Variants of Frontier Mimesis

Colonial Encounter and Intercultural Interaction in the Lao-Vietnamese Uplands

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Abstract: At the turn of the twentieth century, the French colonial administration adopted various strategies and tactics to 'pacify' and control the culturally heterogeneous regions dividing the lowland realms of the Lao and Vietnamese courts, while upland powerbrokers aimed to forge strategic alliances with the new colonial power. This article takes the concept of mimesis as a means to explore the interplay of alterity and identity. With reference to the work of Michael Taussig, along with other theories of imitation, I will discuss processes of mutual appropriation and differentiation within the precarious relationship between colonizers and colonized. Mimesis here provides an alternative reading of upland Southeast Asian history beyond the binaries of dominance and resistance prevalent in James C. Scott's recent work on the anarchist history of *zomia*.

Keywords: colonialism, French Indochina, frontier regions, Laos, mimesis, Southeast Asia, Vietnam

The history of upland ethnic groups in mainland Southeast Asia shows that they adopted a variety of mimetic practices with the aim of negotiating a beneficial relationship with lowland empires (Jonsson 2014; Tappe 2015b). State actors from the lowlands also demonstrated a 'mimetic faculty' (Benjamin [1933] 1986; see also Taussig 1993) in dealing with the different people living in the upland fringes of empires, for example, by modeling frontier administration on local forms of political organization. This article investigates these two fundamentally different yet at times complementary variants of mimesis in the context of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century upland Southeast Asia. In particular, I will focus on the ethnically heterogeneous Lao-Vietnamese upland frontier before and during French colonial administration. I will explore

Social Analysis, Volume 62, Issue 2, Summer 2018, 51–75 © Berghahn Books
doi:10.3167/sa.2018.620203 • ISSN 0155-977X (Print) • ISSN 1558-5727 (Online)

processes of interaction and the manifold entanglements between lowland empires and different upland societies.

Mimesis is first of all a way to create relations. Second, mimetic processes characterize the trajectories and contingencies of these relations. Agents of mimetic appropriation aim to establish mutually beneficial relations (Roque 2015a). Both sides try to shape, to control, or at least to negotiate these relations. Within such encounters and interactions, mimetic practices appear as tactics, in Michel de Certeau's (1984) sense. In contrast to strategies, tactics are adopted in an unknown, potentially hostile setting as flexible and opportunistic responses to specific power configurations (ibid.: 34–39).

During colonial encounters in the Southeast Asian uplands, mimetic practices of both colonizer and colonized appear as tactics, I would argue, because these encounters imply uncertainty, fear, and ignorance on both sides. Local elites would now have to reckon with a new power, while the colonial administrator might find himself remote from the foundations and structures of this power. If state actors and state subjects constitute the opposing poles in such mimetic relations, their respective aims, interests, and mutual representations might collide (cf. Pels and Salemink 1999). How are such inherent power relations perceived and negotiated by the respective actors? This question is particularly acute in a colonial context where state control of mountainous frontier regions gradually increased.

French colonial rule aggravated a process of administrative transformations and rationalization of governance that had already been triggered in nineteenth-century Vietnam and Siam and in their respective upland fringes (Davis 2015; Poisson 2004; Winichakul 1995). Mimetic tactics played a significant role in frontier encounters between lowland state formations and diverse upland societies (Jonsson 2005, 2010, 2014; Salemink 2003). The much-debated concept of 'frontier' describes "a pre-modern and zonal form of boundary" (Imamura 2015: 96), or a social space where "cultures interpenetrate in a dynamic manner" (Leach 1960: 50). Frontier rhetoric often implies an expansive force. According to the well-known views of Frederick Turner (1921) regarding the American West, a shifting frontier demarcates the expansion of civilization or a civilization yet to come—a perspective in contrast to that of James C. Scott (2009) with his idea of a purposefully 'state-repelling' upland frontier in mainland Southeast Asia.

Expansionist connotations of the frontier concept render it epistemologically problematic. Nevertheless, even if the term 'borderlands' appears more suitable in Asian contexts (cf. Giersch 2006), the situation in late-nineteenth-century Southeast Asia was indeed located in a context of imperial expansion. The Siamese and Vietnamese courts were vying with each other for political influence in the uplands, while later the British and French colonial powers intervened and confronted each other in the Golden Triangle (Grabowsky 2003;

A. Walker 1999). Upland societies were increasingly facing a variety of external political actors who interfered in local socio-political configurations to different degrees. Frontier encounters gained intensity in imperial and colonial contexts, resulting in considerable frictions and transformations, along with dynamics of inclusion, appropriation, and gradual enclosure (Cooper 2005; Scott 2009).

In this article I will analyze two parallel strands of mimetic appropriation within the relationship between the colonial administration and the upland population: first, the French colonial appropriation and transformation of local forms of governance; second, local mimetic tactics of adaptation to the changing political economy and increasing state enclosure. My discussion is inspired by the recent debate about James Scott's interpretations of the Southeast Asian uplands—or *zomia* (see Schendel 2002)—as a zone of deliberate "state evasion and state prevention" (Scott 2009: 8).

Contrary to Scott's main argument about state-repelling uplanders, I would like to emphasize tactics of self-empowerment through mimetic adaptation to, and appropriation of, external sources of power—here represented by various state actors such as French colonial administrators. Even if power inequalities and hierarchy may characterize intercultural relations in upland Southeast Asia, this does not necessarily entail a crude dialectic of domination and resistance. Rather, I would like to illuminate the room to maneuver that was available to upland political actors within colonial state enclosure. Uplanders experienced 'the state' not as a mere imposition of external political models but as a relational process from which "alternative governmentalities" (Pels 1997: 177; see also Ladwig and Roque, this issue) might emerge.

