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Contemporary Lao Buddhism: Ruptured histories

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Abstract and Keywords

Lao Buddhism's histories are deeply fragmented. Most Lao were deported to Siam in the nineteenth century, and after the demise of the French colonial regime, the country was drawn into the Second Indochina War. After two decades of brutal warfare and massive destructions, the Lao communist movement took power in 1975. This chapter examines the history of Lao Buddhism in the context of these events, and puts its main focus on the entanglement of religion and politics in the postcolonial phase, as the political polarization of the Lao sangha during the Cold War and the impact of the subsequent revolution remain crucial for understanding Buddhism's position in the current Lao PDR. While under reformed socialism there has been a resurgence of Buddhism in the last two decades, the social and religious transformations resulting from rapid modernization through the capitalist economy and globalization bring new challenges for the Lao sangha.

Keywords: Laos, Buddhism, revolution, communism, colonialism, Indochina War

IT is evident that the borders of current nation-states are only of limited value when discussing the history of Buddhist cultures of the past. Assuming an overlap of territory, ethnic identity and the history of Buddhist culture are in the case of Laos particularly problematic because of the highly fragmented and discontinuous history of the country. The Siamese conquest of Lao territories and the subsequent deportation of large parts of the population in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the creation of a border between French Indochina and Siam in 1893, are the main reasons that most ethnic Lao actually today live in Thailand's northeastern Isan region, and not in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR). Although from a general perspective Thai and Lao share many linguistic, cultural, and religious traits, the ethnic Lao living in Thailand have been subject to cultural assimilation processes that due to Bangkok's centralization policies have also led to differences in the religious realm (Taylor 1993, 40f.).

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French colonialism also brought changes, and tried to create an “Indochinese Buddhism” by linking Khmer and Lao monastic education. More important for the recent history, however, is the fact that the Second Indochina War (“Vietnam War”) between 1955 and 1975 made Laos—although officially never declared a battleground of the US military—one of the most bombed countries in the world. The effects of this devastating war continue until today (Tappe and Pholsena 2013). These histories, the Lao communist revolution of 1975, and the ambivalent position of Buddhism under the new regime have all had a crucial influence on what today can be identified as “Lao Buddhism.”

Another feature of Laos that distinguishes its Buddhist culture from, for example, that of Cambodia and Thailand, is the fact that it remains the country with one of the lowest population quotas of Buddhists in mainland Southeast Asia. Whereas 50–60 percent of the population is classified as Buddhists, large parts of the country are inhabited by a plethora of ethnic minorities who occupy the vast highlands of Laos and in most cases adhere to “animist” religions. For centuries, these minorities were pejoratively labeled *kha*, a Lao term that has connotations of “slave,” or at least of an inferior social status. According to James Scott’s (2009) recent work, these minorities for a very long time consciously resisted integration (p. 275) into the Buddhist polities and kingdoms of the lowlands. Although Scott’s argumentation is rather general and sweeping in nature, one important conclusion that can be draw from it is that the presence and influence of these highland groups have often been overshadowed by a writing of history that favors “high religions” such as Buddhism, while downplaying, for example, the interaction of Buddhism and ethnic minority religions.

The diversity or Buddhism(s) and the partially highly syncretic nature of Buddhism in Laos only recently has come to the forefront of research (Bizot 2000; Holt 2009), and what has commonly been labeled Lao Buddhism as practiced by the ethnic Lao consequently has very fluid boundaries. Minorities such as the Tai Lue (Keyes 1992), the Tai Phuan, the Tibeto-Burman speaking Phu Neuy (Bouté 2011), as well as many Mon-Khmer minorities such as the Suay, have adopted forms of Buddhist practice that speak to a long historical interaction between ethnic groups. However, this overview piece can only allude to the complex religious and ethnic interactions that Edmund Leach’s classical study (1954) has already attested for highland Burma. This is also rooted in the broken genealogy of historical and ethnographic research on Laos: although we have very good studies of Lao Buddhism (mainly in French) from the pre-revolutionary period (Zago 1972; Archaimbault 1973; Condominas 1998), research for a long time lagged behind because the country was closed to most research for almost twenty-five years.

Starting with a short overview of the earlier and colonial histories of Lao Buddhism, this chapter puts a strong emphasis on the entanglement of Buddhism and politics in the postcolonial phase; discussions pertaining to specific Buddhist rites and traditions,

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literature, and doctrinal issues will take up comparatively little space and will be presented while passing through the different periods of history.[1] Lao Buddhism's position in the Cold War politics of religion, the Vietnam War, and the revolution of 1975 are presented as decisive events that continue to influence the current state of affairs. Although the politics of reform initiated in the late 1980s have taken full effect, and Laos is in fact—comparable to China and Vietnam—now a capitalist society, I argue that the influence of globalization on Buddhism and the rise of new forms of religious expression are still rather tentative, and often remain controlled by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) and its religious authorities. Although Laos was and still is one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia, it is now nevertheless flooded by the diverse effects of globalization. Urbanization, increasing social differentiation, and accelerating transformations of the social fabric, even in rural areas (Rehbein 2007), are also impinging on religious ideas and practices. The last part of this chapter will therefore discuss the recent changes that have occurred, focusing on the at times contrastive demands and aspirations the Lao sangha must tackle in a rapidly changing society under reformed socialism.

Early Histories of Lao Buddhism

Although research into the early history of Buddhism in many parts of the world has advanced in recent years, Peter Skilling (2009, 47) points to the "unmapped territories, of the blanks in the historical geography of Buddhism" and asserts that "one of the biggest blanks is Southeast Asia." We also know very little about the transfer of Buddhism to the region that today is called Laos, but the current state of research suggests that Buddhism did not come in (p. 276) a single movement. According to Michel Lorrillard (2006, 144) "the conditions surrounding this penetration remain very imprecise, due to the long duration of this process." Therefore, we deal with a much more partial process that involved a complex mixture of various forms of Brahmanism, Buddhism, and local traditions. Epigraphical sources confirm that the early Lao kingdoms display the first clear signs of the Buddhicization of royal power around the middle of the fifteenth century, when kings were labeled *cakkavatti* (Pali for king as the "turner of the wheel of the Buddhist dhamma") (Lorrillard 2006, 141). Probably, a first wave of Buddhism coming from North Thailand reached North Laos in the fifteenth century, and a second, more orthodox wave in the sixteenth century (Lorrillard 2006, 143).

