Lao Buddhism and Faith in the Revolution

The Life and Career of Maha Khamtan Thepbuali (1919–2019) in the Context of Buddhist Socialist Movements

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1. Introduction

In 1951, the French existentialist Albert Camus published *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*. Examining the historical conditions for the development of social unrest and protest in Western societies, he proposed a distinction between rebellion and revolution: "Rebellion is, by nature, limited in scope. It is no more than an incoherent pronouncement. Revolution, on the contrary, originates in the realm of ideas. Specifically, it is the injection of ideas into historical experience" (Camus 1991: 106) that distinguishes them. What gives revolutions a more coherent and sustained nature, was in his view the insertion of concrete ideas and concepts — sometimes aggregated into various revolutionary theories — into history. Camus did not naively idealize revolutions, and indeed proposed that their rejection of history and transcendental values must lead to violence and new forms of enslavement. More interesting, however, was his focus on 'outsider figures' who created new and radical visions of socio-political life. Some of them remained marginal outsiders and were overrun by history, while others took on political positions in post-revolutionary regimes, and found themselves on the winner's side of the historical process towards an allegedly righteous new political system.

* Patrice Ladwig, Max Planck-Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Ladwig@mmg.mpg.de; Martin Rathie, Vientiane College, martin_rathie@yahoo.com. Acknowledgements: Both authors were in Laos when they got to know that Maha Khamtan Thepbuali passed away in September 2019. Largely unknown outside of Laos, we decided to write about him, which has resulted in a text that combines two aims: First, to review his life, work and ideas in a larger political and historical context, and, secondly, to function as a kind of obituary. While most ideas for this article were developed together, Patrice Ladwig wrote the text, and is responsible for all translations (including mistakes) of non-English language materials. Martin Rathie sourced rare and crucial documents and images, and provided critical feedback at all stages of writing. We want to express our gratitude to our numerous monk- and lay-friends in Laos who over the years have worked with us, and taught us a lot. We are indebted to the editors of *BEFEO* and two anonymous reviewers for commenting on, and thereby improving our piece. Of course, all mistakes remain our responsibility. Patrice Ladwig acknowledges research funding by the Max Planck-Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity (Göttingen, Germany), and thanks Michel Lorrillard, Gregory Kourilsky and all others at the École française d'Extrême-Orient in Vientiane for hosting him during numerous stays in Laos. Thanks also to Khamvone Boualyaphonh and his team at the Buddhist Archive of Luang Prabang for his generous advice, and help during archival research.

Maha Khamtan Thepbuali,[1] who passed away on September 1st, 2019 in the Lao capital Vientiane, can be considered such a figure in the field of Lao and Southeast Asian Buddhist modernism. Reaching the age of 100, he was probably the last Lao Buddhist revolutionary of his generation to pass away, thus eclipsing most of his monastic peers and protégés, such as Pha Maha Vichit Singhalat (1935–2012) and Pha Maha Buakham Voraphet (1909–1996), who also played important roles in what could be called a Lao revolutionary Buddhist movement.[2] Today known in Laos merely by people and monks with an interest in contemporary and revolutionary history, he was one of the central figures who on the level of theory, and in political practice, tried to bridge the gap between the Lao communist movement and Buddhism. His religious education and monastic career (spanning four decades), and his subsequent time as a layperson and politician, show that he used his intellectual capacities not merely for textual erudition, but were more focused on actively pushing Buddhism into a political direction. Born in 1919[3] in Baan No in Champasak province in the south of Laos during the French colonial period, he entered Wat[4] Lakhon temple school in 1927 as a lay temple boy. Coming from a non-privileged family background, it was impossible for him to attend one of the very few state schools reserved for the children of the elite. He therefore ordained as a novice (P. *pabbajjā*)[5] in 1931 to pursue further monastic education. He studied at different temple schools in Champasak province, and then took his higher ordination as a monk (P. *upasampadā*) at the age of twenty. He left Laos for further studies in Thailand in 1942, first in Ubon Ratchathani, and then in Bangkok's Wat Molilokkayaram and Wat Mahathad, living and teaching in monasteries belonging to both factions of the Thai monastic order (P. *saṅgha*), Thammayut and Mahanikay.[6] Reaching the exceptional high grade of eight

1. 'Maha' derives from Pāḷi *mahā* and translates as 'great, big' and is a honorific title given to a monk after certain years of study and time spent in the monkhood. After disrobing, the title is kept. 'Pha' in this text refers to a prefix given to monks in Laos and Thailand. The latter is not kept after disrobing.

2. The details regarding Thepbuali's life are drawn from his writings, the text read out at his funeral, interviews and by friends in Laos. The life and roles of some of the monks who worked with Thepbuali will also be discussed, however, due to our focus on one person and his networks, we can here only give a brief overview, and refer the reader to some previous publications (see Ladwig 2009, 2017a; Stuart-Fox & Bucknell 1982). Most information is only available in publications in Lao language: For the life and works of Singhalat, see his biography (Singhalat 1999: 7–20). Vilaychak (2001: 26–40) discusses Voraphet's career in the monastic order, and his role in the Lao communist movement. Recently a well-researched history of Lao Buddhism has been published by one of the leading younger monks in the Lao monastic order, also covering the period and personae discussed in our essay (Dhammikamuni 2019: 467–478).

3. Like in many cases of his generation where birth registration and passports were unknown, there is contradictory information regarding his date of birth. The announcement of his funeral issued in September 2019 states that he was born in 1919.

4. 'Wat' in Laos and Thailand translates as temple.

5. In this essay terms in Pāḷi are indicated with P., and terms in Lao or Thai have no special marker.

6. See footnote 15 for more information on these orders, and their political influence in Laos during the Cold War. Interestingly, neither Thepbuali himself, nor the different documents on his life, ever mention that he seemed to have studied with both orders. One of the main monasteries for his training was Wat Mahathad in Bangkok, a Thammayut monastery. As will become clear in the next section, there might be concrete political reasons for his silence on this point, as Thammayut monks were often denounced by leftist monks to work for the Thai government and spread pro-American propaganda.

in the Thai Pāḷi examination system,[7] he stayed in Bangkok until 1953, and continued studying and teaching there in various monastic schools. After a brief spell as a teacher in Nakhon Ratchasima, he returned to Laos in 1955. Due to his experience and exceptional skills, he was appointed editor-in-chief of the Lao Buddhist *Buddhavong* magazine, and head of the Pāḷi School at Wat Sithan Neua in Vientiane in the same year.

2. Thepbuali's turn to revolutionary politics: Cold War Buddhism in Laos

Thepbuali's arrival back in Vientiane must have been a rather ambivalent experience. From 1954 to 1956, the 2500th anniversary of Buddhism was celebrated with great enthusiasm across the Buddhist world. Burma hosted the Sixth Buddhist Council (*Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana*) in Yangoon from 1954 onwards up to the final celebrations in 1956. Under the patronage of Burmese Prime Minister U Nu, monks mainly from Theravāda countries held what could be called a two year-long transnational workshop reciting and redacting Pāḷi scriptures. Lao monks also participated (see Grabowsky & Boulyaphonh 2015). In a geopolitical world that had just entered the post-colonial phase, the event was loaded with hopes for a brighter future, and the aim of the council was to rejuvenate Buddhism. Thepbuali did not travel to Burma, but with other high-ranking members of the Lao monastic order (P. *saṅgha*) visited important pilgrimage places. In 1957, his delegation also made a short visit to the US — a country whose government and foreign policy was about to become an archenemy of him and his associates. The atmosphere of a Buddhist renewal celebrated in Burma was already overshadowed by the Cold War and its expanding global ideological conflict, which also became determining features of Thepbuali's future life-trajectory. After he had spent over a decade of studying and teaching in Thailand — an ally of the USA's anti-communist containment policy — he came back to his native country where the situation was utterly different: In 1953, just two years before his return to Vientiane, Laos had gained independence from France, but instead of future hopes due to decolonization, Laos was being drawn into the Cold War. After the French defeat at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954, the US extended its 'containment policy' not only to Vietnam, but also to Laos. Various political factions in Laos, as well as international stakeholders recognized the value of Buddhism for spreading propaganda. This clearly reflects a dominant feature of Theravāda Buddhism, in which the critique and legitimation of political power is always tied to the monastic order.[8] When Thepbuali started to work in the Lao *saṅgha* it was

7. Since the reforms of 1902, higher level monastic education in Thailand was influenced by modernizing aspirations and became more focused on Pāḷi, but the more traditional content was never completely abolished. The *parian* examinations involve translation from Pāḷi into Thai and vice-versa at nine levels. A level eight examination involves over 160,000 words of memorization, and only very few monks reach this level.

