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Ethnic Performance and the State in Laos: The *Boun Greh* Annual Festival of the Khmou

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Abstract: *Following the 1975 revolution, the Laotian statesmen adopted a modernising discourse that targeted "backward" traditions as undesirable. But since the 1990s, authorities have mitigated this standpoint, distinguishing "good" from "bad" traditions according to their compatibility with the program of national development, and professing their will to (re)instate the former as suitable expressions of culture in a multi-ethnic nation. This is manifest everywhere from the National Constitution to TV shows and ethnic catalogues. This paper analyses the implementation of these principles through the case of the* boun greh *New Year festival, an invented ethnic tradition of the Khmou, the largest ethnic minority in Laos. The article demonstrates that this implementation has consequentially implied the adoption of a grammar of national ethnicity; that this official framework paradoxically allows the Khmou to articulate demands for better recognition of their group; and that this process does not mute expressions of "cultural intimacy" at variance with this matrix. The official frame of ethnicity has been eventually adopted by the Khmou, but this state effect has multiplied the layers of expressed ethnicity: it cannot be equated with a unilateral regimentation that would deprive the Khmou of their agency.*

Keywords: *Laos, Khmou, ethnicity, ritual, invention of traditions, cultural intimacy*

Lao Star Channel and the Khmou

Most Laotians prefer the Lao Star Channel to the old-fashioned Lao National Television network. 'Discovery: Taking you to travel' (*Khônha phathiao*)[1] is one of its leading programs. The young, trendy host travels around the country presenting the

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various regions of Laos. Even if domestic tourism is still low in comparison with Thailand, it is growing, and together with travel-by-proxy programs such as 'Discovery', it is an important way to substantiate the imagined national community (Evrard and Leepreecha, 2009). In March 2008, a weekly episode filmed in Phôngsali Province was about a ceremony of the Khmou called *boun greh*. Throughout the festivities, the presenter followed a man who commented on the symbols, the games and the food. An elder explained that the festival was held to celebrate the New Year and to mark Khmou solidarity. The camera displayed scenes of authorities reading discourses, women wearing traditional clothes, people walking on stilts, drinking a toast to the year to come, sipping rice beer from jars around a ceremonial post, and clapping sticks rhythmically on the ground while dancers jumped in between them, all in short sequences with a pleasant soundtrack unrelated to the images. People were obviously enjoying good times, and the presenter punctuated the visit and his doings with positive comments: *sèp!* (delicious!) or *mouan!* (how pleasant!).

Boun greh turns out to be an invented tradition dating back to the beginning of the 1990s. Leaders of the Khmou minority took the opportunity offered by the post-Cold War thaw to promote recognition of their people's presence and identity in a nation dominated by the Lao culture. As demonstrated by this national broadcast, they have achieved at least part of their objectives, since many Laotians nowadays readily identify *boun greh* as the New Year festival of the Khmou.

The development of ethnic folklore, comprising elements such as nice clothes, distinctive foods and funny games has been extensively reported throughout Southeast Asia.[2] The bulk of the literature on that process emphasises the impact of national and international tourism, and stresses how local culture has been commodified to correspond to the visitors' expectations of authenticity. Orientalism, inner- or not, and the strategic use of culture as a resource, are key concepts in those approaches. It has been less common for scholars to investigate this process in relation to the state, but this is precisely what I do in this article. As it turns out, *boun greh* has less to do with tourism than with the Lao state's policies on culture and ethnicity, which is apparent from a study of its history and ethnography.[3]

Stressing the role of the state in cultural revitalisations often leads to a reification of the great divide between state and society as two freestanding and opposite entities. This distinction, although self-evident for the actors and for many scholars, is elusive when one comes to examining concrete social practices. The way this boundary is constructed in a social setting, through everyday processes, deserves much more attention than it has been given to date (Mitchell, 2006). *Boun greh*, or similar cultural displays, cannot simply be analysed as a means for "the state" to enforce its ideology on ethnicity in the national space. For sure, *boun greh* testifies to the pervasiveness of a certain "language of stateness" (Hansen and Stepputat, 2001); but Khmou leaders had a prominent role in its creation, and the ceremony as it is celebrated nowadays is a way for the Khmou to define their participation in the state in a performative way.

In this article, I first analyse the current policies on ethnicity and culture in Laos. After a rapid presentation of the Khmou and of the genesis of *boun greh*, I describe its actual celebration in a local setting. I then show how this celebration has to tally with the national agenda on ethnicity, and is at the same time instrumentalised by the Khmou to give voice to their presence and their rights. Turning backstage, I show how

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the official performance and discourses are paralleled and questioned by more intimate expressions of group identity. Eventually, I demonstrate the inappropriateness of depicting this process in terms of enforcement (by "the state") and resistance (by "the Khmou society"): my approach is rather to stress the framework defined by national policies, the agency of leaders and common people, and the cultural intimacy beyond the public scene.

A Multi-Ethnic Nation with Fine Customs

As a first step, I present the official ideology as phrased by public institutions. Relating to the introductory point, let us turn to a statement from the president of the Consultation Council of the Lao Star Channel – a private company, but closely monitored by state authorities. He declared recently in the *Vientiane Times* that the Lao Star Channel enables

> Lao people to know Laos better, love Laos and build trust in the Party's leadership of national development… Our station has promoted the preservation of Lao cultural heritage and the unique qualities of our multi-ethnic groups so that this heritage exists with the Lao people and the nation forever… The preservation of Laos' fine culture will remain the station's key focus, as the culture of multi-ethnic groups is being eroded from outside.[4]

This rhetoric is exemplified in the TV program referred to at the opening of this article. It should also resonate for anyone who has read official texts about ethnicity in Laos, since reproduction of official views is the norm in public announcements. In the Constitution, the population of Laos is repeatedly described as "multi-ethnic". This characteristic is more developed in Article 8:

> The state pursues the policy of promoting unity and equality among all ethnic groups. All ethnic groups have the rights to protect, preserve, and promote the fine customs and cultures of their own tribes and of the nation. All acts of creating division and discrimination among ethnic groups are prohibited. The state implements every measure to gradually develop and upgrade the levels of socio-economy of all ethnic groups.[5]

Among the institutions concerned with the issue of ethnic cultures, one of the most important is the Lao Front for National Construction, the country's largest mass organisation (Pholsena, 2006). It includes a Department of Ethnic Groups (*kômsônphao*), which has played an important role in informing the political debates on this issue. The Department published in 2005 a catalogue titled *The ethnic groups in Lao PDR*, which is useful for grasping the official standpoint (Petit, 2008b). Its introduction (p. c) is a good example of the regime's ambiguous rhetoric about ethnic minorities: it asserts the moral equality between the different groups but presents the Lao language and culture as national norms; it at once alleges a peaceful past and the role of the Party in the *process* of concord. As for the main part of the catalogue, it presents the different ethnic groups through short monographs bereft of any reference to history, conflict, migration,

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resettlement, land issues, politics or economy. In sum, the ethnic issue is equated with folklore and its sum of specific cultural, rural and archaising traits, a clear example of the "cataloguing syndrome" that has been repeatedly denounced by anthropologists in Laos (Evrard and Goudineau, 2005, p. 44). Yet however exasperating such catalogues may be (at least for anthropologists), they represent the official view of interethnic relations in Laos, and as such are an important "construction site" for ethnicity (Jenkins, 2008, pp. 65–66).

Concerning the "fine customs" of the ethnic groups, an excerpt from the official mission statement of the Department seems to rephrase the words of the national Constitution and the declaration of the TV Council's president:

> To preserve and promote fine custom, tradition, and culture which are unique for each ethnic group. On the contrary, to limit, solve and remove all obstacles which impede the development, unity and mutual assistance among the ethnic groups in compliance with the policy guideline of the Party and Government (Lao National Front, 2005, p. b).

The "fine custom, tradition, and culture" being promoted are not explicitly defined here, but a glance through the catalogue helps one to guess what they are. In the 73 pictures, a large majority (45) show women or couples (very few men) wearing traditional clothes or adornments; then come, in order of decreasing frequency, traditional music and dance, houses, feasts or ceremonies, and handicraft. Most of these are predictable "fine" elements of culture that can be comfortably displayed as ethnic emblems. Ceremonies, however, are more problematic, at least for the ethnic minorities: of the six depicted, five are well-known Lao festivals. More than the other elements listed, ethnic ceremonies are a touchy matter. Some of them, or some of their aspects, might be "obstacles which impede the development, unity and mutual assistance among the ethnic groups", as phrased in the second half of the paragraph above. Here the authors of the book reveal the evolutionist ideology pervading the state policies that intend to lead the different groups on the way to progress by eliminating some of their "archaisms" – a self-evident, praiseworthy objective for a popular democratic republic.[6]

One could guess from such boldly evolutionist assertions that the political authorities have tried to break with the whole set of popular "archaic" traditions, as they did in China during the Cultural Revolution. That has never been the case in Laos for many reasons, including the lack of state resources, the demographic weight of minorities, and the critical role of minority communities during the war of liberation. Furthermore, state agents should not be automatically equated with the official line, even in this single-party socialist republic. In 2008, I interviewed a researcher from the Department of Ethnic Groups. Contrary to my expectations, he was not a paper-pusher but a dedicated ethnographer. He explained that just after the revolution, the state was unfavourable to ceremonies because the emphasis was on economic development, but things have changed,[7] and now the government is trying to restore (*hét khun*) ceremonies. "Each ethnic group must have symbols of identity and a culture to present."[8] According to him, there is no well-defined policy about ceremonies and no interference from the administration, but people must take into consideration their own economic capacities. He gave the example of a ritual of the Brao, in southern Laos, in which 50 to 80 head of cattle

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used to be killed; the authorities advised the people not to waste so much, and to reduce the number of sacrificed animals. As for the New Year festivals, they should take no more than four or five days, for similar economic reasons. So whatever the reassuring tone of this rather sympathetic state agent, we can see that ethnic ceremonies sometimes "need" to be monitored by local state authorities. They are in-between the "fine customs" emblematic of the multi-ethnic nation and the archaic, disruptive obstacles to the development of the country. This ambiguity makes them a good methodological choice for analysing the dynamics of state effects.

The Khmou and the Invention of *Boun Greh*

The Khmou are demographically the second most important national ethnic group after the Lao. Khmou live also in Thailand, China and Vietnam (not to mention those who are refugees in other countries) and the regional diversity of their culture is notable. Their embedment in the Laotian society varies according to specific histories, geographical situations, and experiences with resettlement. The Khmou also differ according to religion: most of them worship spirits but a significant – and active – minority has embraced Buddhism or Christianity. The present case study concerns groups resettled far from their home places, living in multi-ethnic villages on the main national road, and including some who have converted to Christianity. Even if such situations are more and more common for the Khmou in Laos, this can in no way be taken as an average condition for the entire group.

A common feature of the Khmou is that they used to live on the social and geographic margins of the pre-colonial states. As such, they have long been despised as "lacking civilisation". Early commentators offered a possible etymology of the word "Khmou" as deriving from *kha*, "slave" (Proschan, 1997, pp. 96–97); this etymology is dubious, but is revealing of the low consideration the Lao had for this group. Today, one still hears negative comments about the Khmou being a shy, lazy, non-enterprising people. The situation of the Khmou is not better in the area where the research took place, Pakkading District, Bolikhamxay Province. Most of the Khmou living there came between 2000 and 2002 from Xiang Khouang and Louang Phrabang provinces due to a ban on swidden agriculture. I have described elsewhere (Petit, 2006; 2008a; 2008b) the problems these Khmou faced at that time because they did not follow the injunctions of the district administration that wanted them to stay in a "focus village" in the middle of nowhere. Most families eventually left the place to settle in Thongnamy and Nam Deua, two nearby villages.