The "introduction" of Buddhism is strongly associated with King Fa Ngum, who is widely held to be the founder of "Laos" by uniting smaller principalities in 1353 to form the kingdom Lan Xang, which lasted for almost 300 years. The story goes that after his exile

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from the region of Luang Prabang, Fa Ngum returned victoriously from Angkor and the Khmer empire. Due to the strong influence of his tutor in exile—the learned monk Vipassaman—he introduced Buddhism. According to this myth, what he brought with him can be interpreted as the basics of Buddhist civilization: learned monks, texts, statues, craftsmen, and astronomers. Speaking from a perspective of a modern historian, Michel Lorrillard asserts the "complete artificial nature of this narrative" (2006, 140). In order to give these accounts a more historiographic spin, one could argue that Fa Ngum appears in chronicles and oral traditions as a "stranger king" (Sahlins 2008)—a figure who comes from "outside" a given culture, introducing new cultural vigor and contributing to the establishment of a new cultural stream.

Buddhism and its spread also must be understood as bringing fundamental changes not only in worldview and belief, but also relating to social structure and political organization. Buddhism introduced new social hierarchies—it brought with it a class of religious professionals, graded people according to their karma and amount of merit (Pali: *punna*; Lao: *boun*),[2] and introduced political systems focused on kingship. Changes also became apparent in relation to historical consciousness, ways of time reckoning and the writing of history, as Buddhism brought calendrical systems, new forms of art, and, perhaps most important, writing. With the latter, literary genres of historiography were established. *Phongsavadan* (chronicle, dynastic history, from Skt. *vamsha vatara*) and *damnan* (historical record, legend) were written in a variety of *tham* scripts on palm-leaf manuscripts and recounted the introduction of Buddhism to the region, the works of powerful kings and monks, and the travels of holy objects such as statues and relics (Lagirarde 2007).

Indianization and Localizations of Buddhism

The spread of Buddhism from its homeland to Southeast Asia and Laos is on the one hand a process of "Indianization," but on the other hand a process of localization (Acharya 2012). One of the best examples of these complex processes of cultural transmission and exchange is found in the appropriation of classical texts with origins either in Pali or Sanskrit: The Indian epos *Ramayana* and its Lao version—the *Phra Lak Phra Lam*—and the story of *Vessantara* (narrating the last rebirth of the Buddha before he became awakened) both derive from an Indian background, but are heavily localized and transplant Indian geography and customs (p. 277) to Laos (Sahai 1973; Ladwig 2009). Becoming part of what has been labeled the "Sanskrit cosmopolis" (Pollock 2006) therefore always entailed cultural flows that were never unidirectional, but included a multitude of influences.[3]

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What was stated for the writing of history and literature can also be applied to forms of political organization. Like other polities of the Tai (not Thai!) in northern Burma, the southern parts of Yunnan, and Thailand, the early Lao polities were based on a system of supra-village organization that predates Indianization. These pre-Buddhist polities were regulated by a ritual, legal, and administrative code that is still today known in Lao as *hit khong* (Viravong 1974).[4] In this system, villages (*baan*) were subordinated to larger political units or principalities (*muang*) (Raendchen and Raendchen 1998). Condominas (1990) has called this a hierarchically ordered "system of emboxment" of Tai political organization. Buddhist statecraft, with its circle-like encompassing structure (Skt.: *mandala*) (Wolters 1982), did not simply substitute this system, but supplemented it, thereby laying the basis for the formation of larger polities and states. In order to enhance control and state-building, some kings were also eager to purify Buddhism and eliminate, for example, indigenous spirits cults (*phi*). As attested in inscriptions, King Photisarath (1501–1547) tried to suppress the worship of spirits and further Buddhicize the population. However, the "animistic" elements of Lao Buddhism have over time survived all purification efforts and are still today of crucial importance (Holt 2009). Local spirit cults and rituals associated with indigenous ideas of "soul substance" (*khwan*) are in most cases seamlessly integrated into Buddhism, and practitioners rarely see them as contradictive.

Relationships between Buddhists and Non-Buddhist Groups

Buddhism and the Lao did not enter a region that was devoid of people. The area was already occupied by different ethnic groups (mainly Mon-Khmer) with a variety of religious systems. Many chronicles report that the Lao established hegemony over the *kha* by driving them off the land. The non-Buddhists are often represented as "forest people," living in a non-civilized space of wilderness. Andrew Turton even argues that this contrast is so marked that one can set up a structuralist equation in which civilized Buddhists are linked to the space of the *muang*, and the *kha* ("savages") to the *pa* (forest) (Turton 2000, 16). Hence, as an emic marker of civilization, Buddhism is in many narratives and textual sources depicted as bringing social order through kingship and morality based on the Buddha's teachings (Pali: *dhamma*), which the minorities did not (yet) receive. One of the first narratives to establish a civilizational (and indeed physical) difference is to be found in the cosmogenesis of Luang Prabang. The *nithan khun bolum* reports that all human beings were at the beginning of time lumped together in a bumpkin that then gives birth to the various "classes" of human beings. The *kha* come out first and have darker skin than the Lao, with their lighter skin and higher technological skills, who come out last (Souneth 1996; Phinith 1987).

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Pejorative attitudes toward ethnic minorities persist to the present day. However, to draw a clear line between Buddhists and non-Buddhists, as in Buddhist historiography, probably does little justice to the historical situation found on the ground. Multiple (p. 278) identities, conversion, and rather fluid ethnic and religious boundaries have been crucial features of mainland Southeast Asia (Leach 1954). Moreover, strategic alliances between Buddhists and non-Buddhists, between Lao and *kha*, were necessary and desired.[5] Animist Mon-Khmer groups also had important ritual roles at royal courts in Luang Prabang and the southern kingdom of Champassak. These rites acknowledged their roles as first settlers of the land prior to the ethnic Lao, and emphasized their superior powers when dealing with specific spirits and fertility of the land (Archaimbault 1973, 152; Stuart-Fox 1998, 51).

