CHAPTER 11

Huaphanh – Revolutionary Heritage and Social Transformations in the 'Birthplace of Lao PDR'

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Huaphanh province in north-east Laos assumes two roles in Grant Evans's work on the history and cultures of Laos. First, as an obscure hiding place of the Pathet Lao leadership – a rugged frontier from which the revolutionary movement emerged, spreading throughout the Lao uplands and finally reaching the Mekong basin, culminating in the seizure of power in 1975 (as outlined in his 2002 *A Short History of Laos*). Secondly, the province became his anthropological fieldsite in which to study processes of asymmetric cultural assimilation for which he coined the term 'Tai-isation' (2000; also see Évrard 2019). Here, Grant Evans anticipated later debates on Zomia, the uplands of Southeast Asia as multicultural zones of conflict and interactions and complex relations across cultural difference (cf. Scott 2009; Jonsson 2014).

In this chapter, I would like to highlight the significance of Huaphanh for understanding the historical and sociocultural dynamics of past and present-day Laos. My discussion of the caves of Viengxay as a revolutionary heritage site is of course inspired by Evans's seminal works on the politics of history and memory in post-1975 Lao PDR (Evans 1998b). I extend the scope of analysis through a couple of sections dedicated to the social and economic transformations that have taken place in Huaphanh since the 1990s, when the province was opened for tourism and other development incentives. Observations in the provincial capi-

tal Sam Neua and remote places such as the new district Muang Kuon next to the Vietnamese border are also informed by Grant Evans's early studies on agrarian change (in particular the failure of collectivisation) in lowland Laos (Evans 1990a; also see the insightful works by Robert Cole on recent trends of agrarian change in Huaphanh: Cole 2021 and forthcoming). The concluding section on interethnic relations and interactions in Huaphanh takes Evans' 2000 study on Tai-isation processes as its vantage point and aims to find new perspectives on transcultural dynamics in multi-ethnic Laos using the lens of mimesis (Tappe 2018).

The aim of this chapter is to show how the history and landscape of Huaphanh has shaped the lifeworlds of the different people (including Lao, Tai Daeng, Tai Dam, Khmu, Phong, Ksingmul, Hmong and Yao) living in the hills and valleys of the Lao–Vietnamese borderlands. Since my first visit in 2008, the region has witnessed social transformations and new interethnic dynamics – processes that have accompanied the ongoing efforts of the Lao government to make Huaphanh a showcase of revolutionary memory and Party–State legitimacy.

Viengxay, a Revolutionary Heritage Site

Siphone was aware that I was particularly interested in the caves of Viengxay, the place in the northwestern mountains of Laos where the leaders of the communist revolution endured the daily bombings of the Americans during this sideshow of the Vietnam War (Tappe 2013a). And yet the skinny Hmong guide from the 'Viengxay Caves Visitor Centre' insisted on taking me to another brand-new attraction, which was – according to official historiography – the 'birthplace of the Lao PDR' (Lao National Tourism Administration 2010). Leaving the cool shadows of the vertical karst rocks behind, we passed the periphery of the town of Viengxay with its small houses, reminiscent of the time when this area was just an agglomeration of villages.

Like a rocket base in the Kazakh steppe, a huge concrete platform emerged. In the middle, encircled by Lao national and red socialist flags, the five-metre high statue of Kaysone Phomvihane (1920–1992), the late strongman of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, raises his right arm in a benevolent greeting pose. Icon of the socialist Party–State (see Evans's 1998b discussion of the 'cult of Kaysone'; and Tappe 2017), he represents the ongoing claim to power of the Lao one-party regime at



Photo: O. Tappe, 2010

Figure 11.1: The politburo meeting room in the Viengxay caves.

this important *lieu de mémoire* (Nora 1989). My companion, who had accompanied me during previous tours in the area, stressed Kaysone's historical importance for modern Laos and proudly stated that this statue 'was as tall as the one in Vientiane!' He was referring to the identical statue at the Kaysone Memorial in the capital, clearly expressing local pride and ongoing revolutionary devotion.[1]

The monument to Kaysone was sponsored by the Vietnamese government as a token of recognition of the 'special relationship' between the two socialist regimes (see Evans 2002a). It is the most recent addition to the landscape of revolutionary memory associated with Kaysone, marked by a number of caves where Kaysone and other leaders of the so-called 'national liberation struggle' (*kantosu ku sat*) maintained their political and military base during the years of the US 'secret war' in Laos (1964–73). Kaysone's own cave complex, which included the politburo meeting room, is usually the starting point of the guided cave tours (Figure 11.1). Incense sticks in front of a small bust of the revolutionary

1. Interview with Siphone Vangduayang, 2011. This chapter uses material gathered on many field trips to Huaphanh between 2008 and 2019 (also see Tappe 2013a/b, 2017, 2018).

leader indicate ongoing veneration, which is fuelled by heroic accounts of his deeds in school books, newspapers and TV documentaries.

The standard tour around the caves of Viengxay includes detailed information about the 'American War', provided through information plates, by well-informed local guides – mainly of Hmong ethnic origin – and through an English-language audio tour with original voices of witnesses of the American bombings (Lao National Tourism Administration 2010). All the recorded voices somehow unanimously hint at the righteousness of the revolutionary struggle, emphasising the solidarity of party cadres, soldiers, and civilians facing foreign aggression, and thus help the Party–State to perpetuate the narrative of the valiant 'Lao multi-ethnic people' fighting under the leadership of selfless patriots against foreign oppressors (Tappe 2013a, 2013b).

