An Ethnohistory of Highland Societies in Northern Laos

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Relations between ethnic minorities and states of continental Southeast Asia — or kingdoms in the pre-colonial period—have generally been approached by researchers from two angles: absorption, and thus disappearance, the 'minorities' somehow 'melting' into the mass of larger populations, or resistance, a theme which has been more popular. Recently, James Scott, a political scientist, took up this theme of resistance once again in his book with the revealing title, *The Art of Not Being Governed. An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (2009). Assuming that there is a general dynamic that could characterize the relationship between Highlanders and Lowlanders, Scott portrays it as necessarily antagonistic: the mountain peoples of the Southeast Asian highlands would be societies that are not only 'against the state' (Clastres 1974) but would demonstrate throughout history that they always wanted to 'flee the state' and have evolved accordingly (in an area stretching from Assam to Vietnam).

The theoretical position defended here, one that I have upheld since my thesis in 2005, is that rather than embodying a radical 'Otherness' to lowland societies, many of the so-called hill societies acted as 'internal margins.' They continued to trade with the lowland societies or maintained political relations in a symbiotic form that often led to integration. Far from being an isolated case in history, the 'mirror of power' positioning of the Phounoy[2] is an option that has been chosen by many so-called 'minorities,' and this enables us to understand the growth of small kingdoms or local principalities over time, such as the Tai *muang.* But anthropologists have preferred to focus on societies that they believe resisted any form of integration and historians, with a few exceptions (notably Archaimbault 1961, 1991; Grabowsky and Wichasin 2008) have spent little time examining local sources to understand in detail the process of development of some of these 'centers' through the progressive absorption of their internal margins.

In this article, I therefore intend to reconsider the case of the Phounoy and their relationship to the dominant powers through the history of their settlement in what is now the province of Phongsaly in northern Laos and their progressive distinction, via the kingdom of Luang Phrabang during the 18th and 19th centuries, as guardians of the borders. From the example of this Tibeto-Burman language group of approximately 40,000 people (Steering Committee for Census 2006), I will outline the procedures for the ethnogenesis of a population by the way it has integrated into the regional kingdoms and then into colonial and postcolonial Laos. By looking at the history, I will show the process by which the Phongsaly region — the most northern province of Laos, bordering on China and Vietnam — has gradually been attached to the kingdom of Luang Phrabang and the specific place that the Phounoy have occupied there. I will also show how this process of regionalization has gradually led to a

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[2] See my book *En miroir du pouvoir*. *Les Phounoy du Nord Laos. Ethnogenèse et dynamiques d'intégration*, Paris: Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, 2011.

The Journal of Lao Studies, Special Issue 2, 2015, pps 54-76. ISSN : 2159-2152.
Published by the Center for Lao Studies at www.laostudies.org

transformation of the political and social systems of the Phounoy group modeled after the Tai *muang*.[3]

The Phounoy group drew my attention because of two factors that led me to look into its past in order to understand its origins: its name and location, and its apparent 'laocization.' Like many other ethnic groups in the country, those who call themselves 'Phounoy' are found only in Laos itself. Speakers of an often very similar language in neighboring countries have different names (such as the Bisou in Thailand, the Coong in Vietnam, the Pyen in Burma and the Sangkong in China[4]). With the exception of the Bisou,[5] all these group names are exonyms, that is, they are either Tai, Shan, Vietnamese or Chinese terms, originating from the language of the majority population in the region where each group is located. Furthermore, the Phounoy were not just located only in Laos, but were originally confined to a relatively limited territory there, "a square twenty miles long" (Roux 1924: 448), which is the mountainous center of Phongsaly Province. The second intriguing fact is that compared to other Tibeto-Burman language populations[6] known by amateur photographers to be highly colorful, the Phounoy are, on the contrary, primarily characterized by the absence of any outward signs of identity: they have no special costumes, they have houses on stilts similar to those of the Tai Lue, and the first thing they told me was that they were and behaved "just like Lao people." They are one of the few minorities in the country that adopted Buddhism long ago, and the first French colonial texts describe this population as having a system of political organization very similar to that of the Lao and Tai *muang*.[7]

It is therefore difficult to understand the distinctive characteristics of this population, which has a name of Tai origin, along with many specific features typical of Tai groups, and which is in a region, Phongsaly, that is far from the centers of power and where the Tai Lue and Lao represent respectively just 3% and 4.7% of the total population. I will trace this process by distinguishing two main periods: the first half of the 18th century, during which Phounoy language groups settled in the area and were given the role of guarding the borders of a territory assigned to them by the king of Luang Phrabang, followed by the 19th century, when the influence of Luang Phrabang on these mountain groups was reinforced through various edicts that also gave them a form of authority over neighboring populations.

To trace the history of the Phounoy group,[8] I relied primarily on oral narratives, collected from the oldest Phounoy in thirty villages in the province of

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[3] The *muang* is a basic territorial and political unit of Tai populations that can be translated as 'principality,' 'seigneurie,' "Chief's jurisdiction," and can designate both the territory and its center [the town, the village]. For a definition of the *muang*, see J.F. Papet's article, 1997.

[4] There are no ethnographic studies of any of these groups. Only linguistic studies have been carried out among these peoples, placing their languages in the 'Bisoïd' family of the southern branch of Loloish languages—see notably Matisoff (1972).

[5] According to Baudouin, *Bi* means 'person' in Bisou (1991: 20).

[6] The Akha, Hani, Lolo, and Sila populations represent about 30% of the total population of Phongsaly province. If we include the Phounoy, the Tibeto-Burman language speakers make up 50% of the total population of the province.

[7] The types of political organization of Tai language populations (the Lao, Tai Lue, Tai Phouan, etc.) in pre-colonial times are characterized by a pyramidal hierarchy of which the *muang* is the base. With regard to Tai political systems, see, among others, Condominas (1980) and Tambiah (1976). From now on, I will use the term 'Tai' in a global way: i.e., I will refer to both the Lao and the Tai Lue in this context.

[8] I note here that in this article I will only deal with those who call themselves Phounoy. In the province of Phongsaly, there are actually some small groups (1 or 2 villages) who speak a language similar to Phounoy,

Phongsaly during different periods (two years between 1999 and 2001, several months in 2002, 2005 and 2007, until the present day[9]). These narratives were compared with those collected in the 1960s by the linguist M. Ferlus (1969; 1971), with documents of the French colonial administration and with different versions of the Royal Chronicles of Luang Phrabang. Finally, I was fortunate enough to discover documents in Phounoy villages that had been sent by the king of Luang Phrabang to local leaders — some *Kongdin* and various royal orders — that were later photographed and transcribed by members of the EFEO Vientiane[10] and by Grégoire Schlemmer. In 2012, I was able to have these documents translated from Tham Lue to Lao by Mr. Khampeng Kettavong, so I could accurately trace them back to the first half of the 18th century. Much of the data in this article has been presented elsewhere (see Bouté 2011 in particular); however, the information provided by the *Kongdin* has not been published previously.

I. The emergence of the Phounoy and their progressive integration on the borders of the kingdom of Luang Phrabang

Since Phongsaly Province seems to be the main settlement of the Phounoy, a brief overview of the history of this area is required in order to understand the history of the group. Between the 18th century (our sources do not go back any further) and the end of the 19th century, this region was gradually integrated into the kingdom of Luang Phrabang through the allocation of positions and political titles to certain leaders of the local population. By retracing the main steps taken by the king in the region, we will see how some Tibeto-Burmese speaking groups (not yet called "Phounoy") gradually became an ethnic entity through their establishment and distinction by the King.

The arrival of the Phounoy in the region during the first half of the 18th century

Even though it is difficult to date the arrival of the Phounoy to the region (usually, scholars date the settlement of other Tibeto-Burman speaking groups in the north of the Indochinese peninsula to the early 19th century[11]), thanks to the *Kongdin* documents, the arrival of the Phounoy can be traced back to at least around 1750, the date of the earliest found ancient document. This roughly corroborates stories of Phounoy that date their arrival in the area of Phongsaly between the beginning and the first half of the 18th century. Several facts seem to confirm that date. Most of the

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but who call themselves by different names (the Tchaho, Phongkou, Laopan, Tang, Phoumon and Laoseng). An article on these populations, written by the anthropologist G. Schlemmer is currently being prepared. For further clarity, I do not refer to a much smaller Phounoy group that has recently settled on the left bank of the Ou River, and has developed in a slightly different way politically (for these developments, see my article, Bouté 2007).

