OLIVER TAPPE

Phong pioneers: exploring the sociopolitics of mythology in upland Laos

Hat Ang, mythological culture hero of the Phong (an ethnic minority in Laos), exemplifies the figure of the upland pioneer. Taking the legend of Hat Ang as a vantage point, this paper discusses the ethnohistory of this specific Austroasiatic group and offers a mythological perspective into the discussion of uplanders' agency and future-making. This key myth of the Phong addresses questions of remoteness and relationality, of individual aspirations and hubris. Therefore, investigating mythology is key to understanding past and present representations of Phong culture and society within a multi-ethnic upland context.

Key words Zomia, Laos, Phong, mythology, ethnohistory

Introduction

Houaphan Province in northeastern Laos, next to the Vietnamese border, is home to a dozen ethnic groups who share a history and oral traditions of migration and pioneering mobility (see Petit 2020). Although local archaeological sites indicate human settlement of the area for millennia, no group claims autochthony (Källén 2016). The various ethnic groups include the Lao and other Tai-speaking groups, the Khmu and Phong of the Austroasiatic language family, and the Hmong and Yao as historical latecomers from China (via Vietnam) into the rugged mountains of Houaphan.

Houaphan forms part of upland Southeast Asia, and thus constitutes a test case for James Scott's (2009) grand narrative of the allegedly anarchic, state-resisting upland populations of Zomia. Historically contested between the lowland Lao, Siamese and Vietnamese kingdoms, Houaphan indeed seems to fit into the stereotype of the remote and unruly Southeast Asian upland frontier (Tappe 2015). However, the Zomian paradigm reduces local political agency in the uplands to a mere 'escapist' freedom struggle (Jonsson 2014). Avoiding this limited perspective, recent research on upland Laos pays more attention to possible venues of communication and exchange, and to more dynamic historical relationships, especially between local elites and (successive) external powers (Pholsena 2018; Petit 2020).

In consequence, this paper suggests a shift in focus towards the complex local histories of shifting alliances and negotiations across cultural differences (see Jonsson 2014; Tappe 2018). Sociopolitical diverse upland regions like Houaphan are interstitial spaces, marked by relative remoteness in relation to larger polities in the lowlands –potential sources of potency – in different historical contexts. As Rosalie Stolz and

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Oliver Tappe argue in the general introduction to this special issue, upland pioneers manoeuvre this relational remoteness, explore nearby and distant potency, and thus shape the future of their own kin or ethnic communities.

Taking the myth of Hat Ang, a legendary upland 'pioneering' leader, as a vantage point, this paper explores the ethnohistory of the Phong, a small, linguistically diverse group of 30,000 people with historical strongholds in the Sam Neua and Houamuang districts. The Phong stand out among the various members of the Austroasiatic language family – which encompass 33 out of the 50 ethnic groups in Laos – as one of the few Buddhicised groups. Unlike their animist Khmu neighbours, they have been Buddhist since precolonial times (see Bouté 2018 and this issue for the related example of the Phunoy, a Tibeto-Burman speaking group in Phongsaly Province).

According to local oral traditions, the Phong experienced a historical exodus from the Nam Ou river basin, north of Luang Prabang, the old royal city of the Lao. As the following study of the Hat Ang myth indicates, Phong and Lao share a common history of interaction and conflict. As an ethnohistorical contribution to this special issue on upland pioneers, this study aims to bring a mythological perspective into the discussion of uplanders' agency and future-making. As we will see, the figure of the upland pioneer features prominently in Phong mythology, particularly the myth of the culture hero Hat Ang. How does this key myth address questions of remoteness and relationality, of individual aspirations and hubris? In what way are mythological representations of ambiguous upland pioneers relevant for our understanding of Phong society today?

The Phong and the historical 'Tai–Kha' relation

The history of northern Laos and northwestern Vietnam is marked by a sociopolitical organisation referred to as *muang*, a Tai-Lao term that can mean polity, country or city. It is often characterised as a Tai political core with a 'Kha' periphery – *Kha* (or *Xa*) means 'serf' in Tai languages and is used to refer pejoratively to upland non-Tai groups such as the Khmu and Phong (see Condominas 1990; Lentz 2019). Historically, the concept of Kha obscured the sometimes 'symbiotic relationship based on both ritual and economic exchanges' between Tai and neighbouring non-Tai communities (Grabowsky and Wichasin 2008: 11), and the uplanders' important socio-economic position in specific localities (see Sprenger 2006; Badenoch and Tomita 2013; Évrard 2019).

Indeed, the Phong appear in some colonial sources as 'Kha Phong' (and less often as the autonym K'nieng; Macey 1905). However, colonial reports from the 1910s and 1920s differentiate between the Khmu – as genuine 'Kha' – and the Phong, since the latter were considered as more civilised due to their Buddhist religion and an allegedly more 'advanced' social organisation (see Lambert 1913; Lagrèze 1925). Phong notables received the Lao title *phya* and took positions in the local administration of Houamuang District (where no overwhelming Lao or Tai Deng (Red Tai) majority or political dominance was noted).