As Oscar Salemink (2015) argues, Scott (2009) does indeed point at interaction and exchange, but gives it less attention than revolt and other means of state avoidance. Scott indicates the attraction of certain elements of the lowland state for upland populations and refers to the economic and symbolic reach of the state. Uplanders aspired to acquire items of economic (salt, silver, tools) as well as symbolic (titles, regalia, costumes) value, which in the end served local empowerment and "left a deep impression in the hills" (ibid.: 35). Scott does not elaborate on the character of this impression, nor does he explore its consequences. He neglects the aspects of interaction and exchange in order to emphasize anarchy and revolt as the main characteristics of upland societies (Jonsson 2012).

Instead of focusing on the binary of domination and resistance, I argue that we should pay more attention to networks of mutual exchange, to relations and interdependence. The French colonial administration of the mountainous hinterlands of Annam and Tonkin and the local elites in those areas arguably constituted each other through processes that Ricardo Roque (2010: 18) describes as "mutual inclusion and asymmetric balances," a form of symbiosis that held colonial and indigenous worlds together. While Roque focuses on the

juridical realm in his analysis of mutual parasitism during colonialism (ibid.; 2015b), French Indochina is an example of colonial collaboration for economic gains: both the French and the indigenous elites aimed to exploit resources and control trade routes, often to the detriment of peasant livelihoods (Brocheux and Hémery 2009).

The Lao-Vietnamese borderlands provide ample opportunity to test Scott's hypothesis of state-repelling upland societies. In particular, upland Tai societies refute simplistic upland-lowland binaries, since their own social structures resemble lowland state formations but are also adapted to upland livelihoods. Scott misconstrues upland Tai polities (*muang*) as mimic states that imitate lowland empires of the Tai-speaking world. We should, rather, assume an encompassing heterogeneous, hierarchized social space, a continuum linking coastal and mountain communities characterized by manifold economic, political, and cultural relations. According to Karl Izikowitz (1969: 142), "interaction then depends on the nature of the relations … and can lead to war, rebellion, persecution, flight, the imitation of customs, peaceful trade, and many other types of action." Mimesis here provides a useful lens through which to view any social and political relations in Southeast Asia.

Most studies on mimesis focus on the subversive agency of subaltern peoples facing hegemonic colonial powers (see Ladwig and Roque, this issue). However, as indicated above, mimetic tactics can also be observed with dominant actors such as colonial state representatives. As my analysis will illustrate, French administrators in the Lao-Vietnamese uplands tried to implement strategies devised by the colonial administration—based on structures of power, institutions, and knowledge (Certeau 1984: 38)—to co-opt local elites in order to make frontier administration more cost-efficient. Yet on the local level—on potentially perilous terrain—colonial administrators often resorted to ad hoc tactics in everyday negotiations with the Other. Mimetic tactics of mutual appropriation shaped the interdependent relationship—at least in the formative years of French colonial rule—between colonizers and colonized in what Roque (2010: 17–18) describes as "mutual parasitism."

This gamble within the colonial encounter implies mimetic processes that Michael Taussig (1993) summarizes as exploring difference and becoming Other—a dialectical politics of identity and alterity marked by a shifting interplay of identity and difference, proximity and distance (cf. Ladwig and Roque, this issue; Melberg 1995). However, rather than a road to complete assimilation, mimesis aims at "absorbing the outside and changing world in order to stay the same" (Taussig 1993: 131), that is, self-assertion instead of transformation (cf. Gebauer and Wulf 1995). Nonetheless, as the case studies below will illustrate, the colonial encounters of the late nineteenth century definitely initiated processes of socio-political transformation within the apparent continuity of upland-lowland relations.

Following Roque (2015a: 206), "mimesis involves processes of resemblance that are always partial and selective; as such, it calls for parallel processes of differentiation and individuation" (cf. Harrison 2006). Colonial and indigenous actors were able to relate through this specific mode of human interaction, both aiming at mutual appropriation of the power of the Other and thus at self-empowerment. The local elites tapped into the emergent power source of the colonial administration, and the colonial administrators capitalized on local nodes of political and economic power. If we understand statecraft as *Staatskunst*—as an 'art of governance'—Fritz Kramer's (1993) discussion of ritual efficacy through mimetic appropriation of the Other's power provides another useful perspective on mimesis in the colonial situation.

This study is an attempt to combine historical and anthropological approaches in order to attain a long-term perspective of socio-political relations in *zomia* and to rethink upland-lowland dynamics beyond the dominance-resistance narrative through the lens of mimetic interaction. Archival ethnography aims to trace the transformations of socio-cultural configuration in the course of state-making projects in the Lao-Vietnamese borderlands in pre-colonial and colonial times.[1] My approach is intended to provide a corrective to Scott's inspiring but one-sided discussion of state-repelling upland societies. I shall emphasize the tacit rapprochement and mutual interdependence of upland and lowland groups, including the French colonial state in its formative years at the turn of the twentieth century. After a short historical overview of the Lao-Vietnamese borderlands, I will present my case studies on different aspects of mimetic entanglements in *zomia*.

Houaphan and Sipsong Chau Tai: Political and Cultural Trajectories of the Lao-Vietnamese Upland Frontier

The mountainous regions that today constitute northwestern Vietnam and northeastern Laos historically formed a natural frontier between the Indianized and the Sinicized cultural worlds of Southeast Asia (see Arnason 1997; Coedès 1968). Different Tai-speaking groups (Lao, Lü, Black and White Tai, etc.) inhabit the upland river valleys and once entertained tributary relations to other peoples such as the Khmu of the Mon-Khmer language family—pejoratively called 'Kha' (slaves) by the Lao—and the Hmong, who migrated from China in the nineteenth century (Michaud 2006). In particular, the Tai of the Black River region acted as intermediaries between different upland populations and, for example, Chinese merchants (Davis 2011, 2017; Le Failler 2014).

The jagged, densely forested, and ethnically heterogeneous uplands were often remote from the imperial lowland centers, in both a geographical and an administrative sense. Direct conquest was the exception. The Vietnamese and

Lao rulers relied instead on tributary and trade relations with local elites to achieve at least a certain economic control of their resource-rich hinterlands. While the Vietnamese reduced their presence to a minimum, relying almost fully on local alliances (in particular with Muong and Tai groups), the Lao constituted a politically dominant minority in some upland valleys. The upland Lao principalities in Houaphan were small and isolated and entertained only loose tributary relations with the Lao imperial centers by the Mekong River (see Lorrillard 2008; Tappe 2015a).