[9] Investigations were also carried out in the lowlands of the province among the Tai Lue, due to the Lue's former political importance in the region and because of their influence on the Phounoy, notably through Buddhism.

[10] The documents were held by three people in the village of Thongpi where I lived for seven months in 2000. An old woman had two *Kongdin* (one dated 1750, the other 1774), Royal Decrees of 1860 and 1868, and various fragments of different texts (promotion of local dignitaries, magic formulas, etc.; another woman had a *Kongdin* dated 1750 and a Royal Decree from 1860; an old man had a *Kongdin* dated 1774, and several Royal Decrees from 1844, 1860, 1864, 1865 and 1880; outside of these, some documents could not be dated.

[11] Stuart-Fox 1997: 16; Alting von Geusau 2000: 126, 130; Badenoch 2013.

Phounoy elders trace their arrival back seven or eight generations (one generation for them corresponds to 30 years, half the age of a man eligible to become an elder); also, the inhabitants of Samlang, considered the oldest Phounoy village, maintained that it is a little more than three hundred years old.

It is important to note that at that time there was no ethnic group called "Phounoy"; they were instead various village groups speaking closely related Tibeto-Burmese languages. As we will see below, these village groups will only later be identified as "Phounoy" (but for the sake of clarity, I will call them "Phounoy" from now on).

The various stories collected from Phounoy elders tell us that they once lived under Burmese rule. Two main migratory routes are mentioned: one brought the Phounoy directly from Burma to Phongsaly; the other took them first from Burma to Luang Phrabang, then to Phongsaly. The first migration route is said to be the oldest. The Phounoy date it back to the mid-18th and early 19th centuries. The Phounoy were then living in Vieng Phou Kha (Luang Namtha Province today), a region that was under the authority of the Burmese at the time. Following a war between the Burmese and the Chinese, they appear to have fled to Phongsaly through the Sipsong Panna and settled southwest of the current district of Phongsaly. It would seem they founded the first villages at the source of the Pe River,[12] a tributary of the Ou River near Lue villages, whose inhabitants taught them Buddhism. The second migratory route is linked to the history of the Lue in the Phongsaly region, notably the story of the marriage of a princess from Sipsong Panna, who brought the *muang* of Yo, Boun Tai and Boun Neua as the dowry for her marriage to a son of the king of Luang Phrabang. The Lue versions of this story say that the Phounoy were part of the princess's retinue who accompanied her to Luang Phrabang.[13] As the princess was later repudiated by her husband, her people went back with her to the north, travelling up the Ou River to Boun Neua and Yo.[14] The Phounoy themselves recount that after a war between Burma and the realm of Luang Phrabang, their ancestors were captured and brought to Luang Phrabang as prisoners at about the same time that the princess and her followers were on their way there. Profiting from the departure of the Lue (or soon afterwards, following their lead) the Phounoy fled from Luang Phrabang. They were hunted down by the king's soldiers but managed to evade their enemies. They went up the Ou River, following the same route as the Lue, but settled close to Hatsa, in the mountains bordering the river.

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[12] The Pe River runs through the southwest of the region inhabited by the Phounoy, in the current district of Phongsaly.

[13] The Tai Lue from Boun Neua, Boun Tai and Yo have numerous accounts of this marriage. In their narratives, the Lue princess is called 'the young lady with perfumed hair,' Nang Phom Hom. Other versions relating to this princess exist in Northern Laos (see Peltier 1995; Evrard and Chanthaphilith 2011).

[14] According to P. Cohen (1999: 53), for whom these events date back to the 14th century: "In Laos migration reached as far south as Luang Phrabang with the establishment of the Lue village of Ban Phanom. Here the original settlers accompanied wives offered as tribute (*tawaai*) by Sip Song Panna princess to the Lao king Fa Ngum in the fourteenth century." In fact, the Tai Lue inhabitants of the village of Phanom Noy, a few kilometers from Luang Phrabang, today maintain that they are the descendants of members of the princess's escort (Trankell 1999: 203). The Royal Chronicles of the kingdom of Luang Phrabang say that between 1623 and 1681, the king of Sipsong Panna took refuge with his sister and his family in the realm of Lan Xang; the sister of the prince married the son of King Sourinyavong, Prince Latsabout (Lorrillard 1995: 21; Le Boulanger 1931: 129). Another marriage is mentioned in 1782 between a Lue princess from Muang La and the grandson of Latsabout, Tjao-Vong (Le Boulanger 1931: 197).

As I have mentioned above, the "Phounoy" were then different small groups speaking closely related languages who began to fight against one another when they arrived in the Phongsaly area. Indeed, their migratory stories describe a progressive but violent settlement in the region by several small groups bearing names that are today known to be names of Phounoy clans. About 30 years ago, Ferlus (1969) identified a significant body of stories relating how certain clans settled in the Phongsaly region. These settlement stories also mention a period of war between the different Phounoy groups, the cause of which was clearly land possession. The names of most of these groups (Thoum Khong, Mating, P'soum) were also the names of villages, some of which still existed in the region around thirty years ago. These narratives seem to indicate that a community's affiliation to its particular village was — or became — an important distinguishing factor for the small Phounoy language groups. In short, the groups were a long way from forming a homogenous group that shared a common name and identity. On the contrary, there were myriad small groups, none of which were named 'Phounoy.' They referred to themselves by their clan name and/or the name of the village they occupied.

A region at the crossroads of several kingdoms

The Phounoy settled at the intersection of several kingdoms (Fig. 1). In the southeast, the territories of Muang Khoa and Muang Houn, on the banks of the Ou River, appear to have been attached to the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang since ancient times. The Ou River was a strategic point from which incursions came from the north. According to the translation of *Nithan Khoun Borom* (Annals of the Kingdom of Lan Xang) proposed by Doré (1987: 659), in the 14th century the territory of Lan Xang extended to the city of Muang Khoa (currently in the southeast of Phongsaly Province). The area is described in these records as being part of the *Khoun nai khop muang*, that is, areas at the margins of the kingdom whose function was essentially to shelter military garrisons to repel potential invasions.

The territory corresponding to the current districts of Boun Neua and Boun Tai, in the southwest of the province, seems to have belonged to the neighboring Sipsong Panna and more specifically to the *Panna* (district) of Mengla.[15] This area appears to have been formerly 'attached,' meaning that its leaders paid a tribute, to the kingdom of Lan Xang, then to Luang Phrabang (Pavie 1898; Aymé 1930). Lands beyond the mountains that separate the basin of the Black River from the Ou River basin seem to have belonged to the principality of the Sipsong Chau Tai from a fairly early period. According to Gay (1989: 212), it was a customary border, "which respects the traditional boundaries that separate the Sip Song Chau Tai from the Panna of Muang Ou, the kingdom of Luang Phrabang and Houa Phanh Ha Tang Hoc." Finally, the Muang Ou Tai and Ou Neua, which are north of the present province of Phongsaly, constituted the eleventh Panna of the Lue principality (they were ceded to France and incorporated into Laos in 1895). Imprecision remains in regard to the territories between the *muang* of Boun Tai and Boun Neua and the Ou River, a mountainous area occupied by Phounoy language groups but also by Austro-Asiatic

[15] The principality of the Sipsong Panna ("the twelve districts") consisted of twelve constituencies, each one grouping together several vassal *muang* in an enlarged administrative framework to strengthen the control of central government (Liew-Herres, Grabowsky and Wichasin 2012). Aymé (1930: 111) also mentions that certain villages located close to the muang of Boun Neua were dependencies of the Lue kings of the Sipsong Panna until 1896.

language peoples (Khmu), then later, by Tibeto-Burmans (Akha). To sum up, politically, Muang Ou territories in the north were attached to the Lue realm of Sipsong Panna; the allied principalities of Sipsong Panna and Sipsong Chau Tai were in the east and west; and in the south, the *muang* of Boun Neua, Boun Tai and Khoa were part of the kingdom of Luang Phrabang: in the center, an area with no clear political claim over it remained, occupied by Phounoy and by Austro-Asiatic speakers (especially Khmu speakers).[16]