The Rise and Decline of Lao Kingdoms

A major shift of the center of power occurred in 1563 because Luang Prabang in the north was repeatedly invaded by the Burmese and was hard to defend. Therefore, King Setthathilat (1534–1572) officially established Vientiane as the capital of the Kingdom Lan Xang and in 1566, for marking the movement of the capital, sponsored a rebuilding and extension of the *that luang*, a relic shrine (Skt.: *stupa*) that until today remains a focus of worship. One of the first European visitors to Vientiane in 1641/1642, the Dutch merchant Gerrit van Wuysthoff was received by King Suriya Vongsa, and left an impressive description of the city and its flourishing Buddhist culture (Krieken-Peters 2010). Throughout the centuries, high-ranking monks continued to act as advisors of kings, and even at times took political offices (Archaimbault 1961; Grabowsky 2007), reflecting the intrinsic connection of the worldly power of kings and that of the sangha.

Increasing warfare and internal quarrels finally led to the breakup of the Lan Xang kingdom in 1694. It splits up into several smaller ones, namely Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Xieng Khouang (in the northeast), and Champassak (in the south) (Stuart-Fox 1998, 99f.). After this fragmentation of political power, Vientiane was in 1779 conquered by the Siamese and became a vassal state, paying tribute to Siamese kings. King Anouvong's (1767–1829) effort to liberate the kingdom of Vientiane from Siamese domination in 1828 ended in a catastrophe—the city was burned to the ground. Anouvong was to be the last king of the Vientiane. Deported to Bangkok, he was exhibited in a cage, tortured, and finally killed. As the Siamese state was in need of workforce and slaves, large parts of the population were also carried off and resettled on the Siamese side of the Mekong. Vientiane—once a center of Buddhist learning—was now an almost empty city in ruins. Siamese occupation in southern Laos also expanded, and introduced a new Buddhist reform sect there, the *thammayut nikaya*, that in Siam had been flourishing under King

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Mongkut since the first half of the nineteenth century. With its more rational and textual approach to Buddhism, it rivaled the older *maha nikaya* order (Jackson 1989).

With many regions of the former Lan Xang kingdom being occupied by neighboring powers and devastated by war, this unfortunate period of Lao history also left its marks in literary productions. Some of the greatest works of Lao literature, such as *luep phasum* ("extinguishing the light of the sun") and other prophetic works from various periods, deal with the signs of the coming end, the disappearance of the Buddha's *dhamma*, but also with the renewal of the world through the coming of the future Buddha *Maitreya* (Koret 2007).

(p. 279) Buddhism under French Colonialism

When the French brought Cambodia under their control as a protectorate in 1863, several expeditions explored trade opportunities and travel routes on the Mekong, and crossed through Lao areas that were largely under Siamese control. With the Franco-Siamese treatise of 1893, the territories on the left bank side of the Mekong were put under the control of France. With Vientiane still being in ruins and the Lao territories being gradually absorbed by Siam, the French colonizers could present themselves as "rescuing" the Lao from the ravages of bandits roaming Lao areas, and from the domination of the Siamese who had destroyed Vientiane. When Laos became a French colony in 1893, it was the last country to be added to an entity to be called Indochina. Laos functioned as a border zone and buffer state with the expanding British Empire and the Kingdom of Siam, and it remained the most underdeveloped colony of Indochina.

French colonial politics from very early on sustained a revival of Buddhism in order to foster Lao nationalism (Ivarsson 2008, 93). The French colonial doctrine of "association" favored indirect rule and followed policies that, instead of open suppression and violence, aimed at controlling indigenous forms of governmentality. Members of the French School of the Far East—the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO)—became involved in the revival of Lao and Cambodian Buddhism. Penny Edwards's (2005, 31) statement that "France cultural projects in Cambodia were dominated by Indologists" can also be applied to Laos. Over several decades, members of EFEO collected, classified, and analyzed the histories, artistic productions, literatures, and architectures of Laos and thereby laid the groundwork for research of generations to come (Finot 1917; Parmentier 1988).

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In order to subvert the dominance of Thai monastic education in the region, and use Lao and Khmer Buddhism for enhancing colonial control, the French set up institutes for the training of Buddhist monks under the auspices of EFEO. On November 24, 1914, the *École de Pali* was founded by royal decree in Phnom Penh; it was renamed *École Supérieure de Pali* in 1922. Having the aim of enhancing the study of Buddhism through teaching monks "proper" Pali and Sanskrit, two Cambodian monks were in 1922 sent to EFEO Hanoi for language training. There they were instructed by no other than the French Orientalist and long-term chief of EFEO, Louis Finot.

Lao monks first went to Phnom Penh to study at the Buddhist Institute, but Lao branches were finally opened in 1931, reflecting the peripheral position of Laos in the colonial project. Penny Edwards (2007) and Ann Hansen (2007) for the case of Cambodia, and Gregory Kourilsky (2006, 64f.) and Soren Ivarsson (2008, 93f.) for Laos, have explored this restructuring of Buddhist education under French colonialism. They argue that the agendas behind this reorganization of Buddhism in Cambodia and Laos were similar: In order to build a national Buddhism within the context of Indochina, Siamese influence had to be curtailed. Instead of Bangkok, the Khmer and the Lao branches of the Buddhist Institute were to become centers for the higher education for monks.

The French introduced new curricula based on the study of selected and appropriate texts, awarded monks with certificates, and printed Buddhist books (Kourilsky 2006, 30f.). To what extent this colonial influence on monastic education changed Lao Buddhism has been subject to various views. Ivarsson (2008) and Kourilsky (2006) clearly see the changes that (p. 280) came with the colonial era, but Justin McDaniel has a somewhat different position, stating that "there certainly seems to be little direct colonial influence on Lao monastic education" (McDaniel 2008, 42). This is certainly true for monasteries in the peripheral countryside. However, one must also take into account that, for example, the most important Lao intellectual of the twentieth century, Mahasila Viravong[6] (1905–1987), worked at the Buddhist Institute during the colonial era.

What Louis Finot and other researchers of EFEO did for the history, textual traditions, and monastic education of Lao Buddhism was also applied to the architectural heritage of Laos. The most prestigious project was the renovation of Vientiane's *that luang* relic shrine, which lay in ruins when the French took control. The French were aware that it had a significant symbolic value for the Lao Buddhists, and its renovation in the 1930s was an important part of French colonial policy in Laos. The *that luang* was not the only monument renovated. From 1920 to 1927, Vientiane's Vat Sisakhet was rebuilt, and in cooperation with Prince Phetsarath, the impressive building of the Buddhist library was reconstructed. The restoration of Vat Pha Keo, situated just opposite Vat Sisakhet, was carried out between 1936 and 1942.