Parallel to the heroic narratives, there remains a competing discourse of hardship and suffering, as reflected in the frequent description by many locals of their 'poor' (*thuk nyak*) livelihoods. Despite the growing local pride and recognition by lowland Lao and foreign visitors, there is still a sense of marginality and inequality in Huaphanh, as far as my interviewees in Viengxay were concerned. To a large extent this is due to high levels of poverty – many districts in Huaphanh are officially classified as 'poor districts' – which some persons whom I talked to blamed on the devastation of war. Thus, Viengxay is a site of 'spatial melancholia' (Navaro-Yashin 2009: 16) and sad memories, as well as revolutionary nostalgia, discharged by the very materiality of the physical landscape.

Meanwhile, the violent death of the last Lao king, Sisavang Vatthana (1907–1980) in a re-education camp in Huaphanh is hushed up. Evans (2009) presents telling pictures from shortly before and after the communist revolution, one showing the king on an official visit to the 'liberated zone' in front of respectfully kneeling Pathet Lao soldiers, and another more notorious one, displaying the king and his wife now themselves sitting on the ground in a devout posture, apparently in a re-education camp. This episode remains officially silenced so as to obscure the fact that the birth of the Lao PDR was attended by acts of violence and brutality (also see Pholsena 2012). What was a traumatic journey with no return for members of the royal elite and the 'Vientiane side' of the civil conflict that tore apart the country from the late 1950s until 1975 is now an exciting new adventure for the urban middle

classes, who enjoy the rugged landscape and the simple lifestyle of the countryside as offered by the commemorative/touristic site of Viengxay (in recent years often combined with a tour to Phu Phathi mountain, where North Vietnamese sappers captured a secret US American radar station in 1967).

Viengxay as revolutionary commemoration site underscores an increasing local pride and development aspirations that present a contrast to the narrative of the poor peripheral provinces. The new central monument of Sam Neua, built in 2008 and locally just called *anousavali* ('monument'), making it analogous to the Patu Xay (Arc de Triomphe) in Vientiane (Evans 1998b), is considered a key element in making Sam Neua a 'modern' city (see Petit 2020). According to an official of the local tourism office (interview in 2011), the stylised gemstone on the top refers to the 'indestructible' Sam Neua and its brave people, despite the fact that Sam Neua was razed to the ground by American bombs. Along with other recent development initiatives (see below), this monument marks a re-centralisation of this first 'liberated zone' (*khet potpoi*) and revolutionary 'centre' (*sunkang*) of Laos.

As Phill Wilcox (2021) has recently observed, the UNESCO heritage site of Luang Prabang is marked by a tension between preservation and development. In the case of Viengxay, development is part of the story, too. As a party cadre highlighted in a speech on the occasion of the opening ceremony for the new Buddhist temple in Viengxay in 2011, Viengxay had risen from the ashes to become a modern *muang*, a bright example of the farsighted direction of the revolutionary Party. However, Viengxay has yet to fulfil the government's promise of economic prosperity. Before I discuss the ambiguities of development, I will go more deeply into discourses relating to local memory.

Huaphanh as Ambiguous Landscape of Memory

Viengxay is certainly the key element of the memorial landscape palimpsest of Huaphanh. So far, hopes of triggering tourism beyond the caves tour have not been fulfilled. Although the province witnesses a constant flow of visitors, this mainly consists of private Lao tours or groups from schools and ministries, and the occasional Vietnamese delegations. As Siphone and his father Siphanh, former head of the caves tours office, complained in 2015, their private initiatives to establish



Photo: O. Tappe, 2019

Figure 11.2: Lao tourists on Phu Phathi. → Colour version on page 381.

trekking tourism in the hills around Viengxay could not be realised due to lack of Western customers and lack of interest on the part of the Sam Neua department of tourism. Neither Lao nor Vietnamese tourists like the idea of following the old mountain trails of the Hmong (at least not yet). The hike up to Phou Phathi seems to be the most adventurous expedition undertaken, so far (Figure 11.2).

In consequence, the region by and large remains a landscape of ossified revolutionary commemoration. Governmental historiographic hegemony is not interested in a more polyphonic local memory (which I perhaps should not have expected in 2013). Still, Huaphanh offers many different perspectives on local history, which hide beneath the neat surface of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party master narrative. Viengxay and Sam Neua have more to tell.

In 2008 and 2013, I carried out long interviews with Siphanh, back then head of the Viengxay caves tourism office (later officially named 'Kaysone Phomvihane Caves Tour Office'). Besides outlining the process of making Viengxay a national heritage site and appealing to tourists, the renovation of the caves and development of the guided tours,

Siphanh integrated his own biography into the history of Viengxay, and Huaphanh more generally. In conversations like this with older people in Huaphanh, I was able to get an idea of the strength of the imprint that the rugged landscape and the years of the war have left in the individual memories of the people.

Siphanh's childhood memory of his Hmong village in the mountains of Xieng Kho province suggests an idyllic rural life with hard but rewarding work on the upland rice fields and a generous number of livestock ('we had cows and buffaloes, 50–60 pigs, 200–300 chickens…'). The war, especially the American bombings, put an end to this prosperous Hmong livelihood. One day, a huge bomb destroyed many of the houses in Siphanh's village and killed his grandfather and other villagers. The following years, in the late 1960s, were shaped by hardship and a precarious existence in makeshift, mobile forest villages, with most of the young men recruited by the Pathet Lao. Siphanh insisted that his father had already joined the 'Lao Front' (*naeo lao*) before this, and not the 'Vang Pao Hmong' around Phu Phathi, who were the 'enemy' (*satu*).[2]

His story is only one example of many such narratives. Some of them, including Siphanh's account, were printed in the book *Voices of Viengxay* (Lao National Tourism Administration 2010; also see Tappe 2013a: 68). These narratives show how the people of Huaphanh were mobilised (or radicalised?) in the course of the arbitrary US bombings (for a time directed from the radar station on Phou Phathi; Castle 1999). People did not dare to cultivate their fields during the daytime and avoided making fires, as the smoke would attract American planes. Up to 20,000 people sought shelter in the caves around Viengxay, while villagers in other regions just dug out hideouts in the forest, eating roots and tubers and sometimes scavenging in an abandoned maize field.