8. This is a well-known theme in Theravāda-Studies, and there is a vast literature on this. See Kourilsky & Ladwig (2017–2018) for an overview, and an application to Laos and Thailand in the pre-modern and colonial eras. Remarkable is in our view that even during the Cold War this

already turning into an ideological battlefield. Political polarizations had large repercussions in the religious sphere, especially in the capital Vientiane.[9]

When Patrice Ladwig interviewed him in 2008,[10] Khamtan mentioned that he had already come into contact with revolutionary theories during his studies in Thailand, where translations of Marx and Lenin were available, but distributed secretly. It was also in Bangkok where he started writing his first works on revolutionary Buddhism between 1951 and 1953. However, his activist turn to political Buddhism was largely due to the influence of Lao revolutionary leader Phoumi Vongvichit (1909–1994). The latter recognized from early on the value of Buddhism for the revolutionary cause, and in his writings pointed out that it could be used for mobilizing the peasantry.[11] Vongvichit disseminated these views in the Vientiane *saṅgha* when in 1957 he became Minister of Religious Affairs in a coalition government, in which the Lao Patriotic Front (*Neo Lao Hak Xat* – NLHX, the public face of the communist *Pathet Lao*), participated. Here he followed a political line previously established by the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP): The latter had already incorporated radicalized monks in the Vietnamese and Cambodian revolutionary movement since the early 1940s,[12] and the foundation meeting of the NLHX in 1956 also included Lao monks.[13] Buddhism and its protection also featured prominently in a 1957 document concerning the regulations and aims of the NLHX (Lao Hak Xat 1957: 3).

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connection of religious and political power became central. From this perspective, the Cold War was clearly not only a conflict of secular ideologies.

9. Most political struggles took place in Vientiane, and their effects on Buddhism were clearly visible there. Other centres of Lao Buddhism, especially Luang Prabang, where somewhat spared from the tensions in the capital, and an analysis of the developments there would for sure deviate strongly from the case we present here. For more information on the contemporary history of Buddhism in Luang Prabang, see the excellent PhD-thesis by Boulyaphonh (2016), and Grabowsky & Berger (2015).

10. Interview with Thepbuali by Patrice Ladwig, Vientiane, 12 January 2008.

11. Vongvichit can be considered one of the most influential Buddhist-inspired 'secular' figures in the Lao revolutionary movement. In several of his writings he outlines the significance of Buddhism for the Lao population, and the potential roles monks can take on in the revolutionary movement. In an early publication he elaborates that "Buddhism in general represents the basis (the villages), a systematic organization, parallel to the power apparatus of the state. The monks have a great moral influence on the social life in the country, especially on the peasants" (1963: 24–25). In his memoirs he claims that "the Lao revolutionary party has both used the moral teachings of the Buddha and the revolutionary morality developed in Marxism-Leninism to build and improve its members" (1995: 8). The latter book contains various references to his vision of a reformed Buddhism, which is compatible with the goals of Marxist morality and the ideal new socialist man (*ibid.*: 190–211).

12. Even in the days of the Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth League in the late 1920s monks were drawn into the movement as sympathizers because they regarded it as a force for positive social and moral change. In the founding ceremony for the *Neo Lao Issara* (Lao Freedom Front) and the Lao Resistance Government held in Tuyen Quang, Vietnam, in 1950 Lao monks featured prominently in the images taken of the leadership. This continued in subsequent party meetings held in Laos. The most important revolutionary leaders such as Kaysone Phomvihane (1920–1992, and from 1975 to 1991 Prime Minister of the Lao PDR) and Prince Souphanouvong (1909–1995) are depicted on images with monks, and the latter also feature prominently in group photos taken at various party meetings.

13. In 1956 when the NLHX was founded inside Houaphan province several monks were included in its higher ranks and had active political roles. According to the fragmentary historical records of the Lao Front for National Development (the current name given to the NLHX's successor organization), Pha Khu Kongsi, a native of Sam Neua district, became a member of NLHX's Central Committee in 1956, and was also a member of the presidium. Pha Khu Bunma, and Maha Khamphan Vilachit were also part of Central Committee.

During the interview in 2008, Thepbuali vividly described how he attended the meetings held at Vientiane's Wat That Luang Neua and Wat That Foun with Vongvichit, who held open discussion and propaganda sessions when meeting with monks. He primarily condemned the American influence on some sections of the Royal Lao Government (RLG), and tried to push for a reformed Buddhism that could help the political aims of the NLHX. Thepbuali was mesmerized by these discussions — he had developed similar ideas in his writings a few years earlier, and now saw the chance of becoming actively involved. Like some of his friends attending these meetings, he became a 'revolutionary in robes', as he phrased it in the interview. Hence, from 1957 onwards, Thepbuali and other monks who were leaning towards the *Pathet Lao* or the neutralist party *Santhiphab Pen Kang*[14] started to organize political meetings. Their critique of the political situation in that period especially targeted the pro-American Lao elite in the RLG, and American 'aid programs', which were often financed and coordinated by the CIA. The intrusion of Thai and Lao monks belonging to the reformist Thammayut order (*dhammayutika-nikāya*) into the Vientiane *saṅgha* also became a major point of conflict. As the Thammayut order originated from Thailand and was almost non-existent in Vientiane, Thepbuali and his associates assumed that many of its monks worked and spied for the pro-American Thai government, and feared that this could result in a split in the *mahā-nikāya*, the dominant order in the Vientiane region. Moreover, they were worried that with increasing influence of this order, younger monks could be exposed to anti-communist propaganda, potentially diminishing their leftist agenda.[15]

Ryan Wolfson-Ford (2017: 3) has convincingly argued that some parts of the RLG espoused "a unique Buddhist-nationalism that was virulently anti-communist."[16] This indeed strong anti-communism expressed through Buddhism became more open when Vongvichit left the Ministry of Religion, and more conservative-minded RLG members tried to purge the Vientiane

14. Various neutralist forces co-operated with the NLHX or *Pathet Lao* at times, but also opposed them and pleaded for a third way beyond pro-Americanism and the Vietnamese connection. Many monks were initially politically leaning towards these more moderate forces. However, they were increasingly marginalized throughout the 1960s, and finally absorbed by the more powerful communist forces in the early 1970s. For a more detailed depiction of the rather bewildering political landscape in this period see Ladwig (2017a), and Rathie (2017) for the consolidation of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party.

15. The influence of Thammayut monks, belonging to a more orthodox and rational-oriented reform sect founded in Siam by King Mongkut (Rama IV) in 1833, became very powerful after new laws on religion were introduced in Siam in 1902. In Laos, its influence was initially limited to the southern provinces, which until the arrival of French colonialism had been under Siamese control. Due to the pro-Thai faction of the Na Champasak family — the royal family of Champasak — it spread there. With the advancement of the war, and Thailand's increasing involvement as an ally of the US, more and more Thammayut monks also entered Vientiane. Some of them were involved in anti-communist insurgency programs (see Ford 2017: 139–140). A document from the Ministry of Religion from 1958 merely mentions "Monks entering the country intervene in internal affairs" (BAD-12-2-1958.006). The increasing presence of Thammayut was only in 1965 acknowledged in a *saṅgha*-meeting held in Vientiane, although there the questions discussed were more related to matters of ordination, schooling and temple residency (BAD-12-2-1965.006). After 1975, they were merged into one organization in Laos.