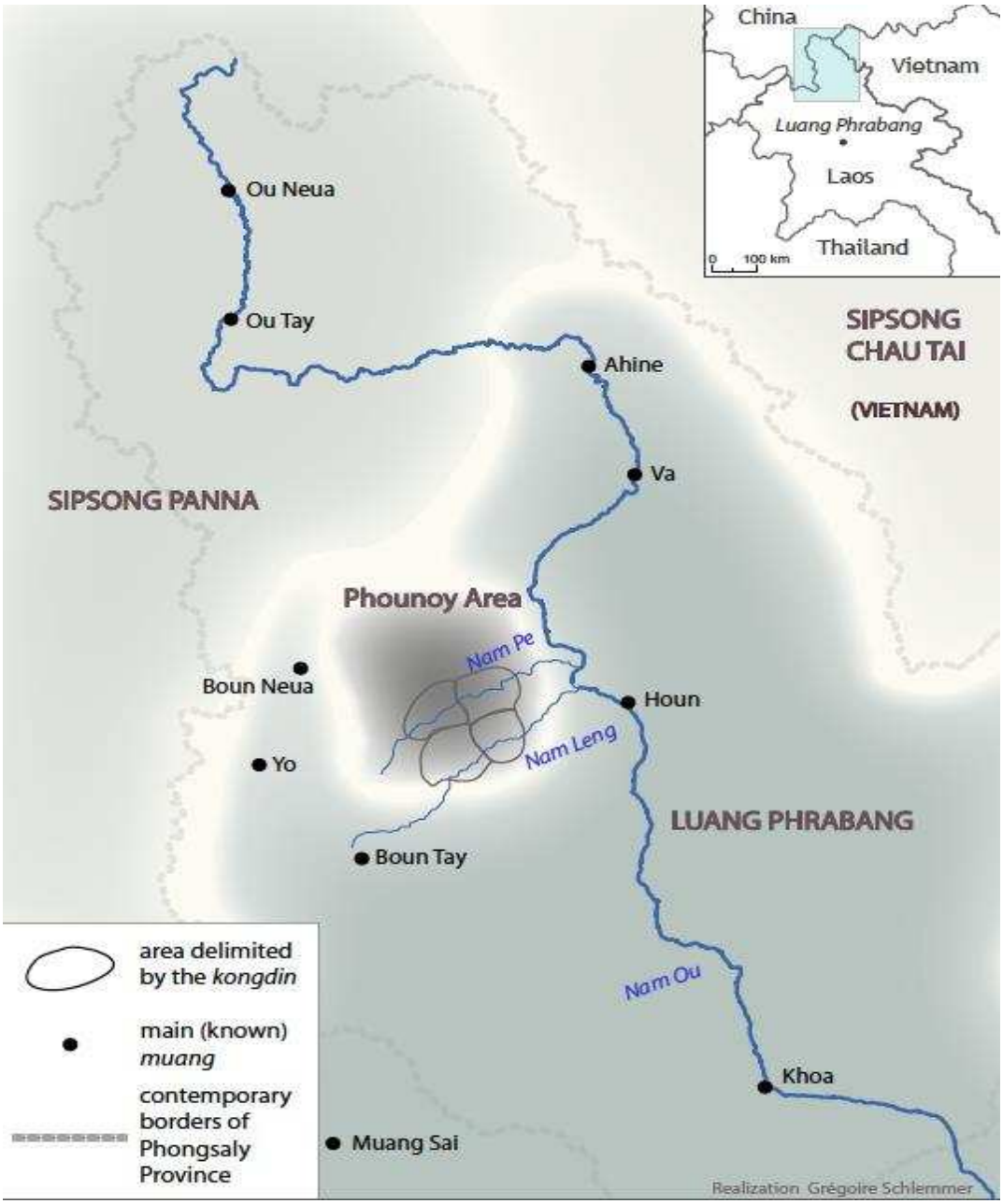

Figure 1: Area delimited by the Phounoy's Kongdin in the realm of Luang Phrabang in the second half of the 18th century

[16] Roux (1924: 453) and Doze (1955: 34) noted that this territory had been called Muang Khang ("the Middle Land") by the Laotians because of its location in the center of several *muang* inhabited by Tai or Lao populations. This term, designating the territory occupied by the Phounoy, is also mentioned in some royal edicts (see below) which were given to them in the 19th century as: *Phong Phounoy ngouang kang* (ຜົງພູນຽ ງວງກາງ).

Because of its geographical position at the intersection of several principalities, the region where the Phounoy found refuge had been at the heart of unrest affecting the realm of Luang Phrabang for a long time. This region served as a strategic zone where the warring factions could find refuge or retreat, but it was also inhabited by various highland populations whose allegiance tended to vary according to changes in the regional balance of power.

The history of the Phongsaly region, as recounted in the Royal Chronicles of Luang Phrabang (according to the versions given by Le Boulanger in 1931, Phinith in 1987 and Lorrillard in 1995), shows how the mountain populations were used as mercenaries during the wars between the region's various principalities. At the beginning of the 18th century, Prince Inthasom, who had taken refuge in the Sipsong Panna, was fighting his brother, King Kitsarat, for the realm of Luang Phrabang. To this end, he recruited the mountain populations in the current province of Phongsaly, with whose help he aimed to capture Luang Phrabang. However, the royal troops proved to be stronger and forced the prince and his soldiers to retreat back along the Ou River. It is possible that some Phounoy language groups might have been among the mercenaries who had joined ranks with the prince.

Nevertheless, the inhabitants of the bordering mountain areas were then targeted by means of integration, not only because the prosperity of the local Lao elite depended on their control, but also because these border populations constituted a potential barrier against aggressions from neighboring principalities. In Phongsaly, the border zones were reorganized, notably by bestowing a special status on the mountain groups. The Phounoy were then appointed as border guards in the middle of the 18th century, and were given *Kongdin* documents.

Mid 18th century: The attribution of written documents known as the Kongdin for the Phongsaly region

According to accounts given to me by the Phounoy — corroborating the observations of the French military at the beginning of the 20th century (Guillemet and O'Kelly 1916: 75; Roux 1924: 452) — the king of Luang Phrabang had made them responsible for defending the frontiers of the kingdom since ancient times. It is therefore possible that this nomination immediately followed the disturbances within the principality of the Sipsong Panna in the second half of the 18th century.

Even though it was not unusual for Tai leaders to bestow the status of border guards on highland populations, it was extremely rare to accompany this gesture by providing written documents, as was the case in Phongsaly (Bouté, 2011: 63–64). In conjunction with this role of border guards, from the first half of the 18th century the king of Luang Phrabang handed over the first *Kongdin* documents to certain Phounoy leaders.

These documents, called the "Books of the Land" (*peum Kongdin*, ປຶ້ມກົ້ງດິນ) and written in tham Lue or Lao script,[17] established the limits of the territories that the king of Luang Phrabang had given to the Phounoy-speaking groups in charge of protecting the frontiers. From the 16th century, the king of Luang Phrabang sent

[17] The Lao (and more generally the Buddhist Tai) have two forms of writing: one called 'tham' derived from the Pégou scripture (Burma) and used for religious texts; the other, the 'Soukhothai' comes from Khmer writing and is used for ordinary texts (Finot 1917: 25–26).

several books (*Kongdin*) showing the limits of the realm in the northern frontier region of North Laos, mainly in Houa Phanh.[18] As these books documented the limits of a territory, they were often in the possession of the Tai kingdoms. The books explained how the borders of the territory had been established (Phinith 1989: 195). It appears that these 'books' were given to communities whose attachment to the kingdom of Luang Phrabang was periodically contested by wars between neighboring kingdoms. Those given to the Phounoy language groups were written on thin strips of palm leaves, about four centimeters wide and forty centimeters long (Fig. 2). At one end is a stamp inscribed with the king's seal (which is represented by an elephant). These strips are rolled up and always placed in a round black lacquer box.



Figure 2: Part of the Kongdin script held by the Lava clan among the Phounoy (1750)

These books were apparently given to certain clans, or groups, among the Phounoy. To a certain extent, the people who received the 'books' became the recipients of royal authority on the lands they occupied, and were thus given the title 'Masters of the Earth' (*chao din*, ເຈົ້າດິນ)—a title passed on, along with the books, from father to son. According to the Phounoy, the people who received these books came from the clan that founded a village or a group of villages, and so the area supposed to be their domain. Perhaps they were chosen on the basis of criteria such as their proficiency in writing, like the ennobled Khouen leaders of Muang Phou Kha (Lefèvre-Pontalis 1902: 147). It is worth drawing attention to this fact as it would substantiate the hypothesis that the Phounoy populations already practiced Tai Lue Buddhism in the first half of the 18th century,[19] which no doubt explains why the most ancient *Kongdin* were not written in *tham* Lao but in *tham* Lue script.