These narratives have certainly been shaped by the revolutionary master narrative of the 'national liberation struggle' (*kantosu ku sat*) of the 'Lao multi-ethnic people' (*pasason lao banda phao*) (see Tappe 2013b; Ministry of Information and Culture 2000). This standard view of the 'birthplace of the Lao PDR' glosses over the internal tensions and ruptures that marked Huaphanh province, beyond the internecine

2. See Benson 2018 for a detailed account of the (civil) war in Huaphanh.

conflicts of the Hmong. The ambiguous role of the Lao and Tai *phya*[3] and other former elite families, and of the Catholic Tai Daeng communities in eastern Huaphanh, most of which had been loyal to the French beforehand, seem to have been erased from local memory.

An old man from Ban Houaxieng (near Sam Neua) spoke of the social tensions that existed due to the rampant paranoia about spies informing the US forces about potential targets. Initially, the villagers tried to avoid taking sides, accepting guests from both sides ('like a bird with two heads', as he put it), but they became more cautious when revolutionary soldiers began aggressively searching the villages for 'traitors'. He remembered one incident when Vietnamese soldiers came to the village and claimed to be from a nearby communist garrison while in fact reporting to the US radar post on Phou Phathi. With a shrug, the old man explained apologetically that it was difficult for the local villagers to tell the different garrisons and troops as at that time they were very busy just surviving…

While 'traitors' and 'enemies' occasionally pop up in the heroic and/or victimizing historical narratives of Huaphanh, there is one notable absence: the fate of the last king of Laos, Sisavang Vatthana, as represented by the uncanny photographic couplet in Evans 2009. His tragic story is either silenced or only mentioned in somewhat apologetic accounts such as the following one, told by Siphanh in 2013:

> They brought the old king to Samneua and built a house for him at Ban Na Ngoua, Xieng Kho district. […] The old king was very sad and unhappy with the incredible living conditions because when he was a king in Vientiane [sic] he led a plentiful life, had a great house for living and nice car for riding, but later to be here his life changed very much. He worked hard, cared for the vegetable gardens. He became ill, headache, and then he passed away.

In fact, the king's 'house' was located in one of the notorious re-education camps where many members of the old elite met their deaths. Some published memoirs written by former inmates of these camps (see, e.g., Bounsang 2006; Khamphanh 2004) tell of the brute force of

3. An honorific title for the heads of what people today call the 'feudal administration' (*bokkhong khong sakdina*), who governed the commoners. Interestingly, Kaysone's cave had previously been used as a secret hideout by the *phya* of Xiengluang, a major Lao settlement during colonial times.

a paranoid regime; of humiliation, violence and death from maltreatment, illness and undernourishment. This is the 'other' landscape, the 'dissonant heritage' (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996) of Huaphanh: not the caves of heroism and solidarity, but the fields of hatred and violence enclosed by barbed wire.

But the local people also suffered from the aftermath of war. Following the brief period when Viengxay was the 'resistance capital' in 1973, the town became almost deserted, when almost everyone moved to Vientiane after the revolution of 1975 – not only the families of the new leaders of the country but also a large part of the already displaced population of the area. Only a few people remained in the war-torn landscape and even fewer planned to stay on longer term. Siphanh spoke of people living in poor-quality, makeshift houses, ready to move on somewhere else at any time. It was only in the 1990s that things improved, when roads, electricity, and public services made the town more attractive (and a key destination for Hmong resettlement).

Aspects of 'Progress' in Sam Neua and Viengxay

The promise of development, reflected in the ashes-to-*muang* story, is perhaps even more relevant for Sam Neua, the provincial capital of Huaphanh since 1905. Completely erased during the US American bombing campaign, it has only recently started to become a prosperous town, benefitting mainly from Vietnamese investment and corresponding development initiatives. Besides the aforementioned new new city pillar monument, a big park in the town centre projects Sam Nueua's new self-image, linking the 'birthplace of Lao PDR' and 'land of heroes' revolutionary narratives with the rich cultural heritage of the region (included in the narratives only recently, though). A replica of the 3,000-year-old megaliths in Houameuang province[4] and statues representing the different ethnic groups – displaying 'traditional' dress and handicraft[5] – represent the cultural wealth of Huaphanh (Figure 11.3).

4. The *sao hintang* ('20 standing stones') in Houamuang district constitute one of the most important archaeological sites of Laos (see Colani 1935; Källéen 2016). Locals proudly stress the fact that the megaliths are older than the famous stone jars of Xieng Khouang province.

5. See Goudineau's (2015) discussion of the increasing official exhibition of ethnic diversity that is taking place, against a background of accelerated standardisation of social and cultural diversity.



Photo: O. Tappe, 2019

Figure 11.3: Displaying multi-ethnic heritage in Sam Neua. → Colour version page 381.

This all forms part of the general climate of economic development and modernisation that is currently shaping the changing urban landscape of Sam Neua. In an interview in 2019, the guesthouse manager Bounhom – of mixed Tai Daeng and Chinese origin – discussed recent urbanisation initiatives with me, such as new infrastructure and a large Chinese market complex offering all kinds of consumer goods (imported from China and Vietnam). He made an interesting connection with the legacy of Chinese traders of precolonial and colonial times, who intermarried locally and represent the origin of the small Lao/Tai-Chinese business elite in Sam Neua (who venerate their ancestors annually at the Chinese cemetery in the north of town). Chinese influence notwithstanding, Bounhom highlighted the fact that it is Vietnamese investment and trading activity that fuel economic development and make Sam Neua a *chaleun* (prosperous) town.

The Vietnamese have been a significant demographic element in the area for more than a century. Recent Vietnamese labour migration into the local construction sector, in particular infrastructure, is reminiscent of the colonial practice of recruiting Vietnamese labour for road

construction in upland Laos. In order to 'unblock' Huaphanh in the direction of Hanoi, and to foster the flow of natural resources downhill, the French ordered Vietnamese 'coolies' (and a smaller number of local hands) to build two key routes linking Sam Neua with the Vietnamese lowlands (Foropon 1927).

