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CHAPTER 5

Good death, bad death and ritual restructurings: the New Year ceremonies of the Phunoy in northern Laos

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Research on Buddhism in Laos has principally focused on the Buddhism practiced by the Lao, the main population of the country. There are, however, other Buddhist populations (the Sö, the Kasak, the Phunoy, etc.) usually designated as 'minority groups' whose religious practices are still little known. The aim of this chapter is to discuss how Buddhism is intertwined with spirit cults among the Phunoy, a Tibeto-Burmese society of highlanders living in northern Laos, with a special focus on local funeral rituals. The Phunoy draw a distinction between two types of dead: the 'good dead' – i.e. those with an 'ordinary' death that allows them to join the community of the ancestors – and the 'bad dead' – i.e. those with an abnormal death – accident or suicide – who will form the group of the malevolent spirits.[1] Traditionally, the funeral rituals for the former are performed exclusively by Buddhist monks, while spirit priests usually perform those for the latter. However today, a specific ceremony – a sort of 'second funeral' led by monks – associates them all. It is part of the New Year festival, *Bun Pimay*, which is one of the most important events in the Lao Buddhist calendar. During this ceremony, the good and the bad dead receive similar offerings to secure their life in the hereafter. They are also prayed to together to protect the living and to provide them with prosperity and fertility for their fields, also reflecting the embeddedness into agricultural practices. Nevertheless, there remain obvious differences in the ritual devices according to the kind of dead involved. It appears that this specific ceremony unifying all the dead is an outcome of a changing conception of Buddhism, partly imposed by the Communist Party in the 1960s. However, this sort of official Buddhist ritualism and ritual restructuring does not prevent the Phunoy from continuing with spirit cults.

[1] See Hertz (1928) for classical work on good and bad death and Baptandier (2001) for a discussion of various Asian cases.

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In the Phunoy villages one can observe a new and original linkage between various religious elements borrowed from Buddhism as well as from spirit cults. Indirectly, we will in this way reopen the age-old debate about the supposed general opposition between the 'great and little tradition' (Redfield 1956), and more specifically between the 'religion of Buddha' (*sasana phout*, L) and 'the religion of spirits' (*sasana phi*, L).[2] I will in my case start to analyse this opposition from the apparent borderline example of Buddhism in a minority population.

THE PHUNOY: FORMER BUDDHISTS AND RECENT CONVERTS

The Phunoy, a group of approximately 35,000 people, live in the north of Laos in the mountainous area of the province of Phongsaly, crossed from north to south by a major river, the Ou. They make a living from shifting cultivation (swidden) and animal breeding, even though, over recent years, government policies have questioned this way of life. The Phunoy were long ago converted to Theravāda Buddhism, and have borrowed from their lowland neighbours, the Tay Lue, the monastic code of discipline, the order of Buddhist ceremonies and the manuscripts in Tay Lue, which differ slightly from those of the Lao.[3]

In the 1920s, Roux noted that four ceremonies (*bun*, L) were celebrated regularly by the Phunoy: the Lao New Year (Pimay, celebrated in the fifth Lao month, i.e. in April), the beginning and end of the Buddhist lent (Khao Phansa and Ok Phansa, in July and October respectively) and in September, Khao Salak (literally 'rice drawn by lot'), a festival for the dead and considered by the Phunoy to be 'the most important festival of the year' (Roux 1924: 482). As with the Tay Lue and the Lao, where ceremonies led by monks in the pagoda were associated with rites in honour of the spirits that protected the village (*phi ban*, L) and the territory (*phi müang*, L), the Phunoy Buddhist rituals cohabited with the totality of the rites addressed to spiritual entities protecting the land and were led by two major officiating priests: the *tjaotjam* and the *maphè*. The former was the intermediary between the guardian spirit of the village and its

[2] Note on the transcription: the words between brackets not followed with indications are Phunoy words; the words in Lao are indicated with an 'L'. There is no Lao official system of transcription so I chose my own. The ù is pronounced as in the word *fluent*, the *u* as in *shoot*, ng as in *camping*, *tj* as in *tiara*, *gn* as in *Kenya*, *y* as in *yoyo*. To simplify reading, the tones (five in Lao, six in Phunoy) and the differences between long and short vowels have not been retranscribed.

[3] For Roux, it would seem that 'the religion of Buddha was introduced to the P'ou-Noi by Lu bonzes [Tay Lue], in an era that it is impossible to ascertain' (1924: 486). Many Phunoy stories date their adoption of Buddhism from when they arrived in the Phongsaly region, at the end of the eighteenth century.

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inhabitants. Every year, the *tjaotjam* carried out a rite at sowing time, asking the guardian spirit of the village to protect the growth of the rice. At the same time, all the villagers prayed to their own ancestors, who were revered on the altars existing in each house. He also carried out rituals when a change occurred in the composition of the village or when a problem threatened its integrity. The *maphè* was responsible for two collective rites associated with the agricultural cycle (one carried out when the land was cleared for cultivation and the other before the harvest) and was addressed to the spirits of metals and of the sky and the earth. The rites carried out by the two priests, addressed to the ancestors (who included the guardian spirit of the village) and to other spirits, were therefore mainly linked to the agricultural cycle, whereas the ceremonies carried out in the pagoda were to honour Buddha and give offerings to the dignitaries in the village at the time of New Year, to oneself at the time of Khao Salak (offerings that the giver would like to find after his death in the hereafter) or to the monks during the Buddhist lent.