As for *boun greh*, it is a recent and public institution of the Khmou that must be distinguished from an older domestic ceremony, *greh* [Kh.], which is still celebrated today and was described by the Khmou ethnographer Suksavang Simana (2003, p. 48) as "simply a ritual ceremony with a meal during which the family formally concludes or 'takes down' … the old year and welcomes or 'puts up' the New Year". It is not a New Year celebration in the strict sense of the term, for it is celebrated at different times in the different households and villages. For convenience, I distinguish the recent/public and the ancient/domestic ceremonies using the terms "*boun greh*" for the former and "*greh*" for the latter, for "*boun*" refers in Lao to a public event.

The creation of *boun greh* must be cast in a context characterised by the imbalance of the ritual presence of the different ethnic groups in the public space. The Lao have a

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wide range of rituals and ceremonies celebrated on a national scale, among which the New Year (*pi mai*) is the most famous, and certainly the most longed-for by the population. It paralyses the country for more than two weeks and leads to lavish spending (Holt, 2009). These last characteristics were also referred to by the officer of the Department of Ethnic Groups presented above, who explained that the usual limitations on time and expenditure obviously cannot be enforced with Lao New Year. Lao New Year is the responsibility of the Ministry of Information and Culture, not his Department, which in any case is further evidence of the dissymmetry between the treatment of the ceremonies of the Lao and of the ethnic minorities.

Interestingly, the Khmou participate in the Lao New Year rituals of Louang Phrabang, the cultural capital of the country. The kings had a ritual link with the Khasak, an Austroasiatic-speaking population reputed to be the former landowners of the place. As such, the Khasak participated in rituals of alliance with and allegiance to the king, and in the ritual procession of the New Year. For some unknown reason, their participation came to an end in the 1960s. Then, after the 1975 revolution, some Khmou refugees from Phôngsali who had settled in Louang Phrabang were asked to take part, and they still currently form an important group during the main procession (Trankell, 1999). This is indicative of the way all Austroasiatic-speaking communities are set on an equal footing with each other by the Lao,[9] and of the early willingness of some Khmou to be identified as a group in one of the main public ceremonies of the country.

Boun greh is very different from the Lao New Year, which is celebrated as a national festival. I was told the story of its creation by two Khmou elders, both in their sixties. According to the first, an urban intellectual, the initiative came from Khmou leaders who, by the beginning of the 1990s, complained about the marginalisation of their group. Khmou teachers from Louang Phrabang eventually sent a letter to Prime Minister Khamtay. They voiced three demands: the acknowledgment of a public New Year ceremony for the Khmou; the broadcasting of programs in the Khmou language on radio; and the official recognition of the transcription of Khmou in the Latin alphabet. The first two demands were approved, and discussion of the third was "postponed". It seems that this rather positive response was partly prompted by the fact that Khamtay's wife was herself a Khmou. Meetings were then held to discuss the form the New Year's ceremony should take, with the participation of National Front authorities, Khmou generals, community leaders and others.

My second informant was Sivon, the leader of the community of Nam Deua. He was a soldier during and after the revolution, and then worked in a ministry before retiring. He is a spirit medium (*mo môn*). According to him, the initiative for the revival comes from the National Assembly and international organisations: since the Indochina Wars put an end to many ethnic celebrations, they decided to "establish/restore the traditions" (*pouklouk ékalak*) of these ethnic groups, with the objective of getting a "better balance" between the traditions of the ethnic groups. The discussions took place in Vientiane in 1993, under the aegis of the Government, the National Assembly, and the National Front, whose president chaired the meetings. The Khmou were represented by leaders chosen at the different levels of administrative structure (*khét*, district, province, etc.) for their knowledge of Khmou customs. Sivon was one of them. This resulted in the creation of *boun greh*, based on the old traditions of the familial *greh*.

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The Celebration of *Boun Greh* in Nam Deua

The *boun greh* I observed was celebrated on 15 January 2006. The Khmou living in four nearby villages – Nam Deua, Thongnamy, Thangbeng and Houay Phet – united to organise it in Nam Deua, the major centre of Khmou population among the four.[10] *Boun greh* was celebrated in a large fenced area in the middle of the village. The fence was covered with plastic cloths, and decorated with papers cut in lace-like designs and high bamboo peeled to create flower-like designs. At both ends of the fence stood two porticos decorated with palm leaves and topped by an inscription in Khmou: good wishes for the year to come, briefly translated into Lao, English and Hmong, even though all visitors were Khmou, with the exception of local authorities and researchers from the National University.

Two young ladies dressed in *sin* skirts and with scarves across their chests welcomed guests under the porticos. The first held a vase filled with small ribbons to be attached to the shirts of the guests; the second received contributions for the feast. On a table lay a bottle of fruit wine to offer to important guests upon entrance, as well as a big heart-shaped box wrapped in glossy paper, of a style that is often used in wedding ceremonies to receive guests' gift envelopes.

Before the discourses for the formal opening of the *boun greh*, guests were provided with pieces of tubers (sweet potatoes, yams, taros) as appetisers. Then a Khmou medical doctor from Vientiane, Siphan, made a speech. He presented himself as one of the initiators of this tradition, for he was the one who had proposed to the National Front that the Khmou should have their own New Year festival, like the other groups, to celebrate their solidarity. He then emphasised that Khmou hold positions at every level of the state from the village to the government and the army. During the war, Khmou and other ethnic groups fought against the imperialist forces. One of the *raisons d'être* of *boun greh* is to celebrate Khmou soldiers who died in the war of liberation "on the



Figure 1. The portico of *boun greh*, January 2006.