I found four *Kongdin* in the village where I stayed the most. The first two are written in *tham* Lue script. They begin by directly giving the date: in CS 1111 on the fifth waxing day of the third month, which would mean Monday, 12 January 1750.[20] Then they give a list of places: the first two lines of the two *Kongdin* are identical; the others differ with respect to the border limits set out. One of them names the area delineated "the land of the Phoutin and Phoumeut," two terms that are names of local mountains but that have been described by the Phounoy as having been clan names. Both territories correspond to an area around the Pe River (see Fig. 1). The two others, dated 1774 (CS 1136), begin with a declaration by Sen Kham Mounti, the *Lam*,[21] announcing that he is handing over the *Kongdin*, written with another dignitary named Sen Sala, and is distributing it among several groups: the Singvay,

[18] Lorrillard, *pers. comm.*, September 2002.

[19] Today, the oldest Phounoy say that they were already Buddhists when they arrived in the region and that the first buildings constructed were pagodas.

[20] CS refers to the Chulasakkarat era or "little era," commonly used in the Lao chronicles (the era begins its reckoning in the equivalent of AD 638). I would like here to express my gratitude to Volker Grabowsky who helped me date the two sets of *Kongdin* documents.

[21] The *Lam* was a system of direct control of the mountain peoples by members of the Tai aristocracy, called *Pho Lam.* There were two types of *Pho Lam*: those who, chosen among members of the Court, operated on the level of the *muang*, and those who were recruited from people close to the head of the *muang*, operating on a village level (Lemoine 1997: 180).

the Thailek and the Phoumeut. However, these two documents allocate different limits to the territories, though they have common borders. The two locations correspond to an area slightly southeast of the first one, beside the Leng River, another tributary of the Ou River (see Fig 2). Both documents end in the same way: one establishes that the territories are located to the south of those belonging to the two Lao dignitaries Sen Ahine and Sen Vang, and stipulates: "This is the *Kongdin* of the Phoumeut and the Thailek," two Phounoy clans; the other certifies that this land was attributed to "masters of small mountains" (*meun moung khoun phou noy,* ຫມື່ນ ມຸງຄຸນພູນ້ອຍ) – here we can find the first mention of the term "Phou noy," here understood as "little mountains."

Certain topographical elements mentioned in the *Kongdin* are easy to identify, such as the Pe and Leng Rivers, as well as the summits of the Phou Tin, Phou Sang and Phou Lava mountains. The Phounoy considered each territory delimited as being the domain of the clans of those who received these "books." These four domains are adjacent to one another and cover four different areas located between the Pe and the Leng Rivers, or the southern part of the district of Phongsaly to the frontier with Muang Boun Tai (Fig. 1). This explains why the information subsequently provided in the *Kongdin* often mentions the latter territory. The texts do not stipulate the number of villages or inhabitants in these territories. According to the interviews I carried out among the Phounoy, perhaps six or seven of these *Kongdin* had been given to certain clans among the small Phounoy language groups,[22] and some elders stated that each domain in the first half of the 20th century comprised four to six villages.

Most of the other *Kongdin* that the Phounoy remembered can no longer be found, as they either disappeared in village fires or their owners got rid of them because of the rigorous constraints surrounding their possession.[23] But it is still possible to have an idea of the total area covered by all the *Kongdin* handed over to the Phounoy, for although the elders insisted that no one was now capable of reading them, the owners of the books were still aware of the limits and attributions of a territory to a particular clan, as the Phounoy had bestowed a ritual function on them. In the event of war or accidental or violent death, the borders of their land as described in the *Kongdin* were to be recited by the owner of the *Kongdin*, holding the book during a ritual. These rituals took place, depending on the area, until the 1960s and 70s. A ceremony paying tribute to the *Kongdin* was also organized annually during the New Year celebrations (*Pimay*). In the village of Thongpi, for example, such a ceremony took place until 2006 (Fig. 3), after which date the village disappeared.

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[22] These were the Lava, Phoutin, Phoumeut, Thailek and Singvay clans (*angtchou*, in Phounoy), according to the four documents that have been found. The interviews reveal that other Phounoy clans received the *Kongdin*: the Tapat clan (north of the present-day town of Phongsaly; curiously, the people here maintain that the frontiers were not written on palm leaves but on an elephant bone), the Tongmoumouba clan (an area corresponding to Mount Phou Fa, and the Ong Yao clan (an area near Boun Neua). Two groups speaking a language similar to Phounoy, the Phoumon and the Phongsek, seemed also to have possessed some (their *Kongdin* covered an area to the east of the territory, including the villages of Phousoum and Phayasi), as well as two or three Phounoy villages located on the left bank of the Ou River. Outside the Phounoy zone, the elders of the Khmu village of Phoukho (southwest of the area inhabited by the Phounoy) and those of the Khmu village of Phya Sou (an area adjacent to the former one, in the west) claim that they also received the *Kongdin*, but that these documents disappeared several decades ago.

[23] The constraints relating to the possession of the books meant notably that they were only to be touched during a ritual, they were to be celebrated on Buddhist holidays (*van sin*), and homage (*soma*) was to be paid to the book during the New Year ceremonies and other ceremonies. For more information on these ritual ceremonies, the powers attributed to the *Kongdin* and the clan territories, see Bouté 2011, pp. 79–82, 127–142.

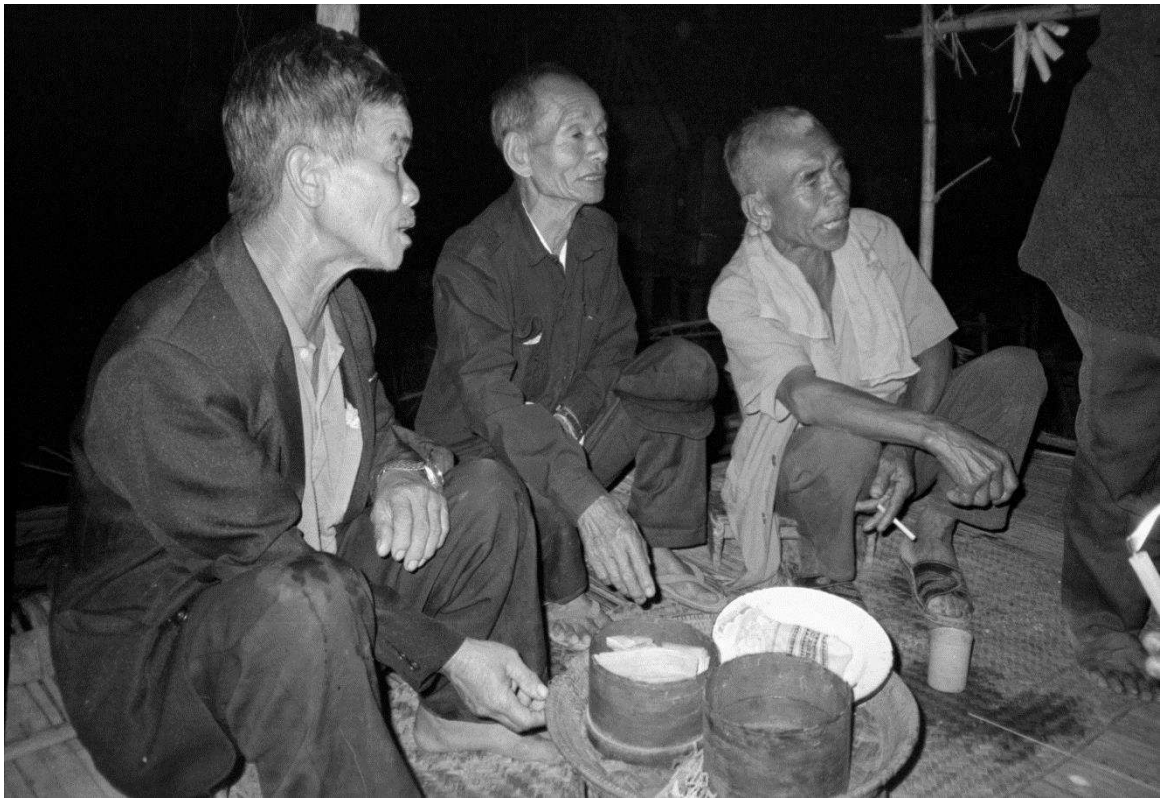

Figure 3: A Phounoy ceremony to pay tribute to the Kongdin during the Buddhist New Year (Pimay)

This royal acknowledgement of the territorial rights of certain populations seems to have pacified and consolidated the links between the central power and the outlying populations. It also fixed the limits of the realm, which until then had remained somewhat vague depending on the allegiance of the leaders in these outlying areas. Finally, establishing borders was also a way of pacifying a group that was already living in the territory.