Today, the number of Buddhist festivals celebrated by the Phunoy, their finalities and their importance has changed. So the New Year celebrations which, at the beginning of the twentieth century, consisted mainly of readings of Buddhist texts in the pagoda (*ibid.*) now include new ritual sequences and have progressively replaced, by their importance, the Khao Salak festival. The ancient collective cults to the spirits which opened and concluded the agricultural cycle have disappeared, as has the *maphè* priest. With the disappearance of the ritual carried out at the time of sowing, the role of the *tjaotjam* is now limited to carrying out the special rituals addressed to the guardian spirit of the village, who is no longer seen as an ancestor, but as a combination of forces of the locality.

These transformations partly result from religious purges carried out by the new government throughout the country from 1975. The Party decided to restructure the Buddhist religious community so that it would be in a position to promote the new national socialist identity, and rejected everything that could prove an obstacle to the constitution of a 'modern' socialist nation (i.e. in the religious field, all that had to do with spirits, the *phi*). For the Phunoy, the religious purges began in the 1960s as the Communists came into power in the Phongsaly province in 1954. The new administration considered that the practices of the Buddhist populations in the region, qualified as 'superstitions' were a hindrance to the economic development of the region. Groups of monks who had joined the revolutionary movement, coming from Sam Neua and Vientiane and accompanied by soldiers, went into the Phunoy villages to urge the inhabitants to 'reject the spirits in the forest' (*thim phi yu pa*, L). The altars to the ancestors

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and the *maphè*, who were the priests responsible for the cults addressed to a certain number of spirits, became the main targets. The Lao monks obliged the villagers, from then on, to go and nourish their ancestors in the pagoda during the Buddhist festivals such as *Khao Padapdin* which is a Lao festival for the dead.

However, this was not the festival principally chosen by the Phunoy to honour their dead. They gave preference to the New Year, which also celebrates the 'second funerals'. I will therefore describe this Buddhist ceremony, which has become today, on the Lao mode, the most important in the Phunoy Buddhist calendar, first by describing the ordinary funerals of which it is supposed to be the prolongation. We shall see how this festival has been transformed in the villages where the collective cults to the spirits have been banished.

RITUALS FOR GOOD AND BAD DEATH

I have previously mentioned the existence of a distinction between the rites carried out in the pagoda and the spirit cults – even if a certain number of the latter have disappeared further to the religious purges carried out by the Pathet Lao. There are consecutively two categories of priests: the Buddhist priests – the monks and the secular head of the pagoda (the *atjan*, a former monk) – and the priests in charge of the spirit cults, *tjaocam*, the soothsayer.[4] This distinction between different cults, carried out by distinct priests, can be observed in the funeral rites for the deceased.

When a person dies, the body is taken out through the main door, but beforehand it is washed, perfumed and dressed in its finest clothes. All its favourite things are placed in the coffin: pipes, certain objects, food and a duck (which has previously been knocked out) to carry it to the beyond. In the house, the monk reads the kusala sutta (*sut Kossala*, L) so that the deceased can find the path to heaven. This text will be read again in the cemetery. At the same time, outside the house, several of the elders and a soothsayer sacrifice some animals at the foot of the ancestor's pole, located at the back of the house. The deceased will feed on their meat and the animal's right back leg will be given to the elder brother of the mistress of the house. Once these preparations have been carried out, the members of the lineage of the deceased and his allies, preceded by the monk, carry the coffin to the cemetery in the southwest of the village. As we shall see in the passages devoted to the

[4] On the function and the transformation of Phunoy religious officiants, see Bouté (2008).

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Buddhist ceremonies, other ceremonies linked to the funeral will later be celebrated in the pagoda.

In the cemetery considered to be for the 'good dead' (*la pum*, 'the place for souls', in opposition to the cemetery for the 'bad dead', cf. infra) the tombs of children under ten years of age are separate from those of adults. The place of each tomb is determined by a divination using grains of rice and carried out by the elders the day before the burial. When the place has been settled upon, the master of the deceased's house (or the son, if it is the master who has died) throws an egg and if it breaks, the place is declared to be propitious. Bamboo constructions are built over the tombs and covered with straw hut grasses, which rot and disappear quickly. When they have completely disappeared, the tomb's place will no longer have any importance. In this way, when a village changes its location, the former cemetery becomes an ordinary piece of land and can be cultivated.

The treatment of those considered to be 'bad dead' is very different. This time, the Buddhist priests take no part in the ceremony. The bad dead are children under ten, women who die in childbirth and those who die a violent death (by suicide or accident). If they die in the village, they are buried in a location next to the cemetery, considered to be the cemetery of the bad dead. If they die outside the village, they are buried at their place of death. These types of dead are said to be particularly dangerous. As death took them by surprise, their soul cannot return to the land of their ancestors and they stay and haunt the place in which they died. As they are angry, they try to lure the living into joining them. Their funeral consists of a simplified form of ordinary ceremonies, except for those who drowned, who are considered to be the most dangerous of the bad dead (the head of a drowned person is laid face down to prevent its rebirth). The deceased's belongings are buried with him, but nothing is built over the tomb. The Phunoy say that with this category of dead, all family links must be severed and, during the funeral ceremony, the bad deceased is asked not to draw the family members down with him. The elders, who must be as many as possible in order to protect themselves from the spirit of the deceased, carry out a ritual led by a soothsayer at the place of the tomb, then at the gate of the village, to be sure that the souls of the deceased have not followed the living and do not try to go into the village with them. The elders repeat to the deceased: 'Now, you are no longer one of us; you are a spirit (*dat*), we are people (*sang*). We can no longer stay together. You must go away'. A divination using rice is then carried out to verify that the spirit has left. As long as the grains of rice thrown form an uneven number, the spirit is again asked to leave. In the future, these dead will not be fed with the ancestors on the altar found in each house.