Figure 2. The elders sitting in front of the ritual post, January 2006.

battlefield or otherwise". The ceremony is a symbol of identity (*ékalak*) for the group, and should be celebrated from generation to generation. He then thanked different authorities: the government for what it did for the Khmou in this district, the president of the National Front, and the Khmou committee in charge of this celebration. He underscored the importance for all Khmou to keep in contact. Other speeches from the village authorities followed, taking about half an hour in all.

Then two ladies from Thongnamy sang traditional songs in Khmou, as they did later on in the ceremony. Thereafter, the action centred on a ritual post (*lak, sum* [Kh.], *krasui* [Kh.]) made of a banana trunk ornamented with objects and symbols: wicker fish (abundance) and birds (good life/liberty), a wooden plane, representing modernity, red flowers (*raangron* [Kh.]) cultivated by Khmou in their fields for decorative and ritual purposes and presented here as an ethnic symbol, a wooden gate symbolic of traditional peace rituals after war, two large banana stems, big tubers of different kinds and sizes resting on banana leaves, boiled rice packed in banana leaves, rice cooked in bamboo, sugar cane, ornamented bamboo tubes traditionally used to carry water, musical instruments and wooden swords to be used later in the ceremony, four jars of rice beer covered by banana leaves, two chickens, wood-and-bamboo stilts, ornamented bamboos of ten sections to represent long life, long gramineous plants, and decorative papers. Khmou elders were seated in front of this ritual post, with the rest of the spectators in rows behind them. Opposite the elders were two rows of chairs where around 15 people – mostly women – were sitting, wearing black and red traditional clothes.

A live male chicken had its lower jaw broken so that its blood poured out slowly; it was smeared on the lower legs of the elders from the knee down, to "leave the bad things from last year". The officiating man spoke during this operation, wishing the elders a long life, many descendants and a developed village. He proceeded the same way with a female chicken, but now from the shin up to the knee, to "make good

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things come". Afterwards the elders were invited to drink beer from the jars at the bottom of the post, in small groups of two to four people, drinking with a straw as is customary with this mild alcoholic beverage.

The 15 people wearing black and red clothes began to walk slowly in procession counter-clockwise around the post. Some of them clapped hands while the others



Figure 3. Sivon dancing with swords inside the procession of musicians, January 2006.



Figure 4. Sivon leading the *sou khouane* ceremony, January 2006.

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played instruments: two small gongs, two pairs of cymbals, a mouth organ (*khène*), bamboo tubes struck on the ground, a pipe with a flexible terminal, and a double horn made of a bamboo blown from the middle. Sivon, the leader of Nam Deua's Khmou, solemnly performed a slow dance with swords inside the procession circle. The last step was a local variation of the *sou khouane* wrist-tying ritual, a ceremony widespread in Laos (and beyond) to call back the recipients' constitutive "souls". It took place on a large mat close to the ceremonial post. A small table was covered with two bunches of flowers, bananas, cooked chops of tuber, cooked parts of the chickens killed for the ceremony, and cotton strings. Sivon recited prayers while people touched the table or raised hands in his direction. He then attached cotton strings to the wrists of people close to him, a gesture of blessing that was reproduced by the other participants.

The feast went on in the tents with a meal of pork, tubers and rice. Women wearing the black and red costume served *Bia Lao* beer to the guests. The meal was punctuated with two or three *lamvông*, during which guests (including myself) were presented by microphone and invited to join in and dance. The afternoon was more strictly festive, with singing, dancing and drinking until after midnight.

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Boun Greh as a Bricolage, and as a "Good Tradition"

An invented tradition never comes from nowhere. Below I briefly present the main sequences of a *greh* celebrated in a household setting after the harvest, based on observations carried out in December 2005 in Thongnamy, in the house of Bounthai, a non-Christian elder whom we meet again later on.[11] Continuities between the public *boun greh* and this eponymous and older ritual are very clear:

> The starting point was the killing of two chickens, one male and one female, to smear with blood the knees of all the relatives living in Bounthai's house: the details of the sequence and the explanations provided by him were very similar to those already reported for the *boun greh*.
>
> Afterwards, men drank ceremonially rice beer, first in a jar representing the past year, then in another representing the year to come. This took place at the base of the post of the house: elders made good wishes before drinking and Bounthai offered beer to his ancestors, putting the straw alongside the post. In Nam Deua's *boun greh*, participants drank from four jars at the base of the ritual post.
>
> The next step was also interpreted as *sou khouane* (Lao) or *tèng hmmaal* (Kh.: calling back "souls") in both contexts. In Thongnamy, it took place around a table with small dishes. Bounthai made, for each of his children, two small balls with rice, tubers and meat from the chickens killed for the ceremony; he stuck them on top of the head of each child while (s)he bowed and put his/her hands up, to receive the balls when they fell, and hid them afterwards for they were his/her "souls" for the year to come. In Nam Deua, it took place around a table with a dish containing the meat of the two chickens killed for the ceremony; cotton strings were tied to the wrists of the participants, as usual in the generic *sou khouane* ceremony celebrated throughout Laos.

Without going further in that direction, *boun greh* appears – as most invented traditions – as a "bricolage" where fragments of former rituals and new symbolic forms are assembled in an original way. Beyond this trivial observation, two relevant questions arise. The first is to understand how the elements transferred from one context to another keep part of the systems of representation to which they were originally linked (Mary, 2000). In this case, most of the Khmou participating in the *boun greh* have taken part in *greh* ceremonies, which means the transfer of meanings is potentially important. The second issue has to do with the embedment of these elements in a new frame that may completely change the sense and the purpose of the original ceremony. In the case of *boun greh*, the new frame informed by policies on "customs" entails important changes, as we will see now.