16. While writing this piece, we had a lively email exchange with Ryan Wolfson-Ford (University of Arizona) regarding the politics of religion and nationalism in Laos. His works outline important complementary perspectives to our essay, and we gratefully acknowledge his insights that helped us to understand the complexities of Lao politics in this period.

saṅgha from leftist elements. Maha Khun Manivong (1898–1968), the abbot of Wat That Luang Neua, and a key sympathizer for the *Pathet Lao* (Vilaychak 2001: 5–25), had been aligned with Lao nationalist movements since World War Two, and had been the Buddhist patriarch (*sangkhanayok*) of Vientiane for several years. When he was dismissed from this position in 1959 without much explanation given, this also precipitated tensions. The situation worsened when in the same year on May 25th, the RLG issued a Royal Ordinance No. 160 that concerned the monastic order. The law was supposed to curtail the politization of monks, and increase government control over monastic affairs (see Wolfson-Ford 2017: 16–18). Basically this can be considered a modern version of the well-known purification measures (P. *visodhana*) in Theravāda Buddhist history, where ruling elites issue promulgations (P. *katikāvata*) for the *saṅgha* in order to control the monastic order (Kourilsky & Ladwig 2017–2018). Perhaps more revealing than this general law is the protocol of a general meeting of the Vientiane *saṅgha* held during 20–22 April, 1959, which was almost completely occupied with the political turmoil in Laos. The resolutions taken there called for a harsh stance on any monk who would associate himself with a party that "advances policies that are in opposition to the ones of the Lao government", spread propaganda for it, or publicly proclaim political positions.[17] The topic also touched upon more fundamental questions about the role of monks in society: An exchange of letters from the following year between the Ministry of Religion, the highest monk from Luang Prabang, and political activists, for example, discusses if it is a violation of the monastic rules (P. *vinaya*) when monks participate in demonstrations and political mobilizations.[18]

The political positions inside the Lao *saṅgha* were at this time for sure diverse, and many did initially not only support the *Pathet Lao*, but also the more moderate and neutralist political forces.[19] Some leading monks in Vientiane such as the *Vipassanā* meditation master Mahaphan Ananto (1911–1968)[20] tried to keep out of these quarrels, and advance a reform of

17. See BAD-12-2-1959.013.

18. A letter from the 2nd of May 1960 from the Ministry of Religion to all provincial governors complains that monks have joined demonstrations together with laypeople, and classifies this as a violation of the monastic rules. Monks and novices should "not support this or that side", and instead "learn the *dhamma*, study Pali, practise the precepts, and meditate" (BAD-12-2-1960.104). A reply letter dated from 15th of October explains at length why this is not so, and why under certain circumstances monks should be allowed to express their opinions, and join demonstrations (BAD-12-2-1960.95). Throughout the 1960s, several proclamations on politics were made. See, for example, a document from 1963 stamped as 'secret' that prohibits political parties to search for support among monks (BAD-12-2-1963.104). This political line of preventing an open association of politics and Buddhism basically continued in the Ministry of Religion until 1975. A newspaper article from 1971 with a statement by Prince Boun Om is entitled 'Ministry of Religion prohibits monks to make connections to politicians' (XatLao Daily 1971).

19. See Wolfson-Ford (2017, 2020) for more information on the Lao monastic order and its changing links both to the RLG and the Lao monarchy. These links became increasingly polarized over the years, resulting in a diversity of political positions inside the *saṅgha*. However, with increasing escalation of the conflict, mediating voices such as those of the neutralist factions became more and more isolated.

20. Pha Mahaphan Ananto was invited from Thailand to come to Vientiane to teach meditation, and was the founder of Buddhist youth and Sunday schools, and also the *Abhidhamma* and

Buddhism beyond politics. It seems, however, that a majority of monks in Vientiane became increasingly politicized, and developed a rather critical stance towards the policies of the RLG. The polarizations and political mistrust were also reflected, and driven by very concrete measures. Recognizing the influence of the NLHX on monastic institutions, both the RLG secret service and other organizations started to systematically collect information about, and actually spy on suspect monks and monasteries: The Asia Foundation had since the mid-50s been active in various projects subsumed under the heading 'Buddhist programming' in Laos and other Southeast Asian countries. Officially, it sponsored Buddhist education and trainings, but basically acted as a clandestine branch of the CIA, trying to inoculate monks against communist infiltration.[21] A report on its activities in Laos states for the year 1959 that "the *Pathet Lao* is well organized, trained and energetic in Buddhist matters. […] Perhaps seventy to eighty percent of the bonzes are opposed to the government […] and as much as ten to twenty have strong *Pathet Lao* inclinations" (Asia Foundation 1964, n.p.). At that time, Khamtan Thepbuali already belonged, and indeed headed this minority group of monks with strong inclinations towards the *Pathet Lao*. Given these increased political tensions and surveillance of political opponents, he and his associates had to be careful with their engagement. Keuang Pathoumxat (1905–1972), a former *Lao Issara* leader, headed a rather conservative group of monks in the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and collaborated with the secret service section of the RLG called the 'National Centre of Documentation'.[22] The latter was from 1958 to 1960 involved in a range of activities aiming at the *saṅgha* and Buddhism, and set up a group called 'Special Actions Vientiane Pagodas'. A report on the activities of this group from 31.3.1959[23] actually maps Vientiane's temples and abbots according to their political orientation, and declares that several temples in Vientiane such as Wat That Fun are already 'contaminated' by *Pathet Lao* influence (see Ladwig 2017a: 97). Despite some successes through propaganda work, the report comes to a similar conclusion like the one of the Asia Foundation cited above: "On a more general level one can say that most of the monks remain pro-Lao Patriotic Front or pro-Santhiphab".[24] Although we have found no documents that support the point that the *Pathet Lao* and the group around

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Vipassanā-meditation centre located at Wat Sok Pa Luang in Vientiane. Today, he is still highly revered. See McDaniel (2008: 53f.) and Vilaychak (2001: 42–84) for more details on his life.

21. The program of the Asia Foundation aiming at Buddhism in Southeast Asia was called 'DT Pillar', whose self-description from 1957 in recently declassified archival material states that its main aim is "to promote in Asia the development of leaders in the field of politics, education and religion, and to provide the organizational instruments and resources […] through which Communist organizational efforts may be countered" (DT Pillar 1957, n.p.). Other lists contain names of people and institutions which were supported in Laos, like, for example, the Young Buddhist Association, Pali schools, or specific people in the Ministry of Religion. The See also DT Pillar (1964) for the follow-up of the program.

22. This was linked to a paramilitary organization called the 'Directorate for National Coordination' and set up by Phoumi Nosavan under the leadership of Lt. Col. Siho in the late 1950s. It was modelled on the CIA trained Border Patrol Police and Police Aerial Resupply Unit in Thailand.

23. "Trimester Report of Activities of the Section 'Political Action' of the National Centre for Documentation (period 1.1.-31.3.1959)". The original is reproduced in the annex of Deuve (1995: 257ff.).

24. *Ibid*.

Thepbuali implemented similar counter-measures such as political screening, spying, and denunciation, it is fairly safe to assume that they tried to keep up with measures equal to the ones by the RLG mentioned above.