Thus, in the second half of the 18th century, the conferment of border-guard status and the handover of the books, ratifying the rights of some of the Phounoy in their territories, represented the first steps toward the region's integration into the realm of Luang Phrabang. This resulted in a disparity between other ethnic groups and the Phounoy, who had a special relationship with the realm of Luang Phrabang and enjoyed a certain prestige. They came closer to the status held by the Tai populations and because of this were distinguished from the whole group, pejoratively called *Kha*—a Lao term that designates non-Tai groups, and also a generic term indicating the social status of servile people.

This may also be the beginning of a process of endorsement of the exonym "Phou noy" (small mountains) by the groups appointed as border guards, as one of the 1774 *Kongdin* states. Throughout the Peninsula, other examples can be found of the attribution of a Tai name to a territory and, by extension, to the population it occupies. In the Shan States, Scott and Hardiman (1900: 577) referred to the Lahu groups (probably the same as those identified as border guards), living in a muang called "*Muang Kwi*" (Kwi being the name by which the Shan designated the Lahu). Similarly, the name of the territory occupied by the Khouen was made up of the pejorative term *kha* used by the Tai: *Muang Phou Kha* "the territory of servile people" (Lefèvre-Pontalis 1902).

II. The strengthening of authority over the populations during the 19th century under pressure from the Siamese

In the 19th century, due to recurring instability, the realm of Luang Phrabang reinforced its interest in the territories and their populations situated inside its borders. Luang Phrabang was affected by various conflicts: insurrection in the upper regions of the Ou River, internal wars in the principality of Sipsong Panna, invasions by armed gangs known as 'Flags' (black, yellow, etc.) from the Yunnan, along the Ou River. The Siamese authorities[24] encouraged the king of Luang Phrabang to launch a major policy of control in his territory through the political reorganization of the *muang* satellites and the confirmation of the powers of governors and other competent authorities in these areas (Smuckarn and Breazeale 1988: 59).

Locally, in the region of Phongsaly, especially in the mountainous area between the Tai Lue *muang* to the west and the Lao *muang* to the east (along the Ou River), this interest was shown by dispatching several royal edicts to the holders of the *Kongdin* and giving them noble status. Indirectly, these two actions completed the transformation of Phounoy society, based on the model of the Tai *muang*.

Reinforcement of the local leaders' rights and duties

I mentioned earlier that today, the Phounoy consider that the *Kongdin* were given to them in order to guard the frontiers of the kingdom of Luang Phrabang. Indeed, one episode of the Luang Phrabang Royal Chronicles tells of the nomination of populations as border guards in the mid-19th century as a result of the king of Luang Phrabang's intervention in the north of the realm. When confronted with rebellions, the prince of Sipsong Panna had indeed asked the king of Luang Phrabang, his ally, to come to his aid. Lorrillard (1995: 261–262) transcribes the event as follows: "in 1841 (...) Chao Ouparat gave orders (...) to Phya Si Thamma Nakhone Lok to go and camp at Muang Boun Tai with 800 men, and to Chao Souvanna Phomma, Chao Souk as well as Phya Cha Ban to lead 800 men to settle in Muang Ahine (...). He then ordered some Thao-Phya(s) to ensure the surveillance of the boundaries with the necessary armies." In other words, the Viceroy, representing the royal council, after sending an armed mission led by several local dignitaries, delegated the surveillance of the borders to local leaders. Since nothing is mentioned about the identity of these "Tao-Phyas"—two terms that designate noble Tai titles—I argued that it is likely they were the Phounoy as they were the only inhabitants that had been given the title of border guards, even though the first *Kongdin* had been handed over to them nearly a century earlier (Bouté 2011).

This hypothesis is now corroborated by a royal edict dated 1844,[25] which was given to one of the descendants of a recipient of the *Kongdin*, later said to be from the 'Phoutin' clan, which defined an area between what were then the villages of Thongpi up to the Chapou and Kodeng villages (see Fig. 4). The dignitary is referred to by the

[24] Since the end of the 18th century, Luang Phrabang realm had been a vassal to Siam (former realm of Ayutthaya).

[25] The edict states: "The year 1206, year of the dragon (*kap si*), 2nd month, 13th day of the waxing moon, Tuesday."

name of Sen Pheuak.[26] Several sections (*matha*) of this royal edict also refer to the autonomy of the Phounoy dignitaries in the areas that they guard, to the protection of the land and local populations, and to taxes.

According to the edict, the Phounoy dignitary was expected to restore some stability in the territory under his control and to be able to preserve the population: "Let people come to the country, repopulate the villages and towns so that the situation may be as stable as in the past." One section states that he was notably required to mobilize the village chiefs (*thao-khoun*) under his jurisdiction in order to maintain local populations (*bao-phai*) within the territory, or bring them back if "they are afraid, if they take refuge elsewhere, in a small village or a big *muang*, towards streams or in deep forests, anywhere." We can see here the constant concern of the Tai sovereigns to control the demographics of their kingdom, the power of the latter being measured more by the number of its subjects than by its size (Grabowsky 1999; Tambiah 1976: 122). Wars were one of the main causes of significant migratory flows in the region between northern Laos, South China, the Shan States and North Vietnam.[27] The edict recommends the utmost gentleness and persuasion—not force—to bring the subjects back and keep them, requiring the dignitaries to allow them to settle at their discretion in the territory of Sen Phouak or that of his neighbor Sen Phongsimun, another Phounoy dignitary.[28] They are also required to provide a warm welcome to any other new arrivals—Ho, Akha, Yao or Lue, among others[29]—who might wish to become royal subjects. In other sections of this royal edict, we learn about the other attributes or responsibilities of the dignitary: he must collect taxes from those he governs (paid in the form of forest products) and he benefits from a type of remuneration, in the form of labor, provided by these inhabitants.

On several occasions, the text insists on the attention that must be given to any potential abuse of local populations, be it by Sen Pheuak himself (who is asked not to put too much pressure on his citizens[30]) or by traders or foreigners not commissioned by the royal council who would seek to take advantage of the people. The intention may have been to prevent certain people from fleeing the realm in an attempt to escape the obligatory duties and/or to achieve a certain social cohesion as the text clearly states; a section of the royal edict states: "if the boat sinks, we must row together, in normal conditions, we can steer the boat together in peace. We must take the vegetables and put them in the basket, bring the people together and put them in

[26] This might have been an ancestor (father or grandfather) of the Phaya Soulinya (*discussed later*), as the document was found with the edicts naming the Phaya, all of which were in the possession of the descendants of the Phaya.

[27] It would seem that more than half of the present-day populations of Phongsaly Province arrived during the 19th century; almost all elders among them mention wars as the reason for their relocation (Schlemmer 2012).

[28] Sen Phongsimun is a character who is still very vivid in the Phounoy memory; he is said to have fought against the Ho as far as the Sipsong Panna (Bouté 2006). Some older Phounoy claim that he was born in 1812 and that the territory he controlled was located near to the Phou Fa mountain (then called Phou Ha), that is, north of the area controlled by the Sen Phouak mentioned here. Certain Phounoy elders described the Phou Ha area as the border between the kingdom of Luang Phrabang and the Sipsong Panna in the first half of the 19th century.

[29] The section of the *Kongdin* can be read and understood as follows: "Khoun Ho-sao Han [Chinois], Kha Li [not identified] the Kha Kho [Akha], Yao Gnin [Yao], the Yang-Yai [not identified, but the Tai Yang of the province sometimes refer to themselves as 'Yang-Yai'], the Nyuane Kao [Lao ?] and Lue."

[30] "The remuneration of Sen Phouak must be preserved, nothing must be added (…) if the subjects are not available or if they have no money, they must be neither mistreated nor fined."

the *muang*,[31] in this way Royal administration will be good." Notably, the capability to mobilize the people if disturbances occurred that might create problems on the borders (*khanta sema*) was required.