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The Phunoy say that they have become the spirits of the forest (*tchitchong seu*, lit. 'the dead of the old forest'), and the villagers will avoid cultivating the land where they died. The offerings which, in the course of ceremonies related to the agricultural cycle, are made to this type of dead are laid outside the village, but we will return to this later.

Afterwards, the souls of the dead (for the Phunoy, there are nine) develop in different ways. Those of the bad dead are said to prowl around and try to drag other accidental deaths down with them. The souls of the 'good dead' are meant to find their way to paradise (*mùang savane*, L). However, this is only made possible if a second funeral ceremony is carried out for the dead after the first funeral.[5] This second ceremony is organised by the members of the deceased's family when they have the financial means, as it is fairly costly. It can therefore be carried out in the year of the deceased's death, or several years later. But it takes place systematically during one of the major yearly Buddhist ceremonies. Although previously carried out during the Bun Khao Salak festival in September, it now takes place during the New Year ceremonies. It is therefore this celebration that we will now study.

DESCRIPTION OF THE NEW YEAR CELEBRATIONS: CHRONOLOGY OF A RITE

For the Lao, the New Year, *Pimay* – which according to the descriptions of Condominas (1998 [1968]) in the 1960s was not the most important ceremony in the Buddhist ritual cycle – consisted mainly of the sprinkling of lustral water by the villagers onto statues of the Buddha so that their New Year would be favourable (Nginn, 1967: 12), purification of houses and recitations by monks to bring righteousness to the dead.[6] Similar ritual sequences can be found in the Phunoy population with, however, a particular emphasis on the offerings made to the ancestors.

Contrary to the Lao, who invariably celebrate the New Year on 13 April, for the Phunoy the time of its celebration varies, according to the village and the year, between the beginning of April and mid-May. None of the Phunoy I questioned could explain the reasons for this variation, but it should be

[5] On the phenomenon of the second burial and its integrative meaning see Hertz's comparative examination (1928).

[6] Tambiah (1970: 154). In the capitals of ancient Lao realms, New Year celebrations would involve other ritual sequences, such as the territory's refoundation and the regeneration of time, linked to a purification ritual (Archaimbault 1973: 20–62 for Luang Prabang, 1971 for Bassak). In Luang Prabang, sprinklings of the Buddha statue named Phra Bang and founder ancestors' mask dances would take place. (Archaimbault 1973: 48–9 n 36 and 46, 49–53); Méridat (1943: 112–17).

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noted that within what used to make up the domains, the village considered to be the oldest is the first to celebrate New Year, followed by the other villages in an order based on the supposed date of their foundation.[7] The celebration is always preceded or followed by sowing, clearly demonstrating the relationship of agriculture practices and the ritual cycle. If the ground is considered to be 'warm' (*ang lang*), i.e. the first rains have not yet fallen after the land has been burnt for fire-fallow cultivation, the ceremony will take place after sowing. If the land is considered to be 'cold' (*ang tcho*), it will take place beforehand.

In the village of Thongpi, where I observed the New Year celebrations in 2000 and 2002, the ceremonies invariably began on 13 April. The long and complex festival lasts for three days. As with the Lao, the first day is considered to be the last day of the year (*mù sangkhan pay*, L); the second (*mù nao*, L) is an intermediary day (depending on the year, there can be two intermediary days). The third is the first day of the New Year (*mù sangkhan khùn*, L). A fourth day, which is not considered to be part of the actual celebrations, is devoted to various rituals.

First day: the building of the phasat *and the 'bringing down' of the Buddhas*

On the last day of the year, the villagers who have decided to make an offering to the dead prepare the *phasat*, a sort of small maisonette built for them, which they carry to the temple (i.e. the building that constitutes the location of the cult).[8,9] Made from bamboo, they are built on tiny stilts, surrounded by a little platform with a garden and enclosed by a barrier. They are large enough for a man to sit in. Inside, the families put everything the deceased might require: a mat, mattress, pillow, material and reels of coloured cotton (so that the deceased can make his clothes). In front of the door, they place a basket of rice, a cooking pot, kettle, tripod for the fire and perhaps some fans, identical to those offered to the monks. On the outside, in what represents the garden, there are two small replicas of rice granaries – one containing

[7] Up until the 1960s, most Phunoy villages were organised in what I call 'domains'. A domain would comprise a group of villages originating from the dissemination of a first village. This organisation disappeared after the Pathet Lao came into power. On ancient domains, see Bouté (2007).

[8] The word *phasat*, which I translate as *maisonette*, comes from Pāli, *prasāda*, which means 'offering, favour made to a divinity' and, by extension, refers to a stūpa (*that*), a building reproducing the cosmos and likened to mount Meru (Mus 1978: 355). In the Lao population, the *Prasat* is a building forming a little temple which is used to present the offerings to the monks (Zago 1972: 98, 295).