3. A new monastic organization and the political split of the *saṅgha*

Given the political tensions of this time, and the level of repression regarding political statements, it was rather easy to further politicize monks. Thepbuali had a circle of (ex-)monastic associates around him, who held similar political views, perhaps rooted in the fact that as young monks they all grew up under French colonialism, lived through WWII, witnessed the reclaiming of Laos by the French, and the subsequent American involvement in the late 1950s. Despite their educational and political differences, before and after 1975 they all played a major role in Laos' politics of religion: Pha Maha Buakham Voraphet, Maha Ku Suvannamethi (1910–2001) and Pha Bunchankaeo Phothichitto (1920–1996), also supported the political line advanced by the NLHX and the *Pathet Lao*. While Thepbuali had studied in Bangkok, some of the others had been politicized during the colonial period at the Buddhist Institute in Phnom Penh.[25] Voraphet had already been politically active during his training in Cambodia, and was jailed for four months for his anti-colonial activities. And Maha Khamphan Vilachit (1914–1995) had already joined the anti-colonial *Lao Issara* ('Free Lao') movement between 1945 and 1949.

The first concerted political action of this critical group of monks aimed at the institutional apparatus of the Vientiane *saṅgha*. While the Ministry of Religion after the departure of Phoumi Vongvichit became occupied with more conservative and RLG-loyal staff, they tried to initiate an institutional change that would allow monks to openly air their opinions. Therefore, with Pha Maha Vichit Singhalat (who until his death in 2012 was head of the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization) and other monks, Thepbuali tried to set up a new *saṅgha*-organization. On November 19, 1958, in a meeting of approximately 200 monks at Vientiane's Wat That Foun, Thepbuali was elected as the first president of the Lao National United Buddhist Organization (*ongkhan phuttha-sasana samphan haeng pathet Lao*), with Singhalat acting as first secretary. However, the sphere of religion and *saṅgha* affairs, remained caught up in political conflict, and the impact of the new organization remained elusive. The situation worsened when in May 1959 some of the most important *Pathet Lao* leaders were jailed in Vientiane. Phoumi Vongvichit and other NLHX deputies and their assisting staff — 16 persons in total — were arrested and detained by the RLG (Tappe 2008: 216f.). The reaction of politicized monks followed immediately: In January, 1960 Pha Maha Buakham Voraphet was radicalizing

25. In the earlier period of French colonialism, most Lao monks went to study for higher degrees at the Buddhist Institute in Phnom Penh. The anti-French feelings crystallized during the 'Umbrella War' (1942), which happened after the colonial administration disrobed and imprisoned two Khmer monks accused of spying for the Japanese enemy. See Hansen (2007) and Edwards (2007) for the history of Cambodian Buddhism under colonialism, and Kourilsky (2018) for the link between Laos and Cambodian Buddhist education in the context of creating an 'Indochinese Buddhism', independent of Bangkok's influence.



Fig. 1 — Maha Khamtan (second from the left) attends a political rally of the NLHX in the liberated zone in the 1960s. First from the left: Maha Voraphet. Monks are due to their status always granted positions in the first row, and feature prominently in images of mass mobilizations during this period. Source: *Khaosan Pathet Lao*.

students with pro-*Pathet Lao* sermons at the Buddhist College at Wat Ongteu, and supporting their involvement in demonstrations. In the early hours of May 24, 1960 the *Pathet Lao* leaders managed to escape with the assistance of some of their prison guards whom they had won over to the revolutionary cause.[26] They left Vientiane and from now on operated from the liberated zone. The *saṅgha* in Vientiane underwent a similar split: After the Kong Le Coup in August 1960, and the Battle of Vientiane later that December,[27] a group of about 100 to 200 monks — comprising Thepbuali and most of the politically active monks already mentioned above — finally decided to take sides and join the neutralist *Santhiphap Pen Kang* and *Pathet Lao* forces operating in the liberated zone, first in Khang Khai, Xieng Khouang province, and later in Sam Neua and Viengxay districts, Houaphan province. This schism in the Lao *saṅgha* can be considered a crucial event in the modern history of Lao Buddhism, and also Thepbuali's life. The latter became the chief-ideologue of this group of monks, and was regularly presenting the monastic order at political meetings and rallies (see fig. 1).

26. For a more heroic Lao perspective of this event, see Luangphasi (2018). The latter also reports that four monks from Wat That Luang Neua joined the 16 NLHX officials in their flight from the capital. They defrocked and then made a special prayer in front of the King Xetthathirat statue before joining the revolution (*ibid*. 186).

27. The Kong Le Coup took place in August 1960 when members of the 2nd Paratroop Battalion led by Capt. Kong Le rebelled against the commanders of the Royal Lao Army and the right-wing leaders of the RLG. The paratroopers had not been paid in months and were frustrated with being sent constantly to fight the *Pathet Lao* Army in some of the remotest and most difficult parts of Laos. Kong Le despised the American interference in Lao affairs and championed a Neutralist, third force.

While "in a few short years millions of dollars had rained down like manna from heaven on the cities of Laos" (Evans 2002: 102), and Vientiane became a sort of boom town due to the massive American presence in the 1960s, Thepbuali and his associates spent more than ten years in the so-called 'liberated zone' in the northeastern provinces of Laos. There, on 14th of November 1961, leading *Pathet Lao* cadres and monks such as Thepbuali, Voraphet and Singhalat founded the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization, which was distinct from the *saṅgha* in Vientiane, Champasak and Luang Prabang. When the war intensified, the *Pathet Lao* moved on to the caves of Houaphan province, seeking shelter from American carpet bombings flown in from Thailand. Under rather harsh conditions, these monks developed a sort of pro-communist, activist Buddhism infused with a strong dose of nationalism that emphasized propaganda preaching (also on radio), text production, printing, and literacy courses for peasants and soldiers (Ladwig 2009). Thepbuali and Voraphet also trained younger monks in revolutionary theory and its potential links to Buddhism. Although the inclusion of Vietnamese 'advisors' was a rather common phenomenon when training Lao communist cadres (Goscha 2004), we do not know to what extend non-monastic Lao and Vietnamese officials participated, and thereby shaped the content and form of these sessions. Thepbuali only stated that he used some of his own writings (discussed in the next part) for these lessons. However, beyond politics and propaganda, the monks in the liberated zone also continued to perform traditional ritual tasks. As one can imagine, funeral rites were a rather frequent occurrence.

Recent research on Southeast Asian cultural productions during this period (Day & Liem 2010), and works on the Indochina wars (Goscha & Ostermann 2009) embed the Cold War into local de-colonialization processes which also point to the importance of transnational connections. This was also the case for Buddhism in the liberated zone under the aegis of the *Pathet Lao*: Due to the intense cooperation of the Lao and the Vietnamese communist movement, there were also exchanges with Vietnamese Buddhists. Images from this period reveal that one of the leading Vietnamese monks who cooperated with the *Việt cộng*, Thich Thien Hao (1911–1997), visited the Lao monks in the liberated zone several times in the 1960s and 1970s. As early as 1963, he and Thepbuali seem to have been in contact with each other. They both attended the Beijing Buddhist Conference in October 1963.[28] However, it remains unclear to what extend these visits resulted in more substantial exchanges. In interviews Patrice Ladwig did with monks who lived in the liberated zone in the 1960s, it became clear that the language barriers were rather high, and that their very different forms of Buddhism complicated things beyond pure representational and symbolic exchanges.[29] Although an international Buddhist liberation

28. As reported in: "Buddhist Conference", *Peking Review. A Weekly Magazine of Chinese News and Views* 6 (43), 1963, p. 3.

29. Interview by Patrice Ladwig with Maha Vichit Singhalat, Vientiane, 8th January 2008. Buakham Voraphet seems to have been the only leading monk who was proficient in Vietnamese. In talks with other men who ordained in this period and were present in this area, it became obvious that these exchanges were important on a political level, but that in interactions beyond that, they largely remained alien to each other. Several Lao mentioned to me that the very different routines

movement remained a mere propagandistic dream, there is still something remarkable about these developments: What here emerged in the religious sphere was something quite different from what was going on in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, and can be conceptualized as a kind of counter-image to the one still upheld by many Westerners interested in Buddhism: Buddhism not as a philosophy of non-violence, compassion and cloistered meditation (see Faure 2009: 85–99), but as a religion that under specific circumstances promotes radical political and social activism, militancy, and legitimizes warfare (see Tikhonov & Brekke 2013; Jerryson & Juergensmeyer 2009).