I had no opportunity to take part in the preparation meetings that, according to my own experience for the Tai Dam New Year celebrations, are an excellent place to observe how village headmen give directives for organisation based on policies: they do so with a mixed attitude of formality and casualness, using the administrative rhetoric, but laughing with their fellows when urging them to refrain from drinking too much. Anyway, the policies' imprint appears for example in the way Sivon, the organiser of the ceremony, reproduces the institutional rhetoric in his interview: the function of *boun greh* is to conserve the traditions (*paphéni*) and the symbols of identity (*ékalak*) of the Khmou. Still, according to him, one of the conditions for a successful *boun greh* is respect for the time schedule: "If it is supposed to take three hours, it should be finished after three hours". This conception of time is in line with the state's policies and at odds with the *greh* or other ancient rituals of the Khmou: *greh* typically extended for a long period to allow for visiting the different houses where it was successively held.

Turning now to the spatial frame, *boun greh* is celebrated in the middle of the village, not in specific households as for *greh*. The way the space is organised – with tents, plastic chairs, a sound system and the fence with two palm-decked porticos – perfectly matches with modern village feasts. This observation also applies to the two hostesses welcoming guests at both entrances, clothed in a *sin* skirt and a scarf – the regular national, Lao-inspired dress for ceremonies – receiving contributions and offering ribbons as is always the case for such contemporary celebrations.

Compared to the way Khmou ceremonies have been traditionally performed – among relatives, over a longer time and in a fuzzier way – *boun greh* has adopted a different frame that is fixed and constrained: it is a public show that spectators watch, it respects a time schedule, and it is cast into the spatial pattern of the Lao village festivals. Here, the state effect on ceremonies becomes obvious: Khmou appear in the public space as (inter-)village communities, not as households. This is a very important shift that defines the way Khmou partake in the national state. Jonsson (2001) has identified a similar process among the Mien in Thailand, basing his findings on an analysis of their village-level "fun fairs".

As well as incorporating markers with which the Khmou themselves can identify, *boun greh* needs to utilise codes easily understood by national spectators so as to allow, for example, its broadcasting on television. One of the codes by which a national audience would expect to identify an ethnic minority such as the Khmou is the "traditional" garment. The present regime has enshrined ethnic clothing as the main vehicle for

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expressing cultural diversity in the country, as it appears in ethnic catalogues as well as on stamps and public boards, and as well as in ethnic parades during mass demonstrations. The costume is the most iconic item of ethnicity, and the juxtaposition of dancers wearing various traditional garments is the most common means of displaying Laos as a felicitous multi-ethnic nation. Sivon conceded that the Khmou do not have a common "traditional costume", for they are scattered across most of the northern half of Laos, and their different subgroups used to dress quite similarly to their Tai neighbours (Suksavang Simana, 2003, pp. 74–75; Evrard, 2006, p. 93). The garments used in Nam Deua are copied from the Lu, according to the tailor who made the costumes, who herself came from a region where the Khmou live in close contact with the Lu.

There are other non-Khmou intrusions into the *boun greh*, including two that obviously come from the national, Lao-inspired, ceremonial register. The first is the ceremony held at the end of the performance by Sivon, which is a variation on the *sou khouane* ceremony aimed at calling back and fixing the souls of the participants into their bodies. This ceremony, which allows everyone to tie cotton strings to each other's wrists while pronouncing wishes, has spread among all the ethnic groups of Laos and has even reached tourists, making it "the" national propitiatory ceremony. The way it is conducted in Nam Deua is closer to the basic and widespread national formula than to the vernacular forms it took in the *greh* ceremony at Bounthai's home. A second element of national, Lao inspiration is the *lamvông* that took place in the late morning. *Lamvông* is a popular music in Laos but also a way to honour important guests. The latter are invited to lead the dance, and the organisers take care to respect social hierarchies when calling the guests. This is a national, originally Lao, way of dancing, and its performance during *boun greh* fit in with national standards well: *lamvông* is the regular festive element for concluding a ceremony.

Taken together, these elements acknowledge the capacity of official policies to inspire a modern substitute to yesteryear's rituals, and to monitor it to ensure it accords with national messages related to the appropriate use of space and time and the symbolic repertoire of a shared national identity. Analysed this way, such a heavily "ritualized act of allegiance to the modern nation-state" (Jonsson, 2001, p. 160) seems a very docile way for the Khmou to engage with the Lao state – but there is another story.

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Unanticipated Meanings

Despite the undoubted elements of conformity to the national-Lao culture that is evident in the account given above, it is also possible to interpret this conformism in a way that contradicts the very idea that it is a servile performance. Public expression of ethnicity is framed by state policies via a set of codes, but this does not prevent or mute interpretations at odds with the official agenda or unanticipated by its original mentors; paradoxically, it may be seen as a channel for them. Formoso rightly warns against undemanding analyses where the use of the hegemonic codes by ethnic minorities would be equated with assimilation.

> The seeming adherence of minorities to concepts, values or expressive norms of the dominant culture cannot be automatically interpreted as a step towards assimilation. Its main effect (or maybe its goal) is to lay the foundations of a

> common language allowing, in a multicultural context, the intelligibility or the legitimisation of the aspirations of the group that expresses them. Minorities, when they use symbols and values that not only make sense but matter to their interlocutors, sometimes find the means to be heard by authorities or in the public opinion of their country (Formoso, 2006, p. 103; my translation).

This line of analysis applies to *boun greh*. Let us remember that it was created on the initiative of some Khmou elites with a view to giving voice to Khmou claims *vis-à-vis* the state and Laotian society in general. The modalities of the actual performance, even if cast along a prescriptive framework, preserve evidence of this initial claim. We have shown that to fit the requirements of a "good tradition", the Khmou had to invent a recognisable ethnic costume. Looking closer, we can see that these costumes are ornamented on the chest with a small cross made of pearls. This refers to Christian religion and reflects the tailor's own faith. This is no mere detail in Laos, for Christianity is always regarded with suspicion and considered to be a possible avatar of American imperialism. Such tensions regarding Christianity have been present for some years (Petit, 2012; 2013).