In the pre-colonial upland frontier of contemporary northern Laos and northwestern Vietnam, the main interest of lowland empires was safeguarding the flow of trade and tribute. Small principalities of upland Lao and Tai people, mirroring the *muang* system of the larger Buddhist lowland empires, controlled the fertile upland river valleys and the trade with different upland groups such as the Hmong, acting as intermediaries between Lao, Vietnamese, or Chinese lowland centers and the resource-rich uplands. When the French arrived in the region and attempted to establish their colonial administration at the end of the nineteenth century, one of their main goals was to co-opt these local intermediaries—one aspect of the military 'pacification' campaigns—and to take control of upland-lowland trade (Le Failler 2014; Poisson 2004).

The six (Lao: *hok*) principalities of Houaphan (Houaphan Tang Hok, according to old Lao chronicles; see Bourlet 1906) had established tributary relations with the Vietnamese court of Hué to balance Siamese pressure during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Sipsong Chau Tai (Twelve Tai Counties),[2] an upland Tai confederation, is a similar case. The White, Black, and Red Tai (sub-groups of the Tai-Kadai language family) enjoyed certain autonomy from lowland empires, even if they were considered tributary vassals. The Sipsong Chau Tai entertained tributary relations with Chinese, Vietnamese, Lao, Siamese, and Burmese centers, and constituted a regional power that was not fully integrated into the Vietnamese state until after the French defeat in 1954 (Lentz 2011). Both Houaphan and Sipsong Chau Tai are characterized by the scarcity of suitable land for wet rice cultivation. Livelihoods in the region consist of a mixture of wet rice and shifting or swidden cultivation, with the latter practiced by all non-Tai groups (Michaud and Forsyth 2011).

Considering the socio-political peculiarity of these upland confederations in comparison with the more unified lowland kingdoms, linguistic aspects are revealing. Houaphan means 'head of a thousand', which arguably refers to the population of each of the six principalities of this Lao upland confederation (Sam Neua, Sam Tai, Houamuang, Muang Son, Muang Soi, Xieng Kho). The Twelve Tai Counties of the Sipsong Chau Tai clearly reflect the loose structure of the alliance with its independent local rulers, who were related through kinship, trade relations, and occasional conflict. In the nineteenth century, the six *muang* of Houaphan constituted a field of tension between different civilizational influences.

They entertained direct tributary relations with the pre-colonial Lao and Vietnamese kingdoms and indirect relations with the Siamese and Chinese. Siam, which had subjugated the Lao principalities at the beginning of the eighteenth century, competed with Vietnam for political control of the frontier regions.

The six principalities of Houaphan were different from neighboring Sipsong Chau Tai because they had been dominated since the sixteenth century by a small Buddhist Lao elite who considered themselves to be 'civilized' lowlanders.[3] In contrast, before World War II, the Vietnamese never bothered to assume direct control in any upland areas, which were considered 'unhealthy', preferring instead the indirect cooperation of local elites (Hardy 2003; Poisson 2009). Yet the Lao principalities in the upland valleys resembled the upland Tai principalities of the Sipsong Chau Tai more than the lowland Lao kingdoms, not least because of geographic and demographic constraints (Boutin 1937). Sipsong Chau Tai and Houaphan—together with their southern neighbor, Xieng Khouang, the former kingdom of the Tai-speaking Phuan—constituted a contested space between the expanding Vietnamese and Siamese kingdoms until the French established their colonial administration in the region at the end of the nineteenth century (Goscha 2012; Ivarsson 2008).

Placed under pressure in this way, the socio-political configurations of the northern frontier regions were further disrupted by invasions of the Ho Chinese, in fact the ethnically heterogeneous remnants of various rebellions that had unsettled the Qing Empire from the mid-nineteenth century. In 1867, the first Vietnamese reports about so-called Qing rebels informed the Vietnamese emperor at Hué about the increasing political chaos in the northwestern mountains (Davis 2009: 26; 2017). Local Tai rulers of the Sipsong Chu Tai either fought against the intruders or sided with them against the increased Vietnamese military presence. Early French explorers deplored the sad state of affairs in the devastated uplands (see, e.g., Cupet [1900] 2000) and took this state of exception as their main argument for the French *mission civilisatrice* (civilizing mission) and pacification of the upland frontier (Fourniau 2002).

Certainly, with the arrival of the French, the general political situation and local power configurations changed considerably. The French intervened both militarily and by co-opting outstanding local powerbrokers. In doing so, the French administration implied a certain continuity with the indirect 'hybrid rule' (Poisson 2004) of imperial Vietnam. As Philippe Le Failler (2011: 44) points out: "It was generally decided to let the inhabitants govern themselves and to uphold the Vietnamese imperial system of delegating power to aristocratic clans." We see here a deliberate selection of allegedly 'traditional' leaders who then self-consciously took advantage of these new power configurations. Before I turn to the specific mimetic faculty of such 'traditional rulers', I will discuss the vector of French mimetic strategies and tactics as part of colonial governance in the mountainous hinterland.

French Colonial Mimesis

In the case of French Indochina, the strategy of colonization was twofold. First, it involved the *mise en valeur* (enhancement) of the colony for the economic benefit of the metropole, that is, extracting resources and countering Chinese economic influence to protect imports from the motherland (see Brocheux and Hémery 2009; Sarraut 1923). The second strategy was aimed at 'civilizing' the colonial subjects, in particular the dominant Lao, Vietnamese, and Khmer populations. This *mission civilisatrice* included the spread of Western culture, education, language, and science in the colonies (Conklin 1997). Yet the idea of assimilation was soon abandoned in Indochina, as the principle of association—co-opting local elites while preserving 'traditional' forms of governance—prevailed (Betts [1961] 2005; Lanessan 1889). The association policy, similar to British indirect rule, provided numerous examples of mimetic interaction between the French colonizers and different indigenous political actors.

