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efforts of both secular and religious institutions by both the state and those opposed to the state, to define the collective, resulting in a politics of ritual displacement. As Palinkas (1997: 194) noted, "the politics of ritual displacement also provide an arena in which the local and the transnational are brought together to shape modern ethnic and religious identities". At the heart of this phenomenon is the contest for ritual space and control over how ritual practice is represented.

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This link with the transnational community is manifested on the occasion of the Chinese New Year with increasing demands on members of the community at the transnational level to donate and participate[18]. This is similar to Jean DeBernardi's (1994: 138) description of the Chinese folk religion in Penang. The practices of Chinese folk religion are shown to be not simply remnants of a once coherent Chinese religious culture, but "a central means to the Chinese community's awareness of its own history and identity and an opposition to the Malay-dominated Malaysian state's attempts to establish Malay culture as the basis for a new Malaysian cultural tradition".

IV. Conclusion

The idea that Western theories of modernization adopted by rulers of the new nation states of South East Asia would lead to an increased secularism had prevailed among scholars and policymakers for a long time. The collective book edited by Keyes, Hardacre and Kendall (1994) provided some interesting first answers, arguing, on the contrary, that "as these states have modernized, religion has become more, not less, significant" (1994: 3).

The dialectic between religion and the state has, until recently, been a national affair, internal to each country. In contemporary times, secular governments such as the Lao PDR co-opt religion (or, more accurately, those aspects of religion of which they approve) in the interests of nation-building. Religion, in other words, often becomes a major ingredient in the construction of a new national identity. This desire for control through religion results in the potential for minority religions to be perceived as threats to power. In Theravada Buddhist countries, many observers have noted—from ancient times to the twentieth century—how Buddhist monarchs and former nation states attempted

[18] In 2020 all the Ho originating from Phongsaly, and their descendants who had settled in the USA or Australia, Macau, etc., were invited to return for the New Year celebration.

to suppress the threat posed by 'spirit cults' (Mendelson 1963, Tanabe 1988) or the "supernatural" (Jackson 1989)[19], because of their local (versus national) influence and power. More recently, the Lao state has abandoned trying to ban local religions, but has increased its control over them through the staging of their public manifestations and removal of their devotional content by extending folklore from the category "spirit cults" to "religion-tradition".

But today, in continental South East Asia, increasingly the threats posed by religion to the state no longer originate at the local level; now powerful transnational religions threaten national governance. In Laos' case, the dominant religion is tightly linked with the state at the national level, while 'minority religions' prove to be increasingly connected to transnational networks. Supra-national religious identity (for example, adherence to Christianity) renders state co-option more problematic than in the case of nationally organized religious traditions such as Buddhism or "*satsana phi*". This is evidenced by the Ho, who increasingly engage with Chinese religiosity, and in the Khmus' conversion to Christianity. The first example serves to demonstrate that groups have more room to negotiate with the state about the representation or evolution of their cultures if they are less isolated, involved in cross-border relationships, or are linked to diasporas. The case of the Christian Khmu—quite the reverse of the Phounoy, for whom 'religion' means integration—illustrates, on the contrary, how conversion to a transnational religion can be perceived, both by the converts and by the state, as a major break with national identity.

Modernization has thus created a certain tension among ethnic, national and religious identities. This tension arises, in part, from the often-competing

[19] "That is, because of its individualistic emphasis on personal protective power. Thai supernaturalism is seen as undermining the collective or community identity nurtured by participation in the national Buddhist church. As indicated by Sophanakhanaphorn's reference to 'the nation' and 'religion' above, supernaturalism is regarded as weakening the authority of Buddhism and as threatening its legitimatory function in Thai society" (Jackson 1989: 58).

Among the Ho were former Chinese dignitaries and officials who, in Phongsaly, became public figures notable for their acute sense of business and trade both within the city and across the province. Several waves of migration eventually dispersed the group throughout the country and abroad. The first migration occurred after the communist takeover of Laos in 1975, when many Ho fled to America, Australia and Macau (China); the second wave occurred in the late 1990s with the state prohibition on opium production. Gradually, investments of opium money and expanding trade in the country's major cities led to their relocation to Vientiane (near the old Chinese district) as well as to major northern cities (Luang Prabang, Oudomxay), where they developed trade with Chinese companies. The Ho, who speak a dialect very close to Mandarin Chinese, have largely benefited from the opening of Laos to China and cross-border trade.

In the current urban context, where religious minorities (*satsana phi* and Christians) tend to maintain a low profile if they do not fully abandon their ritual practices—because those practices are devalued, folklorized, or simply cannot be maintained in an urban and multi-ethnic context—the Ho are an exception.