[9] The Phunoy refer to this building by using the same word they use to refer to all the pagoda's buildings, 'vat'. I will now use the word 'temple' to name this building and 'pagoda', the group of religious buildings (temple, monks' house, etc.).

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paddy and the other rice. On the barriers around the garden they tie fruit, vegetables and bags filled with materials and sweets. There are also small trunks of banana trees decorated with wax flowers (*khan tham*, L). The number of trunks placed there corresponds to the number of prayers that will be paid for by the person who offers the house to the deceased. Lastly, the flags are attached (*sao thung*, L), into which are pinned many bank-notes and some sticks (*um tjêk*) bearing three different layers of material. These will be 'loaded' with the prayers recited and are brought to the deceased through the undulations of the material.

While the villagers build their maisonette and install it in the temple, several of the elders deal with the preparations relating to the statues of the Buddha which will be 'brought down' (*ao phatjao lum*, L) from their altar. To do this, in the courtyard of the pagoda, they install a wooden house on stilts, normally kept in the corner of the temple, and place on it a large Nāga in painted wood.[10] Then, as the villagers start to file into the courtyard, the elders go to fetch the statues of the Buddha. They place them in the courtyard and shower them with water. The secular head of the pagoda (*atjan vat*) then turns around the statues three times while sprinkling them with water, followed by the men and then the women. The latter also sprinkle water over the pagoda drums then, when inside the temple, the four corners of the room. The men throw water in the direction of the village (the pagoda is always built above the village, on a ridge) then on the monk's house. The statues are then placed in the wooden house and are once more showered by pouring water on the Nāga that is above them. All the participants then go in procession to pour water over different places: the entrance to the clump of trees where the village's guardian spirit lives, the altars of the *thevada* (the divinities that protect the four corners of the pagoda), the monk's house and the drums and finally the banyan tree located outside the pagoda and in front of which each villager also lays a wooden stick. The elders go to the gates of the village and put sticks of wood on the ground across them, a sign to any strangers passing by that the village is closed to them.[11] In the evening

[10] The Nāga, a well-known figure in Theravāda Buddhism, is a snake, master of the chthonian world, but it is also said to live in the sky from where it would help to obtain rain. In tales on the life of Buddha, the Nāga protects the Buddha by sheltering him from the flood caused by the demon Māra in order to injure him (Tambiah 1970: 169–75); on the rites to obtain rain and the role of the Nāga among the Lao, see Archaimbault (1968).

[11] A little way beyond the fence which often encloses Phunoy villages are four 'doors' (*keu tan*), which are just simple wooden posts. One leads to the pagoda located above the village, one to the cemetery below the village and the two others to the path crossing the village. All have protecting trellises or sculptures representing arrows or knives, protecting the villagers from wild animals, malevolent spirits and other types of evil powers.

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(and the following day) each of the families who have placed a maisonette in the temple organises in turn a meal, to which all of the villagers are invited.

Second day: the prayers to the dead in the pagoda

The next day is the day of prayers for the dead. In the morning, various purification operations are carried out by individuals or by all the members of a household in order to get rid of any bad luck (*kho*, L) they may have had in the previous year. These rituals are carried out on the second day of the celebration as this is a sort of intermediary phase, a liminal day that does not really exist because it is neither part of the old year nor of the new one. In the afternoon, all the villagers go to the pagoda to lay down candles and flowers in front of the Buddha altar, the statues in the courtyard, the altars of the *thevada*, the monks' house and the banyan tree. Then they all try to fit into the crowded temple. The monk, the novices and the *atjan* arrange the books to be read. On a sign from the holy men, the families throw water onto the maisonettes that they dedicate to their deceased. This is the beginning of the ceremony. The monk recites the *vandana*, then the *tisarana*, which are repeated by the villagers.[12] Then the religious participants (monks, novices, *atjan*) each go into one of the maisonettes to start the prayers, which will soon be rapidly transformed into a confused and indistinct brouhaha. On a metal support, the families honouring their dead tie and burn cotton threads. This operation will be carried out before each prayer, to inform the *thevada* of the pagoda that the recitation is about to begin. After each prayer, the assembly throws rice on to the maisonette and the person reciting the prayers receives a small sum of money from the owner of the maisonette. The former change regularly, so that one maisonette does not exclusively receive the prayers of a novice while another receives the prayers of a monk. This ceremony will last until nightfall.

Third day: the 'raising up' of the Buddhas, 'dead and born again'

The third day is the first day of the New Year. It is the time for washing and repainting the statues of the Buddha, which have been brought into the courtyard, then reinstalling them on their altars in the temple

[12] These are two prayers in Pāli. The *vandana* is the prayer of salutation to Buddha, by which all Buddhist ceremonies begin. The *tisarana* is a recitation concerning the veneration of the 'Three Jewels' (the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Saṅgha).