A second telling element of the Khmou costume was observed during a wedding party in 2004: the costumes were decorated with three large letters, PKM, on the back. According to participants, the letters stood for *phao Khmou*, or "Khmou ethnic group", which is an overly direct way to express one's identity in Laos. The letters were Latin characters, a spelling system discouraged by the state. This renders all the more significant the fact that the two porticos of *boun greh* were topped by inscriptions in Khmou transliterated in Latin characters.

Another point at variance with a sweetened presentation of ethnic folklore is the celebration's opening speech. It emphasised the central contribution of the Khmou and other ethnic groups in the war against imperialist forces and it commemorated the sacrifice of those who died on the battlefield. This statement is revealing. On the one hand, it has a very nationalistic tone, for narratives and manifestations about the "liberation war" constitute the very core of nation building and the ultimate legitimacy of the present regime (Tappe, this volume): as such, Siphan's discourse demonstrates the full adhesion of the Khmou to the national community. But on the other hand, it is a clear reminder that the state is indebted to the Khmou for their sacrifice during the war, and this can be understood as an indirect critique in the present context, for the national authorities do not acknowledge the ethnic minorities' role as explicitly as they did in the past (Pholsena, 2006, pp. 180–92). After the revolution of 1975, these minorities benefited from political and social measures in their favour, but such favourable policies waned as time went on, and the Khmou presently feel let down and bitter (Evans, 2003, p. 222). With this context in mind, the creation of *boun greh* could be interpreted according to theories of ethnic mobilisation.

A third way in which the Khmou voice their position has to do with food symbolism. In the ceremony, tubers (*man*) of all kinds were displayed at the bottom of the ritual post, and appeared on the table during the *sou khouane* ceremony; this was also conspicuous in the TV program. They were served as appetisers and during the meal. This is in line with the domestic *greh*: according to Bounthai, the presence of tubers in the meal for the ceremony is mandatory (see also Suksavang Simana, 2003, p. 77). I

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was often told by the Khmou during the celebration and interviews that in the time of Chuang (we will present this mythic hero soon), before rice cultivation was invented, men used to eat tubers, the original food of Khmou. The high status tubers occupy during the *boun greh*, as the primeval food of mankind, could therefore be interpreted as offering validation for a representation of history wherein Khmou antedate the other groups in the country.

This interpretation is all the more likely, for another element of the ceremony can also be linked to the question of origins. Comments about *boun greh* – especially by Sivon, who presents himself as a *mo mône* (spirit medium) of Chuang – repeatedly linked it to Chuang, who was the king (*phachao*) of the Khmou and the founder of their race/lineage (*suasat*). *Boun greh* is *boun Chuang* (the feast of Chuang). The sword dance is done in memory of his army. The wooden portico set up beside the ritual post is a reminder of the rituals of war and peace in the times of Chuang. The post itself is the post of Chuang, to be compared to the city posts (*lak muang*) of the Lao. The jars of rice beer recall the huge ones in the Plain of Jars, which were used by Chuang to celebrate his military victory. *Raangron* [Kh.] are the flowers of Chuang. The month chosen to hold the celebration, the second month of the Lao calendar (January), is the month of Gni, which was Chuang's name when he was young (Suksavang Simana, 2003, pp. 4–5, pp. 47–48). We could go on showing how prolific the references to Chuang are. I cannot here analyse the place of Chuang in Khmou ethno-history and the controversies about what this means for the Khmou and for the Lao. Oral traditions of the Khmou describe how Chuang, the original king, has been deceived by invaders (Ferlus, 1979; Proschan, 1998; Suksavang Simana, 2003). With this in mind, it is not surprising that Chuang has been invoked repeatedly during Khmou revolts or messianic movements for more than a century (Proschan, 1998).

Taken together, the primeval status of tubers and the reference to the cultural hero both express Khmou aboriginality. This is in line with former rituals of kingship in which representatives of Austroasiatic-speaking people ceremonially handed over their authority to Lao kings, as was done by the head of the Khasak during the New Year festival in Louang Phrabang (Platenkamp, 2010). But this representation is at odds with the official discourse, which emphasises a conception of "collective autochthony" for all the ethnic groups of the nation, and rejects the very idea of "indigenous people" (Goudineau, 2000; Pholsena, 2006, pp. 77–118).

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Sceptics

Until now, we have seen that however effective the regimentation of public expressions of ethnicity is, the Khmou in charge of implementing *boun greh* in a local context load the ceremony with unexpected and unorthodox meanings. There is yet another critical element in the politics and symbolism of *boun greh*: in specific contexts, the public ceremony is despised by the Khmou themselves as not being a "real" tradition of their own, but something invented to suit the expectations of the authorities. Such a critique is made by Suksavang Simana, a Khmou scholar and ethnographer, who, after a detailed explanation of the traditional familial *greh*, sums up the situation in this way:

> In these modern days, people in many places have started to celebrate "*greh*" in a new way including giving it a new meaning. For example, all villagers and families may organise just one big collective village ceremony in one place. It becomes a matter of village planning and responsibility, a matter of politics and government policy, a matter of others deciding on the procedures and programming it… This new way of collectively celebrating doesn't really appeal too much to our elders and farmers… The original feast has mainly brought the family together … according to their own ritual traditions and wishes and according to their means, at the time that best fitted their own cycle of labour in the fields. The matter of putting together our means, our efforts and our food in common and preparing a collective feast is a transformed socialist model of our own former "*greh*" family ritual, but it is not really ours one hundred per cent anymore (Suksavang Simana, 2003, p. 53).

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Thongnamy villagers expressed similar complaints. Vilaiphone, a lively woman in her forties, is a leader of one of the two Christian churches of Thongnamy (Petit, 2012). She was in charge, along with another Christian leader from Thongnamy (the tailor of the Khmou traditional suit referred to above), of leading *boun greh* in Nam Deua with music, songs and performances by young dancers. During an interview in 2008, we looked through the pictures I had taken two years before in Nam Deua. She gave interesting information about elements of the ceremony. Then, at her suggestion, we went to meet *loung* (uncle) Bounthai, for according to her, he was the most knowledgeable Khmou on such matters.