4. Towards a modernist revolutionary Buddhism: Thepbuali's writings

Additionally to his practical political work, Thepbuali wrote three short books that outlined his views of an activist, nationalist liberation Buddhism, whose ideas and practices could be merged with socialism. *Politics and Buddhism* (1976a), *The Lao Monks and the Revolution* (1976b), and *Buddhism and Society* (1976c) were officially only published after the seizure of power of the *Pathet Lao* in 1975, but most of the ideas contained in them were formulated and penned down during his years in Bangkok, and during the war. In a review of the second book for the *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient*, Saveng Phinith (1977: 322) states this "is not a work of erudition, but a manual of popularization aiming at the Lao population", trying to mobilize the monks and laypeople that have remained politically passive. On the one hand, Phinith is certainly right in his estimation of 'vulgarisation', as he puts it in French. Like in most of Thepbuali's writings, the language is clear and undeniably has a propagandistic tone saturated with ideological and nationalistic vocabulary. Many thoughts and concepts in his written works can be considered a direct reflection of Lenin's famous dictum that "without revolutionary theory, there can be no revolutionary movement" (Lenin 1961: 121). It is simplified, socialist propaganda aimed at making revolutionary and nationalistic ideas understandable for a peasantry that previously had no or little exposure to such ideas. Thepbuali develops a rather dualistic world-view in which the Buddhist *dhamma* is considered to stand on the right side of history. Describing the tasks of monks in the revolutionary process and fighting against American imperialism in *The Lao Monks and the Revolution*, Thepbuali first mentions practical propaganda tasks monks are involved in, and then summarizes:

> They [the monks] know how to harmonize Buddhist teachings with the mission for the struggle and liberation of the nation: Preaching and thereby educate the people on a broad level to have a patriotic mind and love the nation, love religion and morality, and enable them to see which things are according to the *dhamma*, and against it. And, moreover, make the people recognize who are the friends and the enemies of the nation and Buddhism in Laos. (Thepbuali 1976b: 40)

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and habits of the Vietnamese *Mahāyāna* monks (eating times, robes, chanting etc.) were rather bewildering for them, and that they could only talk to them with an interpreter.

In *Buddhism and Society*, he takes a somewhat broader perspective beyond Laos, and links the spread of capitalism in the 20th century to Buddhist resistance in other countries. After describing the theories of Marx and Lenin as a "shining ray" (1976c: 5) illuminating the global situation, and declaring that socialism abolishes class-society, exploitation and oppression, he refers to anti-colonial revolts and Buddhist activism in Cambodia, Burma, Japan and Vietnam (*ibid*.: 6–9). This global resistance is then connected to the Buddhist *dhamma*, and two rivaling political systems: "This struggle between capitalism and the socialist society is a fight between the representatives of the *dhamma* and the representatives of the anti-*dhamma*. The socialist society represents the *dhamma*, while the capitalist system is to be considered the anti-*dhamma*." (Thepbuali 1976c: 11).

One could also argue that Saveng Phinith's review, and his estimation of a vulgarization, completely ignores the context under, and for which purpose Thepbuali created these works. Political theorist John Dunn wrote in his classic *Modern Revolutions: An Introduction to the Analysis of a Political Phenomenon*, that "we have to understand what being a revolutionary meant at particular times and in particular places and why there were revolutionaries of that particular sort there and then" (Dunn 1989: 12). If we transfer this — at first sight rather obvious and simple statement of Dunn — to the case of Thepbuali, one might understand the tone and content of his writings. Simply taking into account the conditions under which his books were written: After 1964 the mountainous regions of Laos were subject to US carpet-bombing. People were hiding in caves, thousands died and the ones who survived had to endure hardships that today are hard to imagine. Although in our conversation in 2008 Thepbuali mentioned with a smile that the few remaining monks in the liberated zone (most men were drafted as soldiers anyway) were often wearing military boots under their robes during the years spent in the forests and caves, this smile perhaps only glossed over the conditions under which they lived. While most monks in Vientiane enjoyed a rather peaceful and comparatively comfortable life, Thepbuali and his associates spent years in a zone of war. Perhaps one can here find an explanation for the radicalism of his vision of Buddhism, which must have appeared shocking to monks trained in more traditional ways.

However, besides these propagandistic elements one also finds rather unusual interpretations of Buddhist history in Thepbuali's works. By employing a kind of critical historical hermeneutics, he advances perspectives that take into account the social and political forces that shaped Buddhism in the context of its respective time. Instead of simply glorifying the civilizational achievements of Buddhism, lineages of great kings, and monotonous re-iterations of the value of the five precepts (the usual features of Buddhist historiography), he gives this history an unusual spin. Although the *dhamma* (and therefore righteousness and morality) is in his understanding always present through the ages, he also sketches out an alternative history, which is characterized by repression, and the appropriation and instrumentalization of Buddhism through hegemonic forces and

rulers. In the first chapter of *The Lao Monks and the Revolution* he outlines the socio-political context into which the Buddha was born: "In this era, India and many other countries in the world were in the period of feudalism (*sakdina*). […] A democratic administration conflicted with the interests of the feudalists. Therefore, there was no justice in this period, and the people and the population were engulfed by complete darkness." (1976b: 2). He then outlines the functioning of the caste system during Siddhartha's time, which the latter, when growing up, also recognizes as a world of divisions, "full of injustice, suffering, torture, and cloudy darkness" (*ibid*.: 5). Finally this leads Siddhartha to leave his comfortable royal palace and become an ascetic, propagating the four noble truth and the *dhamma* (*ibid*.: 6). However, after the Buddha's death, the monastic community becomes divided by different opinions, which certain feudalists exploit for their own cause (*ibid*.: 9). In chapter three Khamtan moves on to Lao history, and argues that many monks upheld the *dhamma* in the feudalist period; they had a positive, taming influence on kings, some of which were actually righteous rulers. But over time, Buddhism became instrumentalized by the ruling class, and some monks were sullied by receiving honorific titles and high positions in the ecclesiastical hierarchy (*ibid*.: 16–17). Moreover, the feudalists manipulated the population by calling the people to perform meritorious deeds and donate their work-force in order to build temples and *stūpa*s, but in reality, Khamtan claims, they betrayed and exploited them (*ibid*.: 18). What follows is a kind of false conscience production through a selective and wrong interpretation of Buddhist texts and values: "The feudalists use the values of *mettā* (loving-kindness), *karuṇā* (compassion) and *muditā* (altruism) to oppress the people, and they instrumentalize *upekkhā* (equanimity) for keeping them in a subjugated condition" (1976b: 17). Buddhism is here inserted into an interesting cultural Marxist view of history, its ideologies and power relations.

In other passages he continues his hatchet job on mainstream Buddhist history, but also refers to a certain resilience against appropriation: "In this historical era, the feudalists also exploited Buddhism as a tool that could be used, but the system was not able to appropriate the true *dhamma* as a whole because the real goal of Buddhism is to eradicate oppression. […] Therefore, Buddhists had strength to fight the feudalist system…" (1976c: 18). He then also refers to the positive effects of Buddhism for society, and describes the temple as a school, hospital and meeting point for ordinary people (*ibid*.: 21–22). Khamtan also gives us a larger estimation of Buddhism's fate through the ages, and refers to its unfulfilled potentials: "The truth of Buddhist morality always had progressive features, but because it existed for 2500 years in the context of systems and societies in which it conflicted with differing political goals, its development was blocked, and the Buddhist morality could not develop and expand as it was supposed to" (1976c: 2).