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(*ao phatjao khùn*, L, literally 'raising up the Buddha' but this operation has also been described to me as when 'the Buddha dies and is born again'). The *atjan* recites a prayer asking the Buddha to bless the New Year, inviting him to admire the renewal of nature (in this case, branches representing trees which have been planted all around the statues), while the men repeat his words. The villagers then erect many small nine-storey clay stūpas covered with bamboo shoots. On some of them, the owners of the maisonettes plant flags (*sao tung*, L) which, linked by a cotton thread to the temple, are for the dead to whom the maisonettes are dedicated. On their pole many other small flags are stuck, and a bamboo platform on which food (rice, alcohol, sweetmeats) are laid. The material hanging down from the top will enable the dead, as did the Buddha, to 'rise' to heaven, using the flag as a ladder and taking the bird for a mount or the wooden dragon that sits in state on the top. The villagers not only put flags out for the dead, they also feed them. To this end, each mistress of the house brings a plate of offerings with different foods as well as receptacles full of water (kettles, bottles) and protective trellises in bamboo (*kra bia*), that she first presents to the statues of the Buddha, then to the banyan tree and finally to the altars of the *thevada*. She then lays these platters close to the altar of the Buddha in the temple. On each platter there is a piece of paper on which is written in Lao: 'the spirits of the house of so and so are . . .' followed by the names of the different dead people in each house (for three generations). The *atjan* then reads the names written and will say a prayer for the dead. This ceremony lasts for several hours.

The statues of the Buddha are then brought down from the wooden house and laid in the courtyard, while the branches representing trees are cut down. The novices and certain men from the village bang the cymbals and drums in the pagoda and, in front of them, the elders perform the 'dance of the big drum' (*tum ba djien gé*) using two sticks. From time to time, rifles are fired. All this is aimed to frighten the malevolent spirits who would like to take advantage of the Buddhas descending from their pedestal to attack them. The monks, the men and then the women shower the statues with water. The men repaint the statues, dress them in small orange clothes identical to the robes of monks, and slip bank-notes inside.[13] The statues are then carried into the temple. The women take off their scarves

[13] By contrast with the Lao, where women are not allowed to touch the statues of Buddha, among the Phunoy, old women take part in those operations. It should also be noted that the individuals who personally offered a statue to the pagoda have to take it down themselves and wash it before the others.

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and make them into a sort of carpet going from the monks' house to the courtyard in which the statues were placed.[14] The monks and the novices come down from their cells, walk across the improvised carpet and disappear beneath floods of water thrown at them by the villagers. They are then dried off and carried ('like statues', I am told) into the courtyard where the statues of the Buddha have been placed. Here, they are sprinkled with perfumed water.

The maisonettes are then dismantled. The pieces making up their structure are thrown away below the village and the objects which decorated them are sold cheaply to the villagers the following day. The money will be divided into four parts: one for the Buddha (administered by the *atjan* and one of the elders, this money goes towards the upkeep of the pagoda), one for the monks, one for the novices and one for the *atjan*. A ritual supervised by the monk concludes the ceremonies of the day. This enables all the misfortunes of the past year to be expelled. The elders, led by the monk and the *atjan*, make a sort of tray (*kro tang kao*, L) with a bamboo frame and a base made of banana leaves. This tray has nine compartments, each of which contains black rice, white rice, dried meat, small bones, flowers, some gold and silver (represented by bits of shiny paper) and a different animal in clay (buffalo, chicken, pig, dog, horse, snake, cow, elephant).[15] A human figurine is placed in the central compartment, named the Lord of the Days (*Panya van*, L). It is then said that the former Lord, burdened with all the bad things that have happened in the community, must be thrown away to make place for the new one. This tray, which has a door on each side, is in fact a spirit trap. They run to get the food and the doors are then destroyed. The monk, then the *atjan*, begin a prayer to imprison the spirits in the trap, which is then thrown away outside the village, towards sunset.

In the evening, the families that offered a maisonette to a deceased person invite the villagers to other festivities. They notably jointly organise firework displays, which are set off from the village square. These 'fire flowers' (*dok fay*, L) are addressed to the dead and the *atjan* sends up a prayer with each firework.

[14] Lafont and Bitard (1957: 201, 209) noticed a similar practice during the ordination of Tay Lue monks. Women's headdresses and men's turbans were, in this context, seen as substitutes of the bodies of the devotees, alluding to the legend according to which the hermit Sumedha offered his back as a bridge to a Buddha. Such a practice would enable the devotees to obtain merit.

[15] The model of this square is very prevalent in the Buddhist communities of the peninsula, but the ritual procedures related to its use differ according to types of population. On the use of this square among the Intha (Shan State, Burma), see Robinne (2000: 119–25).

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Fourth day: the tributes of the day following the celebrations

The next day, the second day of the New Year, relatives who had come to visit go home. But for the villagers, this is the day for sending off rockets (*bang fay*, L) and paying tribute to the elders.[16] In Thongpi, rockets are let off in the afternoon a short way away from the village, on a large flat area. This is one of the rare occasions during the New Year celebrations when all the villagers without exception (and not just one representative from each household) are present, dressed in their finest clothes. The women and the children crowd together in the school buildings and comment on each firing while eating sweetmeats. The young men take care of the preparation and the firing of the rockets, which is accompanied by the banging of drums and cymbals. The elders, installed on benches in front of the rockets, recite prayers for the rockets to take off well and fly high, and invite the dead to come and get them. Each time a rocket flies really high, the assembly shouts for joy and the happy owner is carried in triumph.