Interestingly, *phong* is a Tai-Lao word and refers to 'large villages (or clusters) inhabited by non-Tai populations' (Bouté 2018: 39) within a Tai or Lao *muang* – that is, it refers not to a remote upland village but to an integral part of a *muang*, straddling the upland–lowland dichotomy. Pierre Petit (2020: 86) mentions the title of *phya phong* as

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referring to the head of a cluster of non-Lao villages in northern Houaphan. Given the fact that, according to oral history, the Phong originally settled in the Nam Ou basin, an important trading route between Luang Prabang and Sipsong Panna, it is very likely that the exonym Phong refers to a sociopolitical or administrative category for certain non-Tai components of a local Tai-Lao *muang*.

While my Phong informants date the Phong migration from the Nam Ou to Houaphan roughly back to the 18th century, the French traveller and journalist Alfred Raquez is more precise: according to his Phong interlocutors – 'neither Lao, nor Tai, nor Kha' (Raquez 1905: 1398) – from the village of Ban Saleuy, their migration to Houaphan (via Luang Prabang) started in the 1720s, that is, shortly after the disintegration of the Lao kingdom of Lan Sang into the competing kingdoms of Luang Prabang, Vientiane and Champasak. This was certainly a time of turmoil and of the decline of Lao political sovereignty. By then, the Phong already knew the Lao language and had adopted Buddhism and the festivals of the Lao Buddhist calendar.

The Phong share this trajectory – especially the close inter-ethnic relationship with Lao and/or Tai communities – with the Phunoy of northern Laos, as studied by French anthropologist Vanina Bouté (2018, this issue). Neither Phong nor Phunoy fit into James Scott's (2009) image of the 'anarchic Zomian' (Tappe 2019). Rather, they exemplify a history of contact, exchange, cultural borrowings and mimetic appropriation – but not complete absorption into the Tai-Lao cultural realm (for a related study on the Khmu, see Évrard 2019).

Although converted to Buddhism, the Phong still follow animist ritual practices like those of their Mon-Khmer-speaking neighbours, the Khmu (Évrard 2019; Stolz 2021 and this issue) and the Ksingmul (Evans 2000). In contrast to those groups, the Phong insist on being 'Lao Lum' ('lowland Lao', in contrast to 'Lao Thoeng' – 'Lao from the mountain slopes', an officially abandoned ethnic category that is still present in Lao everyday speech and refers to the Mon-Khmer speakers in Laos; Schlemmer 2017), as they share the relevant cultural markers with the Lao cultural mainstream: Buddhism, weaving and wet rice cultivation (even if limited due to terrain). They often use the ethnonym 'Lao Phong' to highlight their Lao citizenship and their belonging to the so-called 'Lao multi-ethnic people' (*pasason lao banda phao*), one of the key ideological pillars of the contemporary Lao People's Democratic Republic (Pholsena 2006).

The following study of the myth of Hat Ang adds fresh perspectives on upland ethnogenesis and present-day social configurations at the margins of the Lao PDR. Mythology is used as a tool to explore the history of the dynamic 'Tai–Kha' relationship and to investigate the role of upland pioneers in shaping this relationship. Besides functioning as 'cartography of the social order' (Évrard and Chiemsisouraj 2011: 71) or as an explanatory model for the present-day marginality of upland peoples (cf. the myth of the money tree of the Mon-Khmer-speaking Rmeet, which also addresses upland–lowland inequalities; Sprenger 2006), the myth of Hat Ang offers a host of interesting detail and ethnographic information: historical origins, pioneering mobility, kinship, exchange, ethnic stereotypes, cosmology etc.[1]

Along with my own recording of the myth of Hat Ang, I use versions noted down by Alfred Raquez (1905) and the colonial administrators Adolphe Plunian (1905) and Antoine Lagrèze (1925; an almost verbatim reproduction of Raquez's version).

[1] Nathan Badenoch (2020) discusses another Phong myth that offers fresh interpretations on linguistic variety and human–nature relations in the uplands of Laos.

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Interestingly, both Raquez and Plunian mention the same informant, the sage Phya Boun; Plunian probably hosted his fellow traveller in the French post. Curiously enough, Raquez's account of the myth differs from Plunian's version in quite some detail. While Raquez refers to Phya Boun as 'thai' – *phya* being a Tai-Lao honorific title and *boun* the Tai-Lao word for 'merit' – it is not unlikely that he was a Phong notable who had enjoyed education in a Lao Buddhist temple and eventually received his title and authority from the Lao *chao muang* of Sam Neua, Houaphan's political centre.[2]

Hat Ang's birth

Once upon a time, an upland hermit walked along the banks of the River Nam Ou. He took a rest in the shadow of a big *mak san* tree. Contemplating and listening to singing birds and deer roaming in the woods, he helped himself to the fruits of the tree and let his soul flow into one of them. He threw the fruit into the river, where it floated downstream. Shortly afterwards, the youngest daughter of the king of Muang Sua (the former name of Luang Prabang), a beautiful girl of 15 years, picked the fruit from the floods and ate it.