Reading these short excerpts, one can easily imagine that Thepbuali was a staunch realist. His vision of Buddhism can be seen as exposing specific features of what David McMahan (2008) has described with the concept of

'Buddhist modernism',[30] but with a stronger political, nationalist and activist twist: His writings always emphasize that Buddhist teachings and the *saṅgha* are inseparable from the social and political conditions they exist in. They also contain passages that try to rationalize and de-mythologize Buddhist teachings, and bring them in line with the natural sciences (1976b: 65–67). Displaying a great knowledge of traditional Lao literature and culture beyond Pāḷi (*ibid*.: 18), he nevertheless rejected magical practices[31] as residues of a superstitious past, and emphasized work and engagement over meditation and erudition in texts. For more traditionally minded Buddhists especially, his critical interpretations of Buddhist history were for sure bewildering, or even blasphemous.

5. The wider picture: Theravāda Buddhism Socialist movements

The effort to reform Buddhism, and bring it into line with a Marxist-inspired liberation and de-colonization movement was by no means limited to Laos and Thepbuali's circles. At an earlier stage and beyond Theravāda Southeast Asia, Buddhist thinkers explored similar ideas. In China, the *Mahāyāna* Buddhist monk Tai Xu (1890–1947) aimed for a modernist and political Buddhism that was influenced by socialist ideas (Pittman 2001). Likewise, the Japanese Zen priest Uchiyama Gudō (1874–1911) developed what could be called an anarcho-socialist agenda (Rambelli 2013). It is rather unlikely that Thepbuali actually knew the writings and ideas of these monks in more detail, but as already mentioned above, he at least referred in his texts to other Asian Buddhist movements that employed similar ideas. However, he was clearly aware of the works that were circulating in Laos and Thailand. One Lao contemporary of his also pleaded for a kind of Buddhist Socialism, but was much more moderate in his aspirations: Bong Souvannavong (1906–1978), who throughout the 1950s and 1960s was politically very active, had a vivid interest in Buddhism, and often critiqued the pro-American politics of the RLG. Despite the title of his major publication *Doctrine Lao ou socialisme dhammique (sangkhom dhammadhipatai) pour l'instauration de la paix* published in 1961, he was not a socialist in a strict sense, but more of a neutralist democrat. Nevertheless, strongly opposing the American influence, he and his network also supported the NLHX and the *Pathet Lao* at times. Bong thought that Lao Buddhism had degenerated and was in need of thorough reforms. Somewhat like Khamtan, but less radical, he

30. McMahan (2008) points to important topics such as demythologization, scientific rationalization, de-emphasis on ritual, the rejection and reform of traditional cosmologies and so forth. Buddhism's encounter with radical political movements also provoked questioning into many of its basic assumptions; see, for example, McMahan's reference to the Chinese leftist monk Tai Xu (*ibid*.: 75 ff.). However, the radical political aspects of Buddhism are somewhat peripheral to McMahan's otherwise important book.

31. Whereas the escape of Pathet Lao leaders after their imprisonment in Vientiane was attributed to the supernatural powers of Souphanouvong, in his writings Thepbuali (1976b: 58) fervently denies this and simply attributed this to the righteousness of the Buddhist *dhamma* (see also Tappe 2008: 220).

primarily pleaded for a kind of modernist, rational Buddhism that, in order to contribute to a resolution of the crisis in Laos, would have to shed itself from superstitious belief and ritualism (Christie 2001: 153). Bong suggested that in a decolonized world, Buddhist ethics and values can contribute to the creation of peaceful international relations beyond the poles of capitalism and communism. He was clearly inspired by the *panca-sila* ('five general principles') concept propagated by Jawaharlal Nehru and others.

Beyond Laos, the post-colonial moment of the Cold War fueled aspirations for a third way beyond the two dominant political systems, and several thinkers aimed at combining Buddhism and socialism. Socialist movements encountered one another — one could say — in a short window of historical opportunity. This may be grounded in the fact that many members of the elite that were to rule after the end of colonialism came into direct contact with leftist ideas during their educational years. Socialist theories were up in the air in a decolonizing world, and were often merged with more traditional, indigenous religious concepts. Particularly between the 1950s and 1970s, one finds efforts to merge Buddhism with socialist ideas and practices in practically every country with a significant proportion of Theravāda Buddhists. In Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Sri Lanka various partially and strongly diverging forms of Buddhist socialism were promoted (see Ladwig & Shields 2014; Ling 1979: 89f.). A good example is Burma, where U Nu (1907–1995) and the intellectual Thein Maung became acquainted with socialism and communism while studying in Yangoon and in the United Kingdom. U Nu translated parts of Marx's *Das Kapital* into Burmese, and Thein Maung became a member of Clemens Dutt's 'Communist League Against Imperialism' in London.[32] When he became Prime Minister, U Nu also launched a public campaign to transform Burmese society through his Buddhist-Socialist ideas (see Sarkisyanz 1965: 210–228), which were, however, more oriented towards a democracy. From a more propagandistic viewpoint, King Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia (1922–2012) published a short pamphlet entitled *Notre socialisme bouddhique* in 1965, in which he proposed the notion of an indigenous Khmer socialism during the Angkor period. He here referred to the great public works and social welfare systems that were allegedly implemented during the reign of Jayavarman VII. Being less political, and more philosophically oriented, the eminent Thai Buddhist monk Buddhādasa (1906–1993) developed the notion of 'Dhammic Socialism' in the turbulent 1960s (Buddhadasa 1989: 158–203; Jackson 2003: 240f.; Gabaude 1988: 487). For Buddhādasa, socialism is actually the original state of nature, where things are in balance, and no surplus is taken. He merged this idea with that of the righteous king as depicted in the *Aggañña Sutta*, who, endowed with the *dasabidharājadhamma* ('the ten royal virtues of righteous king'), will guarantee the stability of the *dhamma*.

The argument by Thepbuali invoked before — that the Buddha had a sort of egalitarian, if not revolutionary view of the social order of his time — also

32. For U Nu's Marxist education see Butwell (1963).

appears in the work of the Ceylonese D.C. Vijayavardhana. His 700-page book *The Revolt in the Temple*, published to coincide with celebrations of the *Buddha Jayanthi* in Yangoon in 1956, aims at integrating communism, Buddhism and Sri Lankan nationalism. Vijayavardhana first invokes Hegelian dialectics and stated that: "the thesis of traditional Buddhism and the anti-thesis of Marxian communism is incomplete. […] We have reached a stage where synthesis is necessary" (Vijayavardhana 1956: 603). Many of his arguments for this synthesis referred to early Buddhism, its forms of monastic organization, and its property rights as an example of a communist community:

> The early *saṅgha*, as established by the Buddha, comprised real Communists whose precept and practice have virtually disappeared from the earth. They were a classless community of which every member was equal (*sama samaja*). They individually owned no property, all possessions being held by the community. […] Here, as far as it was humanly possible, was realized the true Communist ideal of a classless equalitarian and non-attached society. (*ibid*.: 596–597)

Interestingly, the equation of class and caste, and the idea that Buddhism offered an exit from the latter, can be found among many writers and thinkers who tried to combine Buddhist and Marxist views. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956) is probably the most influential on a practical level, because his conversion to Buddhism in 1956 inspired many Untouchables (Dalits) in India to follow his example, and thereby leave the caste system. Also playing on this elective affinity of class and caste was a Lao acquaintance of Thepbuali, Maha Ku Suvannamethi, a *Pathet Lao* sympathizer, who worked in the Lao Ministry of Religion for many years. He also pleaded for a very similar interpretation of Buddhism like Vijayavardhana quoted above. After outlining the discriminatory features of the caste system, he presents the Buddha as someone who enabled everyone to join the monastic order, and thereby actually leave the caste system. The Buddha taught "solidarity, democratic independence and freedom in all fields, without having to have a position in the caste system" (Suvannamethi 1975: 44). Thepbuali does not reference any of the thinkers outside of Laos we briefly discussed above, and perhaps their partially much more complex thinking was not of direct value for his more propagandistic intentions. However, the fact that during the Sixth Buddhist Council in Burma in 1956 these ideas were propagated, makes it quite likely that he was exposed to them.