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Pacification and Resistance

In the later phase of colonial rule, Lao elites began to claim national leadership, and the first resistance groups formed. Although the sangha was loosely integrated into this awakening of nationalism and independence, Buddhism and its institutions were rarely involved in oppositional activities. However, while the French patronage of Buddhism on some level might have had effects that prevented conflict, it is crucial to emphasize that Buddhist-inspired revolts troubled the French for several decades. Several insurrections —led by charismatic leaders who claimed to be a "man of merit" (*phu mi boun*)—on southern Laos's Bolaven Plateau reached a first peak around 1901, but smaller outbreaks continued well into the 1930s, and also spread among the Lao in Thailand (Gay 1989). When we understand these revolts (and their use of prophetic literature) as expressions of political marginalization and economic instability (Nartsupha 1984), it is significant to point out that these messianic movements mobilized not only ethnic Lao and Buddhists, but also numerous ethnic minorities (Moppert 1978; Baird 2013). The "revolutionary potentials" of Buddhism also appealed to non-Buddhists and created syncretic movements that rebelled against the (colonial) state and expected the coming of a new age, ruled by the *dhamma* and the future Buddha *Maitreya* (Ladwig 2014).

Independence and the US War in Vietnam

When the Japanese occupation and World War II came to an end, most Lao hoped for independence, but despite the efforts of anti-colonial movements such as the *Lao Issara* ("Free Lao"), the French did not grant independence until 1953. Under various Royal Lao Governments (RLG), the crucial position of Buddhism as a state religion was also engraved (p. 281) into the 1947 constitution of the post-colonial Lao state. In 1958 the Lao sangha had approximately 17,000 members (Asia Foundation 1964, 8; Halpern 1964, 50). With an overall population of about 2 million, 1.5 percent of the Lao population continued to fulfill functions that were not only purely "religious." One example can be found in the Lao school system: until 1950, 878 out of 1,172 primary school teachers were monks (Taillard 1974, 149). This changed rapidly in the 1960s, when the state started to build a secular school system that, especially in urban areas, "effectively removed one of the wat's [temple] principal functions" (Barber 1974, 48).

More important than the general effects of secularization, however, was the political situation arising just after official independence in 1953. After the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and the end of the First Indochina War, the Cold War conflict in

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Indochina entered a new phase. With the retreat of the French, American military aid, presence of staff, and clandestine operations increased massively. Simultaneously, North Vietnam's engagement in Laos became more apparent. Vientiane and other urban areas, with their small upper class, profited in grand style from the influx of US financial aid. Inequalities in wealth led to more and more internal division among Lao politicians, and were also seen as a threat to Lao culture. The radical changes associated with this "sent shivers of cultural anxiety down the spines of its leaders and cultural institutions such as the Buddhist *Sangha*" (Evans 2002, 100). Sections of the sangha also profited from this foreign aid, but most monks developed a rather critical attitude toward American policies and the various RLG governments that partially cooperated with the United States (Halpern 1964, 60).

Cold War Politics and Lao Buddhism

After 1954, the Lao sangha became deeply immersed in the political conflicts of the Cold War. This involvement in the conflict between neutralist, communist, and pro-American forces was not only caused by Buddhism's significance for the worldview of the Lao, but also had very practical causes. For political stakeholders, the sangha, with its institutions, influence, and networks, offered capacities that could be utilized, as in the 1950s Laos had very weak center-periphery relations. Also, modern developments were starting to emerge: Under the leadership of the meditation master Mahapanh Ananto (1911–1968), the Buddhavong Association was founded, which promoted Buddhist Sunday schools for youth, public lectures, radio programs, magazines, and meditation classes in Vientiane and other places (McDaniel 2008, 53f.). The networks in which these activities took place represented a political resource and an apparatus that could be filled with new tasks. Consequently, a number of political movements and actors became active in the Lao Cold War politics of religion.

Several neutralist forces that tried to mediate between American intervention and communism had a strong connection to Buddhism. The *Santiphap pen khang* ("Peace Is Neutrality") party, founded in 1955 and led by Kinim Pholsena, attracted the support of many monks. Another member of a Buddhist-inspired neutralist camp was Bong Souvannavong (1906–1978). Throughout the 1950s and 1960s he was very active in political and Buddhist matters, and in 1961 published a book entitled *Doctrine Lao ou socialisme dhammique (sangkhom dhammadhipatai) pour l'instauration de la paix* (Souvannavong 1961). However, he was not a socialist in the strict sense, but primarily pleaded for a kind of modernist, rational (p. 282) Buddhism that could contribute to a democratic resolution of the crisis in Laos (Christie 2001, 153).

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Buddhism and Its Links to the Lao Communist Movement

What was to become in the course of the conflict the most powerful political faction, the Pathet Lao (PL), or its official face and legal political wing, the Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS), was also very active in Buddhist matters and attracted the support of some sections of the Lao sangha. The NLHS was in the public mostly perceived as a nationalist liberation movement, and less as an organization of a communist party operating from the liberated zone—an area in Laos's northeast that was to become the stronghold of the communist movement after 1964. Building on a reservoir of politicized (ex-)monks that had emerged during the colonial era, the Lao communist movement from very early on made concerted efforts to recruit monks and get them politically engaged (Stuart-Fox 1996, 92–93; Holt 2009, 123f.). In particular, two figures of the Pathet Lao were important in the politics of religion and the Buddhist-inspired self-representations of the movement. Prince Souphanouvong (1909–1995), one of the most competent and prominent figures of the communist movement, has been described as an extraordinarily intelligent and charismatic leader. Although not directly involved in the politics of religion, Souphanouvong made regular allusions to Buddhism and used it for political agitation. More influential on a practical and operational level was Phoumi Vongvichit (1909–1994), who before and after the revolution remained an influential figure in the politics of religion. In propaganda texts, he clearly outlined Buddhism's potentials for the revolutionary cause (1964, 24–25). A turning point in his early political career and influence on Buddhism came in 1954, when in a coalition government with NLHS participation he became minister of culture and fine arts, also responsible for the sangha. Although the coalition was short-lived, Vongvichit cleverly used his power in the ministry and created concerted propaganda programs that were to have a lasting effect on the sangha.