Five to six months later the royal court was in upheaval: the young princess was pregnant. Neither she nor the royal diviners could come up with a plausible explanation. She gave birth to a boy – Hat Ang – who at birth was as tall as a three-year-old and who came to charm the whole court with his intelligence. One day, Hat Ang fell severely ill and the royal diviners stated that he would have to see his father in order to be cured. Again they interrogated the spirits of the realm and, this time, they came up with the name of the hermit. The king sent troops up the Nam Ou to find the 'savage' forest dweller. They took him to the palace, where the boy took his hand and recovered right away.

The marriage of the uplander and the Lao princess was arranged and the princess gave birth to a second son, but her husband remained a clumsy outsider at court. Through various intrigues he eventually fell from royal grace and the king decided to expel the young family. They travelled the Mekong on a raft equipped with food and agricultural tools and, after 15 days, disembarked at Don Chan (the well-known sand bank of Vientiane). Hat Ang's father left for the mountains to prepare upland fields (*hai*) but the trees he felled used to grow back after a while.

Confused, one night he hid in the forest to investigate this strange phenomenon. He spotted a black-and-white monkey hitting a gong. With each strike of the gong, a tree rose up again. Hat Ang's father jumped at the monkey, threw him onto the ground and threatened him to reveal his secret. The monkey told him that his magic gong could produce valuable essences, whole villages and fruit trees. The man set the monkey free again in return for the gong and two other special tools: an awl by means of which one could produce humans and all kind of animals from the earth, and a hoe which could cut solid rock. When, after his return, he told his story, his wife at first held him an idiot. However, when he demonstrated the power of his new tools, his family was stupefied: men, women and children emerged from the ground, a big village with pagodas gleaming in the sunlight, gardens with flowers and coconut trees – Vientiane! (Plunian 1905: 126–8).

[2] One piece of evidence for this is the fact that generations of Phong village headmen in Ban Saleuy are from the 'Bounkhoun' family, a kind of local elite who trace their privileged position back to precolonial times (even if the title *phya* has disappeared since the communist takeover).

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Raquez's version differs from this interesting detail – a mixed 'Tai–Kha' origin of Vientiane (cf. the related origin myths of Chiang Mai and Chiang Saen in Thailand; Évrard 2019: 235) – in that the story starts in Vientiane right away. These inconsistencies hint at the political shifts in the 18th and 19th century when the different *muang* of Houaphan were contested between Vientiane and Luang Prabang – and either of them could be a potential focal point of upland mythology.

According to Raquez (1905: 1398–9), the Lao princess from Vientiane found the fruit in the Mekong, ate it, became pregnant and finally gave birth to a boy who cried day and night. Neither the midwives nor the doctors nor the astrologists were able to find out the reason. One day, a Phong man travelled down the Nam Ou and the Mekong to visit Vientiane. When he gave a *mak san* to the boy, the royal offspring stopped crying. The king took this as heavenly sign and offered his daughter's hand to the Phong man.

Both versions of the myth take a similar trajectory in describing how the young couple moved to Don Chan Island, where they tried in vain to establish swidden fields (*hai*) in the nearby hills. However, the mythical monkey is missing from Raquez's story; instead the Phong man is blamed for the couple's misfortune. The king accuses him of being a malevolent spirit himself and sends the couple into exile, up to Houaphan. In Raquez's version the present-day settlement of the Phong in Houaphan is clearly the result of a malfunctioned 'Tai–Kha' relationship, with Hat Ang's father being a kind of outcast, associated with malevolent spirits.

Even if the myth articulates the upland–lowland divide between the upper Nam Ou and Luang Prabang/Vientiane, relations and interactions at first suggest a common 'Tai–Kha' social space, a 'space determined by the set of the systems of relations characteristic of the group concerned' (Condominas 1990: 1). The myth describes an early alliance between Lao and Phong through the story of the Lao princess eating an enchanted fruit – imbued with some kind of spiritual essence of Hat Ang's father; the act of eating this special fruit is perhaps allegorical for a premarital relationship. The princess's marriage with Hat Ang's 'Kha' father remains an ambiguous one. The different versions of the myth indicate more or less forced exile instead of a shared Lao-Phong space – a disruption of the affinal relationship across ethnic differences, here between Hat Ang's father and his Lao affinal relatives.

Plunian's version specifies that the princess is the youngest daughter of the Lao king. According to the Lao kinship system, the youngest daughter is supposed to stay at home and care for her parents. A 'Kha' groom would find himself in an awkward situation, a position of inferiority towards his Lao parents-in-law (cf. Leach 1954). In other cases, affinal relations were usually a strategy for Tai leaders to weave complex patron–client networks that crossed ethnic boundaries. As Volker Grabowsky and Renoo Wichasin (2008) show, affinal relations produced a web of kinship and economic relations to control people and natural resources in Tai *muang* contexts. The paramount gift of a daughter would produce a debt that entailed continuous flows of prestations, tributes and oaths of allegiance.