The Ho are not Buddhists. In Lao language, they say they belong to the "*satsana phi*" category. Unlike other non-Buddhist minorities in the country, they are the only ones (along with the Hmong and Yao, other largely "sinicized" groups) to possess a script using Chinese ideograms. The cycle of Ho ritual ceremonies is not related to the agrarian or livestock cycle, but instead, to ancestors (and to trade). There is no institutionalized priest, and ritual practices are performed within individual households; therefore, migration did not affect Ho ritual practices.

On the contrary, with the growth of cross-border trade, we can observe a revival of Ho rituals in urban locations. Household rites have gain more visibility. For example, the Ho temple (*miaofang*) has been enlarged and embellished with Ho emigrants' money and family altars are clearly visible from the street. Neighbouring China's influence is apparent in this process on all levels. When ritual

elements are missing or forgotten, the Ho consult the Chinese rites on YouTube; there is an abundance of New Year's "Chinese" costumes (purchased over the border), and above all, an increasing interest in participating in this transnational 'great religion' practised by the Chinese of South East Asia, China and beyond.



Pic.6 Above: Ho's New Year Celebrations, February 5, 2019. Below: left, the Ho temple (miaofang); right: a house decorated for the New Year. All elements (clothes, temple, Chinese characters) were much less visible in the public space twenty years ago. Photo by V. Bouté.

Over the past few years and in this context, Phounoy ethnic songs and costumes—which were previously only used during provincial cultural or political festivals to highlight the multi-ethnicity of the province—have been introduced "offstage" into Buddhist ceremonies. The Phounoy wear their ethnic costumes during individual or family Buddhist temple events, such as ceremonies for the deceased or rituals to expel individual misfortunes or increase lifespan, etc. Instead of the spread of a standardized Buddhist way of practising coming from the capital Vientiane, one can observe an upholding of the old Phounoy—and also Tai Lue—way of performing ceremonies, different from the ethnic Lao practices.



Pic.5 Buddhist Ceremony among the Phounoy in Honour of the Deceased, February 2019. Women and men now wear black clothes with red borders - an innovation based on a traditional costume that had not been worn for about 30 years. Photo by V. Bouté.

Here, playing the game of integration into nation-state through an old, strong commitment to religion seems at first sight to be a strategy which pays off for the Phounoy. At the provincial level, as well as in other northern provinces, the adoption of Buddhism allows the Phounoy to assert local practices of this "national" religion; being at the heart of the organization of Buddhist ceremonies in places where they are the majority offers them greater ethnic visibility. Additionally, it gives them a way of showing "their" great traditions embodied in various Buddhist festivals—unlike other provincial ethnic groups who are only allowed to express their "ethnic" identity on a yearly basis.

However, does this strategy really strengthen the group's ethnic identity? According to the National Census, between 1995 and 2015, 25 percent of the Phounoy people did not register under the ethnic category "Phounoy". Given that a quarter of the group has thus merged into the ethnic Lao population, the state's goal of integration is being realized even in this case.

The Ho: Towards a Transnational Religion: Escaping the State?

The Ho, with a population of 12,000, are the third largest ethnic group in Phongsaly's capital (after the Phounoy and the Khmu). The Ho were originally Han peasants who, fleeing from wars in Yunnan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, settled in Phongsaly province. Some joined a small Phounoy village in the beginning of the twentieth century and, as a result, the two groups were the first inhabitants of what became the capital of the fifth military territory administered by the French. They also founded other villages where they lived mainly from cattle breeding, peddling, and until the early 2000s, from poppy cultivation. In official statistics, they constitute their own ethnic category, i.e. they are clearly distinguished from the Chinese, and they account for one of the forty-nine officially registered ethnic groups.

teach Buddhism to Lao ethnic groups. Van, a middle-aged Khmu woman working as a hairdresser, explained, for instance:

> "They explained us that when one is Buddhist (*phut*), one should not believe in spirits; but when one belongs to spirits religion (*satsana phi*), one can believe in Buddhism; that's new. Buddhism is a good religion, right? It's followed in the whole country".

The second tendency is Protestant conversion, which is increasing among the Khmu in the neighbouring provinces of Luang Prabang, Luang Namtha and Oudomxay, as well as across the whole country, where most Protestants are members of ethnic Mon-Khmer groups (US Department of State 2017). As Keyes (1996) and Salemink (2009) noted, this is a widespread phenomenon in continental South East Asia among those groups where "the practice of localized animistic religions is markedly disjunctive with the world in which they now live" (Keyes 1996: 288)[16]. Protestant conversion, then, becomes a form of "modernization". Through the alliance with a major world religion that is different from the dominant religion of the nation or state, ethnic difference is still expressed, but without inferiority.

But unlike the cases pointed out by Salemink (2009: 47), where "Christian conversion can be seen as marking difference without breaking off contact", here the conversion works as a point of rupture with the state. Converts cannot ignore that they have adopted a religion which is considered 'foreign', to which the Lao state is strongly opposed (as noted above), and of which a negative vision has been widely spread through national rhetoric including: "We already have a religion, Buddhism is good enough", or, "We do not want people to take religion from another country".