Vongvichit and the PL also recognized that Buddhism offered a set of metaphors that could translate and simplify socialist propaganda, making it understandable for a peasantry that had no or little exposition to such ideas. Throughout this period until the early days of the revolution, the propaganda units of the PL and NLHS therefore also used Buddhist-inspired concepts to convey their message: the coming of a communist classless society of abundance was in village propaganda sessions equated with the coming of the future Buddha *Maitreya* (Thepbuali 1976). In several other countries, this mixture of postcolonial national awakening, Buddhism, and socialism became prominent in the 1950s (Ladwig and Shields 2014), but also faded away rather quickly.

Some leading Lao monks also had open sympathies for the Pathet Lao and its aim of liberating Laos from American domination and the RLG governments, which in their eyes were the "lackeys" of American politics. Maha Khamthan Thepbuali (b. 1922), who after

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1975 became one of the Lao sangha's chief ideologues, returned in the 1950s from his studies of Buddhist psychology in Bangkok and became increasingly politicized. Similar political views were held by Maha Vichit Singhalat (1935–2012), who until his death in 2012 was the Supreme Patriarch of Lao Buddhism. Then a monk in his twenties, Vichit returned to Laos after his studies in India and quickly became politically engaged. Also, older members of (p. 283) the Lao sangha were already on good terms with Vongvichit and other leaders of the NLHS. Maha Khun Manivong (1898–1968)—during this period the highest-ranking monk of Vientiane—was described as an open advocate of the NLHS and its policies. Maha Buakham Voraphet (1909–1996) also supported the political line advanced by the NLHS and the PL. Voraphet had already been politically active during his training at the Buddhist Institute in Phnom Penh, where he was jailed for four months for his anti-colonial activities. In 1958, he became head of the largest and most important school for monks in Vientiane, and he used this position to spread his political views.

As Marcel Zago's (1972) study of Buddhism in Luang Prabang suggests, the pre-revolutionary period there was somewhat less politicized. Largely spared from the political struggles that took place in Vientiane, there were nevertheless also some well-trained monks politically active in Luang Prabang, such as Maha Khamphan Virachit (1914–1995) and Pha Bunchankaeo Phothichitto (1920–1996). Lao history books, for example, report that revolutionary leaders regularly came to consult with Pha Bunchankaeo on political questions (Grabowsky 2012, 68).

Counterinsurgency and Increasing Polarizations

Trying to counter this increasing political radicalization, in 1959 the RLG government set up a secret service unit that spied on the sangha (Deuve 1995, 298f.; Ladwig 2016), and also allowed international political stakeholders to intervene in Lao religious affairs. As Thailand's prime minister General Sarit Thanarat was a strong ally of US politics and a staunch anti-communist, Thai monks (mainly from the *thammayut* sect) were sent out for spreading anti-communist propaganda in Thai-Lao border regions and Lao monasteries. Moreover, the American-sponsored Asia Foundation and its mission of "Buddhist programming" acted as a CIA-controlled counterinsurgency unit. By providing schoolbooks to monks, sponsoring "development programs," and writing reports about the political orientation inside the Lao sangha, Thai monks and members of the Asia Foundation hoped to limit the Pathet Lao's influence on monastic institutions. However, after being active in Laos for a few years, a report of the Asia Foundation summarized rather pessimistically, "The Pathet Lao is well organized, trained and energetic in Buddhist matters […] In general, the feeling is that Buddhism in Laos is far from being a

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bulwark against Communism and that the Pathet Lao is making considerable inroads among the Buddhist clergy" (Asia Foundation 1964, 22, 33).

Beyond these largely clandestine operations, a legal intervention, namely the change of sangha regulations, was considered by many RLG politicians as a more efficient measure to drive out neutralist and communist monks. In May 1959, a new Lao Sangha law took effect. Increasing the government's control of the internal workings of the sangha, several teachers of the Buddhist Institute who were suspected to cooperate with the PL and the neutralists were "transferred" to other posts. Most important, the highest-ranking monk of Vientiane, Maha Khun Manivong, was dismissed from his office. Although the efficacy of these measures is retrospectively difficult to assess, they seemed to have a contrary effect as they aggravated an already problematic relationship between the RLG government and the sangha. In January 1960, Buakham Voraphet, the head monk of the Pali school in Vientiane, gave his students "pro-communist lessons" (Deuve 1984, 141–142), and an open demonstration of (p. 284) monks a few months later indicated a further escalation of the conflict between government and sangha.

Monks Joining the Communist Forces

A schism within the Lao sangha came only a few months later, during the battle of Vientiane in December 1960. A group of about 100 monks—comprising most of the politically active monks already mentioned—finally decided to take sides and joined the oppositional forces operating from Khang Khay on the Plain of Jars in the liberated zone. In 1961, leading Pathet Lao cadres (including Phoumi Vongvichit) and monks such as Thepbuali, Voraphet, and Vichit founded the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization in the liberated zone (Rasdavong 2005, 43–45). With the intensification of the war and the start of carpet bombings, the neutralist forces gradually lost their significance, and the Pathet Lao moved to Houaphan province, where the communist forces, in cooperation with their Vietnamese allies, erected their base in a vast net of caves. Throughout the war, the monks loyal to the PL—besides fulfilling "traditional" roles—became more and more involved in political work (Stuart-Fox 1996, 92–93; Ladwig 2016). The communist movement could now plausibly claim to actively protect Buddhism, as it had integrated well-trained monks into its apparatus. Although this was a rather small group of monks (most men were drafted as soldiers anyway), their roles in the coming revolution were crucial for Lao Buddhism's future fate.

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Buddhism and the Communist Revolution

Only when the American withdrawal and the end of the war was dawning in 1973, did some PL-sympathetic monks return to Vientiane to “prepare” the sangha for the time to come. Like the most senior pro-PL monk, Buakham Voraphet, younger monks like Vichit Singhalat and Thepbuali had by now been firmly indoctrinated by, and integrated into, the Pathet Lao. With the proclamation of the Lao PDR on December 2, 1975, their careers in the new post-revolutionary sangha administration began. The LPRP elevated them into high positions previously occupied by monks who had not been politically involved, or who had been more or less faithful to the Royal Lao government.