Hat Ang as culture hero

Hat Ang and his brother Hat Souk grew up to be strong young men. They received the magic tools from their father and moved out to create new settlements – indeed a

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pioneering *muang* making! While Hat Souk moved south and took the gong with him, Hat Ang travelled the northern mountains looking for a good place to establish a new village. One day he drove the awl into the ground near Muang Sum[3] and a huge flock of deer emerged to roam the vast forests, followed by millions of tall men with long noses and painted faces.

Hat Ang moved on and, deciding that the number of creatures was still insufficient for this vast realm, used the awl elsewhere to produce another million people. Leaving the people to settle down, he went on to look for a suitable place to build a palace, the site of his capital. By the Nam Peun River (Muang Peun today, in Houamuang District), he was happy to find a good place. Lacking the gong to produce whole villages but enjoying manpower and using the hoe to break rocks, he managed to create a great kingdom, which comprised the whole of Houaphan's present territory. His subjects carried large rocks to build the palace for their beloved king (Plunian 1905: 127–9).

While Plunian's version focuses on the pioneering *muang* creation in the uplands, Hat Ang had already established a *muang* in Houaphan in the versions noted by Raquez and Lagrèze, who do not mention any brother. Hat Ang is introduced here as an ambitious Phong leader who received 'instruments bizarres' (Raquez 1905: 1399) from a powerful spirit:[4] a double-faced gong, a hoe with a diamond blade and an iron awl. With the help of the awl, Hat Ang could produce a water source from sheer rock and make fire (a clear reference to upland swidden cultivation). With the hoe, he could break rocks. By hitting the gong, he was able to summon protective spirits.

After having accepted the rule of the king of Luang Prabang for a long time, the Phong now saw the chance to throw off the yoke of Lao rule and withdrew their allegiance. Luang Prabang sent an army but was beaten by the Phong, thanks to their spiritual support. The Phong kingdom flourished and Hat Ang became a king recognised by 'heaven' (Raquez 1905: 1400).

In the heat of one summer day, people were resting in the shade when a hawk (Raquez 1905) or marten (Lagrèze's version) invaded a henhouse, provoking quite some uproar. The Phong confused the turmoil with an armed attack from the Lao and, in a panic, hit the gong. The troops went to arms but saw nothing but the escaping animal with a chicken in its fangs. The spirit resented this sacrilege and demanded back the misused gong. Hat Ang obeyed and his people lost confidence due to the divine anger (even if they were able to keep the remaining instruments, but had no support from the deities anymore, this was a disruption of a critical sociocosmological relationship).

Hat Ang, although being of mixed 'Tai–Kha' origin, is clearly categorised as an uplander, as the offspring of an exiled couple and as the founder of an upland kingdom. Through emulating the Lao *muang* with temples and a palace, he seems to challenge the authority of the lowland Lao[5] – not least thanks to magic/sacred (Lao: *saksit*) tools granted by spiritual powers (a mythical monkey, a powerful spirit/deity). The magical instruments are a key theme of the myth: the gong, the awl and the hoe refer to

[3] A Tai-Lao *muang* in Muang Et (probably the first Phong settlements in Houaphan after their migration from the Nam Ou region).

[4] A *phi thaen* (Lao: 'celestial spirit') according to Madeleine Colani's (1935: 25) similar version of the myth.

[5] Perhaps analogous with the example of ambitious *gumsa* leaders among the Kachin – 'feudal satellites', in Leach's (1954: 251) words.

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functioning cosmological relations, manpower and natural resources, all of them key to agricultural subsistence and social reproduction.

The Phong leaders obtained the tools through risky encounters in the wilderness and/or spiritual domain (Hat Ang's father ambushing the monkey in the forest) or through sheer spiritual benevolence – which turned out to be ambiguous given the eventual demand for the return of the tools by the displeased spirits. Perhaps most important is the fact that the tools are of cosmological origin and sensitive to profane misuse (grinding; false alert). Exchange relations with the spiritual domain and sources of potency are thus contingent and precarious.

Another interesting detail: the Lao tools that Hat Ang's father tried to use for his swiddens in Plunian's version seem to be useless. The fact that 'lowland' tools do not function for upland livelihoods indicates that social reproduction requires exchange relations with the spirits, with exogenous sources of potency (Sprenger 2016). Another interpretation would have it that lowlanders just lack the skills and technique to do upland cultivation – an inversion of the Lao-centric paddy>swidden hierarchy. The gong is reminiscent of the bronze gongs and drums that many Austroasiatic groups value as brideprices, the production of which is associated with supernatural power (see Évrard et al. 2016; Sprenger 2007).

