique, Vientiane, le 23 février 1931. AEFEO.

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