[16] But the same observation can be made elsewhere. HSIEH Shih-chung (1987) thus noted that in Taiwan the aborigines' almost universal belief in Christianity could be seen "as a means of releasing long-term anxiety about Han domination and of coping with the impact of the Han civilization" (*op. cit.* in HSIEH 1995: 323, footnote 17).

The Phounoy: Mirroring the Power through Religion

A Tibeto-Burmese-speaking group of nearly 40,000, the Phounoy emerged as an ethnic community during the eighteenth century by constructing a privileged "mirroring" relationship with the various Tai and Lao realms dominating the region. As guardians of the borders and allies of the colonial authorities administering Phongsaly province, they became crucial allies of the communist administration and eventually took control of key positions in local administration. They securely established themselves as indispensable intermediaries between state power and the other mountain ethnic groups (Bouté 2018).

Another characteristic distinguishes the Phounoy from other non-Tai ethnic groups in Laos: they are Buddhists, and have been for quite a long time. Their Buddhist ways of performing ceremonies, as well as the rules for monks, were directly inspired by their Tai Lue neighbours[17]. In Phounoy villages, Buddhism was closely associated with—as is the case in ethnic Lao villages—spirit cults addressed to the rice and territorial spirits. The purges carried out in the 1960s to purify Buddhism of superstitions resulted in the disappearance of devotions made to territorial spirits, or to ancestors in homes.

However, though most Phounoy now living in urban settings, unlike the Khmu, they maintain a strong identity of tradition. Being the largest Buddhist population in the province, Buddhism is closely associated with them at the local level (a panel detailing Phounoy history is located at the provincial stupa). The Phounoy themselves finance the construction of new pagodas, supply them with monks, and thereby establish their prestige.

[17] The Tai Lue are a Lao-Tai-speaking population, located mainly in Sipsong Panna in Yunnan province. Like the Lao and the Thai (in Thailand), they were organized in principalities. Those living in Phongsaly province were, until the end of the nineteenth century, part of the twelve Panna principalities.

The Khmu: An Oscillation between Integration into the State and Contesting the State

The Khmu are a Mon-Khmer-speaking population of some 700,000 persons—the largest one in Laos after the ethnic Lao—living mostly in northern and central Laos. Those living in Phongsaly city are mostly employed by the army. In rural areas, before they joined the army and left to live in the city, the Khmu had a ritual cycle focused on rice culture and dedicated to territorial spirits (mountain spirits, village spirits, cemetery spirits, etc.) with specialized and sometimes hereditary officiants.

When I inquired about religion and rituals among the urban Khmu in Phongsaly, I discovered that little remained of their "*satsana hitkong*" (religion-tradition), especially for the growing majority who had never experienced village life. Former rituals were linked to places (mountains, rice fields) as well as to a specific community (the village) and to cultural practices (tending rice fields) which did not exist in the urban context. Some of the oldest people emphasized the incompatibility of traditional animist beliefs with modern conditions. For instance, due to the road, the ritual for the village cloistering is no longer possible, nor can traditional funerals be carried out because the cemetery is shared with other groups with different beliefs. When I asked about what remained of "Khmu traditions or customs" in this context, people had very little to say. They could only speak about their annual festival, Boun Greu, officially recognized by the state and the other ethnic groups in town. The younger people couldn't offer any example of Khmu traditions and mocked them as an ethnic group without "traditions". Some high-ranking, ethnic Khmu-origin members of the provincial government tried to increase the visibility of their own group by making the Boun Greu festival a more consequential event. The effort failed as the initiators could not generate sufficient support from the Khmu population, because they faced difficulties rallying people around a common definition of the Khmu tradition.



Pic.4 Boun Greu Festival organized by "Sensaly Guest House" in Phongsaly Province 2019 (the owner invites her friends, Khmu, Ho and Phounoy to celebrate and wear ethnic Khmu clothes (@Cortesy: Seng)

In this context, two tendencies related to religious conversion emerge among the Khmu. The first is a tendency to occasionally join the pagoda for practical reasons (for instance, for the cremation of the deceased; cemeteries do not exist in urban places, and the crematorium is the property of the Buddhist pagoda) and social motives. This Khmu-Buddhist conversion does generate generational conflict between, on the one hand, the older Khmu—who still say they believe in the "religion of the spirits"—and the younger ones who want to join the pagoda and the "religion of the Buddha" (because everybody is going). As the majority of converts do not master the Buddhist models, codes and rules, they are considered by other Buddhist ethnic groups in the city—the Phounoy, the Tai Lue—as second-rate Buddhists[15]. Note that the Khmu conversion to Buddhism is strongly endorsed by the state, which also encourages monks to

[15] This observation is also noted by other scholars among ethnic minorities in Thailand. Kammerer (1990), for instance, observed that among the Akha in Thailand, conversion to the Protestant religion was chosen primarily to avoid being 'second-rate' Buddhists.

of repressive measures; Buddhism accompanies a powerful centralized monarchy, while animism coincides with the triumph of local forces and rebellion. Similarly, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the King of Thailand launched reform movements aimed at integrating the Tai Yuan people in the north of the country, which until then enjoyed great autonomy; these measures are said to have been based on a desire to reduce local religious practices, potentially linked to secessionist intentions that would call into question the unity of the country and royal power (Keyes 1971).