As was the case with the Chinese merchants, Vietnamese workers and petty traders have intermarried locally, as have the Vietnamese soldiers who have increasingly operated in the region since the 1940s. When in 1953 the Vietminh and a small group of Lao Communists under the leadership of Kaysone managed to seize Sam Neua from the French – a prelude to Dien Bien Phu (Lentz 2019) – the North Vietnamese had established a number of military posts in the borderland and they have remained an important political and economic factor ever since.

Despite the celebrations of the Lao–Vietnamese 'special relationship' (see Evans 2002a) and the promising economic opportunities linking Huaphanh with Thanh Hoa province (Pierre Petit 2020 describes a dancing performance in the cultural hall enacting this relationship), locals in Sam Neua expressed some resentment of increasing Vietnamese in-migration. The aggressive behaviour of Vietnamese traders particularly annoyed the many local people (mainly women) who engage in very low levels of petty trade to help support their families.

I recently (September 2021) asked a local friend via WhatsApp if the Covid19 pandemic has affected this issue. He was quite upbeat in his response, telling me that due to the stricter border regime fewer Vietnamese migrants have been coming to Laos, thus opening up new opportunities for trade and work for locals. At least that was his view. He underscored this observation by mentioning that there is an ongoing flow of commodities from Vietnam – but without the involvement of the Vietnamese themselves. The importance of agriculture in Huaphanh's economy arguably also provides a safety net against the disturbances caused by the pandemic.[6]

Vietnamese work migration is certainly connected to Vietnamese investment in a range of infrastructure projects in Sam Neua. The new

6. I have learnt from what I have seen and been told in the border areas with Thailand that people in Laos suffer more from restrictions that hamper the flow of goods and people (given that work migration to Thailand and corresponding remittances used to be a key factor for local subsistence).

bridge across the Nam Sam, the new market buildings, the cultural hall, and finally the huge concrete madness of a new revolutionary memorial: such projects form part of a wider Lao–Vietnamese economic collaboration as part of which 'gifts' like these are made, together with tax exemptions and other incentives for Vietnamese investors.

Another visible expression of this collaboration are the guesthouses, restaurants and entertainment venues that are created to cater for Vietnamese customers in Sam Neua and Viengxay. Signs in the Vietnamese language are an unmistakable marker of this development (and were not very common a couple of years ago). My Lao interlocutors seemed ambivalent about this recent trend. A few welcomed the fact that there is now some action going on (e.g. Vietnamese karaoke bars) – something to offer visitors from Vientiane and other urban places. More people, however, pointed to the rise of prostitution (which was, of course, already present beforehand) and other moral problems. An over-the-top party in one of the Viengxay caves went viral on Facebook; it was, again, the allegedly immoral Vietnamese who were blamed for this.

Thus it seems that the revolutionary heartland faces the ambiguous and contingent effects of development and modernisation. This is also true for the countryside.

Muang Kuon: A New District, Old Connections and Upland Development

I met Siphone again seven years after our first encounter, while I was doing some research using oral history methods in the districts that border Vietnam, Sam Tai and Muang Kuon. In Muang Kuon, a small town that has been turned into a new district capital, he showed up during an interview with the head of the Department of Information and Culture, Bountong, and his colleague from Sam Tai, Somsouk. Siphone seemed unhappy with his new office job, and said that his plans for tourism in Viengxay had not, beyond the occasional cave tour, been successful. Although his new job means a stable, if low, income and a certain social mobility and prestige (see High 2021), he had apparently had other plans for his life. This reflects the dilemma faced by ambitious young cadres, who still find themselves in a rigid system where you move mainly by being moved, for better or worse, within the complex clientelist system that marks Lao society today.

In 2012, Muang Kuon was separated from Sam Tai district of which it formed a large part south of Sam Tai town, bordering Xieng Khouang province and Vietnam. What emerged on the maps as Muang Kuon District was, in fact, an underdeveloped periphery of a periphery. Sam Tai itself had long been a dead end at which one arrives after a journey of several hours from Sam Neua. Muang Kuon was only connected by dirt roads, and was basically inaccessible during the rainy season. Around 2010, a development program by the Asia Development Bank (ADB) brought a paved road between Sam Tai and Muang Kuon, and further discussions of rural development in this remote region.

Siphone's office mates claimed that it was Nouhak Phoumsavan's (1910–2008) initiative to develop these areas of Huaphanh. Interestingly, the former Party–State's 'Number Two', after Kaysone, had initiated one of the first development projects in the region that was funded by non-socialist countries, namely an Australian project in Ban Tao by the Sam river near the Vietnamese border (Kathryn Sweet, personal communication). Every now and then during my stays in Huaphanh province, local people talked fondly about Nouhak, who regularly stayed at his 'cave house' until he was very old, and engaged with issues of food security and agrarian development in the poor districts of Huaphanh. Rumours have it that he had a *mia noi* (mistress) in Ban Tao. Nouhak was certainly among the Party leaders (*phak-lat*) who maintained a particularly close bond with the revolutionary heartland in the uplands – regions that in recent decades have often been bypassed by lowland economic growth.

Initiatives to develop this remote (in many respects) area were soon followed by the idea of making Muang Kuon the centre of a new district (in 2012). The local authorities in Sam Tai district had been facing administrative challenges in this vast, mountainous and sparsely populated district – echoing the complaints of French colonial administrators of a century ago. Dividing Sam Tai District would have the advantage of separating the administration of Sam Tai town and the larger Nam Sam area on one side from that of the rugged, allegedly underdeveloped terrain further south, which would be administered from a new focal centre. The division would also have other advantages. To quote from the interview I carried out in the Department of Information and Culture:

> Bountong: The idea of dividing Sam Tai district was first proposed by the district authorities to the central government.