The rockets are made for the dead, those that have been given maisonettes on the previous days and those who died recently, and who have not yet received offerings in the pagoda. If the rockets fly high and far, it is said that the deceased has already reached paradise and that he is drawing the rocket to him. If, on the contrary, the rocket falls quickly or burns up before taking off, it is a bad sign: the deceased is still wandering sadly on earth. His family will send up a rocket the following year to see if, in the meantime, he has managed to reach paradise. The firing of rockets is therefore an important event which is the object of a lot of discussions over the following days.

After the rockets have been sent up, there are then tributes (*soma*, L) to the elders, the monks and the dignitaries, in exchange for their blessing. These tributes can be carried out on the evening following the firing of the rockets, or the next day, which is the day on which sowing commences. These little ceremonies take place in several stages. The sons and their wives first pay tribute to their parents. The son lays in front of his father a plate and a piece of material containing a little money and some flowers, while his wife (or sometimes the unmarried girls) washes the feet of her father-in-law. The elder touches the plate and recites prayers aimed to protect the members of the household and to obtain wealth and fertile fields.

In the afternoon, the gong is struck to warn villagers that the *soma* ceremony will be carried out in the pagoda. Few people go to this. Some old women bring

[16] In a Lao context, the firing of rockets (*Bun Bang Fay*) is a distinct celebration, generally celebrated around June (Condominas 1998 [1968]: 87).

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four platters (*pha kao*) on which each newcomer places some yellow and red flowers, some paddy, small candles and a little money.[17] The elders dance around the drum. Two or three women wash the monk's feet and then the elders come to bring him some candles, flowers and some material containing a small sum of money. The monk then recites prayers aimed to protect the community. In the evening, a small procession of elders and young people carrying cymbals go to the houses of the *atjan* and the head of the village to pay tribute to them. They receive the same offerings as the monk, pronounce in return wishes for prosperity and invite the participants to a meal. Once this final stage of the New Year celebrations has been completed, the men, having the protection of the dead and the Buddha, can begin to plant the rice.

THE UNION OF THE INSIDE AND THE OUTSIDE: THE RENEWAL OF A PACT

The main beneficiaries of the festival are the Buddha and all the dead of the community and in the forefront, those to whom maisonettes are offered. The most important objective of the rites is to make the deceased happy (unhappy, they would make the living sick), by feeding them, dressing them, etc. It is here significant to point out that this is achieved in a very specific way: contrary to Lao Buddhist ceremonies, no-one speaks of transferring the merits of the dead. The term *bun*, 'merit', is not used. The dead are honoured in the hope of a counterpart: they are expected to bring protection and fertility. There is therefore a fundamental difference to the observations of Hayashi and Tambiah in Lao Issan Buddhism (see below). According to Tambiah, there is no cult of ancestors. If the Lao Issan transfer merit to their dead during the Buddhist festival this is not, according to Tambiah, a cult to the ancestors in the sense of a systematic propitiation of the deceased and a formalised relation by which the deceased interacts with the living. He notes that there are also no sanctions on the part of the dead. The accent is solely put on the help the living give to their dead through Buddhist festivals (Tambiah 1970: 191; Hayashi 2003: 139–49). On the contrary, not to punish and to bring fertility are the actions that the Phunoy ask of their dead but also, to a certain extent, of the Buddha, in exchange for the offerings given to them.[18] Let us now examine the way in

[17] Four is a number pertaining to the dead and also to the village and its inhabitants, which is divided into four sections.

[18] For the Phunoy, the effigies of the Buddha are also ambivalent elements. If they are no longer worshipped, they are capable of becoming very angry with the villagers and bringing destruction in the form of epidemics.

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which these two requests are precisely expressed during the New Year celebrations.

Even though the New Year is a festival dedicated to the dead, it is also a festival of renewal: of the coming year, symbolised by the new 'Lord of the Days', of the surrounding nature that is presented to the statues of the Buddha, the Buddha himself 'dead and born again', explain the villagers, referring to the fact that after they have been bathed, the statues are painted and dressed in little clothes into which money is slipped.[19] This renewal is also for the rice fields to come, the village and its inhabitants, a renewal which, as we have seen, is achieved through sending away misfortunes and by prayers for protection to have a prosperous year. In the more precise case of the village, we will see how the ritual expression of these requests seems to take place around a rite of recreation, implying a shutting and opening of the village, two moments when the recipients of the celebrations, other than the Buddha and ancestors, are revealed indirectly.

The renewal of the village supposes expelling any bad elements which might be found there, and appears to be carried out through a sort of refounding of the village. This is shown in various ways. The villagers say explicitly that the itinerary they follow is similar to one carried out when the villages are founded. They rite shows a reenactment of this process performed in social space: the villagers go successively to the most important places in the village, which are the pagoda, the banyan tree located close by and the clump of trees where the guardian spirit lives. According to the Phunoy, the precincts of the pagoda and the four corners represent the village and its four gates. The banyan tree, which is a vital stage in the circuit, is compared by the villagers to the 'heart of the village', (*lak ban*, L, 'village pillar', the first spot from where the men start to clear and build a new site). In certain villages, this refoundation is more obvious. In the village of Xay, for example, on the second day of the New Year celebrations, the monk recites the text of the founding of villages, *ton ban*, which is only pronounced at times when the integrity of the village comes under threat (by a fire, an epidemic, a bad death) and when it is therefore necessary to redefine its limits.