There is thus a permanent feature in the articulation between state and centralized/local powers and Buddhism/spiritual cults that transcends the case of the particular relationship of the Laotian party-state to religions. How does this articulation between state power and authority and local religions and traditions translate on the scale of a multi-ethnic province of northern Laos?

III. Local Response to this Religion-Tradition Link Driven by the State

While Laos was originally portrayed as a rural, mountainous country where individual ethnic groups lived in separate villages, Laotian provinces today are increasingly characterized differently. Laos is experiencing growing urbanization due to forced displacements of mountain populations towards the plains and the roads (Goudineau 1997*b*), imposed and binding agrarian policies (Baird and Evrard 2017), and the development of trade and increased wealth of a middle class. As mono-ethnic villages shrink, multi-ethnic small towns and provincial capitals are growing as a result of rural-urban migrations (Bouté 2017).

How is the religious coexistence of different groups developing in this context? Is this religious heterogeneity a potential factor in challenging the

hegemonic authority of the state which attempts, as noted previously, to keep all this under control? To answer this question, we consider three different groups that are perceived as 'ethnic minorities'—the Khmu, the Phounoy and the Ho—located in the provincial capital of Phongsaly province, in northern Laos[13]. I will present how these three groups respond differently to this state-enforced hybridization of tradition and religion[14].



Pic.3 The provincial capital of Phongsaly province on heights of the mountain (1400m), Northern Laos, home to members from three "ethnic minorities"—the Khmu, the Phounoy and the Ho. Photo by V. Bouté.

[13] This province is bordered by China and Vietnam, and there are very few ethnic Lao.

[14] I would like to point out that I have observed a similar configuration to the one described here in other small cross-border towns where I have conducted surveys previously, such as the town of Nateuil, 20 kilometers from the Chinese border in Luang Namtha province, or the main town of Boun Tay district.

‘”stages”, and foreign experts — who were mistrusted before — are now invited to share their knowledge of specific groups or to participate in the creation of museums in the provinces (ibid.: 43).



Pic.2 National Day Celebration, Phongsaly Province, Dec. 2018. The inhabitants of the province were invited to dress in the emblematic clothes of “their” ethnic group and to make a parade, representing the ethnic diversity of the province, for the celebration of the national day. A woman, at the head of each group, carries a sign with the name of the ethnic group.

The religious festivals of some ethnic groups have been included in this cultural exhibition. By virtue of the principle of equal treatment of all ethnic groups, and at the request of high-ranking military ethnic officers in particular, the two most populous groups, the Khmu and the Hmong (who are also depicted—with ethnic Lao—as emblematic of the multi-ethnic nature of the nation), have each been granted an emblematic festival modelled on the Lao

New Year (*Pimay*). This acknowledgement has been extended to other minorities, and now every official provincial radio and TV station covers all regionally associated “New Year” celebrations[11].

Interestingly, in reality, officially recognized ‘ethnic’ festivals do not resemble what people used to do in the past; they have been cleansed of their devotional and spiritual content. From household or lineage ceremonies, they became—according to the state vision—collective and village festivals. They mainly consist of the promotion of beautiful costumes and ‘nice traditions’ and the celebration of the perpetuation of a reinvented normative tradition. An indicative key of this ‘folklorization’, and especially of this forced hybridization of tradition and religion, is the new term invented by the Ministry of Home Affairs in 2016 to replace the category ‘spirit cults’: *satsana hitkong* (religion-tradition).

I argue that the effect and/or objective of this policy of “culturalization” of local ethnic religions is to rid them of the devotional aspects that were once manifested in collective rites addressed to local spirits. Everything has been done to eliminate practices that might help federate a group, with forms of “localisms” being perceived as competitive and dangerous to state legitimacy and national unity. This is reminiscent of similar forms of repression carried out by the rulers of the small Sipsong Panna (now southern Yunnan) kingdom in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries against village cults, as they viewed them as competing with territorial cults (e.g. *phi müang*)[12]. In another way, too, we can relate this situation to what Mendelson (1963) pointed out about the history of Burma: when Buddhism is strong, spirit worship is weakened—partly because

[11] A similar shift has been analysed by Malarney (2002) in Vietnam where a number of ceremonies and rituals, once stigmatized as superstition, are increasingly tolerated as long as they are not perceived as disruptive or politically subversive. Malarney emphasizes several reasons for this shift, one being the authorities’ deep concerns about the detrimental impact of Western culture to which many Vietnamese are increasingly exposed. (In some ethnic minority areas, there are parallel efforts to promote traditional culture as a bulwark against the encroachment of evangelical Christianity.)