When the French came to the mountains of Southeast Asia, the ethnically heterogeneous region was characterized by overlapping spheres of Chinese, Vietnamese, and Siamese political and cultural influence. For the French established in lowland imperial cities such as Hué, the upland margins constituted "zones of unpredictability at the edges of discursive stability, where contradictory discourses overlap[ped], or where discrepant kinds of meaning-making converge[d]" (Tsing 1994: 279). Houaphan and Sipsong Chau Tai were considered rebellious hinterlands and challenges to the French strategy of pacification. Houaphan—being claimed by the kings of both Luang Prabang and Annam, and notorious as an arena of local conflict—became a particular space of contestation also within the French administration (Gay 1989).

The French responded to cases of local unrest in Houaphan with two solutions: either increasing the Vietnamese military presence and integrating Houaphan into Annam proper, or assisting the local Lao notables in solving the conflict and preserving the status of Houaphan as an upland confederation dependent on the Lao kingdom of Luang Prabang (Tappe 2015a). After having seized authority over the Lao territories east of the Mekong from Bangkok in 1893, the French replaced the Siamese as protector of the Lao king in Luang Prabang. However, the question remained as to whether this kingdom should be a semi-autonomous part of French Indochina or annexed to Annam (Goscha 2012). The people of the Lao-Vietnamese upland frontier thus encountered various French actors and motivations instead of a monolithic colonial state.

In Luang Prabang, Commandant Supérieur Joseph Vacle[4] suggested following the previous Siamese model of upland governance in Houaphan. He argued that the authority of the king and viceroy of Luang Prabang was supported "by their presence in the Siamese realm" and by their ability to make the population believe that Bangkok operated on behalf of the Lao people.

Although factual authority was in the hands of the Siamese, the king of Luang Prabang still held considerable prestige and authority in his kingdom. Vacle concluded: "We have the same opportunity … the King would be the first to accept our presence if we let him keep his face … and time will peacefully complete our conquest of the country."[5] Co-opting the king of Luang Prabang and underpinning the Lao king's authority in the uplands constituted the key to efficient administration (see Pavie 1942).

Some French administrators in Thanh Hoa (in the province of Annam), however, disagreed with Vacle. They preferred the example of Vietnamese indirect rule in the mountainous hinterland as had been established under Minh Mang in the nineteenth century (Poisson 2004). Claiming to defend 'Annamite rights' in the uplands (Ivarsson 2008; Lemire [1894] 2008), the French had approached local elites to discuss the expense of Siamese political influence. The French authorities in Thanh Hoa looked on Houaphan as an unruly hinterland where a strong Vietnamese military presence should guarantee stability and thus fulfill a major precondition for the *mise en valeur* of the uplands.[6] Their stance in fact favored a more direct rule enforced by a Vietnamese militia under the direction of French officials.

The extent and manner of French colonial adoption of Siamese or Annamite ways differed considerably. Various French political actors considered different models of governance and mimetically adapted elements of indigenous forms of statecraft (Tappe 2015a). Their goal was to gain a thorough understanding of local political culture (Michaud 2013) so as to establish military control and efficient administration. The adaptation of French bureaucracy to local conditions and the appropriation of indigenous forms of governance, including ritual elements, created new political and socio-cultural configurations. This mimetic practice of state making can be considered a "production of a world with relation to another world" (Gebauer and Wulf 1995: 9).

With this policy, the French colonial administration forged political relations between France and the various 'races' of Indochina as state subjects. Unlike previous attempts to turn the colonialized into French citizens via a policy of assimilation, the Indochinese situation was characterized by a shift toward association. The French considered local political hierarchies and singled out strategic groups for co-optation—mainly the elites of the dominant lowland groups such as the Vietnamese, the Khmer, and the Lao, but sometimes also locally influential upland groups (called *montagnards* by the French). As Jean-Marie de Lanessan (1889) proposed, this divide-and-rule strategy would guarantee more efficient administration and economic development. However, the policy of association was implemented differently by different colonial actors and often entailed political tensions between privileged groups and those ignored by the French.

In his excellent analysis of French colonial politics toward the *montagnards*, Salemink (2003) introduces the administrator Léopold Sabatier as an example

of successful co-optation of upland groups. Sabatier adopted and apparently mimicked the practice of annual oaths of allegiance, which were characteristic of the hierarchized societies in mainland Southeast Asia.[7] The *palabre du serment* (palaver of the oath) was a deliberate appropriation of a local traditional way of governance in order to harmonize French colonial claims for authority with political and ritual conventions in the highlands. This approach corresponded with former Gouverneur Général Albert Sarraut's "political paternalism, which adapted indigenous policies to the perceived needs of every 'race' according to its degree of evolution" (ibid.: 90; see also Sarraut 1923). Sabatier claimed the key position in the *palabre du serment* as paramount authority while affirming local autonomy—reminiscent of previous practices of indirect rule by lowland rulers.

In the *palabre du serment*, village chiefs and other influential men swore an oath of allegiance to the French. As Salemink's analysis indicates, Sabatier succeeded in institutionalizing this ceremony as a kind of interface between local socio-political configurations and the French colonial apparatus. Mimesis provides the key to this process. Sabatier identified the oath of allegiance as a key element of *montagnard* political ritual and appropriated it—albeit in a slightly transformed and fixed form—for the purpose of colonial administration. Acting like a powerful local ruler, he thus blended into indigenous socio-political logics. Sabatier replaced other potential rulers and epitomized the potential of efficient protection, a crucial aspect of political authority in pre-colonial Southeast Asia. While the French adapted to selected variants of indigenous governance, the ceremony provided a channel for peripheral groups to interact and negotiate directly with this powerful new political actor.