By using various symbols that demarcate the transformation of social space, the refounding ritual also implies closing and then opening the village. It is surrounded by cotton threads and the gates are closed. The villagers then place crossed bamboo sticks through the threads to forbid passage. The water sources, which are located at the entrance of the village

[19] Slipping money into the statues seems to be a reference to the enthroning rites for new statues, during which their power is activated by giving them a heart made of gold.

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(they must not run inside the village for fear of letting in the spirits of the spring), are also shut down. On the first day, the little canal formed by the waste water is cleaned and dug out, and the bamboo that drains the spring is changed. On the second day, little wooden bridges are built over this canal, but their access is forbidden by two crossed bamboo sticks at their entrance (on the outside of the village). They are also surrounded with cotton threads and bamboo trellises. The village is thus shut on the first day of the New Year celebrations (which is the last day of the year) and on the second day, which is the intermediary day, outside the year, and particularly propitious for changing the order of things and opening up to the outside world. For if this opening enables the bad things to be expelled from the village, it also makes it possible for other spirits to enter.

On the third day of celebrations, the village opens the gates again. The old gates, considered to be no longer efficient, are thrown away and replaced by new ones that have been made effective by their former stay in the temple. The little bridges placed over the springs are also opened. For the first time, the ceremonies do not take place exclusively within the village, but also outside. The rockets are sent up from a large flat area and the villagers go briefly into the fields to start the first stages of sowing.[20] The opening up of the village therefore not only results in the villagers going out, but also brings the outside world back in. This is signified in the direction in which the bridges are crossed, not from the village to the outside but from the outside into the village. The bridge is not only used by women who want to have a child, but also by the rest of the villagers. 'It is to obtain good fortune, strength' (*ga thanibeu*) one of the villagers told me, who was impatient to be first over the bridge. This also seems to be the significance of the branches planted in the courtyard and presented to the Buddha, which come from the clump of trees in the sacred area where the guardian spirit of the village (*dat tu*) is said to live, outside the village precincts.

These operations seem therefore to imply a temporary opening up of the village to the outside, as if fertility were obtained through the intrusion of external forces, associated with the rites pertaining to the benevolent figures of the Buddha and the ancestors, and among which the guardian spirit of the village seems to occupy an important role. For it is indeed the figure of this spirit that emerges in certain of the ritual stages of the ceremony.

[20] Each head of a household marks off a small square about 2 × 2 metres in the area of land that he has cleared, next to the hut in the field. He surrounds it with cotton threads and bamboo trellises. On it he sows a few handfuls of rice and then builds a small altar on which he puts some of the meat that was offered to the dead in the temple. It is said that in this way, the spirit of rice, Apitchaba, is laid in the field as up until then, he was in the rice granary.

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In another village named Kiu, where I observed the New Year celebrations, the link between the guardian spirit, the 'outside' brought into the village and the Buddha was even more evident. The elders and the *tjaotjam* first lay offerings of meat on the altar of the guardian spirit in the clump of trees just outside the village. Carrying so many branches that they almost disappear beneath them, they then lead a procession around the altar. Then they make a sort of stretcher on which seems to be a real reconstituted tree, but that the villagers present as being a stūpa. The stretcher is carried around the spirits' altar three times, then taken through the village where the inhabitants sprinkle it copiously with water, and finally laid at the foot of the Buddha statue in the courtyard of the pagoda. As with the bridges in Thongpi, which were crossed from the outside to the inside of the village, so the procession in the village of Kiu goes from the forest (or more precisely from the altar of the guardian spirit of the village) to the pagoda located here in the very centre of the village. The important role played by the guardian spirit in these ceremonies is not surprising if one remembers that it was formerly this spirit that was honoured before the sowing and to whom villagers prayed for fertility. It should also be remembered that if the offerings are now addressed to the dead, the guardian spirit was previously considered to be the spirit of the first head and founder of the village.

If the village is temporarily open in order to expel misfortunes (via the ceremony of the tray) and to underline the link with the village's guardian spirit, other more ambivalent figures could also make their way in. The third day is the moment when the elders perform the dance of the drum in order to prevent malevolent spirits penetrating the village. There are usually considered to be many of these evil spirits roaming around outside the village but on this particular day only certain of them are considered likely to appear: the spirits of metals (*sam pum dat)* and the chthonian snakes (*piahong dat*), are indeed ambivalent spirits as in some villages they were and still are considered to be the distributors of gifts or blessings. These chthonian spirits were formally closely linked with the 'spirits within the village' (*khong thon dat*) and to which the *maphè* paid worship before the land was cleared and after the harvest. During these two rites, the *maphè* built two altars for the spirits of the sky and the earth, but on which he also gave offerings to the spirits of metals and the bad dead. The propitiation of these forces was thought to be necessary to enable work in the fields to progress well and harvests to be plentiful.