Bounthai was indeed very well informed and described in detail the domestic *greh* ritual he celebrates annually. When we came to discuss *boun greh*, he became sceptical, saying that traditionally *greh* takes place in the familial setting, so that everyone can go and drink rice beer in the different households day after day – something a one-day collective feast does not allow. Things have changed since the mid-1980s. At that time, he was a village chief in Xiang Khouang Province, and he remembers receiving demands from political authorities (*chao gnai*) that people should not be attached too much to beliefs in spirits and rituals, because this had unfortunate economic consequences. Instead, authorities suggested that the village organise a collective (*hét louam*) *greh* to showcase the Khmou traditions.

Then Bounthai went on looking at the pictures of the *boun greh* of Nam Deua, and blamed the organisers for doing it wrongly and mixing disparate elements together. The ritual post, he explained, was to be erected for the ceremonial building of a "big house" for honouring one's ancestors; three head of cattle had to be killed and offered as food to them. The bamboos employed to strike the ground as percussion were also to be used for this event, not for *greh*. The result is more like a National Day celebration (*boun pachamsat*) than a tradition (*hit khong*). During the interview, Vilaiphone nodded and agreed with him more and more, saying that the real tradition is the one celebrated at home. She explained that the present *boun greh* is what the public administration (*kanchatkan*) has made of it: they do not know the traditions and have thrown together a big ceremony just to "show off" (*sô susu*) to the provincial and district authorities. Bounthai went on: in the past, the Party and the administration (*phak lat*) sent officers to villages to suppress (*luplang*) some aspects of the ceremonies. Vilaiphone confirmed

this and added that these officers advised the villagers to reduce the cost of rituals; they should not kill cattle for ceremonies, or go to see traditional healers, for these practices wasted household resources. Questioned about authorities' present-day position on the Khmou ceremonies, Bounthai said they did not forbid them, for it is understood that the Khmou cannot give up their traditions. While state agents can suggest lowering the costs or frequency of events, how can they do much more when the cattle killed for the occasion belong to those who organise the ceremony?

Vilaiphone and Bounthai's interviews are telling: they show that criticism of *boun greh* as a political creation is not just the purview of learned Khmou who care about preserving their cultural heritage and are disappointed by the loss of "authenticity". Villagers with a basic level of education also express this sentiment. Vilaiphone's attitude, in particular, is remarkable, for she held successively two different opinions about the ceremony. She played a role in organising the ritual in Nam Deua and sang moving songs from her home province; when I interviewed her alone, she gave enthusiastic explanations of the symbolism of the ceremony. But sitting close to Bounthai, she switched to another discourse, occasionally levelling even more detailed criticism than his. I do not believe that one of these two discourses better reflects her "real" opinion. Rather, they display two aspects of the expression of identity. Any institutional and public expression of identity is balanced with more intimate discourses and performances that seemingly defy and contradict the public one: this is the hallmark of what Herzfeld (2005) calls "cultural intimacy". Rather than seeing these two levels as opposing, they are linked together in a tension – a creative tension, for the two registers are used by the same people in performing their identity. Khmou present themselves in *boun greh* as a respectable and respectful component of the nation, mastering the Lao majority's rhetoric and ritual and partaking in the edification of Laos as an assumed multi-ethnic nation, but this is counterbalanced by an ethos critical of the subordination to political authorities that *boun greh* seems to imply. *Greh* and other domestic rituals taking place at home or in the village are manifestations of this cultural intimacy with no regard for the demands of public officers and their concern about waste of time and economic assets, with no ethnic uniform to show off in front of authorities or visitors, with no restraint for sacrificing cattle to spirits, and with no shame for drinking and being drunk. Vilaiphone explained with laughter that Khmou were born at the same time as *lao hai* (the rice beer made in jars), which can be described as *bia Khmou*, "the beer of the Khmou" – in distinction to the national brand *Bia Lao*, literally the "beer of the Lao". This wordplay relates to the reputation of the Khmou as overly fond of rice beer (Suksavang Simana, 2003, p. 59), which she essentialises in linking it to the origins of the group.

Vilaiphone's successive affirmations are not evidence of her changing mind or of opportunism or cynicism: they reflect a "disemia – the formal or coded tension between official self-presentation and what goes on in the privacy of collective introspection" (Herzfeld, 2005, p. 14). Khmou engaging in official representations such as *boun greh* need to develop in parallel more intimate (and reassuring) models of identity. But this is unspeakable in public, and when unveiled to outsiders it is often done with shame, humour or irony.

Cultural intimacy is not confined to the population as opposed to civil servants, and cannot simply be assimilated to a critique of the state apparatus. Let us come back to

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Bounthai's presentation of the ceremonies he organised in the mid-1980s, when he was village chief. The villagers killed a buffalo on that occasion, which seems to be at odds with the ban on cattle sacrifice and with the injunction for thrift that was being enforced during that period. He went on to say that these feasts were funny, for many official guests left the place totally drunk, even forgetting to say goodbye to their hosts. We can see here that civil servants can indulge in the practices they forbid in their public announcements. Such discrepancy is common in Laos (as elsewhere), as for example when civil servants eat deer meat in restaurants close to Thongnamy in violation of the official ban on poaching, or when they eat the meat confiscated from poachers instead of burning it, as officially prescribed. When I was invited to join such meals, officials would usually smile and casually relate their behaviour to the Laotian way of life. Hence the burden of the official agenda seems to generate a repertoire of a more intimate nature, where atavisms become a virtue, a proof of belonging, and not an obstacle to the modern destiny of the nation. Civil servants are part and parcel of the population – a trivial reality often overlooked by dualistic appraisals opposing state and society.