> Somsouk: Because of the difficulties of development.
>
> Bountong: The development process is very slow and uneven as the territory of Sam Tai is too large.
>
> Somsouk: And the budget we receive for district development is also limited… so if we have two districts then we can receive a double annual budget!

This was a smart move on the part of the district authorities at Sam Tai, intended to get the provincial government of Huaphanh to allocate additional funding from the central government for local development. In 2017, the results were visible: more roads, electricity, office facilities (still rudimentary, though), and a new 'government' quarter with large houses, where only a few years before wooden stilt houses had dominated the landscape. Simultaneously, Muang Kuon became a focal site for the resettlement of upland villages, so that the population of the town doubled within five years (to almost 5,000 inhabitants by 2017; the whole district has 25,000 inhabitants).

As Muang Kuon is located on a plateau, water supply is the main challenge in relation to development there. Costly large-scale irrigation schemes have been introduced by the ADB, with pump systems bringing water up from the rivers that pass the plateau a few kilometres away. Paddy land is scarce, and the growing population mainly relies on swidden cultivation. Local authorities are aware of the pressure on natural resources but they turn a blind eye to rampant deforestation. As one official told me in a similar context near Viengxay: 'People must eat rice.'

In anticipation of irrigation and available land, large numbers of Hmong and Khmu people were attracted to Muang Kuon, following in the footsteps of others from the same communities who had already been resettled there. Later on the same day that I carried out the interview in the Department of Information and Culture, I talked to a Hmong woman who was waiting by the roadside for her son (a soldier in the nearby military base) to pick her up. She informed me that she moved to Muang Kuon in 2002 (when the resettlement campaign was already in full swing; see Évrard and Goudineau 2004). Nine households had, she told me, moved there from her village, which was called Houay Bouay, but five of them had returned, after realizing that there was not enough farmland available. She had decided to stay. Her main reason for staying was the fact that there was a school in Muang Kuon: a future for her

children. Many resettled Hmong mentioned the school as a reason for remaining. They also said that they resent the fact that there are either no schools in remote villages or a lack of teachers. Thus, the Hmong are, in practice, accepting precarious livelihoods for the sake of access to education and other forms of infrastructure.[7]

The Hmong in Muang Kuon form separate neighbourhoods around an 'urban' core consisting mainly of Lao and Tai Daeng houses – called 'Tai Kuon' by the Hmong woman – as is the case in many towns in Huaphanh that have recently expanded in size. A similar spatial configuration can be seen in the Hmong village Ban Phu Say, which is located just outside Viengxay town. In the Tai Daeng village of Ban Kho (near Sam Tai town), the demographic situation has changed immensely, with resettled Hmong now making up half of the population, the rest of which is predominantly made up of Tai Daeng. In Muang Kuon, the spatial demarcation between the 'old' Tai village and the Hmong part, further up the hill, is striking. The integration or non-integration of Hmong households into village communities deserves further scrutiny, and Muong Kuon would be a good test case.

The reason why Muang Kuon was chosen as a new 'centre', in spite of water supply problems, was mainly its geographic location and its existing, albeit rudimentary, infrastructure. The town is located at the junction of historic trading routes linking Sam Tai with Nong Het in Xieng Khouang province and southern Huaphanh with Nghe An in Vietnam. In colonial times benzoin resin and shellac were key commodities in trade with the lowlands, and opium was also an important source of income for decades ('many hectares!' [were planted with opium], as Somsouk exclaimed) before the eradication campaigns of the 2000s. As will be discussed below, maize is the number one cash crop now.

Livelihood Transitions – the Examples of Agriculture and Weaving

In an early issue of the journal *Anthropos*, the French missionary Antoine Bourlet claimed to have observed a strange form of 'socialism' in

7. Interestingly, a Lao friend from the Ministry of Information and Culture suggested half-jokingly that the Hmong will outpace the Lao soon as they have more children and take proper care of education (unlike the Khmu, he said, as they prefer their children to start working, at the expense of their school education; as Stolz [2021] points out, there is a strong work ethic in Khmu society, despite the fact that they are poor and marginalized).

Huaphanh: '[…] une manière de communisme, mais un communisme qui ressemble fort à de la féodalité' (Bourlet 1906: 525). Every couple of years the village land was redistributed according to household size. In addition, anyone who cleared a tract of new land for cultivation could claim proprietary rights as long as he cultivated it.

Interestingly, this system is still used in some Tai and Lao villages, while others have subsequently moved to a system of private land titles – and an even smaller number of villages still have land that is cultivated cooperatively. There are overlaps between customary forms of land organisation and different forms of state-controlled cultivation. Village maps of previous land allocation programmes, which demarcate farmland from (different kinds of) forest land, are often ignored by local committees faced with dealing with integrating resettled communities and other challenges relating to local land organisation.

An old man, a former *nai khet* ('head of area', meaning the head of a village group, reminiscent of the older Tai title *nai kong*) of Muang Kuon before it became a proper town, told me about the various transformations in land use since colonial times. He highlighted the fact that in the 'feudal' (*sakdina*) system, there had indeed been a practice of land redistribution, as documented by Bourlet. However, the Tai or Lao *phya* ('lord') owned most of the paddy land, on which he could conscript villagers to work. Labour conscription was also usual for tasks like house construction and the organisation of festivals. Finally, at least two servants recruited from among the villagers took weekly turns to stay at the *phya*'s house and to accept any assignments (they even had to bring their own food).

This, together with arbitrary taxation – no one knew how many of the *piastres* collected by the *phya* were really passed on to the French authorities – gave fodder to the anticolonial and antifeudal propaganda disseminated by the Vietminh in the region. The last 'feudal' leader of Muang Kuon, Phya Leu, was chased away after the revolutionary takeover in 1953, briefly returned during the period of the coalition government in 1956 (probably thanks to what was still a functioning network of patronage) but was ousted again when the civil war escalated – 'and then no *phya* anymore', as the elderly *nai khet* whom I interviewed said.