Sabatier was not the first to experiment with forms of local political ritual. In 1895, Jean Gustave Monpeyrat became head of the commissariat in Houaphan where he soon forged close alliances with Lao notables. Within the French administration, he was considered an expert on Tai-Lao culture and politics who was skilled at fostering good relations with the locals.[8] This included organizing an annual *fête du serment* (festival of the oath) or *ceremonie de l'eau du serment* (water-sprinkling ceremony of the oath) to foster the unity of the confederation and to underpin French authority.[9] In April 1897, on the occasion of the Lao New Year, Monpeyrat summoned notables from the six Houaphan for the oath of allegiance, ritually enacted by sprinkling water, as in many Buddhist purification rites (Archaimbault 1971). Most of them were Lao notables linked to the court of Luang Prabang, where the French had already established a loyal protectorate.

The ceremony was a bricolage of European and indigenous practices of political ritual. It started with a military parade of the *garde indigène* (local militia). After that, Monpeyrat handed over certificates of appointment and

letters of honor to certain Lao *phaya* (lords), a common practice in upland Southeast Asia. This element implies official recognition of local authority by an external power, with the French commissar having replaced the Siamese and Lao kings. In a letter to Vacle, Monpeyrat regretted that the medals intended for this occasion did not arrive on time "because the handing-over of the medals in the presence of all mandarins and notables would have made an excellent effect."[10] The French commissar was aware of the efficacy of combining indigenous and foreign elements of political ritual.

While Monpeyrat invited the principal notables into the commissariat for lunch—a specific separate space representing the emergent French colonial state—the population of Muang Son and the surrounding villages gathered for 'amusements' including games, music, and dance. At 10:00 PM, the monks started to chant oaths and recitations *pour la prosperité du pays* (for the prosperity of the country), important ritual aspects of Buddhist statecraft. Meanwhile, the party continued all night. Unfortunately, Monpeyrat's account provides no ethnographic details about the music, dances, and costumes or the ethnic composition of the crowd. After the ceremony, the notables stayed another three days at Muang Son to discuss various issues. Monpeyrat took advantage of this meeting to give them instructions about tax collection, thus integrating aspects of modern governmentality into indigenous governance.

By organizing such a ceremony, Monpeyrat adhered to Vacle's strategic adaptation of Lao-Buddhist statecraft. As Iain Walker (2005: 189) points out, "pseudotraditions" like our examples of the *fêtes/palabres du serment* have to be grounded in a specific socio-cultural matrix to be efficacious and to acquire any legitimacy. Monpeyrat occupied the ritual position of the Lao king as a node within the socio-cosmological relations in the upland *muang*. As in the case of Sabatier discussed by Oscar Salemink, this partial mimesis also entailed considerable transformations and resulted in the routinization of French authority in the following years. Mimesis thus contributed to shifts in local socio-political configurations and power relations.

It is evident here that mimesis goes beyond mere copying or imitation. Inspired by Taussig's (1993) paired contrasting of mimesis with alterity, Walker (2005: 192) interprets mimetic practice as "appropriation of the Other, and the power of the Other, as part of a process of social change." In the context of colonial encounters that preceded the establishment of a pervasive colonial state apparatus, this process of mimesis was a reciprocal one characterized by mutual appropriation and adaptation. As Bronwen Douglas (1992: 98) indicates in the context of French colonization of New Caledonia, for the local people "the French had become a meaningful element in their present political realities." In the next section I will discuss examples of mimetic tactics adopted by local powerbrokers to engage with external sources of power.

Mimesis and Upland Agency

During pre-colonial and colonial times, it was a common practice among uplanders in Southeast Asia to imitate the 'civilized' Other in order to win him/her as a trading partner or to attain local prestige. This kind of everyday practical ethnography implied "knowledge of their habits" (I. Walker 2005: 188), in particular with regard to gestures and material culture. Colonial photographs show upland Tai lords dressed in precious Chinese-style silk dresses that differed strongly from locally woven garments, mainly black cloth with colored embroidery. As my case studies will illustrate, local powerbrokers presented themselves to representatives of external powers such as China and France as prestigious 'mandarins' by appropriating dress codes and postures of allegedly 'civilized' Chinese nobles.

While such mimetic strategies might appear at first sight as mimicry intended to subvert specific power structures, I would prefer to analytically separate mimicry from mimesis. Criticizing Taussig's conflation of mimesis, mimicry, and imitation and his focus on subversion, Graham Huggan (1997: 94) suggests that mimetic processes should be considered as forms of representation and mediation between different worlds or symbolic systems (see also Gebauer and Wulf 1995; Ladwig and Roque, this issue). As E. R. Leach (1954, 1960) has indicated, the boundary between upland and lowland societies is fluid and permeable, a dynamic field of diverging processes of inclusion and exclusion, of interaction and difference.

In the ethnically heterogeneous upland polities characterized by shifting Tai-Kha hierarchies—with in-migrating Hmong and Yao groups a new factor in regional power configurations—frictions resulting from "interconnection across difference" (Tsing 2005: 4) were commonplace. Entitled intermediaries (Lao: *lam*), often of lowland origin but not necessarily so (see Évrard 2006; A. Walker 1999), represented communicative linkages that ensured trade and tax flows. Such powerbrokers distinguished themselves by their linguistic and strategic skills. Badenoch and Tomita (2013: 40–49) provide the fascinating case study of Lanten clan leaders who acted as an "interface between the non-Tai upland people and the Tai rulers in the *muang*." They received Lao titles and enjoyed administrative authority prior to and in the first years of French colonial rule. The frequent use of Lao titles, for example, *hua na* (headman), and Chinese ones, such as *quan* (mandarin), by upland leaders also epitomizes their appropriation of external sources of power for local authority.

One of the most prominent examples of an intermediary between uplands and lowlands was Đèo Văn Trị (1849–1909), the chief of the White Tai ethnic group of the Black River area (see Le Failler 2011, 2014).[11] Following Scott (2009), Đèo Văn Trị would be considered as head of a 'mimicry state', that is, a small upland principality that only superficially imitated lowland imperial

structures so as to gain advantage in upland-lowland (economic) interactions and in order to be recognized as 'civilized'. However, the White Tai *muang* organization must not be confused with state mimicry since, as indicated above, it constituted a socio-political model of all Tai groups that existed before ideas of Buddhist kingship expanded to Southeast Asia (Condominas 1980).