[12] See Tanabe 1988.

A tangible sign of this urge to control is that, despite the extensive diversity of religious and spiritual practices in the country, only five religions are officially recognized: Buddhism (according to the 2015 National Census, 64.7 percent of the population is Buddhist. Buddhism is also presented in the Ministry of Home Affairs report as a "national and indigenous religion linked to the national unity"). Then there are three religions which are presented as "foreign religions": Bahai is a small community of 800 persons based in three cities of the country; Islam has approximately 1600 adherents, the vast majority of whom are foreign permanent residents of South Asian or Cambodian (ethnic Cham) origin, and Christianity. This last category includes Catholics (45,000 persons) and Protestants (67,000)—the latter rapidly grew during the last decade, and Lao Evangelical Church officials now estimate that Protestants number as many as 100,000. The fifth category was first called "Others" in the 2005 Census, noting that "animism was not regarded as a religion". This category was revised in the 2015 Census as "*bo thue satsana/seua thue phi lue banpha bulut*", i.e. "those who don't believe in religion/believe in spirits or spirits of ancestors". It is more commonly used in the provincial census and among the population under the unregistered name of *satsana phi* (spirit cults)[10]. This latest category indiscriminately includes the very diverse religious practices of one-third of the population of the country. As with Buddhism, these spirit cults are considered local and indigenous practices.

[10] This is a Lao term that consists of the aggregation of the word *satsana* (religion initially referring to Buddhism) and "spirits".

Table P2.9 Total Population by Sex and Religion

Religion	Population			Percent		
	Total	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male
Total	6,492,228	3,237,458	3,254,770	100.0	100.0	100.0
Buddhist	4,201,993	2,104,718	2,097,275	64.7	65.0	64.4
Christian	112,230	56,403	55,827	1.7	1.7	1.7
Bahai	2,122	943	1,179	*	*	*
Islam	1,605	749	856	*	*	*
Other	19,901	8,279	11,622	0.3	0.3	0.4
No religion	2,040,365	1,009,893	1,030,472	31.4	31.2	31.7
Not stated	114,012	56,473	57,539	1.8	1.7	1.8

Table 1 The five religions officially recognized by the Lao State.
《No religion》 = in the Lao Language Version of the Census: ບໍ່ຖືສາສະຫນາ/ເຊື່ອຖືຜີ ຫຼືບັນພະບຸລຸດ "Those who don't believe in religion/believe in spirits or spirits of ancestors". (Source: Steering Committee for Census of Population and Housing, 2016)

Collusion between Ethnic Traditions and Religions: A Way for the State to Gain Control?

The state seems to face several contradictions. While it aspires to build a national culture based on ethnic Lao customs and therefore on Buddhism, it also aims to promote multi-ethnicity and protect the traditions of all ethnic groups. Advertising the diversity of ethnic groups' cultures, the state puts limitations on their religious practices. This leads to a legitimate question: How does the state manage the "ethnic religions" (spirit cults) which are representative of almost 40 percent of the population?

As Goudineau (2015) has shown, the discourse on multi-ethnicity has not fundamentally changed, but its form has evolved over recent years in Laos. Never before has so much importance been officially given to the cultural heritage of minority groups. Officials at the district level are required to "present" their local traditions. In addition, increasing numbers of villagers are mobilized to show their own "ethnic characteristics" in new festivals or on new

Religion is indeed identified as a possible threat to the Lao state, as it is the most likely channel for two 'evils': superstition and division.

The reforms aimed at purifying Buddhism, mentioned above, first of all addressed what were considered to be superstitions: beliefs in spirits, worship of territorial spirits, cults addressed to ancestors inside people's homes, and sacrifices to spirits, etc. These are all the different elements which are part of the religions of non-Buddhist ethnic groups. Therefore, they were stigmatized as irrational, backward and even stupid. These reforms led to purges, particularly among Buddhist minorities (such as the Phounoy), where monks from the capital came to burn altars to the ancestors and the paraphernalia of shamans (Bouté 2018). Similar measures were taken with other non-Buddhist minorities at the bidding of the local authorities: in Phongsaly province, the Khmu's spirit altars were also destroyed; in Luang Namtha province in the 1980s, mountain worship officiants were sent to re-education camps for a few days after celebrating village rites to the spirit of the mountain[6]; in the south, the Katu were forbidden to perform large, lavish buffalo sacrifices (Goudineau 1997*a*).