Death and decline

All versions agree that Hat Ang created a prosperous Phong kingdom, a genuine mountain *muang*. One day, the king of Muang Sua/Luang Prabang – in fact Hat Ang's cousin – learned about the beauty of Hat Ang's daughter. He demanded her as a bride for his son. Hat Ang rejected him (Plunian's version). The king became furious but refrained from declaring war because he feared Hat Ang's magic tools and apparently limitless manpower.

Later, a royal minister from Muang Sua stayed at Hat Ang's court and obtained his trust. He told him to sharpen his tools to increase their power. But alas, after this treatment the tools lost their magical power. Now the king of Muang Sua began his attack on the Phong kingdom. However, Hat Ang's troops successfully defended the kingdom. After a period of peace, another emissary from Muang Sua again took advantage of Hat Ang's naïve confidence. He persuaded him to erect a tower overlooking the realm towards Muang Sua, so large that Buddha himself would see it and would return the power of the tools as a reward for this meritorious act.

Hat Ang summoned his people to cut pine trees and build a tower, and later took his ministers to the top of his half-finished project. They counted millions of subjects and even spotted the Mekong and the sea of Muang Keo (the old Lao name for Vietnam). After the people had followed their leader to enjoy the view, the devious Lao set fire to the tower, which was devoured by flames and crashed down, burying the Phong people near Muang Ven (in Sam Neua District) where the top of the tower crashed: 'Ce fut la fin du royaume des Pungs' (Plunian 1905: 130; cf. Deydier 1954: 20–1).

Plunian (1905) adds that the standing stones (Hintang) of Houamuang were rocks supposed to be used for Hat Ang's palace yet dropped by the desperate people fleeing after the fateful end of their king (cf. Colani 1935; Källén 2016). The crash of the burning tower also explained the sparse vegetation on the hills between Muang Peun and

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Muang Ven, where only a few pines scattered the dry hilltops. According to Plunian's informer, the melancholic sound of the wind in the pines was in fact the laments of the former protective spirits of the realm. He concluded that this 'fateful race' (Plunian 1905: 130) was dispersed in small villages throughout the province while the Tai (sic!) had taken over the realm and founded Houaphan.

The Raquez/Lagrèze version differs in some detail: after the king of Luang Prabang had learned about the loss of the gong, he decided to steal the remaining tools. He sent his son to win the heart of Hat Ang's daughter. Unlike in Plunian's version, Hat Ang was very pleased about the charming prince's proposal and accepted the marriage. Everything went well until the devious prince took the magic tools and threw them into a volcano. In addition, he talked Hat Ang into building a high wooden tower so that the Phong king and his entourage could watch the beautiful city of Luang Prabang. When Hat Ang and hundreds of Phong climbed the tower, the prince set fire to the wooden construction. As if this wasn't enough, the Lao prince chased the Phong people into ravines and streams; only a few of them – 'Les débris de la race pong' (Raquez 1905: 1401) – made it to the mountains.

Here, in addition to the loss of divine support due to disruptions to sociocosmic relations (and, previously, the affinal relation to the Lao court), the element of lowland Lao cunning is introduced as an explanation for the decline and inferiority of the Phong civilisation. This is in contrast to the Rmeet myth described by Guido Sprenger (2006), where the people cut the tree of money so that the precious fruit ended up in the lowlands – necessarily so because the tree was overgrowing villages and fields. Even if both myths suggest an asymmetric 'Tai–Kha' relationship, aspects of upland agency and aspirations differ (on the ethnohistory of the Lahu, see as well O'Morchoe 2020).

In the Hat Ang myth, kinship remains a key issue. By the time he received the *saksit* tools in Raquez's version, Hat Ang had become an established upland ruler and a potential candidate for lowland *muang* patronage – e.g. as a border guard, as a provider of forest products, and indeed as a partner for marital exchange: as the history of Laos and Thailand reveals, kings used to assemble a large number of wives and concubines, many of them tokens of loyalty and respect from lower ranking notables or even other leaders (both Tai and non-Tai; cf. Condominas 1990).

And yet the different versions of the Hat Ang myth are not consistent in this respect: in Plunian's version, Hat Ang refused the marriage between his daughter and the Lao prince, while in Raquez's version he seemed to happily agree with the proposal. What could be the reason for this ambiguity? The Phong's patrilineal system would imply a superior position of the wife-giver and the transfer of the bride to the lineage of the groom. This would explain Hat Ang's positive response in Raquez's version, since it would be a very prestigious marriage. The opposite reaction makes sense as well if we understand the marriage as a representation of vassalage (from the perspective of the Lao ruler). Refusing such a marriage would be a sign of disobedience – a refusal of asymmetric relations and an affront towards the Lao. Reflecting on contradicting logics of co-existing kinship systems thus helps us to understand the contingencies of affinal ties in Southeast Asian history.