Yet it is evident that Đèo Văn Trị, who was of Chinese ancestry, strategically adopted elements of Chinese civilization to qualify himself as a suitable intermediary between the Chinese empire and the 'raw' frontier. By mimetically appropriating Chinese mandarin panache—for example, wearing pompous silken clothing and honorary medals as documented by colonial photographs (Dion 2010: 111)—he made himself visible in a specific way. The French traveler Eugène Lefèvre (1898: 30) assigned him "a general appearance of ruse and finesse … His clothes consisted of a Chinese coat, flowing trousers and a turban, all of bright colors. He talked sufficient French so that he needed an interpreter only in a pinch. He was fluent in Lao, Chinese from Yunnan, Chinese from Canton, and Vietnamese." Here, the White Tai leader appears as the intermediary par excellence, a local powerbroker capitalizing on his various external relations and communicative skills.

Mimetic appropriation of and adaptation to external sources of power were widespread practices among political actors in upland Southeast Asia. Leach (1954: 223) cites a travelogue from 1871 that mentions a similar case of efficient mimesis, here of a Kachin chief: "He wears his hair in Burmese fashion, but his dress is a mixture of Shan and Chinese." This practice probably contributed to his successful recognition by Burmese and British authorities, who gave him "gold umbrellas and honorific titles appropriate to the status of a *saopha*" (ibid.). The partial assimilation toward a Shan prince (*saopha*) was not without risk, though, and an ambitious Kachin chief risked enmity and isolation from local sources of power—a tendency that made him increasingly dependent on the aid of external authorities (ibid.: 224).[12]

In addition to the adoption of certain aesthetic aspects of the Chinese mandarin system, specific concepts also traveled into the upland Tai realm, most importantly the Chinese/Vietnamese word for mandarin as such: *quan*. While the Lao used the expression *nai ban* (head of village) to designate village headmen, the Red Tai in Vietnam used the expression *quan ban* instead (Robert 1941: 23). The appropriation of the title *quan* by Tai groups hints at an inclination to mimetically adapt to the Confucian bureaucratic system. Here again, the idea of mimesis refers to local processes of appropriation (see Jonsson 2010), which must be distinguished from systems imposed by a dominant civilization. When Đèo Văn Trị received the title Quan Dao (Uplands Patrol Commissioner) from the French colonial administration in 1893 (Le Failler 2011: 49), it served his self-empowerment through superficial incorporation into the French-Vietnamese colonial state.

When doing research in the French colonial archives on the local history of Sam Tai district (of Houaphan), I came across a certain *lasa quan*, a notable "of Kha origin,"[13] probably ethnic Khmu. His story illustrates the interstitial position of upland powerbrokers entangled in a complex network of socio-political hierarchies and shifting alliances. After the notorious Kha Cheuang rebellion (see Proschan 1998) against the domination of the Tai-Lao groups was quelled with the aid of Siamese troops, and when most Khmu "had taken on the yoke again" (Boutin 1937: 96), a Khmu headman was apparently incorporated into the feudal hierarchy of the Lao upland *muang* of Sam Tai. The title *lasa quan* is in fact a combination of the Tai-Lao word for king (*lasa* being derived from Sanskrit *rājā*) and the Chinese/Vietnamese term for mandarin (*quan*). This title, a rare example of the combination of Indianized and Sinicized politico-administrative terms, indicates two levels of mimesis—one toward a Lao aristocracy and one toward the Confucian world.

In 1894, the *lasa quan* of a Khmu village in Sam Tai district demanded the payment of a large sum of silver ingots from their Lao neighbors. That money, incurred when the Lao recruited the Khmu as mercenaries against attacking Ho bands, had been overdue for 10 ten years. Since the demand had been declined again and again, the *lasa quan* turned his allegiance away from the Lao and encouraged his fellow Khmu to adopt stronger measures against the debtors. Having recruited some Hmong fighters from the surrounding mountains, the *lasa quan* attacked the combined Lao and Vietnamese militia—the *garde indigène* installed by the French—in Sam Tai. When the headman of a Hmong village died in the skirmishes, his followers called for revenge and instigated a general revolt of the local Hmong clans.[14]

The French, who had only recently quelled a prolonged revolt in Houaphan and adjacent Thanh Hoa province in Annam, were alarmed (Fourniau 2002). Two strategies seemed viable as already indicated above. The first was to increase the military presence by dispatching more Vietnamese troops to Sam Tai, thus integrating these Lao upland *muang* more into Annam proper. Indeed, parts of eastern Houaphan were attached to Thanh Hoa in 1894 and occupied by a Vietnamese militia (Gay 1989). Second, some French administrators preferred to assist the locals in solving the conflict according to traditional Lao law and customs—"in a way a moral treatise"[15]—while preserving the status of Houaphan as an upland confederation within the Lao realm of Luang Prabang.

Therefore, in order to appease at least the Khmu population, the French commissar in Luang Prabang, Vacle, suggested that the French—besides strengthening the military presence in the upland region—take over the compensation of the Khmu as requested by the *lasa quan*.[16] Actually, the *lasa quan* accepted an advance payment, and the Khmu returned apparently peacefully to their fields. The *lasa quan* even provided the French with information about the rebel Cầm Bá Thước, a Tai leader associated with the Vietnamese anti-French

Can Vuong movement (Fourniau 2002), with whose partisans he had previously attempted to ally himself. Moreover, the *lasa quan* denounced some of the Lao responsible for violent retaliative assaults on the Hmong. Shortly after, references to the *lasa quan* disappear from the French sources.

In the case of the *lasa quan* and his shifting allegiances, the keyword is reciprocity. The Khmu had entered into a hierarchical relation with the Lao and questioned it only when the Lao refused to pay their Khmu mercenaries—or maybe this was the last straw in a context of aggravated tensions and socio-economic pressures. The *lasa quan* tried to renegotiate an adjustment within the Tai-Kha hierarchy—possibly as *lam kha* (Gunn 1985: 56), a local intermediary in charge of the organization of corvée labor—as he always at risk in case local rivals should turn against him. He was partially integrated into the Lao hierarchy, and a matrimonial alliance can be assumed (cf. Condominas 1990). Evans (2000: 279) argues that intermarriage between Tai and Kha commoners did not occur often, but concedes that integration into Tai society through marriage was one way for a Khmu chief to raise his status.