For historians of Buddhism, many of the argumentations we have outlined in this part may be rather doubtful, or even ideologically suspicious. To what extent the Buddha opposed the caste systems has been subject to some discussion.[33] Like in Christian Liberation Theology originating in South America, such novel readings of a religious tradition must first radically critique hegemonic understandings of religion, and can only then proceed to formulate new,

33. See Krishan (1986) for a critical overview of these discussions. Despite academic criticism, the point that Buddhism was opposed to the caste system has become a standard argument used by (even non-radical) modern Buddhists to point to their religion's 'progressive' character. For a critical textual analysis of assemblies in the Pāḷi canon, and the question whether the early monastic community can be understood as an ideal society, see, for example, Steven Collins (1998: 436f.).

and revitalize allegedly 'forgotten' or 'misunderstood' parts of a tradition, which can then be used to address questions of social justice, oppression, exploitation and so forth. Beyond these questions of historical heuristics, however, we want to emphasize another point here: For a long time, the general, dominant image of the relationship of Buddhism and communism has been one of antagonism and oppression. Although this was undoubtedly the case in many places such as Maoist China, this is only one side of the story. Like with Christian Liberation Theology, here we witness what could be called creative appropriation and the indigenization of Marxism. Although some of the Buddhist movements and thinkers mentioned above diverged widely in their understanding of socialism and communism, and were at times using a rhetoric and vocabulary derived from 'Western' ideologies such as nationalism and communism, a model of cultural transmission that assumes that the West as the origin of these ideas, and depicts Asian Buddhists merely as passive recipients, is no longer adequate to understand these processes. The title of Emanuel Sarkisyanz's (1965) pioneering work *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution* captures very well the often overlooked role of religion in indigenizing Marxism. What Thepbuali and other thinkers in this period tried to accomplish was to create something new, which was not simply a copy of dominant Western conceptions. Marxism and other revolutionary theories underwent crucial changes in these so-called 'peripheries' of world-history, and only in recent decades Western scholars have slowly started to take them into account as genuine productions on their own, partially independent from Western hegemony. Closer readings of these works have the potential to 'provincialize' and thereby de-centre European thought, as post-colonial scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) has called it.

6. Taking power and engineering a new Buddhism under the revolutionary regime

When in 1973 the end of the Second Indochina War was ebbing to a close, first attempts to reconcile the different political sides including the monastic order were started. The Lao King Savang Vatthana, and monks from Luang Prabang visited Sam Neua, the bombed out capital of the liberated zone (fig. 2). Preparing the take-over of power, Thepbuali started travelling to fellow Buddhist countries already,[34] but then returned to Vientiane. There, the monastic order had under the conservative Prince Boun Om — Minister of Religion from 1966 to 1972 — been brought into the political line of the RLG. Two factions of the *saṅgha*, who had over 15 years taken very different paths under regimes caught up on two different sides of a war, now had to be brought together under the aegis of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party. The declaration of the Lao PDR on December 2, 1975 was celebrated. Several of the leading revolutionary monks attended the meeting (fig. 3), and

34. In April 1973 Khamtan and other monks from the liberated zone flew from there (not Vientiane) to Sri Lanka. See Foreign Broadcasting International Service (hereafter FBIS), *Buddhists to Sri Lanka*, Pathet Lao News Agency (clandestine) in English 0937 GMT 23 Apr 75 BK.



Fig. 2 — Reconciliation efforts a few months before the new regime took power. Maha Khamtan, Maha Voraphet and other monks welcome Prince Souphanouvong and King Savang Vatthana in Sam Neua in April 1975 during the royal tour of the liberated zone. Source: *Khaosan Pathet Lao*.

Thepbuali represented the monastic order in a speech given there (fig. 4). At the first meeting of the national assembly, the initial euphoria was quickly caught up in the *Realpolitik* of re-building a country that had been torn apart by years of war, and political factionalism, and was now subject to political paranoia and economic depression.

Thepbuali was at the forefront of restructuring the Lao *saṅgha*. Equipped with a rather determined character, he and his associates took on the task of forming a nation-wide Buddhist *saṅgha*. In a meeting that lasted eleven days (10–21 June, 1976) they created a new organization, which on an official level abolished any sectarian divisions between Thammayut and Mahanikay monks. Their old associate, and now high-ranking government cadre Phoumi Vongvichit, also participated, and from now on mediated between *saṅgha* and the new regime. Thepbuali was appointed as president of the Lao United Buddhist Organization. In July and August 1977 a 'teach-in' headed by Thepbuali and Voraphet for 115 monks and nuns from Vientiane province was held. The government news agency *Khaosan Pathet Lao* (KPL) announced:

> After 36 days of study and free discussions, the Lao monks have understood more clearly the correct line and policy of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, and seen through the enemy's dark schemes to alienate monks and nuns from the revolution. This has strengthened their belief in the leadership of the Lao party and the United Buddhist Association as well as the bright future of the country.[35]

35. FBIS, *Monks finish teach-in on LPRP policy, enemy schemes*, Vientiane KPL in English, 0915 GMT 24 Aug 77 BK.



Fig. 3 — Buddhist representatives attending the national assembly to found the Lao PDR. in December 1975. Standing from left to right in the front row are Pha Maha Thongkhun, Pha Maha Khamtan, Pha Maha Bouakham, Leuam Insixiengmai and Souk Vongsak. Source: *Khaosan Pathet Lao*.



Fig. 4 — Maha Khamtan gives a speech detailing the role of Buddhists in the newly founded Lao PDR at the first gathering of national representatives immediately after the seizure of power. Vientiane, December 2, 1975. Source: *Khaosan Pathet Lao*.

This propagandistic language, saturated with simplistic friend–enemy distinctions and the usual references to reactionaries, from now on set the tone under the new regime. Free discussions and the correct line of the party obviously also had other implications that went beyond the alleged dark schemes of the enemy: In the 2008 interview, Khamtan somehow admitted retrospectively that hard decisions had to be made, but still used Lao revolutionary jargon and terms like 'eradicate' (*lueblang*) to describe the cleansing and brain-drain of the Lao *saṅgha*. Many monks who had been loyal to the RLG disrobed, but out of fear many monastics who had kept out of politics also left the *saṅgha*. Like many Lao, they crossed into Thailand and ended up in one of the numerous refugee camps there. When they stayed on, they had to undergo political screenings with often unpredictable consequences. One example here is Pha Maha Kamphun Philavong (19??-2005). Before 1975 he was one of the most prolific Buddhist teachers and authors in Vientiane. Before the revolution he was loyal to the RLG, but not explicitly anti-communist, he became a layperson, and after some time spent in one of the 'seminar-camps' the new regime had set up. He returned to Vientiane in 1977, and opened a book shop there. Some Buddhist activists like Bong Souvannavong, who had 15 years earlier pleaded for another form of Buddhist Socialism, and at times had co-operated with the *Pathet Lao*, also had to go down this road. However, Bong was not as lucky as Philavong, and never returned from the camp.[36] Others fled to Thailand, and even got engaged in anti-communist insurgency (Baird 2012). After the change in 1975, Buddhism in Laos not only lost many of its leading thinkers through these draconian measures, but, moreover, its institutional structure underwent further major transformations and contributed to its intellectual and institutional decline: The meditation centre at Vientiane's Wat Sok Pa Luang was closed down, the *Buddhavong* magazine was stopped, the Buddhist Youth Association dissolved, and meditation was seen as unproductive. Important educational networks to Thailand were cut off. The 'new' Buddhism that Thepbuali and his associates were trying to build primarily implied political submission to the regime, and left little space for forging a modernized Buddhism beyond political ideology. Although exchanges with other socialist countries with a proportion of Buddhists (for example Cambodia, Vietnam, Mongolia and Buryatia in the USSR) were started, and Thepbuali and his delegation did several trips abroad,[37] these new connections could not prevent the increasing isolation of Lao Buddhism, which remained in a somewhat paralyzed state for years to come.