We must remember that at this time, if the two mentioned Phounoy dignitaries had free management of their territory and its citizens, they had to first refer to the *muang* head for judgments and pass on the tributes paid to the king via the *Lam* (we will see that a few decades later, Phounoy leaders gained more autonomy and took their taxes to Luang Phrabang themselves). Meanwhile, the edict reiterates that the Phounoy in this domain are a free people (*phai* ໄພ່) and refers to them as the "spearhead of the kingdom" (*foung ni pen phai lam hok,* ຝູງນີ້ເປັນໄພ່ລ່ຳຫອກ). As such, they are exempt from any levies that might have to be paid by the servants and envoys of high dignitaries of the Court to other populations.[32] Their role as frontier guards seems to have given the Phounoy a certain independence compared to other neighboring mountain groups.

In 1860,[33] another edict, ratified by the head of Muang Xay, was given to the Phounoy head of the village of Phou Ha, who had authority over the others, along with a second head of the village of Chapou (these are the two territories previously mentioned in the edict of 1844.[34]) They both received various instructions, but their supreme order was to uphold justice by settling conflicts before the Tai Lue dignitaries of Boun Tai. The order was ratified by assuring the Phounoy (referred to here as *Bao-Phai*) that their privileged status would be maintained ("so they can be reassured, they will remain as they are; it has been this way for 9 generations until this year 1860," says the text).

Indeed at that time, the Phounoy were supervised by the neighboring Tai Lue muang chiefs, who used to pejoratively call them not "people of the small mountains" (as in the *Kongdin* of 1774, see above) but "small people"; and indeed, the pronunciation of the two terms in Lao or Tai is very similar: it is "Phou noy" (but a small difference in the modulation of the first consonant "ph" changes the meaning, so, it is ພ for "mountain"; and ຜ for "people"). The Phounoy appointed as border guards were, due to their geographical proximity, in more direct contact with the Lue populations who passed on their Theravada Buddhist beliefs and practices. They also had to go to a Lue village to get their salt. However, their relations proved to be potentially confrontational, or so it appeared in their oral accounts, according to which the Phounoy always won their fights against the Lue thanks to the power of their leader, Sen Phongsimun. Neis (1885: 61) also notes conflicts between the two groups in 1880: "The Paï Pou Noï told me that they did not manage to arrive in time for the water festival [in Luang Phrabang] because they were at war with the Lue, their neighbors." The Phounoy population was organized into groups made up of several villages (which then became, after receiving the "Books of the Land," domains). A more elaborate political organization compared to the other mountain

[31] Literally: *Kep phak sai sa kep kha sai muang*. See Kraisi (1967) and Grabowsky (2001) who give different interpretations to this expression. Here in particular, there is no question of displacing people by force, but rather persuading them to return or to stay.

[32] "Do not ask for shellfish taxes (*bia noi*), silver, clothes, cows and buffaloes, pigs, dogs, ducks and chickens, grain, rice and rice fields, and women as these people are free…"

[33] Year 1222, year *kot san* (monkey), month 7, 5th day of the waning moon, Saturday.

[34] The head of the Phou Ha was formerly Sen Phongsimun; the village of Chapou mentioned as the second territory belongs to the same group of villages of the Phoutin's *Kongdin*.

peoples was thus formed, which would have enabled them to fight the Lue's tendency to control them, as we will see below.

The nomination of the Phaya (from 1880)

During the second half of the 19th century, the social and territorial organization of the area inhabited by the Phounoy adopted even more striking characteristics of a Tai *muang*. Titles of nobility hitherto reserved for Lue and Lao lords were awarded, and new dignitaries were appointed from the Phounoy leaders, who controlled far larger political and administrative territories than those of clans formerly defined by the *Kongdin*. Several facts prompted this restructuring: increasing unrest in the north, as well as Siamese and then French influence.[35]

To strengthen the control of this region, the kings of Luang Phrabang carried out several military expeditions there. First, in 1869, the royal troops launched a brief attack against the Lue and Ho gangs, and withdrew, taking a number of prisoners (Smuckarn and Breazeale 1988: 37); then from 1875 to 1887, Ho incursions were particularly common throughout the Ou River basin; in 1887, it was the Siamese who, under the pretext of pursuing the Ho, did not hesitate to occupy Muang Houn, installing various detachments in Phounoy villages, and exercising authority over the Tai Lue in the south of the province (Aymé 1930: 110).

Within this context, from 1860—1870, the appointment of local leaders among the minorities of the Phongsaly region multiplied. This is demonstrated for the Phounoy by other royal edicts found among the descendants of dignitaries that establish the appointment of a particular leader (Sen) to the higher rank of Sen Phong Luang Soulinya (1865) or Sen Tham Khoun Mong. But we should note here that this royal gesture was also extended to other ethnics groups, notably the Khmu. Some ethnic Khmu chiefs, in the south of the province, received the title of "Phya." One of them, referred to as "Phya Sou," controlled an area next to the Phounoy dignitaries' territory south of Phongsaly district and the Leng River; Phya Sou is also mentioned in the royal edict of 1868 sent to four Phounoy dignitaries, as well as in the 1880 edict (see below). Even farther south, the second Khmu leader, Phya Lek, controlled an area south of the present administrative center of Boun Tai. Later (1870–1890), many heads of Khmu villages around the Lao *muang* of Khoa gave themselves the title of *Phya* or *Lasa (Raja*), even though their control did not go beyond the confines of their own village (their villages also remained dependent on the fathers of *lam* and heads of Lao Taseng belonging to Muang Khoa).[36] These data may be of interest to Lao ethnohistory, as they show that this phenomenon at the end of the 19th century was no longer restricted to the Phounoy, but was more widespread in Northern Laos.

In 1880, a second edict provides us with information that reflects the transformation of the Phounoy area's political organization since the previous edict of 1868. A chief bearing the title of Phaya Soulinya Vongsa Phong Luang[37]—a more

[35] Here, I will refer to a period between 1880, the date of the most recent edict found in possession of the descendant of Phaya Soulinya, and the1930s.

[36] Many of the villages are still named after the dignitary today, such as the village of Phya Lek, or Phya Sou. I thank Gregoire Schlemmer (*pers. comm.*, December 2, 2013) for providing me with information on the Khmu villages history in the province of Phongsaly, based on oral narratives.

[37] The dignitary Thao Katthinya, nominated as Sen Phong Luang Soulinya in an edict dated 1865 and then mentioned in an edict dated 1868, is not the same as the person nominated as Phaya Soulinya Vongsa Phong Luang in 1880 and mentioned in the 1920s by the French military; he would have been at least 75 years old.

prestigious title than the previous titles of Sen and Phya—was the main recipient of the order. Better known as the Phaya Soulinya in oral narratives I collected from the Phounoy based in the area of Thongpi village (formerly Ban Phaya Soulinya) where I carried out my research between 1999 and 2005, this leader is mentioned in the order as being the main head of all villages in Phounoy territory (here named *Phong Phounoy* ພ້ງພູນ້ອຍ "the territory of small mountains" and the mountainous areas *fa khao*[38]). Although the text was addressing four other Phounoy dignitaries and the Phya Sou of the Khmu area, it specifically commands the Phaya Soulinya to render justice in exceptional cases, assemble other dignitaries every year at the time of tribute, to go together and give their report to the royal palace, and receive valuable products (elephant teeth, ivory and rhino horns) that he will offer in person to the king. Unlike what was stated in the edicts of 1844 and 1860, matters of justice or the tribute should no longer be brought before a local Lao or Lue dignitary, as the Phaya is now directly responsible.

Some ten years later in 1894, when the members of the Auguste Pavie Mission, who were responsible for the demarcation of frontiers in the Luang Phrabang realm, arrived in the region, the territory corresponding to the province of Phongsaly was made up of Tai and Lao *muang* of Boun Neua, Boun Tai, Houn, Khoa and Ahine, and in the center, a territory occupied by a fraction of the border guard populations installed on the right bank. This zone, having the characteristics of a Tai *muang*, was at that time called Muang Phounoy, no doubt because of the relative autonomy of its inhabitants, their rudimentary organization in domains, the presence of ennobled leaders, and their location at the junction of several Tai Lue or Lao *muang.* Indeed, at the beginning of the 20th century, the French military noted that the inhabitants of the Muang Phounoy had a certain amount of autonomy compared to other mountain peoples. Nonetheless, it is this name that is entered on the map drawn up by Lefèvre-Pontalis in 1894. In 1916, the Fifth Military Territory was created, the contours of which resemble the province of Phongsaly as it is today. It was placed under both the administrative authority of the Superior Resident in Laos and the control of the realm of Luang Phrabang. It should, however, be noted that after 1880, no document coming from the Royal Court of Luang Phrabang was to be given to Phounoy dignitaries. The *muang* that made up this Fifth Military Territory, traditionally governed by Lue and Lao leading citizens, were successively reallocated by the French administration into cantons (*taseng*), 'delegations,' and finally divided into new administrative units also referred to as *muang*.