The (asymmetric) inter-ethnic relationship between Tai-Lao and 'Kha' is certainly the leitmotif of the myth: after Hat Ang – himself being of mixed 'Tai–Kha' origin – established a kingdom in the uplands, the Lao king defeated him with cunning and left a scattered population. From the perspective of the Phong, this is a tragic story reflecting their bygone glory and traumatic decline. Contrary to James Scott's (2009;

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cf. Jonsson 2014, 2017) interpretation of purposefully stateless 'Zomian' societies, the Phong interpret statelessness as loss and as a result of lacking intelligence and over-ambitious aspirations. Hat Ang's magically supported political power notwithstanding, the cunning and intelligence of the Lao took advantage of Phong myopia and hubris in order to defeat them.

Hat Ang today: the relevance of a mythological pioneer

During an oral history project in 2014, I visited the Phong village of Ban Phao as a starting point to learn more about the standing stones of Hintang. Sitting one night in the headman's house, the local elders shared myths and legends circling around the mysterious megaliths, which date back to the time of the stone jars of Xieng Khouang Province – famously explored by the archaeologist Madeleine Colani in the 1930s (see Colani 1935; Källén 2016).

An 80-year-old man who was actually able to remember *mae madam* Colani also told the story of Hat Ang – in a much shorter version than those discussed above, and amid much discussion and laughter. The elders' smiles shifted between enjoyment about sharing a good story – magic tools! – and embarrassment about telling a foreigner about the Phong's historical defeat and present-day marginalisation. Characterising the Lao as deceitful and morally corrupt was also a sensitive issue as indicated by the lowering of voices.

The old Phong man briefly commented that Hat Ang once built a city which was destroyed, the debris constituting the standing stones of Hintang today (to the disagreement of the village headman). He added that even the king of Luang Prabang supported Hat Ang when he built temples and houses (a reference to 'civilisation'), but that he became suspicious when his vassal started to build a palace. The Lao king used cunning and sent his son to marry Hat Ang's daughter. The prince saw Hat Ang's marvellous tools, such as the awl for producing water springs, and a double-headed gong for producing silver. According to the old man, the gong is now hidden in a steep rock named Pha Hap. People would like to retrieve the gong to get valuable things. The old man added that the gong could produce people to help build the city 'Muang Hintang', of which the king of Luang Prabang had been aware as well.

As said, the prince sneaked into the Phong community and persuaded Hat Ang to build a tower from clay with a wooden roof. Then he told the people to go up to see the capital Vientiane from above. Hundreds of thousands of people squeezed onto the top of the tower. The Lao prince put dry grass at the foot of the tower and lit it. People burnt and fell down and died. The old man then listed several Phong villages of today where the people had once dropped from the tower. Meanwhile, the Lao destroyed the tools or removed their magic power (he did not elaborate on how the gong ended up in the rock).

Another man added that the 'son-in-law' (note the kinship term) asked for the awl to sharpen it but afterwards it broke when Hat Ang tried to use it. Following on this detail, the old man explained how the gong lost its magic (*saksit*) power: the prince hit the gong when he saw a bird of prey attacking his chicken. When the deities came to see the danger, they got angry and removed the power from the gong (another man confirmed that the son-in-law's abuse of the gong is the reason for this bad luck: 'We cannot get people by hitting the gong any more'). The narratives of the men were not

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consistent about the powers of the gong and whether it produced silver or people, alarming spiritual protectors, etc.

Another interesting detail: the second man claimed that only intelligent (one could add: aspirant) people climbed the tower to see the capital, while only the ignorant ones remained on the ground – thus, only stupid people survived. Not surprisingly, this anecdote inspired some general reflections about local poverty *vis-à-vis* the alleged wealth of the big Lao cities. The local 'Kha elite' had been destroyed, hinting at the ambiguities of aspirations and perils of pioneering mobility (cf. Petit 2020; Lutz, this issue).

Unlike the colonial versions claim, most Phong today do not consider the Hintang megaliths as remnants of Hat Ang's palace. As archaeologist Anna Källén (2016) confirms, the Phong deny indigeneity or any connection to the prehistoric site. The original creators of the megaliths precede the Phong or any other local group – contrary to Madeleine Colani's (1935) assumption. As in the case of the famous stone jars of Xieng Khouang, the origins of the artefacts remain a contested object of archaeological interpretation. This indicates the plasticity of myths, which may drop certain elements and incorporate others, thus reflecting historical trajectories (Évrard and Chiemsisouraj 2011; O'Morchoe 2020). What remains is the dynamic of Tai–Kha interaction, questions of sovereignty and precarious sociocosmological relationships.

Discussion: Phong pioneers in Zomia

The Hat Ang myth may be read as a tale of disturbed sociocosmological relations, which in the end prevented Phong social reproduction: the first affinal Lowland/Tai–Upland/Kha relationship ceased due to forced exile, followed by a denied or false marital relationship, perhaps as a result of the first failure. The spiritual anger mentioned in the myth may be seen as resulting from the dysfunctional exchange relationships (see Sprenger 2016). Besides this apparent perturbation of the sociocosmological order, another relationship to the spiritual domain failed as well: the gift of the deities was abused, considered as ignorance of reciprocity that resulted in the loss of divine support.