Nowadays, beliefs in spirits, even if they are no longer directly attacked, remain stigmatized. This is illustrated, for example, in documents produced for provincial officials by the Ministry of Information and Culture to label villages as "cultural villages" (*ban vatthanatam*). Encouraging the promotion of good behaviour and good culture, the brochure puts forward several criteria: good moral behaviour (no divorces, no single mothers, etc.), impeccable cleanliness of the village area, and the rejection of "superstitions". This latter criterion was left to the discretion of provincial and local authorities. In 2017, in Phongsaly province, I asked about villages that could be labelled "cultural villages", and I mentioned the name of this or that village. Then, the authorities replied, embarrassed: "Ah no, these people are practising shifting cultivation, it's a sign of backwardness"; "In this one, the inhabitants still believe in spirits. They cannot be cultural villages". In fact, the only ten villages in the province to have been labelled "cultural" were Buddhist villages practising irrigated rice cultivation on the plain.

[6] Interviews conducted in Ban Nateuil, Luang Namtha province, November 2012.

The government strongly emphasized another problem potentially caused by religion: the risk of dividing the nation. *De facto*, Article 9 of the Constitution discourages all acts that create divisions between religious groups and persons. It urges awareness of enemy strategies taking advantage of religious affairs in order to oppose the current government regime (Maha Khampheuy 2005: 22). The government has interpreted this clause to justify restrictions on religious practice by all religious groups, including the Buddhist majority and animists[7]. Even if it is not mentioned specifically, these provisions also target Christianity and, more particularly, the numerous evangelical churches[8]. The party's stance led authorities, notably at local levels, to intervene in activities of minority religious groups, especially Protestants, on the grounds that their practices disrupted the community. Several documents report occasional displays of intolerance towards minority religious groups, again notably the Protestants, such as eviction from villages, conflicts between ethnic groups, forced relocation to new areas, arrests and detentions[9].

[7] We can find other examples in the Constitution such as: "some religious workers have infringed on the rules and laws of the Lao PDR, creating sabotage and destroying harmony among Lao ethnic people" (Instructions of the President of the Lao Front for National Construction 2002), or, "they are wrongful people (…) who use religion as a tool to oppose and destroy our new regime as well as government and party policies" (Instructions of the Central Committee of the Lao Front for National Construction on Registration and Formulation of Religious Organization, Sect and Religious Committees in Lao PDR 2004). This is a very similar vision to that of neighbouring Vietnam: in 2003, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) produced yet another Resolution (No. 25) on government administration over religious organizations: "The government guarantees respect for religious freedom and the realization that religion and faith can fulfill the spiritual needs of the people", adding in Article 8: "Any using or abusing (*loi dung*) of religious worships for the purposes of creating superstition and other unlawful activities are strictly prohibited".

[8] Only the Evangelical Church and the Seventh-day Adventist Church are registered.

[9] See Foreign & Commonwealth Office (2016); US Department of State (2017).

before the integration, the form that Buddhism would take was first revised and transformed by the new leaders of the country. Teachings delivered by the monks to the laity were changed to reflect communist ideals, and religious ceremonies were tightly controlled. In addition, in order to avoid jeopardizing the establishment of a "modern" and scientific socialist nation, the communist state rejected anything related to beliefs in spirits (*phi*).

The attitude of the ruling communist party towards Buddhism softened somewhat after the economic reforms of 1986. This situation has gradually evolved with, on the one hand, the need to build a unified national history and culture (in a country known for its great ethnic diversity and divided by war) and, on the other hand, with the imperative for party elites to build legitimacy based on this history and culture, conceived as that of the Lao majority ethnic group — of which Buddhism is one of the characteristics (Evans 1998, 2002). For the last two decades, Buddhism has been given a prominent place in the Lao PDR's policy regarding religions. Although the government does not recognize a state religion, its provision of financial support and promotion of Buddhism, along with its willingness to exempt Buddhist groups from a number of restrictions, has given the religion an elevated status — at least until the promotion of a new decree in 2016[2]. Kaysone Phomvihane, the party's central committee president (1992), stated: "Buddhism contributed the greatest benefit for the preservation and the development of the national culture"[3]. Similarly, Grant Evans observed that in the Constitution enacted in 1991, "the profile of Buddhism was also upgraded from one religion among others, to being the one specific religion named in the documents" (Evans 1998: 65). This more tolerant

[2] A 2016 decree with the stated intent of clarifying rules for religious practice extended registration requirements to Buddhist groups, which had previously enjoyed a de facto exemption, and defined the government's role as the final arbiter of permissible religious activities.