We also know that the younger brother of the Phaya Soulinya, Khamsan, would have been born in 1880 (he died in 1946 in his sixties). There would therefore be a 35-year age difference between the two brothers (assuming that Katthinya was 20 when he was named Saen Phong, in 1865), which is quite impossible. Moreover, all the children of the Phaya—whose only son, Ounkham, died in 1954—were, according to their descendants, born between 1890 and 1915. It is more probable that the dignitary mentioned in 1965 was the father of the Phaya, the documents (*Kongdin* and royal edicts) and the titles being handed down from father to son.

[38] This term written ຟ້າເຂົ້າ remains a mystery; *Fa* (ฟ้า could mean 'the sky'; *Khao* could refer to the term 'mountain'; *Fa khao* would mean 'the mountains of the sky', or the high mountains. I thank L. Gabaude, V. Grabowsky and R. Renard, who helped me search for a possible meaning for this term (that they also discovered for the first time). According to Inthamone, one could also read ฟ้าภเขิา as 'near to the mountains.' There is also a very similar term in the Tai Chronicles of Mäng Khön (southwest of Yunnan), which uses *löy fo fa* to designate the mountain territories occupied by the Jingpo and the Ta'aang [Bulang], (Daniels 2013*b*: 158).

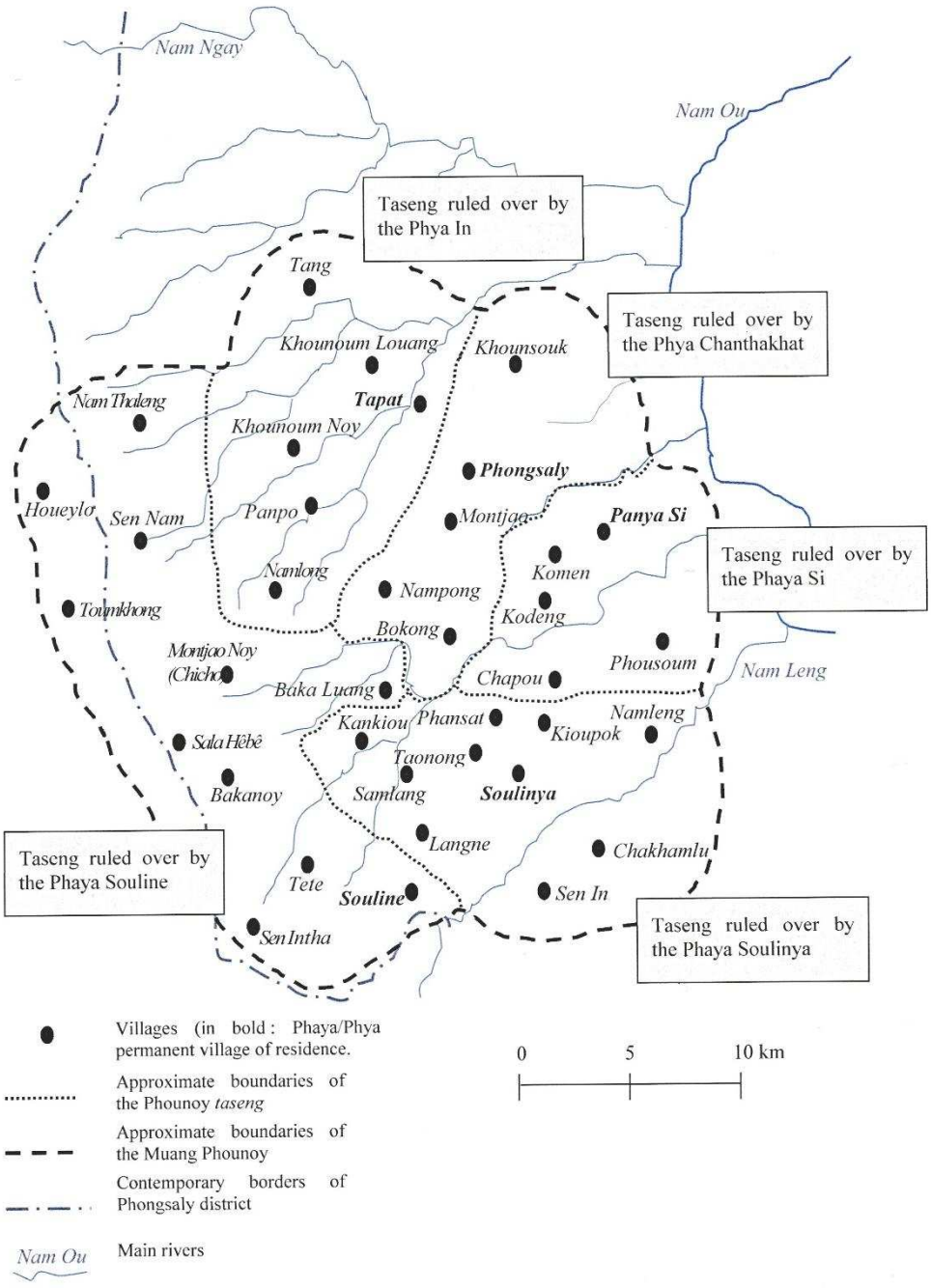

Figure 4: The Muang Phounoy and the five Taseng administered by the Phaya and Phya in the 1910s

Shortly before (or at the same time as) the reorganization of the region by the French, the four other Phounoy leaders (mentioned previously in the royal decree of 1880) or their sons[39] along with Ho leader Phaya Somphou[40] received the titles *Phya* and *Phaya*.[41] According to the Phounoy elders, Phaya Soulinya and three of the other dignitaries were chosen from those with ancestors who had received the *Kongdin*, the so-called Masters of the Earth. The fifth one, Phya Chanthakhat, was not a Master of the Earth and was nominated at a later date. The creation of the *taseng* that he was to govern no doubt corresponds to the importance of the small village of Sen Sili, which the French renamed Phongsaly and which became the administrative center of the Fifth Military Territory in 1921 (Aymé 1930: 123).

Each territory (*taseng*) governed by a *Phaya* or a *Phya* Phounoy included two or three clan domains, but we do not know how the decisions were made to divide the territory and regroup certain domains into *taseng*. The ten or so domains of the Phounoy groups were regrouped into four, then five new units, the *taseng*, which formed the Muang Phounoy (Fig. 4). Each Phaya or Phya ruled over a *taseng*. The Phaya Soulinya's *taseng*, in the southwest of the Muang, comprised ten villages; to the east of this area, Phaya Souline was the leader of ten villages. To the northwest, was Phaya Si's *taseng*, with five villages. The northern part of the Muang was divided into two smaller *taseng*: the Phya In (with six villages), and the Phya Chanthakhat, with five villages.

The five Phounoy dignitaries thus benefited from a greater autonomy than the other group leaders (the former Khmu dignitaries, for instance, remained under the jurisdiction of their neighboring Lao muang leaders in Muang Khoa). Generally, the canton (*taseng*) is an administrative unit that is part of a larger human and geographical unit—the *muang*—governed by a leader. But the Phounoy were not placed under the authority of a Lao or Lue *muang* leader and were directly responsible to the governor of the province authority (*Nai Khouang)*. They were therefore "independent in law," in accordance with the terms used by Aymé (1930: 72). According to Guillemet and O'Kelly (1917: 198), this situation resulted from their status as border guards: "the court of Luang Prabang considered them to be the border guards of the kingdom and as such, always treated them in a special way, as a small State. Their leaders are the natural intermediaries between them and the Kings officials."