Obtaining a position in the Tai hierarchy and elevating himself above other chiefs, the *lasa quan* was probably under stronger pressure to fulfill his reciprocal obligations within the Khmu community. This is reminiscent of Leach's (1954: 220–224) aforementioned case studies dealing with the ambiguities of Kachin-Shan intermarriage and the tensions between the two social systems. Did the *lasa quan* face a crisis of authority within the Khmu community that forced him to put his newly established position within the Lao hierarchy at risk by attacking them? Or did the Lao rebut the mimetic approximation of the ambitious Kha and try to put him off with a title and some minor privileges, provoking him to engage in a show of power for both internal and external observers?

The sources reveal little about the motivations of the *lasa quan* and the internal dynamics of the Khmu in Houaphan. We also do not know to what extent specific items such as Lao regalia or mandarin dress were part of the *lasa quan*'s mimetic tool kit. Yet the fact that he entertained various risky relations with the outside world—with Lao notables, anti-colonial rebels from Vietnam, Hmong peasants, and French administrators—betrays a considerable mimetic faculty that made the *lasa quan* stand out from other Khmu leaders in the region. Like Đèo Văn Trị, he appears at least temporarily to have been a flexible networker and efficient powerbroker at the Lao-Vietnamese upland frontier.

Le Failler (2011: 61) argues that "if, from 1895 to 1945, a handful of French 'controlled the area' to use the expression of the time, it was because their activity presented no hindrance to incumbent power structures or, more likely, because some people had something to gain from it." I agree to the extent that at least some local actors, perceiving the French as potential allies and thus as an emergent part of local socio-political configurations, reckoned with this new external source of power and attempted to appropriate it for their own benefit.

Such local powerbrokers became the first targets for French co-optative strategies in the hinterlands in what Osterhammel (2009: 72) describes as a "convergence of interests" to avoid the negatively connoted term 'collaboration'.

With the establishment of the colonial state and later the Lao and Vietnamese nation-states, upland rulers increasingly witnessed more constraints to local modes of governance. A process of internal colonization (Evans 1992; Hardy 2003) came to dominate relations between the state and minorities. The emergence of the idea of national minorities entailed a growing tension between mechanisms of belonging and marginalization (Lentz 2014). The dialectic of identity and alterity became more dramatic, as Hjorleifur Jonsson's (2005, 2014) inspirational work on the relation between the Mien and the state of Thailand demonstrates. Mimesis remained a (sometimes performative) tactic to gain recognition and negotiate relations with the outside world.

To conclude this focus on local elites, I would still like to hint at the contemporary role of upland village headmen as intermediaries between the socialist state and local communities (see Lentz 2014; Schopohl 2011). Not unlike their (pre-)colonial predecessors, they switch roles and appearances based on the context, dressing either like communist functionaries or according to local customs. As Lentz (2014: 5) puts it: "The village head embodies a multiply-fractured, sometimes contradictory orientation: as an official, split between high and low administrative units; as a communal leader, straddling inside and outside relationships." The uplanders' mimetic faculty in the post-colonial, socialist state context of the Lao-Vietnamese frontier deserves further analysis.

Conclusion

As Patrice Ladwig and Ricardo Roque suggest in their introduction, the articles in this special issue assume a shared history of mimesis and colonialism. Mimetic practices are indeed part and parcel of imperial and colonial encounters and interaction. Historical processes of mutual appropriation characterize the relationship between imperial actors and local elites on the fringes of empire. Common political and economic interests initially motivated interaction in spite of latent suspicion. The aim of my historio-anthropological analysis is to show the significance of the mimetic process for a thorough understanding of upland Southeast Asia under colonialism.

In the case of French Indochina, the relationship between colonial administrators and local powerbrokers in the uplands shows properties of mutual parasitism, a relationship of interdependence across difference that involved "reciprocal gains and reciprocal losses" (Roque 2010: 18). At the beginning of the establishment of French administration in the uplands following the military pacification campaigns, the French were perceived locally as a new power, not

unlike other external powers such as the Vietnamese and Chinese mandarins. In fact, from the outset French colonialization took up previous Vietnamese rationalizations of governance (Davis 2009). Control mainly remained indirect through the co-optation of local elites, such as the Đèo family or selected Lao *phanya*. To underpin their authority, French officials adopted the attributes of lowland mandarins or claimed to represent the interests of the king.

This policy corresponded with practices assumed by local rulers to increase their authority by tapping into external sources of power. Local powerbrokers appropriated elements of the lowland Other. Resembling the Other implied being recognizable and accepted as an intermediary. This tactic had the potential to aggravate local power hierarchies and inequalities and consequently to increase socio-political tensions. Self-empowerment through temporarily becoming the Other came at the risk of internal misrepresentation or provoking local rivals' resentment. Entertaining relations with the external Other thus implied power, potentiality, risk, and vulnerability. This became particularly acute when the French tightened their bureaucratic grasp in the first decades of the twentieth century, often leaving local elites with no choice but to collaborate or face deprivation.

The early colonial state provides ample evidence of mutual mimetic appropriation resembling upland-lowland relations in the mid-nineteenth century and the varying imperial frontier politics of Bangkok and Hué. Colonial administration of the northern frontier regions constituted less a radical break with pre-colonial governance or a sudden enclosure than a gradual process of socio-political transformation of the imperial upland fringes. James Scott (2009) correctly identifies a considerable state enclosure of *zomia* after World War II, but his insistence on the resistance paradigm for the preceding history leaves key aspects of upland-lowland entanglements aside.