Like the majority of the population, many monks were at first euphoric because of the end of a war that had ravaged the region for almost two decades and had caused unprecedented destruction. Despite the fact that the sangha members loyal to the new regime on some level guaranteed Buddhism’s survival, Buddhist monks and laypeople were quickly confronted with new and harsh political realities. The “hard-liner years” from 1975 to 1979 were not only marked by political instability, paranoia, and re-education camps, but by floods, food scarcity, and failed agricultural collectivization. Due to the uncertain future they were facing, many monks who had not been with the PL disrobed, or in robes joined the mass of refugees crossing the border to Thailand. Most of them settled in the Lao-speaking Isan region. A few radical monks, such as Achan Chanh Ly (1941–2004), assisted anti-communist forces by providing food, shelter, and moral support (Baird 2012). The overwhelming majority (p. 285) of Buddhists, however, were simply trying to come to terms with their refugee status and their new lives after the escape. What evolved outside Laos in the years to come were various forms of refugee Buddhism. In France (Choron-Baix 1991), the United States and Canada (Esterick 1992), and many other places, small Lao communities tried to rebuild their Buddhist identities.

Harsh Realities: Buddhism under the New Regime and the Limits of Social Engineering

The ones who stayed had to adjust, sometimes in rather harsh ways. Buddhism was not the state religion of Laos anymore, but rather only one (albeit an important one) of many traditions to be integrated into the socialist project. One reason for Buddhism’s downgrading were the new politics of ethnicity and culture. The regime wanted to reward the minorities for their participation in the war against the United States, and was intending to radically alter the position of (mainly non-Buddhist) ethnic minorities. The Lao multi-ethnic people were supposed to be united, and the “new socialist man” was

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imagined to transcend the various ethnic and religious affiliations found under the old regime (Pholsena 2006; Tappe 2008, 49f.).

A major blow for Buddhism was its separation from Buddhist kingship. The last king of Laos, Savang Vatthana (1907–1984?)—before the revolution, constitutionally the highest protector of Buddhism—was with other members of his family sent to a "re-education camp" from which he never returned.[7] With the abolishment of a tradition that had lasted for hundreds of years, many other things also fell into oblivion. Rites formerly held at the Buddhist court in Luang Prabang were prohibited (or at least re-engineered), and titles were changed. The office of the *sangharaja* ("king of monks") was abolished; it was replaced by a committee that was designated with a secular terminology that omitted the word "king." Many monks continued to flee the country, among them the former *sangharaja* of Luang Prabang, Pha Thammayano (Zago 1978). The fate of some Buddhist-minded politicians, such as Bong Souvannavong, was also unfortunate; due to of his critique of the post-revolutionary treatment of Buddhism, he was sent to a re-education camp, where he died a few years later (Christie 2001, 156).

Reports by refugees suggested that, due to the secretive politics of the new regime, the increasing isolation of Laos, and the infamous re-education camps, Buddhism was in the course of disappearing completely. Some almost drew parallels between the LPRP's politics and those of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, where in fact a genocide and a systematic destruction of Buddhism was taking place. Although most of these reports were somewhat exaggerated, the changes to Lao society as a whole—its culture and with that, Buddhism—were in fact radical. The fervor and radicalism of the first years under the new regime saw much of Buddhism's cultural heritage under attack. Buddhist cosmology, with its belief in spirits (*phi*) and angels (*thewada*), in an afterlife in heavens (*sawan*) and hells (*narok*), and much of traditional literature was supposed to be purged from its "superstitious" and "feudalistic" elements. Scientific rationality, socialist ethics, and solidarity were now to be emphasized (Stuart-Fox and Bucknell 1982). Although the curricula of Buddhist schools were somehow adapted to the new political line, most of these modernistic purification **(p. 286)** projects were simply unrealistic, and luckily enough had a very limited impact in the long run.

In terms of administration, however, the LPRP was quite successful in establishing a new sangha administration. Under the leadership of Phoumi Vongvichit and Maha Thepbuali, the sangha became linked to the communist party's mass organization, the Lao National Front for Reconstruction. Sectarian divisions between *thammayut* and *mahanikay* monks were abolished by force, and integrated into the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization. The link of the latter with government bodies has remained quite stable until today. Through an array of practices, committee meetings, and control mechanisms, Lao

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Buddhism's institutions remain under the tight control of Lao state authorities (Ladwig 2008, 483f.).

From Buddhist Offerings and Meditation to "Marxist Productivity"

Another significant change was related to the disposition of resources for religious purposes. Traditionally, Lao villages channeled a lot of their surplus into the ritual economy (Halpern 1961, 3). During the early years of the revolution, gift giving to monks and the sangha (Pali: *dana*) performed outside the regulated framework given by the state was seen as either a waste of resources for reproducing social hierarchies, or in the worst case as feeding "unproductive" members of society. Buddhist monks loyal to the new regime stated that "feudalists live on the people, they pretend to be meritorious, but just take away people's belongings in order to build temples" (Thepbuali 1975, 18). In the same vein, Phoumi Vongvichit, revolutionary leader and first man for religious affairs after the revolution, asked Lao Buddhists to "abandon these residues of capitalism" (Vongvichit 1987, 171). Many rites were re-signified as expressing solidarity (*khwamsamakhi*). Most Lao were simply shocked by this new form of state-controlled Buddhism that in their view deprived believers from making merit (*hed boun*).

The status of monks was also subject to change, and they now had to be "productive" in terms of work. They were encouraged to act as teachers and cultivate vegetables in the temple. In line with a Marxist emphasis on work, meditation was considered unproductive, and it became almost impossible to teach it on a broader basis. The small but flourishing meditation movement centered on the Abhidhamma school in Vientiane's Vat Sok Pa Luang was closed in 1975. The Buddhavong magazine, the Buddhist youth association, and all projects that once heralded the modernization of Lao Buddhism in the 1960s died with it. In line with this, the forest tradition (Pali: *arannavasi*), with its strong emphasis on meditation (Pali: *kammatthana*), almost disappeared completely. Town-dwelling monks (Pali: *gamavasi*) were spatially fixed and easier to control than wandering forest monks (*thudong*). Although draconian disciplinary measures were rare, the government kept up its strict surveillance of Buddhism. In 1987, for example, Achan Mahaphimpo, before the revolution a meditation master, abbot of Vat Phon Phonau, and a monk with healing capacities (Pottier 2007), was expelled from the state-controlled Buddhist sangha because of rumors about his magical powers (Evans 1998, 64).