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Conclusion

Ethnic "traditions" of the recently invented type cannot be understood if we do not take into account both the way national policies frame them and the various ways people engage with them. Ethnic catalogues, TV shows and declarations from officials all exert a powerful and effective "state effect" on the local expression of ethnic identity. A neo-traditional New Year festival is framed according to implicit and explicit rules about what a "nice custom" means in the multi-ethnic nation of Laos. Yet cultural engineering is a poor representation of what is going on. Incorporating the national codes paradoxically enables the articulation of discourses, claims and attitudes at odds with some hegemonic representations. Further, the staging of official ethnicity is doubled by an insiders' version of ethnicity that questions the relevance of the former.

One may wonder if such a case study, by comparison with those focused on the core structures of the state, is not a too indirect and less rewarding contribution to the anthropology of the state. A first answer is that approaching the state from below, through its everyday and banal practices, helps us to understand how it is "substantiated in people's lives" (Sharma and Gupta, 2006, p. 11). *Boun greh* is an official ceremony, managed by local authorities, attended by many villagers, and the source of many comments on the administration and policies – Vilaiphone and Bounthai's "state talk" being memorable examples. This attention to the "micropolitics of state work" (Sharma and Gupta, 2006, p. 11) is an excellent means to keep a distance from abstract theories that pervade many scholarly discussions on the state.

A second answer is that the present research is a contribution to the on-going debate about the mechanisms through which the state is represented as distinct from society. Mitchell (2006, p. 170), already quoted in the introduction, considers this is a key question, and underscores the need to "examine the political processes through which this uncertain yet powerful distinction … is produced". An obvious way to follow his advice is to study the practices and representations that constitute the state as such, from "inside": bureaucratic routines, national history, urban legends on the state and

statesmen, and so on. Another and less common research avenue is to investigate how the "other" of the state – be it the "civil society", the economy, or "communities" – is constituted in different contexts (Hansen and Stepputat, 2001, p. 22). "Languages of stateness" are at the same time "languages on society", to paraphrase the last two authors' felicitous expression. I have analysed how a prescriptive framework, originally developed by politicians and state officers, and revolving around what culture is or should be among ethnic groups, has been adopted in and adapted to a local context, to craft a decent "ethnic group", or a (inter)village community – i.e. a component of "society" to be governed by "the state". This process, however intrusive it may seem, in no way deprives the Khmou of their agency, or of their often ironic reflexivity on their own engagement with "the state".

Notes

1. All words in italics are in Lao, or in Khmou if mentioned [Kh.]. The Khmou I interviewed in Bolikhamxay Province are fluent both in Khmou and in Lao. Interviews were conducted in Lao with the help of colleagues from the National University of Laos, who acted as research assistants and translators (see Petit, 2008a).
2. See Taylor and Jonsson (2002), Evrard and Prasit Leepreecha (2009), Michaud and Picard (2001), etc. Unfortunately, the literature on the recent dynamics of "ethnic" New Year festivals remains limited (Jonsson, 2001; Gros, 2013), even if such processes are conspicuous in the whole region. For Laos, scholars have mainly analysed the *pi mai* (New Year) festival of the Lao (Trankell, 1999; Holt, 2009; Platenkamp, 2010).
3. This distinction is however not a substantive one: tourism is of course regulated by national policies; performances such as *boun greh* are not attended by tourists, but attract local visitors, and sometimes lead to indirect tourism when relayed in the media.
4. 8 May 2011. See http://www.vientianetimes.org.la/Video_FileVDO/VDO_the%20world.htm, accessed 12 February 2013.
5. http://www.na.gov.la/, accessed 12 February 2013.
6. Vietnamese ethnographers would surely endorse these proposals since they were the mentors of their Lao colleagues (Evans, 1999; Pholsena, 2006, pp. 158–61). During the first years after the revolution, the struggle against "archaisms" or "superstitions" did touch the Lao ceremonies as well: some Buddhist practices and village spirits' ceremonies were purged, or banned; many Lao monks and mediums were relegated for years to "seminars" in the highlands (Hours and Selim, 1997; Stuart-Fox, 2002). It was nevertheless clear to the political leaders that Lao had the "highest cultural development" in the nation, as phrased by Kaysone (Evans, 2003, p. 213), which explains why the debate over "traditions" soon focused mainly on ethnic minorities.
7. There is no clear turning point for the relaxation on rituals. An early sign in that direction dates back to 1980, when the press mentioned a *basi* ceremony conducted by the highest leaders of the state during the Lao New Year (Evans, 1998, p. 80). The process went on throughout the 1980s, in parallel with the progressive overtures of the regime, and has been much clearer with Lao and/or Buddhist practices (Evans, 1998, p. 67, p. 74).
8. *Thoukthouk sônphao tong mi ékalak lè vatthanatham thi sadèng ok*.
9. Austroasiatic-speaking groups were – and sometimes still are – described as Lao Theung (midland Lao) by opposition to Lao Loum (lowland Lao) and Lao Soung (highland Lao), in a time when political leaders wanted to promote the unity of the nation through these generic names. Note that the *boun greh* described here is celebrated by the Khmou, not by the "Lao Theung" in general.
10. Since that time, the celebration has been skipped in some years for allegedly practical or financial reasons. The success of *boun greh* remains limited in Laos, and the celebration is not organised in all Khmou villages (at variance with the *pi mai* of the Lao).
11. See Petit (2012) for a longer development about this ceremony. Khmou do not all celebrate *greh* in the same way. Evrard reports no ceremonial aspect for the closure of the harvest in Louang Namtha, which amounts merely to a period of mutual invitations and beanfeast (2006, p. 145).

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Suksavang Simana gives a lengthy description of the ritual, based on observations in Louang Phrabang, Xiang Khouang and Houaphan – i.e. the northeastern provinces whence the Khmou of Thongnamy and Nam Deua come from (2003, pp. 47–54). This is evidence of the regional diversity of the Khmou referred to above.

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