When the magic power was lost, either through the Phong's ignorance or the Lao's cunning, the fate of Phong political sovereignty was doomed. According to Leach's (1954) famous model, the Phong would then move from being Shan-like *gumsa* to acephalous *gumlao*. Yet as Phong ethnohistory reveals, political stratification and hierarchies still remained. They remained *phong* in the administrative sense of being a quasi-*muang* without Tai people. The use of the Tai-Lao title *phya* for a Phong headman hints at an ongoing *muang* logic (as elsewhere in northern Laos; see Badenoch and Tomita 2013; Bouté 2018; Petit 2020). In sum, this is a tale of precarious sociocosmological and political interactions, and of contested sovereignty.

The figure of the upland pioneer is relevant for the mythological framework of these sociopolitical dynamics. Hat Ang, as the offspring of mixed Tai–Kha alliance, demonstrates excellent preconditions for being an aspirant upland leader: a potential relationship with powerful lowlanders, political skills in the *muang*, pioneering mobility and relationships to spiritual sources of potency. Remote Houaphan arguably provided the ideal space to fully unfold his potential: Zomia as a site of (ambivalent) opportunity.

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Some motifs of the myth recall other well-known legends of the region, such as the myth of Queen Camadevi or the legendary childhood of the Lao king Fa Ngum (see Condominas 1990). Both share the fate of being exiled on a raft and being raised in a Buddhist, 'civilised' environment (Mon and Khmer, respectively). Both returned and – according to different legends – brought with them political authority and order. Similarly, Hat Ang, after being raised in the Lao cultural realm, established a prosperous kingdom in the uplands. His supernatural aura (e.g. his extraordinary size at birth) is reminiscent of Fa Ngum and his alleged 33 teeth, another conspicuous sign of *saksit* power.

The myth of Hat Ang thus offers an alternative reading to the schematic narratives of Zomia as 'state-repelling' zone of refuge (see Scott 2009). The Phong category emblematises a kind of betwixt and between position within the 'Tai–Kha' sociopolitical configuration in upland Southeast Asia, exploring and manoeuvring the relational remoteness on the margins of lowland *muang* (cf. Saxer and Andersson 2019; introduction to this special issue). Aspirations for an equivalent 'Kha meuang' in the mountains perhaps indicate a tendency towards what James Scott somewhat pejoratively calls a 'mimicry state' (2009: 37). However, if we avoid state-centrism, the Phong's mimetic mobility is probably the key to understanding multi-ethnic sociopolitical configurations, where selective adaptation and mimetic appropriation shapes local identities instead of leading into complete assimilation (Tappe 2018; Rumsby, this issue).

The story of Hat Ang seems to fit nicely into the sociopolitical dynamics of upland Southeast Asia in the 18th and 19th centuries, with competing lowland polities waxing and waning, and different populations in the upland buffer zones re-positioning themselves accordingly. Hat Ang exemplifies a pioneering leader navigating the vast uplands to explore opportunities for centre – and future – making. However, the Phong, maybe in contrast to the Lanten upland pioneers, who maintained their position as a bridge into the *muang* administration in Northwest Laos, as described by Badenoch and Tomita (2013: 49), apparently ignored existing relationships and obligations, provoking Lao retaliation.

Phong oral traditions such as the Hat Ang myth may thus reflect a pioneering ethos and perspectives of future-making, but may also function as a warning for overly ambitious leaders: disrespecting sociocosmological relations (with past and present Lao authorities as well as with the spiritual domain) and ritual obligations may result in bad luck. Hat Ang thoughtlessly risked both spiritual and political sources of potency in his quest for an autonomous mountain *muang*. Upland agency and aspirations appear to be a two-edged sword, with eventual upland/Zomian 'isolationalism' being 'the product of political breakdown and entrenched hostilities at specific moments' (Jonsson 2014: 33).

The denial of a relationship by a superior power may provoke political unrest. In one version of the myth, Hat Ang agrees with the re-establishment of a (matrimonial) relationship with the Lao. By marrying his daughter to a Lao prince, his family would have created strong ties with a lowland political power, ideally entailing further exchange relations and, thus, economic opportunities for his group. The betrayal and violence of the Lao destroys this hope and hints at political disruption at a specific point in history. Jonsson (2014: 45–6) gives the example of the viceroy of Luang Prabang who in the late 19th century – without the king's consent – ordered the killing of submissive Khmu and thus 'marginalised' this group (to the advantage of the

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recently immigrated Mien and Hmong, who came to enjoy closer relationships with the Lao court, their chiefs even receiving Lao titles).

We can only speculate about whether a similar internal struggle among the Lao – of which there were numerous in the 18th-century upheavals – resulted in the dispossession and exodus of an upland group that later became the mythological core of the Phong category. The Phunoy clearly show a different trajectory, having established a more harmonious relationship with the court of Luang Prabang as border guards in the buffer zone between the Lao and Lü realms. However, they arrived in the Nam Ou valley only towards the end of the 18th century, maybe later inheriting the Phong's position as a privileged upland group. Since the Phunoy category emerged from 'a myriad of small groups, none of which were named Phunoy' (Bouté 2018: 43), shaped by contact with their Lao and Lü neighbours, it is very likely that the 'lost' Phong group had experienced a similar process of ethnogenesis.