(p. 287) First Reforms and the Tentative Resurgence of Buddhism

After the new regime had consolidated itself and the hard-liner phase came to an end around 1980, things progressively "normalized." Religious freedom remained restricted,

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but at least it was again possible to hold Buddhist rites. Ordination numbers also stabilized, but remained at a low level. What followed in the 1980s was a longer period that many Lao perceived as a standstill in religious matters. In Thailand, Buddhism was at this time becoming increasingly diversified, with Buddhist reform movements such as Santi Asoke catering to different audiences in a rapidly changing society, but nothing of the kind happened in Laos. However, things started to move a bit when in 1986 (after eleven years of "official" socialism), political reforms were initiated. Although rather slow and tentative, Buddhism step by step regained some of its pre-revolutionary significance (Holt 2009, 173f.). Then, with the collapse of most communist regimes in 1989, the LPRP quickly resorted to Buddhism as a source of nation- and identity-building. The debris of socialist modernity had to be covered up, and Buddhism was one of the means at hand to do this. The funeral of revolutionary leader and long-term president Kayzone Phomvihane in 1992 can here be understood as a key event that marked a change in Buddhism position and standing. Phomvihane was given a state funeral, with hundreds of Buddhist monks making merit for him (Evans 1998, 64). Moreover, before his death, Phomvihane had turned to Buddhist monks for counseling and for their knowledge of traditional medicine.

Political Reform and the Contemporary Revival of Buddhism

Since 1986 the Lao state has introduced a reform process that in terms of ideology and implementation is very close to Vietnam's *doi-moi* policy. This includes a down-tuning of socialist symbolism and discourse, an open-market policy, greater religious freedom (at least for Buddhists), but also the affirmation of the party-state to uphold its power. Like in China and Vietnam, the resurgence of religious practices under reformed socialism has to be seen as a concerted revitalization. With Buddhist institutions being still firmly integrated into the party-state, Buddhism and the language, moral values, and lifestyles associated with it are now again promoted as "national culture." Vatthana Pholsena (2006, 70) describes this as "a secularized image of Buddhism in order to reconcile the official ideology and the religion." A process of the Buddhification of not only the political sphere, but also everyday culture, is observable, at least in regions with a high proportion of ethnic Lao (Evans 1998, 67).

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Revolutionaries and Buddhist State Rituals

In particular, Lao state rituals are increasingly imbued with Buddhist symbolism and discourse, and the ritual for the Buddha's relic in Vientiane enshrined in the *that luang* (p. 288) is perhaps the prime example of this new policy. This relic shrine that for centuries has assumed the role of a palladium of various kingdoms, does so again in the contemporary period. On a symbolic level, the presence of its icon reflects the ideological changes that have occurred: it now features prominently on Lao bank notes, stamps, and so on, replacing the former communist symbols, the hammer and the sickle. Moreover, in 2003 and 2010 the Ministry of Information and Culture inaugurated statues of King Fa Ngum and King Anouvong. The rituals surrounding the worship of relics and statues have become displays of the patronage power of the Lao government, which thereby is intending to connect itself to a glorious Buddhist past in order to increase its legitimacy in the present (Ladwig 2015). However, many state rituals have also been carefully re-engineered since 1975. The roles once filled by Buddhist kings and royalty have been taken over by delegates of the LPRP. Probably the discontinuities of these replacement processes are more obvious in Luang Prabang than in Vientiane because the last Buddhist king resided there.

Religious Globalization and New Developments

The gradual opening of Laos also implies that the effects of globalization in Laos are now also recognizable in the religious sphere (Rehbein 2007). Due to cultural and linguistic proximity, and the omnipresence of Thai-TV, Thailand has become a sort of mediator of Laos's globalization. Whereas during the period of high socialism it was almost impossible for Lao monks to receive monastic education in Thailand, most sangha members now take their higher degrees at one of the Thai universities specializing in Buddhist studies, such as Mahachulalongkorn University in Bangkok. A few stipends also enable monks to study in Myanmar (Burma) and India. The globalization of Lao Buddhism also implies that much of the research that was interrupted for almost twenty years is now catching up. The members of the French EFEO have produced some excellent translations of texts that explore, for example, the tantric dimensions of Lao Buddhism (Bizot and Lagirarde 1996). With Lao counterparts, EFEO member Michel Lorrillard (2008) has carried out extensive surveys of manuscripts and inscriptions that explore the earlier histories of Lao Buddhism. The German-sponsored Digital Library of Lao Manuscripts project, in cooperation with the Lao National Library, has made a large part of Laos's literary heritage available online in digital form (Hundius and Wharton 2010).[8] Similarly, the UNESCO world heritage status of Luang Prabang has also led to more

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global engagements of its Buddhist institutions. The highest-ranking monk of Luang Prabang, Maha Khamchan Virachitto (1920–2007), kept his transnational networks active, even during the time of socialism, and has had a major impact on the resurgence of Buddhism in Laos (Boulyaphonh 2014). The large collection of photos he left after his death, and those of other laypeople and monks taken over the last hundred years, are now being transformed into an archive that will be of great value for documenting the past religious culture of the city.[9] Besides an increasing number of foreigners, the amount of Lao researchers working on Buddhism is also increasing. Some Lao students are now taking PhD degrees abroad, and have started publishing in English (Sengsoulin 2014).[10]

But the revolution has also led to transformations that are of a more lasting nature and cannot simply be reversed in the context of Buddhism's revitalization. For some monks of (p. 289) the Lao sangha, it has been hard work to re-establish meditation instruction. Maha Sali Khantasilo, the monk who is now the leading figure of the small group of meditation monks, had to lobby for several years to get permission to train younger monks in meditation, which was finally approved at the end of the 1990s. Now meditation is again promoted, and temples and Buddhist schools (such as Vat Ong Toe Sangha College) in Vientiane and Luang Prabang offer regular training for monks and laypeople.