[3] In Maha Khampheuy Vannasopha, *Religious Affairs in Lao P.D.R.: Policies and Tasks*. Vientiane: Department of Religious Affairs, Lao Front for National Construction, Central Committee, 2005.

attitude was evident in through increased participation and visible support of Buddhism by the party cadres, including demonstrating devotion during Buddhist ceremonies; conspicuous religious patronage of Buddhist activities (Evans 1998); the integration of several Buddhist festivals as national holidays; and erection by the state of Buddhist stupas (*that*) in each provincial capital as national landmarks[4].

A Different Challenge for the State vis-à-vis Religious Diversity

While the government had to swiftly deal with the country's extensive ethnic diversity, it found itself facing a dilemma: it needed to recognize the cultural diversity of the country's populations, find cultural unity and forbid the development of "superstitions". While the scattering of the various ethnic minorities across the territory never led to indigenous or territorial claims, it was different for religion. Several insurrections led by charismatic leaders between the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth succeeded in unifying different villages and sometimes different ethnic groups. All were religion-based messianic or millenarian movements, such as the Khmu unified rebellion at the end of the nineteenth century (Proschan 1998), the Hmong millenarian rebellions[5], and the anti-colonial multi-ethnic millenarian movements in southern Laos on the Bolaven Plateau (Baird 2013; Gay 1989). Although the Lao PDR Constitution ensures the right of Laotians to believe or not to believe in a religion, and the right to choose a religion, all religious activities remain under the strict control of the Central Committee of the Lao Front for National Construction and, since 2016, the Ministry of Home Affairs.

[4] The 2016 decree states the government may continue to sponsor Buddhist facilities, incorporate Buddhist rituals and ceremonies in state functions, and promote Buddhism as an element of the country's cultural and spiritual identity and as the predominant religion of the country.

[5] The Hmong messianic movements occurred not only in Laos, but also in Vietnam and Thailand (Culas 2005).

or Vietnamese, the Lao PDR refused any recognition of nationality or regional autonomy, or as in Burma, divisions into "ethnic states". Instead, multi-ethnic solidarity in the context of a single and indissoluble Lao nation was proposed, to be supported by a national culture, the latter being modelled on Lao-Tai cultural norms. This was only partly because the Lao-Tai constituted a majority, and was primarily because the group had the highest level of "cultural development" (Goudineau 2015). As Kaysone Phomvihane, the party's central committee president stated:

> "Lao culture must be the basic culture shared by all the ethnicities, and must be the one to provide the connections for the exchange of culture between all the ethnicities; spoken and written Lao is the common language, and written Lao is the regular writing of all the ethnic groups". (op. cit. in Evans 1999: 171)

Thus, the Lao state has adopted a contradictory stance towards ethnic minorities. On one hand, the national Constitution acknowledges and hence protects the multi-ethnicity of the country; the state has been tasked with preserving the intangible heritage of all ethnic groups within the country. On the other hand, as a promoter of "modernity" and "progress", and more specifically, to aid the positive development and living conditions of these groups, the Lao PDR deploys several policies towards ethnic minorities which strongly encourage them to join what is regarded as the better ethnic Lao way of life. These policies have included arbitrary political decisions forcing massive displacements of highland communities to the lowlands (Goudineau 1997*b*), and a ban on shifting cultivation which has deeply impacted rural people's livelihoods as well as their cultural reproduction (Evrard and Baird 2017).

As a result, the ethnic issue (even if it has not really been a threat to the state in the past, apart from the Hmong rebellion) is under control. As ethnic communities are scattered among provinces and, in most groups, the political

structure does not traditionally exceed the village level, individuals do not really have a sense of a greater 'ethnic' community. It also appears any future threat remains minimal.

The Communist State of Laos and the Question of Buddhism

Since its advent, the Pathet Lao communist government has relied on Buddhism to establish national unity. Chinese and Cambodian communists neutralized religious institutions by demolishing monasteries and temples, murdering monks and generally forcing secularization. The need to build national unity in Laos forced the communist parties to behave differently and take advantage of ethnic Lao culture, and consequently, Buddhism. Therefore, the latter was integrated into official rhetoric to show that Buddhism and Marxism share a similar vision of the world, i.e. an ideal of social progress (Stuart-Fox and Bucknell 1982; Stuart-Fox 1996: 65).