The collectivisation of the 1970s (see Evans 1990a), when all the harvest was collected and redistributed, was considered a failure by most

villagers. The old man identified the main problem as being the fact that people became lazy as you got the same ration according to a certain score that depended on your family size, independent of how hard you worked. This led to severe food shortages and hunger, a downward spiral and eventually abandonment of the system (the old man laughed at how ridiculous it all was…). In the late 1980s, not only was the paddy land divided again but it was even reclaimed by the former landowners, thus reproducing old hierarchies.

All of the 50 ha of paddy land in Muang Kuon have been divided up, with land titles to all land, with no communal land remaining – except swidden land, which is used according to demand and availability. However, since 2003 it has not been possible to divide the land any further, according to the old man, because too many people have settled in Muang Kuon and land has become scarce. In 2005, the authorities decided that if people want to settle in Muang Kuon they can only come as businesspeople. Not surprisingly, most newcomers still cultivated swidden land in the vicinity, with resulting pressure on the forest base.

People in Huaphanh still claim that *het hai het na* (making swiddens and growing rice in paddy fields) is the basis of agriculture there. Cash crops like maize and other income opportunities have, in fact, meant that livelihoods in rural Laos have become more complex. However, rice-growing continues to be the focus of many villagers' livelihoods in the valleys of Huaphanh. But, as a Vietnamese maize trader quoted by Robert Cole (forthcoming) argues: 'If all of you only grow rice, you cannot get out of poverty.'

In his recent studies on livelihood change in Huaphanh, Cole (2021; Cole and Rigg 2019) discusses the way in which villages have experienced a rapid livelihood transition from what was primarily subsistence rice farming before 2006 to increasingly commercially-oriented livelihoods combining rice with hybrid maize thereafter. This transition has reflected government policies that are aimed at fulfilling the development objectives of economic growth and modernisation. This includes controlling and harnessing peripheral space and making 'productive' use of it (Barney 2009; Hirsch and Scurrah 2015).

Export-oriented production has been made possible through contract farming arrangements, which have helped to extend commodity

crops further into marginal spaces, connecting cross-border traders with farmers, opportunity-seeking Vietnamese traders and a cross-border expansion of the Vietnamese feed sector fuelled by increasing demand for maize (Cole forthcoming). This appeared to be a solution for food insecurity after the opium eradication campaigns of the 2000s. Farmers belonging to the different ethnic groups in Huaphanh learned quickly from the Vietnamese farmers-turned-traders, as Cole reports from his fieldsite in northern Huaphanh (see Lu 2017 for a similar example relating to rubber cultivation).

Vietnamese sold fertilizers, chemical sprayers and rice-mills, and the farmers would pay with maize production after the harvest. Thus, villagers depended on the trader to purchase their output and to build and maintain the feeder roads each year (this is what I learnt in Sam Tai district as well). Longstanding contacts implied trust, but also risk, as the villages in Huaphanh remained highly dependent on their Vietnamese trading partners. In 2017 people in Houamuang district (which is further from the Vietnamese border than are Sam Tai and Muang Kuon) complained that a drop in market prices resulted in Vietnamese traders not showing up to collect the harvest, leaving the villagers with rotting corn and no money to buy food.

The farming households of Huaphanh displayed a pioneering spirit in experimenting with new and sometimes risky crops. The female members of many of these households demonstrated a similar spirit in professionalizing the production and distribution of handwoven textiles (Stolz and Tappe 2021). Lao and Tai Daeng weavers in particular are renowned throughout Laos for their excellent weaving skills. Silken scarves and skirts from Huaphanh are highly esteemed by both domestic and international customers, and are sold in the boutiques of Vientiane and Luang Prabang or exported abroad.

In her inconspicuous wooden house, a well-established weaver from Sam Tai told me in 2017 about her customers in countries such as Japan, Australia, and USA, often diaspora people who appreciate what are regarded as the authentic weaving traditions of Huaphanh. However, her main customers are well-off urban people from Vientiane, especially the 'daughters-in-law of the elite' (*phu nyai*) who can afford these handmade silk textiles (instead of the cheaper fake ones from China). She mentioned in particular the daughter-in-law of Thongloun Sisoulith, who

was at that time Minister of Foreign Affairs, later prime minister, and who comes from Sam Neua.

One pioneer of this translocal business and an example of female mobility was Ms. Souksayphone, who inspired many local women to increase their production of textiles in order to generate income. There is such a high demand for these textiles that Ms. Souksayphone is able to maintain a network (extending into remote rural villages) of 200 weavers who work for her. She also runs two guesthouses in Sam Tai. She has, through all of this, established a profitable female socioeconomic network (also see Vallard 2017) that challenges the male *phu nyai* patronage system.

During the interview, the weaver called her daughter and her neighbours on the phone, asking them to bring products to sell to me. It was only when I listened to the recordings later that I realized that in one of these conversations she had said: 'Bring XY, as the *falang* [Westerner] is interested in traditional Tai Daeng patterns.' These are successful businesswomen, generating most of income that comes into the households to which they belong. Not surprisingly, looms are a common sight in virtually any Tai and Lao house, and also in Phong houses that have appropriated their neighbours' techniques and patterns (see below). Girls start weaving from the age of seven and eight, in the evening after school.

A young neighbour of the weaver showed me a particularly fine piece of weaving, with a very detailed pattern, the result of two months' work. She calculated a sale price for it of 500,000 Kip [around 50 euros]. This would imply a monthly income of 250,000 Kip if she made regular sales like this. She claimed that the amount she earns is not much, and that it is quickly spent on rice if there is a bad harvest; however, households in this area usually have enough rice, as well as having some maize to sell. If you compare standard salaries for civil servants, teachers etc. in Laos (which range from 250,000 to 500,000 Kip), this is quite a good income and it is easy to see how important weaving is for household subsistence. That said, it increases the massive workload for females, who also do most of the household labour, tending the chicken, weeding gardens and fields, etc.