36. Bong remained in Laos after 1975, but due to his critique of the post-revolutionary politics of religion was sent to one of the infamous re-education camps in Houaphan, where he died in 1978.

37. A visit by the president of the Soviet Buddhist delegation by a *Mahāyāna* group of monks headed by Bandido Khambo Lama S. Gombayev, Abbot of Ivolginsky Monastery in Ulhan Ude (Buryatia, USSR) to Laos in February 1976, was followed by travels to the 'Moscow World Religious Congress' in June 1977. Further visits to Mongolia and Vietnam happened in the same year. See FBIS, *Soviet Buddhist Delegation Visits*, Vientiane Domestic Service in Lao. 0430 GMT 28 Feb 76 BK; FBIS, *Delegation leaves for Moscow World Religious Congress*, Vientiane KLP in English, 0918GMT 2 Jun 77 BK; FBIS, *Delegations Return Home*, Vientiane KPL in English 0903GMT 18 Sep 77 BK.



Fig. 5 — Khamtan during an interview with Patrice Ladwig in 2008. Source: Patrice Ladwig.

The new government also had to establish a less Buddhist-oriented, and more secular political line than the previous regime. In 1975, Laos became an explicit multi-ethnic nation-state, with Buddhism not being the state religion anymore. Many of the soldiers that during the war had fought for the *Pathet Lao* were from minorities, and until today about 30–40% of the Lao population belong to non-Buddhist ethnic minority groups. An increased recognition of minority cultures through a secular constitution implied that Buddhism had to lose some of its significance. Over the years, however, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party has carefully blended Buddhism into its mainstream image, albeit always in well-dosed and controlled ways. One reason for this can certainly be found in the fact that the group of monks led by Thepbuali had joined the communist movement *long before* the seizure of power, and was therefore already an integral part of the new regime. So

despite the partial downgrading of Buddhism, and hardships especially during the first years after the revolution, the new regime obviously never considered to go as far as the Khmer Rouge, who also took power in 1975. The Cambodian revolutionary movement, like the Maoists in China, viewed religion in very different ways, aiming at wiping it out completely.[38]

In 1979, after the major, and often draconian institutional reforms and adaptations had been implemented, Thepbuali disrobed and became a layperson at the age of 50, after almost 40 years of being in the monkhood.[39] Asking him why he did so during an interview, he answered: "My job was done. The nation had been liberated, the monastic order had an organization, and I simply wanted to have a family". Some Lao friends — well-acquainted with the political situation at the time — aired the suspicion that his old associate Phoumi Vongvichit (Minister of Education, Sport and Religious Affairs under the new regime) was trying to push Thepbuali into higher positions, which were only open for laypersons. Be that as it may — after he left monastic life, he got married, adopted a son, and continued his political career as the director of the Department of Religious Affairs in the Ministry of Education. He remained a permanent member of the Standing Committee of the Lao Front for National Construction, and worked in different departments there until 1996. After his retirement, he continued to be active, and regularly attended the meetings of the Lao *saṅgha*. Occasionally, he wrote and gave speeches at meetings of the Ministry of Information and Culture (see, for example, Thepbuali 1995), and in 2007 published a booklet with 18 short essays entitled *Buddhism and Lao Society*. In comparison to his earlier works, the propagandistic and nationalistic tone is somewhat tuned down. Some of his texts still dwell on the historical role of monks in the liberation of Laos, and recount some of the crucial moments and meetings we briefly discussed in this article (Thepbuali 2007: 44–67). However, other essays in the book also refer to the general role of religion in contemporary society, canonical accounts of the Buddha's death and his *parinibbāna*, or explore the earlier Buddhist history of Southeast Asia and Laos (*ibid*.: 1–27). His nationalist and political approach to Buddhism was once more confirmed in a lecture he gave at the Wat Ongteu Buddhist College in Vientiane on September 13, 2010 entitled 'The role of Buddhism and the mission of nationalism'. In his 90s, his health began increasingly to fail, and when Patrice Ladwig tried to meet him in 2012, he was hospitalized for some weeks, but shortly after returned home, where his family took care of him.

38. The latter's chief ideologue, Nuon Chea (1926–2019), endorsed the widespread purge of the *saṅgha*, and viewed the monkhood as both parasitic and a rival patronage network to the absolute rule of the Party (see Harris 2013). Maoism in China and Cambodia evidently had a very different approach to revolutionary theory and practice, and the position of religion in the new system.

39. Although this might have come as a surprise to many after all these years as a monk, this is not unusual in Lao and Thai Buddhism. Contrary to Sri Lankan Buddhism, where disrobing is somewhat frowned upon, and to a lesser extend in Burmese Buddhism, moving in and out of the monastic order is rather common in Laos and Thailand. Unusual, however, was Thepbuali's age. Most elderly monks disrobe before the age of 30. But he may be a rather specific case due to his political career and standing.

7. Epilogue

Some Lao who went into exile might see Thepbuali as an ideological propagator who rationalized and betrayed Buddhism due to his association with the *Pathet Lao*. Most elderly monks in Laos, and persons acquainted with the history of the Lao revolution, still regard him as an important figure in the politics of religion. The patronage of Khamtan's funeral by Lao Prime Minister Thongloune Sisoulith, and recent books on Buddhism by Lao scholars (where he features prominently in the history section) attest to this. Others might see him as a figure of the past who created and practised a form of radical Buddhism that developed under exceptional political and social conditions. Beyond any value judgments about his life and work, one can attest that the fate of Lao Buddhism would have been a very different one without him, and the other Lao Buddhists and monks he co-operated with, and who passed away before him.

Perhaps somewhat as an irony of history, one has to acknowledge that the continuing "re-Buddhification" of Lao society and culture — as Grant Evans (1998: 67) has aptly remarked over 20 years ago — is also grounded in the influence of revolutionary Buddhists like Thepbuali. The survival, and indeed firm integration of Lao Buddhism into the structures of the new regime, was possible largely due to the pre-revolutionary engagement of him and his associates. Likewise, the participation of high-ranking politicians in state-rituals such as that of the That Luang relic shrine in Vientiane, has some of its roots in these earlier politics of religion (see Ladwig 2015). However, with Lao Buddhism having entered a new phase since the politics of reform have taken hold, and meditation, magic and shiny temples have returned to the more affluent urban areas of Laos in recent years (see Ladwig 2017b: 288–290), Khamtan's revolutionary Buddhism is undoubtedly of little appeal to most Lao today.

Maha Khamtan Thepbuali's cremation took place on September 5, 2019 at Wat That Fun temple in Vientiane — the same place where over 50 years earlier, in 1958, he was elected head of the new Lao *saṅgha* organization, and where his official political career as a revolutionary in robes started. With some imagination, and in an allegoric sense, his passing away itself might be read as a motive that merges Buddhism with an analysis of capitalism: Death can be considered one of the ultimate expressions of the Buddhist idea of *anicca* — impermanence, constant change and non-continuity of all of conditioned existence. And Marx and Engels (2004: 16) defined modern capitalism as a "constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation". Even 150 years after this sentence appeared in the *Communist Manifesto*, quite a few readers might actually still agree with this short-cut analysis of the socio-economic system that has now permeated the whole globe (capitalism, neo-liberalism, you name it). Although the end of history, and the futility of revolutions and utopias have been discussed over and over again, Camus's *Man in Revolt* which we invoked right at the beginning of this essay is not an anachronism, but a potentiality that will always hover over us. Daring experiments in religious thinking, and political theory and practice such as those of Khamtan Thepbuali are therefore, despite all their necessary failings and shortcomings, never futile and obsolete.

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