The case studies presented in this article discuss different mimetic processes that characterized the intercultural encounters and interactions in the ethnically heterogeneous Lao-Vietnamese upland frontier region. Some shaped strategies of (internal) colonization as part of state-making processes; others implied responses to and local appropriation of external sources of power. The upland-lowland relation, from this perspective, appears both as a social continuum and as a contract that is permanently renegotiated. This relationship might be likewise interpreted as a kind of symbiosis, an intimate relation characterized by hospitality and hostility, by mutually parasitic relations, at least in the first decades of colonial administration.

The first case study aimed to illustrate how the emergent colonial state of French Indochina was in fact characterized by a fractured state-making process that was shaped by the mimetic faculty of different political actors. Colonial functionaries such as Sabatier and Monpeyrat experimented with indigenous forms of governance and appropriated specific local elements to include in

colonial administrative practice. In the process, they blended into local socio-political configurations by playing roles similar to those of former powerholders. In particular, they participated in traditional political rituals that were eventually transformed by colonial reinvention.

In the next section, I presented some examples of mimetic appropriation of external sources of power by local powerbrokers. Outstanding individuals like Đèo Văn Trị, as well as lesser-known figures such as the Kha *lasa quan* of Sam Tai, forged strategic alliances with various Others to strengthen their own positions in local power structures. This practice called for making oneself recognizable and appealing as a potential partner. While Đèo Văn Trị played the role of an upland mandarin with elements of Chinese/Vietnamese aesthetic conventions, the general tendency was to adopt foreign titles, such as the Lao honorific title *phanya* or the Chinese *quan*, and to underpin the mimetic appropriation of the powerful Other by displaying prestigious items, like the medals that were identified by Monpeyrat as having an "excellent effect."

I have juxtaposed these two variants of mimesis in the colonial context to demonstrate how different mimetic practices create a dynamic interplay entailing cultural innovation and transformation. Competing mimeses—arguably mutually parasitic—stimulate and constrain each other. Here, I follow Jonsson's (2010: 125) convincing argument: "Mimesis calls attention to the practical impossibility of delimiting any identity as unique and uniform (bounded, homogeneous, having a fixed agenda)." Since it takes place in relations and negotiations across difference, mimesis is always linked to power contestation and social control.

The question remains as to whether mimetic practices that only partially and temporarily allow for a certain degree of assimilation—in the sense of selective resemblance—are at odds with or correspond to state-making mimesis projects. It can be argued that neither state nor minorities desire full mimicry, and that mimetic practices on both sides necessarily have to remain limited and flexible to be efficacious. Self-empowerment through mimesis must balance rapprochement and differentiation, not least when competing mimetic practices intersect in a culturally heterogeneous social space such as *zomia*. The entanglements of multi-layered mimetic interactions within emergent state formations highlight the significance of both collective and individual agency in historical and anthropological discussions of state-making projects on the upland frontier.

Acknowledgments

This article is the product of a fruitful research exchange between the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology (Halle/Germany) and the Instituto de Ciências Sociais (Lisbon/Portugal). The author would like to thank both institutions for their support of this project (funded by the German Academic Exchange Service). Special thanks go to Patrice Ladwig and Ricardo Roque for the initiative to organize this exchange, and to Christiana Bastos and Christoph Kohl for the interesting discussions during our joint workshops. The Global South Studies Center at the University of Cologne provided an inspiring intellectual environment during the writing-up phase of this article.

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Notes

1. Case studies included in this article are based on secondary literature and archival research in the Archives nationales d'outre-mer (hereafter ANOM), the French colonial archives in Aix-en-Provence. For the purpose of this article, I consulted the inventories of the Gouvernement Général de l'Indochine (GGI) and the Résidence Supérieur du Laos (RSL).
2. According to Le Failler (2011: 65), the Vietnamese word *chau* (county) replaced the almost homonymous Tai word *chao* (lord). The Vietnamese administration conceived upland polities in territorial terms, unlike the Tai focus on manpower.
3. See Ladwig (2016) for a related case study from southern Laos.
4. A member of the Mission Pavie 1888–1891 (see Dion 2010; Pavie 1901), Joseph Vacle was an intimate expert on the Lao-Vietnamese upland frontier since the 1880s (Brébion 1935: 420). He was trusted with the command of Luang Prabang (Haut-Laos) by Gouverneur Général Jean-Marie de Lanessan, one of the most influential proponents of the policy of association.
5. Letter dated 22 November 1894, from Vacle to Gouverneur Général; ANOM, GGI 20871. All translations from French into English are my own if not otherwise indicated.

6. For a contemporaneous view on the Annamese province, see Robequain (1929).
7. See Archaimbault (1971) and Platenkamp (2008) for similar practices in Laos.
8. Dossier Monpeyrat, GGI 30571.
9. Letter from Monpeyrat to Commandant Supérieur Vacle; 5 May 1897; ANOM, RSL, E2.
10. Ibid.
11. Le Failler's (2014) insightful book *La rivière Noire* includes a meticulous historical analysis of Đèo Văn Trị and his relationship with the French colonial administration. It should be noted that Monpeyrat—by 1902 a commissary in Son La and still on good terms with the Lao and Black Tai (at that time dominated by the White Tai)—became a strong opponent of Đèo Văn Trị's local autonomy, which was granted to him by the French administration thanks to Pavie's patronage (ibid.: 201–205). Unlike the more submissive Lao notables in Houaphan, the White Tai leader was apparently a counterpart on an equal level.
12. Jonsson (2014) discusses similar cases of lowland rulers seeking strategic partnerships with upland powerbrokers, for example, the Lao king of Luang Prabang giving the title *phaya* to Yao and Hmong chiefs.
13. Telegram from the commissar in Houaphan to the Gouverneur Général; 3 April 1895; ANOM, GGI 20749.
14. Report from Vacle to the Gouverneur Général; 12 April 1895; ANOM, GGI 20749.
15. General report, 18 October 1894, administrative post of Muang Et (Houaphan); ANOM, GGI 20724.
16. Ibid. Vacle shared Pavie's good relationship with Đèo Văn Trị and thus knew about the specific mechanisms of socio-political configurations in the ethnically heterogeneous upland *muang* (see Le Failler 2014).

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