Another interesting aspect of this amazing development of textile production in Huaphanh was the fact that successful weavers claim to master the different techniques and patterns of different ethnic groups.

Lao and Phong women highlighted their skills in emulating 'traditional' Tai Daeng styles, which are particularly in demand in Vientiane and Luang Prabang. This is only one aspect of mimetic appropriation in this multi-ethnic context, as the concluding section will show.

Processes of Mimetic Appropriation in a Multi-Ethnic Society

As I have discussed elsewhere (Tappe 2018), mutual mimetic appropriation is a key phenomenon of interethnic relations in upland Laos. The Austroasiatic Phong of Huaphanh are a case in point. Almost 100 years ago, the French administrator Lagrèze (1925) speculated that the Phong (like all 'Kha') showed 'a tendency to leave their customs and even their religion'. By this he probably meant certain animist ritual practices – 'their ancient customs'. Only 10 years later, French archaeologist Madeleine Colani (1935: 27) described the Phong as 'a race close to extinction'. Conversion to Buddhism and a lack of significant local material culture are put forward as key markers of this.

The Phong do indeed constitute a good test case for a process of sociocultural transformation that Grant Evans (2000) and Olivier Évrard (2019) discuss as Tai-isation or Lao-isation. Besides conversion to Buddhism – which had already taken place in precolonial times – the (mimetic) appropriation of Tai/Lao material culture, loanwords and sociopolitical structures exemplify this process (see Tappe and Badenoch 2021; Ladwig and Roque 2020; Jonsson 2010). A replica of the Sam Neua city pillar monument located next to the Buddhist temple suggests a self-consciously mimetic *muang*. And yet, even if they increasingly call themselves 'Lao Phong', indicating belonging to the Lao 'multi-ethnic' nation (see Évrard 2019), the Phong stress their specific Phong-ness and a sense of place, as the proud village community in Ban Saleuy demonstrates.

Besides cultivating their own language within the village community, the Phong have specific cosmological beliefs and ritual practices that even today distinguish them from their Lao Buddhist ('Lao Phut') neighbours. As with Austroasiatic speaking groups on the Boloven Plateau (Sprenger 2018), conversion to Buddhism produces shifts concerning the temporality and spatiality of the ritual cycle but does not completely transform these original systems. Conversion to Buddhism did not lead to cultural assimilation, and neither did the adoption of silk

weaving from the Phong's Tai and Lao neighbours. Such cultural borrowings have been vernacularised and constitute key markers of Phong local identity today (Tappe and Badenoch 2021; also see Évrard 2019; and Bouté 2018 on the Phunoy of Phongsali).

Grant Evans (2000) has proposed a one-sided process of Tai-isation of the Ksingmul (who are Austroasiatic speakers, like the Phong and the Khmu) through contact with the Tai Dam, especially with regard to their material culture, which is now virtually indistinguishable from Tai Dam material culture. Nathan Badenoch (forthcoming) criticizes Evans's conclusion that the Ksingmul are on an inevitable cultural merger with the Tai Dam, since the persistence of the Ksingmul language suggests that there is at least some resistance to hegemonic Tai culture. Badenoch adds that a Tai Dam discourse of alleged Ksingmul laziness is central to Evans' argument. Unfortunately, Evans seems to confuse laziness with alleged un-productiveness, thus reproducing socialist narratives of unproductive uplands that contrast with the work ethos that is cultivated among many upland groups (see Stolz 2021for the Khmu example).

Even if the Phong appear by and large indistinguishable from their Tai-speaking neighbours with regard to material culture – which seems to confirm Evans's argument regarding cultural assimilation – their oral history suggests a creative process of cultural appropriation that aims to strengthen Phong identity (Tappe 2021; Tappe and Badenoch 2021). The increasing use of the autonym 'Lao Phong' links self-identification to a specific positionality within the Lao PDR context, in particular as 'civilised' Buddhists. The politics of belonging and recognition are also evident in the 'official register' (Badenoch 2018), which uses the term 'Lao Mai' ('new Lao') as an ethnonym for the Ksingmul. As I learned from Siphanh in Viengxay, the Ksingmul hid Kaysone in the forest during the early insurgency against the French, and apparently received Lao Mai as an honorific and apparently inclusive ethnonym (also see Badenoch forthcoming).

Lao Buddhism also seems to function as an integrating principle vis-à-vis non-Buddhist people in the context of Lao-isation in the sense of national building. The opening ceremony of Viengxay's Buddhist temple in 2010 – in a region with a non-Buddhist majority of Tai Daeng and Hmong – managed to mobilize a large part of the population under the umbrella of national 'solidarity' (*samakkhi*). Following Lao and Tai mu-

sic and dance performances, a dozen Hmong schoolchildren performed a 'traditional' group dance – an ambiguous performance of inclusion and recognition, but also of cultural difference and even infantilisation of the minorities. During my conversations with Hmong observers of the ceremony, it appeared that most of them are either indifferent or pragmatic in their attitude to the Buddhist temple. As one old man put it: 'Our grandchildren will be Buddhists, anyway.'[8]

Besides Lao-isation in the Lao PDR context, long-term processes of mutual cultural borrowings (and different registers thereof) remain under-researched. Two interesting examples of the diffusion of specific elements across ethnolinguistic boundaries are the practice of ritually sharing a jar of rice beer (*lao hai*); and the demarcation of villages and fields with a *talaeo* – an ornamental structure made from rattan or bamboo – to ward off strangers and spirits or simply to ritually indicate taboo spaces. As these cultural phenomena appear among all the different ethnic groups of Huaphanh, this is less an asymmetric assimilation process than a series of mutual borrowings without a clear starting point, which eventually lead to the development of a transethnic ritual language operating in a culturally diverse and multilingual setting.