New Roles and Challenges for the Lao Sangha

Beyond the long-term effects of Lao socialism, it is now in fact capitalism that is a major driving force for social and religious change. Whereas during the high phase of socialism things seemed to be frozen, many Lao now have the feeling that things are happening too fast and that Buddhism is caught up in a process that juggles between various roles. On the one hand, Buddhism is supposed to be a pillar of Lao traditions in an era of globalization, whereas on the other hand, monks are also expected to respond to actual social problems that have evolved recently. Some monks have taken up the latter challenge and have been engaged in activities that in Thailand and other Buddhist countries have been labeled "socially engaged Buddhism" (Queen and King 1996). Since 2000, the Lao sangha has, for example, been involved in HIV prevention through the Metta Dhamma project (Ladwig 2008, 475). A more encompassing vision has been put into practice by the Buddhism for Development Project under the leadership of the highly revered Maha Sali Khantasilo. In order to establish itself and gain permissions, the group has had to struggle with government agencies (Ladwig 2008, 478f.).

A question that will become of tremendous importance with the rapid cultural, social, and economic transformation of Lao society is linked to the diversification of Lao Buddhism in the future. With an evolving middle class, increasing urbanization, and the emergence of

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lifestyles and gender roles beyond traditional Lao peasant culture, it is likely that new forms of religious expression will evolve. In Thailand, the efflorescence of spirit-mediumship, magic monks, and the formations of movements like Santi Asoke or Dhammakaya Buddhism have been interpreted as signs of a religious "postmodernization" (Jackson 1999; Kitiarsa 2012, 83f.). With the current emphasis on sectarian unity and its control of Buddhism, the Lao government has until now largely prevented Buddhism's diversification. Although most "revolutionary monks" have passed away in recent years (the former supreme patriarch Maha Vichit Singalat died in 2012), the younger generation working in the sangha administration has until now had little space for maneuvering.

The Capitalist Economy and Buddhism

The economic liberalization of Laos's market has in some fields developed into a rampant capitalism, producing hitherto unknown disparities in wealth and new social stratification. The sangha profits from this new wealth, and most monasteries are busy with building projects. But the simple fact that the rich can donate much more than in the past also implies that the competition for merit has become much fiercer. Many of the poorer Lao are critical of this development, and suspect that corruption will increase and monastic discipline will decline.

(p. 290) New economic demands have also impinged on the monastic education system. Despite the fact that Buddhist schools in urban areas are currently flooded with novices from the provinces, the general value of religious education has further declined due to an expanding private education sector. Speaking in numbers, the picture is—despite all the talk of Buddhism's revitalization—not that convincing. While in 1957 Laos had 17,000 monks and novices with an overall population of about 2 million, the fall in numbers becomes apparent when looking at the statistics: in 2004 Laos had 20,000 sangha members, but an overall population of 6.5 million (Vannasopha 2005).

Conclusion

Although many of the effects of the Lao revolution have now been overwritten through the concerted revival of Buddhism, the current "re-Buddhification" of Lao politics and culture after the decline of the socialist master narrative also has its "dark sides." Some of the dismissive attitudes toward ethnic minorities that were officially countered by revolutionary discourse now seem to have returned, albeit under different conditions. Conversion to Christianity has until now been successfully blocked by the government,

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and there are signs that Buddhism is increasingly spreading among ethnic minorities (Ladwig 2016a).

In the future the Lao state will continue to rely on its control of Buddhism and the religious field in order to foster its "national culture" after the decline of socialism. In their constant search for legitimacy and in order to prevent the erosion of cultural hegemony, Lao state agents are now busy engineering a revitalization of Buddhism; however, such a renewal rarely comes from grassroots initiatives. A diversification of Lao Buddhism that could serve the needs and tastes of an increasingly differentiated society until now seems not to happen, at least on an official level. With Lao civil society being weak and the state's grip on Buddhism being firm, the question of when and how this diversification will occur remains largely open. In particular, the influence of Thailand and its institutions of monastic education will play a crucial role. Monks and laypeople alike look across the border to Thailand for new inspiration and opportunities, but at the same time are also shocked by the scandals that have haunted the Thai sangha during the last decades. And despite the euphoria about new shiny temple buildings, some are already aware that the commercialization of Buddhism (in Thai called *phuttha phanit*) will not stop at the Lao border. Finding new trajectories for Buddhism between tradition and capitalist modernity, between government policies and religious innovation, and between royal past and an increasingly secular present, remains a delicate process.

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Notes:

(1.) For studies focused on the ethnography and interpretation of specific rites, see the excellent and still valuable studies of Condominas (1998) and Zago (1972). Many of the studies of Buddhism in northeast Thailand (Tambiah 1970; Hayashi 2003) are, despite the influence of the Thai nation-state, also worth considering. Additionally, there is a plethora of studies written in Thai on Buddhism in this region.

(2.) In the following, Pali and Sanskrit (Skt.) terms will be identified by italics and the indication of the language. Lao words will be in italics, but without indicating the language, unless otherwise noted.

(3.) See Peltier (1987) for an overview of the rich literary tradition of Laos.

(4.) The code has a huge variety of versions. Sometimes it is in Lao also labeled *hit sipsong khong sipsi* (“twelve rites and fourteen traditions”) and refers more explicitly to the yearly ritual cycle. See the excellent bibliography in Raendchen and Raendchen (1998, 200–216) for numerous works in Thai, Lao, and Western languages on this aspect of traditional law and ritual.

(5.) See John Nelson’s “Diasporic Buddhisms and Convert Communities,” Chapter 20 in this volume, for a discussion relating to this theme.

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(6.) Mahasila Viravong probably had the largest impact on Buddhism in Laos in the twentieth century. He compiled many books, and was the teacher and personal secretary of Prince Phetsarath. For the career of Viravong and his ideas about Buddhism, see his autobiography (Viravong 2004).

(7.) Revolutionary leader and long-term president of Laos, Kaysone Phomvihane, admitted during a visit in France that the king had passed away in 1984 at the age of seventy-seven.

(8.) The project has also produced an excellent webpage with a search engine for manuscripts. http://www.laomanuscripts.net/en/index.

(9.) See the textual description and film of Hans-Georg Berger, who has been heading this project together with Volker Grabowsky and a number of Lao monks and researchers. http://britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/endangeredarchives/2014/07/buddhist_photographs_laos.html.

(10.) Most works of foreigners working on Lao Buddhism are part of the bibliography of this chapter. Research by Lao published in Lao still remains somewhat invisible due to the limited means of the small community of researchers there. However, at Dong Dok University (Department for Lao Literature; Department for Social Sciences), at the Lao National Library, and at Vat Ong Toe Sangha College, research on Buddhism is expanding. Due to the limited scope of this chapter, I cannot list these works here.

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