The name previously attributed by the Tai populations (first the Lao King via the Royal Edict, then the Tai Lue chiefs) to a territory inhabited by small groups with a particular status then became, for the colonial administrators, the ethnonym of the inhabitants of this locality. The inhabitants of Muang Phunoy, with their clearly

[39] The stories gathered from the descendants of these dignitaries bring to light a certain correspondence between the names mentioned in this edict and the names of those considered to be the fathers (or grandfathers, depending on the story) of the Phaya: Sen Southama and Sen Sivongsa (edict of 1880) would respectively be the grandfather and father of the Phaya Si and the Phaya In; Sen Inta Panya Vongsa would be the former name of the Phaya Souline (who is also said to be the descendant of Sen Phongsimun, mentioned in the edict of 1844).

[40] The Ho is a Han population originating from Yunnan. Phaya Somphou, the Ho dignitary elevated to the status of Phaya, was born in 1881 and died in 1931 (dates indicated on his tomb, Phongsaly Province); it is therefore likely that he had gained this title in the 1900s. On the Ho leader, see also Daniels (2013*a*: 22).

[41] The Phounoy *Phaya* and *Phya* seemed to appear between 1880, the year of the royal decree addressed to Phaya Soulinya, and 1916, the year when the existence of the Phounoy dignitaries was first mentioned (Guillemet and O'Kelly 1916). It should be noted that these dates corroborate information collected from the Phounoy themselves.

delimited territories and their particular institutions, thus unified, had the feeling they were different from those situated at the periphery. The name of the territory that had been used to designate the inhabitants in reference to their social status ("Phou noy") was progressively taken on by the latter.

Strengthening the distinction: Social and political organization of the Phaya's territories

At the beginning of the 20th century, the adaptation of the Tai political and administrative system to the scale of this upland population, underscored by the ennoblement of local leaders, was completed by the French when they reorganized the administrative structure of the villages themselves. The smallest ones, with less than twenty houses, were no longer considered autonomous entities and were grouped with other small villages or larger units. New authorities were nominated. These village authorities were given Lao titles again: the position of the leader was renamed *Sen long,* perhaps to mark the difference of status with that of his deputy (*Sen kouan*, designated by methods of which we know very little). There were also people put in charge of districts (*Sen phrasi*). Roux (1924: 490) indicates that these individuals were called *"nai ngeu'n,"* or "head of the money," which may indicate that they acted as tax collectors in their district.

The titles remained hereditary as was the case prior to the colonial period, and so the new titles of *Phaya* and *Phya* passed on to the eldest son. The *Phaya* received, in addition to their title, the insignia of their new position: a sword, a small drum, cymbals and a flag. The *Phaya* often gave their name to the village in which they lived (*Ban Phaya Si*, *Ban Phaya Soulinya*, *Ban Phaya Souline*). They were mainly responsible for relations between the people under their jurisdiction and the central government. They organized tax collection (in kind or money), supervised construction works and maintained roads and buildings reserved for the military. The *Phaya* also acted as judges in the event of inter-village conflicts.

If colonial writings do not mention a hierarchy among these leaders, many Phounoy – from all areas now establish a hierarchy among the five dignitaries: "Before, Thongpi [former residence of Phaya Soulinya] was a village far larger than Phongsaly. People from Phongsaly had the Phya, who was responsible for helping the Phaya," says a village elder from Phongsaly. "All the villages were dependent on Thongpi. At first there was only the Phaya Soulinya and when the French left, then returned, it is they who nominated the Phaya Si and the Phaya Souline because the area to control was too large for Soulinya," say residents of the ancient villages of Phaya Soulinya and Phaya Souline. The French military came to the same conclusion: "There are several group leaders who have under their control a certain number of localities. Of all of these leaders, Panya-Soulignat, with his clever and cunning face, seems to have established himself and have the most authority," says Cheyrou-Lagrèze (1921: 34), while Roux (1924: 452) notes: "Those who are the best informed about the actions of their ancestors are the two greatest leaders Phaya Soulinia and Phaya Soulintakhet."

The ennoblement of local leaders and the pyramidal organization of the territory (the domains integrated into the *taseng*, which were part of the Muang Phounoy) brought to light social differences between and within the Phounoy villages. Thereafter, the Tai administrative system was applied within the villages whose organization had not previously been based on a hierarchical system (Bouté 2007).

Following these appointments, the *Phaya* behaved in the same way as the Tai Lue lords, and the Phounoy social environment reproduced the *muang* model. The *Phaya* controlled several villages and had, theoretically, power of life and death over his subjects. He benefited from free labor to work his fields and received taxes in kind and a leg of each animal hunted on his territory. He nominated the village heads, who received, in turn, some advantages as a result of their status. The powers granted by the king to the *Phaya* tended to create differences between villages. Often, the most populated villages where the Phaya lived acquired some level of prestige as they became important centers, where meetings between the district's village heads were held, and subsequently, various commercial transactions were carried out.[42]

Observing this Tai model of organization, the French military personnel that settled in the region often made a distinction between the Phounoy and the other highland populations. They believed the former to be more trusting (Doze 1955: 33), or the most "likeable" people in the region (Guillemet and O'Kelly 1917: 324; Doze 1955: 33), which denotes a somewhat paternalistic attitude, underlining the privileged relations that the French managed to establish with the Phounoy, "the tribe in the Territory that is the easiest to command" concluded Aymé (1930: 40). They also considered them to be extremely hardworking (Roux 1924: 451), as well as more civilized: "Even less than with the other Khas, the word "primitive," applied at random and wrongly to all the tribes of the race, could not be attributed to the Pou-Noi" (Guillemet and O'Kelly 1917: 198). As a result, the Phounoy were selected from among all the other mountain peoples to receive military training (Guillemet and O'Kelly 1917: 324), and, along with the Annamese, made up the French Indigenous Guard (Doze 1955: 34; Roux 1924: 451). Furthermore, they were the only upland people of the area allowed to attend French lessons in Luang Phrabang (Gay 1995: 235). Consequently, through their actions, the French helped to maintain, if not increase, the difference between the Phounoy and the other ethnic groups in the province until 1954.

Conclusions

In the broader context of the Indochinese peninsula, the opposition between the State societies of the plains and ethnic minorities in the mountainous border regions continues to be a subject for discussion among anthropologists and certain historians. Many ethnologists, extending the 'modernist' theories of ethnicity (against any form of cultural essentialism) and downplaying this opposition, emphasize a dynamic of development of the various societies through the interaction of one with the other. On the one hand, there are centralized societies that are formed by the progressive absorption of their margins, and on the other, the minorities, who have remained marginal, and whose distinctive identity is formed both by contact with the lowland populations in the plains and in reaction to them. From Leach (1954), to Izikowitz (1951) or Condominas (1980), this is how the inter-ethnic relations linked to the formation of "Tai political systems" (*Tai muang*) have been understood. It is also in this perspective that far more consideration has been given to the local history—oral and sometimes written—of this confrontation between *Civility and*

[42] This is according to several old people that I questioned in the forty or so Phounoy villages still included in Phongsaly district in 1999.

Savagery, to quote the title of the book published by Turton (2000) about different perceptions of the regional influence of Tai State structures.

My study of how the Phounoy population's identity was formed follows these same lines of research that seek to analyze the relations between mountain minorities and the Tai and Lao principalities, not only from the point of view of the centers of power but also of the margins, that were subject to and had to deal with these dominant centers. But what emerges from the ethnography and from elements of local history that I have gathered is evidence of a special destiny that differs from that of other neighboring Tibeto-Burman or Austro-Asiatic minority populations. The Phounoy group appears to have emerged and developed through a privileged relationship with regional powers.

Not only have the Phounoy enjoyed a particularly advantageous political position, successively recognized as border guards by the king of Luang Phrabang, then allies of the colonial power and finally administrators of the province, they also largely borrowed from their Tai and Lao neighbors some of their cultural and ritual features, particularly Buddhism.[43] In doing so, they gradually created their own territory, a specific political and cultural entity, the Muang Phounoy, in many respects unique in the mountains of northern Laos, and they have established themselves as key intermediaries between the central government and the neighboring hill tribes (such as the Akha and Khmu).

Far from distancing themselves from the State, as is the case, according to Scott (2009), for most of the Highlanders of Southeast Asia, whose history is summed up as a continuous line of flight to preserve their autonomy, the Phounoy have made a point of working with the Lue and then the Lao authorities. They thus belong to those groups who show a tendency, sometimes under pressure, to participate in the management of local affairs while serving a dominant society.

[43] This aspect has not been developed in this article; see Bouté 2008 and Bouté 2011.

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