Today, the spirits of metals are only brought offerings before the clearing of the land but they remain, on several points, closely linked to the village that they threaten to enter during the Buddhist holy days (*van sin*, L, i.e. the

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eighth and the fifteenth days of the waxing and waning moons) which occur between the New Year celebrations and the harvests. A parallel could be drawn here between the telluric spirits and the village guardian spirits in the Lao Buddhist populations, who roam freely in the village on holy days: the women cannot hull the rice, the villagers cannot cut or bring in wood and they must also not take any vehicles into or out of the village.[21] In the Phunoy populations, similar restrictions are observed by the villagers on holy days. However, it is not the guardian spirit that wanders around freely, but the spirits of metals and chthonian snakes, due to the pact made in olden days with the first inhabitants of the village. The history of this pact tells that a chthonian spirit came in olden times to get his food by killing men. They made a pact by offering him, instead of human flesh, animals that they sacrificed and made him promise only to come near the village again on holy days. This pact made with an animal spirit brings to mind figures of the ogres, demons etc. which, once pacified, become the guardian spirits of the Tay people's territory (see for example Kraisi 1967). It is true that the Phunoy do not consider these chthonian spirits to be the guardian spirits of the village, but the time when they come back to the village corresponds to the villagers' prayers to protect the growing rice. The ritual opening of the Phunoy villages on the holy days following the New Year also addresses the spirits that are feared but are necessary to obtain a primordial fertility indispensable to the regeneration of the villages, the men and the fields.

CONCLUSION

The New Year is therefore presented as a festival of rebirth, namely of the Buddha but also of the village and its occupants, who carry out certain rites of purification and reestablishment of the village. It is shut then opened again to the outside world, and its unity is reconfirmed (each villager places a stick representing themselves in 'the heart' of the village: the four sections of the village celebrate together the last day of the festival). This ceremony is today mainly directed towards the dead who were previously given offerings of food outside the house, then in the fields, before the sowing period began. Today, say the Phunoy, they are solely given nourishment in the pagoda.

This process of 'Buddhisation' of the ancestors is accompanied by another, more recent, phenomenon: the inclusion of certain bad dead in Buddhist ceremonies. In theory, the bad dead are buried in a separate

[21] Tambiah (1970: 267). Zago adds to these prohibitions, hunting, fishing (killing animals does not please Buddha) but says that any works of public interest are allowed (1972: 116).

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cemetery and a special rite is carried out to sever the links between the bad dead and the living, especially their close relatives. However, in recent years, once these rites have been carried out, those who suffered a violent death are also entitled, during the New Year celebrations, to a ceremony almost identical to the one previously reserved for the ordinary dead.

On the first day of the New Year celebrations in 2002, two maisonettes (*phasat*, L) were built: one for a woman who had committed suicide a few days earlier, the other for a little girl who had been mortally wounded by gunshot from a rifle with which she had been playing. In and around the maisonettes were all the offerings usually made to the 'normal' dead: there was food and the wooden bird on top of the mast to carry her to the beyond. The ceremony did not take place in the temple or even in the pagoda, but nearby, a cotton thread linked the two masts addressed to the dead to the roof of the temple. 'This means that the Buddha authorises the ceremony and that he is watching over it', the monk told me. In short, the entirety of this ceremony seemed to be aimed at honouring the bad dead as if they had been good dead, and the people I talked to confirmed this. 'In the olden days, we would not have been able to do this. A bad dead was a bad dead. But today, it does not matter so much. The bad dead who died in the village are not very dangerous and we can carry out the same rituals for them as for the others. The families are very unhappy to think that their relatives are condemned to wander eternally and never find rest. So by carrying out this ceremony, we turn them into good dead'.

These ceremonies can be interpreted in several ways. For the anthropologist R. Hamayon, the 'recovery' of the bad dead often seems to happen in minority groups with a small population.[22] The 'advantage' of reintegrating the bad dead and turning them into good dead is that they are reborn into the group. This proposition corroborates the fact that the integration of bad dead goes hand in hand with distinct decrease in population in the area. The Phunoy would carry out these new rites to 'recover' the souls of the bad dead, as ancestors were diminishing in number. Finally, reintegrating the bad dead is also a sign that the ancestors are necessary for the reproduction of the group. This is not only through their reincarnation within the community – as the whole idea of reincarnation, very present in Theravāda Buddhism, remains quite foreign to the Phunoy – but more importantly by obtaining the fertility that is bestowed upon them by the ancestors. The New Year

[22] Oral communication, third workshop in the programme *Dynamiques de l'identité et de l'ethnicité en Asie du Sud-Est et en Chine du Sud*, IRSEA-CNRS, University of Provence, 18–19 December 2004, 'Présence et usage de l'autre dans l'imaginaire religieux'.

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ceremony can therefore be seen not only as a festival where the ancestors are prayed to for fertility, but also an occasion to 'make' dead, be they good or bad, who will become ancestors.

Finally, it is also as if the prayers for fertility of the people and the fields addressed to the ancestors under the auspices of the Buddha were indissociable from a prayer addressed to the 'other' forces linked to the wild. Formerly the founding ancestor of the village, the figure of the guardian spirit has become the representative of the forces of nature surrounding the village but also of the chthonian forces prayed to in olden times when the land was cleared, and at harvesting time. The 'opening' of the village during the New Year celebrations therefore seems to signify that the contribution of the outside world is necessary for the regeneration of the inside world. We find again here elements related in Phunoy tales concerning the establishment of the first villages, when two clans were necessary, one notably being associated with the outside world and the fertilising rain. The description of the multiple facets of the New Year ceremonies therefore shows that the transformation and addition of new ritual sequences to this cult results, on the one hand, from the integration of ancestral figures and, on the other, from taking into account the finalities of ancient collective cults, which are to ensure the fertility of the fields and the fecundity of the people.

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