Even if shrouded in mystery, historical reconstruction through fragments from archives and oral history reveals an experience of pioneering mobility and precarious interactions across difference. This is certainly a strong factor in oral traditions that reflect present stakes in the past (Petit 2020: 7), indicative of how societies represent their own pasts and presents, and of how ethnic identities become meaningful to people over time (O'Morchoe 2020: 162). In the case of the Buddhist Phong, their self-representation as having once been on a par with the 'civilised' lowlanders and indeed as having created a political centre on the margins, is crucial here.

Besides this, the myth also has broader implications for our understanding of what Grant Evans (2000), following Georges Condominas's (1990) pioneering work, coined 'Tai-ization': a dualistic process of (incomplete) assimilation and perpetuation of ethnic boundaries (see as well Évrard 2019) between Tai and non-Tai groups, for instance between Kachin and Shan in Leach's seminal study (1954; see introduction to this special issue) and Ksingmul and Tai Dam in Evans's case study. In the case of the Phong today, they emphasise markers of lowland 'civilisation' such as Buddhism, wet rice cultivation and silk weaving, but insist on the use of their own language in villages and on specific localised relations to village spirits.

Conclusion

Visiting Houaphan in the 1930s, Madeleine Colani (1935: 27) described the Phong as a 'race in danger of extinction', while other colonial contemporaries point out the lack of any craft tradition such as textile production (see Lagrèze 1925; the present-day silk weaving is apparently a cultural borrowing from their Lao and Tai neighbours). However, today the Phong demonstrate a strong local identity in Houaphan as self-confident members of the 'Lao multi-ethnic people'. Their oral traditions reveal a history of pioneering mimetic appropriation, and an awareness of close and necessary (asymmetric) relations with the Lao.

The Phong cultural hero Hat Ang epitomises both the ambiguities and dynamics of the 'Tai–Kha' relationship: hierarchy and conflict, mutuality and exchange, assimilation and difference. His story indicates a *longue durée* of asymmetric relations across cultural differences, from harmonious to violent. Such oral traditions constitute an antidote to simplified narratives of upland–lowland dichotomies or 'anarchic' uplanders. Apparently, upland societies in Southeast Asia share a historical experience of

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pioneering mobility, exploring and negotiating exogenous sources of potency – from capricious spirits to lowland authorities.

Hat Ang's father appears as an ambivalent upland pioneer *par excellence*, even venturing into the lowlands to marry a Lao princess – increasing his status while remaining a social outsider in the Lao realm. Hat Ang is the archetypical intermediate. He is offspring of a mixed alliance but still 'Kha', yet fluent in two (overlapping and sometimes clashing) cultural worlds, and able to tap into various (spiritual and material) sources of potency that enable the foundation of a 'mountain *muang*' – a provocation to lowland Lao sovereignty. Can Hat Ang's fluency in both Phong and Lao cultural worlds be seen as indicative of situative superiority with regard to the lowlanders, reflecting present-day mimetic flexibility of the Phong?

As Rosalie Stolz and Oliver Tappe have pointed out in their introduction to this special issue, pioneers are ambiguous figures: they can be drivers of innovation and prosperity but at the same time may risk their integrity and cultural autonomy. Pioneering mobility can come at social costs, as the contributions by Vanina Bouté and Seb Rumsby illustrate. The story of Hat Ang provides a mythological perspective on the hazards that upland pioneers face in their quest to shape the future of their kin.

To conclude, an ethnohistorical or mythological perspective helps to contextualise uplanders' individual agency and aspiration beyond the simple upland–lowland binary, highlighting the relational remoteness of upland societies in Laos. Oral traditions transport interpretations of the past as well as hidden desires, anticipation and caution towards potential futures. Today as in the colonial past, the fate of Hat Ang is still a compelling and revealing story – for both Phong and foreign researchers.

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Les pionniers Phong: exploration de la sociopolitique de la mythologie dans les hautes terres du Laos

Hat Ang, un héros culturel mythologique des Phong (une minorité ethnique du Laos), illustre la figure du pionnier des hautes terres. En prenant la légende de Hat Ang comme point de vue, cet article discute de l'ethnohistoire de ce groupe austroasiatique spécifique et offre une perspective mythologique dans la discussion sur l'agence et l'avenir des montagnards. Ce mythe clé des Phong aborde les questions d'éloignement et de relationnalité, d'aspirations individuelles et d'orgueil. L'étude de la mythologie est donc essentielle pour comprendre les représentations passées et présentes de la culture, ainsi que de la société phong dans le contexte multiethnique des hautes terres.

Mots-clés ethnohistoire, mythologie, Laos, Phong, Zomia

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