As the Pathet Lao increased the use of the Sangha to establish its ideology, it gradually imposed its own vision of Buddhism and how it should be practiced in the country. The Pathet Lao government then had two expectations: on the one hand, to radically establish a break with "ancient" Buddhism (many of whose rituals were linked to royalty), and on the other hand, to reject anything that could hinder the constitution of a socialist and "modern" nation (e.g., to purge things in the Buddhist religious field related to beliefs in supernatural entities in order to establish a national religion free of all elements perceived as irrational). On 30 June 1976, the National League of Lao Buddhists made the following statement: "In the social field, the Association will defend all fine customs and habits of the people and the good morality of religions, while eliminating superstitious practices and all other social evils left behind [by] the old regime (...) The spread of Buddhist morality must accord with the line and policies of the Laos People's Revolutionary Party ..." (Evans 1998: 61). Even



Pic.1 Map of Northern Laos and Phongsaly Province. (@G. Schlemmer)

II. Lao State and Religion

Wishing to build the unity of the young Lao PDR, the new government of Laos faced two challenges: the question of the integration of the different ethnic minorities in the country and the question of its position, as a Marxist-Leninist party, regarding religion. Indeed, according to scholars and policymakers, Western theories of modernization adopted by rulers of the new South East Asian nation states should have led to increased secularism. But what happened in Laos? I will review here the evolution of the position of the state regarding

religion, showing that it has on the one hand defined what a good religion is, while on the other hand rejecting other less prominent or local religions, considering them "false beliefs". This has led to the adoption of several paradoxical attitudes, particularly towards ethnic minorities.

State Management of Multi-ethnicity

When it was created, the Lao PDR government had to deal with something that sets Laos apart from neighbouring countries: extraordinary levels of ethnic and cultural diversity. The ethnic Lao account for only 50 percent of the country's total population (6,400,000 inhabitants in 2015), while the other 50 percent is divided among forty-eight officially registered ethnic groups. Another characteristic of the Lao PDR is a major cultural division between the Lao-Tai majority, largely Buddhist and practising irrigated rice cultivation, and non-Buddhist ethnic minorities (thus labelled as "animist") practising dry rice cultivation in the foothills of the mountains and adhering to various slash-and-burn agricultural methods. Valley inhabitants manifest a cultural unity based mainly on a common adherence to Theravada Buddhism, while highland societies include a wide diversity of social structures and religious systems.

Upon taking power in 1975, the communist government of the Lao PDR made it clear that it would make the unity of the country a priority. It promised that every minority could retain its "ancestral customs" and that the party would ensure that all ethnic groups were treated equally. Indeed, liberation of the country had relied largely on rural ethnic groups. Under the new regime, minorities initially enjoyed special privileges, including formal representation in several institutions (in the National Assembly, where the two vice presidents were from "ethnic minorities", and in the Front for National Construction), and were able to obtain high positions in some provincial governments and in the army (Rathie 2017). But unlike the early revolutionary positions of the Chinese

populations of Northern Laos, considered “ethnic minorities”, responded to the centralizing and homogenizing vision of the state.

Keywords: State, Ethnic Minorities, Religious Changes

I. Introduction

As a communist state, Laos did not adopt atheism in absolute principle. Unlike the initial situation in communist China or in Cambodia with the Khmer Rouge, the Pathet Lao communists quickly gave up rejecting religion when they took power in 1975. They tried instead to integrate Buddhism into their Marxist reading of the country’s development, seeing it also as a force for cultural unification given the nation’s ethnic diversity (Stuart-Fox and Bucknell, 1982; Evans, 1998). From a historical perspective, we will first look at state policies on religion in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (LPDR) in order to highlight the way in which the new state gradually addressed the country’s religious diversity. While officially promoting the cultural diversity of the country’s different ethnic groups, the place given to the religious beliefs and practices of ‘minority’ populations (subsumed under an ad hoc category *satsana phi*, i.e. spirit cults) has been singularly restricted. “How does the Laotian state consider and manage ethnic and religious diversity today?” This will be the first question we will ask here. We will then look at the different ways the members of three local populations of Northern Laos, considered “ethnic minorities”, responded to the centralizing and homogenizing vision of the state. Through ethnographic data I collected in Phongsaly, the northernmost province of Laos, bordering on China[1], we will see their adaptations, their resistance, or their “lines of flight.”

[1] Since 2018, I have benefited from the support of the European Project H2020 *Competing Regional Integrations in Southeast Asia* (CRISEA) for my field research conducted in Phongsaly province (January-February 2018 and February 2019). I also relied on previous fieldwork conducted in Khmu villages in Phongsaly and Luang Namtha provinces in 2017.

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專題論文

台灣東南亞學刊，16 卷 2 期，2021 年，頁 79-110

Religious Changes, Ethnic Minorities and the State in Laos

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Abstract

As a communist state, Laos did not adopt atheism in absolute principle. Unlike the initial situation in communist China or in Cambodia with the Khmer Rouge, the Pathet Lao communists quickly gave up rejecting religion when they took power in 1975. They tried instead to integrate Buddhism into their Marxist reading of the country's development, seeing it also as a force for cultural unification given the nation's ethnic diversity. From a historical perspective, we will first look at state policies on religion in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) in order to highlight the way in which the new state gradually addressed the country's religious diversity. While officially promoting the cultural diversity of the country's different ethnic groups, the place given to the religious beliefs and practices of 'minority' populations has been singularly restricted. We will look at the different ways the members of three local

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