In 2010, on my first visit to Muang Kuon, a group of young Lao and Tai Daeng teachers invited me to talk about local history in one of their houses, a typical Lao house on wooden stilts. They produced a jar of *lao hai* for us to drink together – something that I still associated at that time with the 'ethnic' imagery on stamps and tourism brochures, where it is mainly used to represent 'Lao Theung' ('Uphill Lao', an outdated name for Austroasiatic groups; see Schlemmer 2017) culture. When I mentioned this, they insisted that this was a 'Lao Loum tradition' (*papheni Lao Loum*).

It would seem that the Lao of Huaphanh – described as Tai Neua ('Northern Tai') in French colonial sources – have incorporated certain elements usually associated with upland cultures. Still claiming to be 'Lao of the Lowlands', they have adopted livelihood patterns typical of other mountain-dwelling groups such as the Khmu or the Hmong – in particular swidden agriculture, due to the scarcity of land suitable for

8. This accords with Patrice Ladwig's (personal communication) recent observation of an increasing number of Hmong novices in the temple in Luang Prabang – another option for education and mobility for the children of rich Hmong families.

wet rice cultivation. Moreover, the *lao hai* – from which I have since been invited to drink in many villages belonging to different ethnic groups and to all ethnolinguistic categories – is a means of communication intelligible to everyone in Huaphanh: it is a means of integrating outsiders into an ephemeral (ritual) community (see Lissoir 2017 for an excellent study of the Tai Dam practice).

This reminded me of Edmund Leach's famous statement that 'people may speak different languages, wear different kinds of clothes, live in different kinds of houses, but they understand each other's ritual' (Leach 1954: 279). As Stéphane Gros (2007: 259) points out, Leach conceived of ritual mainly as a system of symbolic communication and a way of expressing the otherwise abstract social structures of a given society. Although Leach focused mainly on the circulation of wealth in the context of *mayu–dama* (wifegiver–wifetaker) relations, the underlying idea of a transethnic symbolic language can be transferred to different contexts such as the *lao hai* ritual of village hospitality.

There is no question that the *lao hai* creates a sense of solidarity that encompasses 'civilised' Lao Buddhists and their culturally different neighbouring groups. In this case the civilising process has included the adoption by the dominant group of cultural elements that used to be characteristic of the Other and that function as a means of interethnic communication. The *lao hai* expresses a temporal situation of communality despite difference, a performance of hospitality and temporal integration of a stranger into a village community. Moreover, it points to the fact that the upland groups of Huaphanh are more often than not spatially isolated and that essential networks of good exchange can only function through a specific ritual system of hospitality that permits strangers to enter other villages and create or reproduce social and economic relations. Latent hostilities are softened through common drinking. At the same time, hierarchies within the groups and are enacted and visualised.

Another case in point is the *talaeo* (see for example Formoso 2018; Anuman Rajadhon 1967), a bamboo ornament that marks areas as (temporally) taboo, e.g. graveyards. This symbol is so widespread among the different ethnic groups in upland Laos that one can only speculate about its origins and patterns of cultural diffusion. What matters here is that the *talaeo* is intelligible in various cultures with animist backgrounds –

including even the Buddhist Lao, whose cosmology is characterised by a manifold pantheon of ghosts (Holt 2009; Ladwig 2017). The belief in ghosts among many different ethnic groups arguably constitutes a transethnic 'moral milieu' (Durkheim and Mauss 1971: 811), although animist practices are frowned upon today as 'uncivilised' according to official *sivilai* ('modern', 'civilised') discourse. However, even the Lao and other Tai groups living in the uplands still perform buffalo sacrifices at important ritual occasions. This common ritual or symbolic language unites the different groups in the region. Thus, the upland frontier of Huaphanh is a centre in itself or at least a multi-centric region with diverse civilisational influences and internal interethnic dynamics where certain forms of symbolic communication create a sense of belonging to a common life-world.

Conclusion

As Gustav Izikowitz (1969: 142) once noted, interethnic interaction 'depends on the nature of the relations, the accepted evaluation of the different ethnic groups etc., and can lead to war, rebellion, persecution, flight, the imitation of customs, peaceful trade, and many other types of action'. I have discussed some aspects of the lifeworlds of Huaphanh in this paper. The region offers various vantage points from which to study interethnic dynamics, and also from which to study livelihood transformations and the dynamics of state integration with the discourses around memory that accompany these.

Huaphanh, in particular Viengxay, has been defined as the 'birthplace of the Lao PDR' and is thus a keystone of revolutionary historiography. Local discourses around memory are shaped by the master narrative of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, which highlights the valiant struggle of the 'Lao multi-ethnic people' against foreign oppressors. Alternative views hardly contest this narrative, as my discussion of the caves of Viengxay has shown. And yet different layers of this specific historical palimpsest remain, hidden under the heroic story of party and people enduring the war in the caves.

Meanwhile, urbanisation in Sam Neua and the processes of agrarian change also reflect another dynamic within the region, beyond the ossified commemorative politics of the government. Promised by the Party–State since the incipient of socialist Laos, economic change

has only recently been felt to any significant degree by the people of Huaphanh; and this has included unexpected consequences that are not always positive, such as increasing Vietnamese migration and new risks such as those that have accompanied the boom in maize-growing. With all these changes, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party's claim to power, with its associated imagery (as displayed in the Viengxay caves tour), is put into question. It remains to be seen how this will all play out in the coming years.



Photo: O. Tappe, 2019

Figure 11.2: Lao tourists on Phu Phathi (discussed on page 282).



Photo: O. Tappe, 2019

Figure 11.3: Displaying multi-ethnic heritage in Sam Neua (discussed on page 286).

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