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The Red Necks and the importance of magic during the post-1975 insurgency in Laos

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ABSTRACT

Magic (*xaiyaxat*) has long played an important role in Lao society, in everyday life, but especially during times of particular danger. Therefore, it is not surprising that magic was important for anti-Lao PDR insurgents during the 1970s and 1980s, particularly for providing protective qualities for soldiers and thus increasing their confidence to engage in armed conflict. This article considers a group of insurgents who operated between Buengkan District in northeastern Thailand and adjacent parts of Khammouane and Bolikhamxay Provinces in central Laos, and were protected and emboldened by the mysterious magical beliefs and practices of an ethnic Lao spiritual leader named Kong Manychanh. While different groups and individuals relied on magic to varying degrees, this article demonstrates the important role that magic played during this period, including how magic was used for protective purposes through spells (*mon katha*) and protective items made sacred through magical practices (*visa akhom*).

KEYWORDS

Laos; Thailand; Mekong; insurgency; border; magic

Introduction

After 1975 – when the communist Pathet Lao took control of the government of Laos (Goldston 2009) – political and military resistance to the newly declared Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) emerged in various parts of the country (Baird 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d; Gunn 1983; Na Morrison 2023; Quincy 2000). This resistance involved people from various ethnic groups, regional influences and political orientations who opposed the Lao PDR government and their Vietnamese mentors – who many believed had essentially colonized Laos, with the intention of absorbing it as a province of Vietnam within a broader 'Indochina Federation' dominated by Vietnam (Baird 2025b; Ban Muang 1977).

This article considers a particular ethnic Lao insurgent group, one that was spiritually led by Achan (teacher)[1] Kong Manychanh, an ethnic Lao man who emboldened a group of armed anti-Lao PDR insurgents to cross the Mekong River between northeastern Thailand and adjacent areas of central Laos during the 1970s and the 1980s. The

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[1]He was referred as '*achan*' (teacher) because he had previously been a hermit (*leusy*) who wore white and stayed in a cave where he meditated.

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group became known as the Red Necks (*kho deng*),[2] and was militarily led by Lieutenant Khamprasong (Prasong) Phommalet, a Catholic, who operated mainly in Khammouane and Bolikhamxay Provinces, in central Laos. The Red Necks maintained bases on the Thai side of the border in Buengkan District,[3] northeastern Thailand, although the Thai government denied that it was harbouring anti-Lao PDR insurgents (*Bangkok Post* 1982).

Significantly, Achan Kong relied on magic, which played a critical role in the Red Necks' political and military strategy. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, magic in Thailand is defined as 'the art or practice of using supernatural forces'.[4] It is not necessarily 'white' or 'black', but in the Lao or Thai context, it is often linked to receiving protective powers through supernatural forces (Reynolds 2019). While Achan Kong and the Red Necks were not the only insurgents to rely heavily on magic to embolden the insurgency – far from it – their circumstances shed light on the nature of the post-1975 insurgency and how beliefs in magic were entangled with political and military resistance.

Resistance leaders with strong beliefs in magic and miraculous powers have frequently emerged in Laos during crisis situations, whether it be during the early 1800s when Sa Kietngong led an army of peasants against Champassak in response to increased slave hunting in their area (Baird 2007), at the turn of the twentieth century when *phou my boun*[5] (Men of Merit) rose up in southern Laos and northeastern Thailand (Baird 2013b), or during the ethnic Hmong and Khmu uprising against the French in the 1910s and 1920s led by Pa Chay Vue in northern Laos (Lee 2015). Moreover, magic has been used by guerrilla resistance movements in other parts of the world apart from South East Asia (Lan 1985). Thus, the circumstances along the border between Laos and Thailand after 1975 represent yet another example of this phenomenon.

The main argument of the article is that while beliefs in magic are often part of the everyday life of Lao people, they play a critical role during times of danger, due to their potential for providing protective powers. Furthermore, magic became crucial for emboldening anti-Lao PDR insurgents. However, magic can play out in various ways, depending on a range of factors related to ethnicity, political orientation, regional traditions, Buddhist beliefs and individualized beliefs and practices, among others. Although the role of amulets and talismans in society has generally been studied less in Laos than in neighbouring Thailand (i.e. Jackson 2023; McBain 2024; Tambiah 1984) (although see Petit 2024), they are, nevertheless, of considerable general importance in society in Laos. However, there are various differences in how they are understood and used, depending on circumstances, and understanding these differences, including the ways that magic brings people together, is therefore important for assessing the overall political circumstances during the post-1975 period. Thus, Achan Kong's case adds to our understanding of the roles of magic with regard to the Lao insurgency.

[2]Note that this literally means red neck, and it does not have the same connotations that the term has when used to describe rural right-wing people in North America.
[3]At the time, Buengkan was a district although more recently it has been upgraded to be a province.
[4]https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english-thai/magic, accessed 13 April 2025.
[5]In this article, the standard systems for transliterating Lao and Thai words are used, depending on the context of use. Thus, the inconsistencies are intentional, based on Lao or Thai contexts.

Methods

The content of this article has largely been obtained through in-depth Lao language interviews conducted over many years with key actors associated with the post-1975 anti-Lao PDR insurgency. This long-term approach provided opportunities to meet and interview people in various parts of the world, including Thailand, France, the US and Canada. It also allowed time to corroborate interview data (Baird 2023) and contextualize information received from other sources. All interviews were conducted in the Lao language without translation. I met the people I interviewed through introductions from other Lao people; some were interviewed multiple times. Detailed notes were taken, but the interviews were not recorded, as doing so would have reduced the candour of many of the interviewees. I could not interview people in Laos about this topic, as the conflict discussed here has never been resolved. I am only able to name those people who live outside of Laos and who, for political reasons, continue to refuse to travel to Laos. It would be unethical to name those living in Laos. Those interviewed are certainly not neutral observers, and I have taken their biases into account when analysing information they have provided.

Oral histories have limitations; informants can forget, and selective memory is the norm. Sometimes people's memories can shift over time, leading to certain inaccuracies. Sometimes people also choose to emphasize certain parts of the past, while playing down or fully omitting others. Understanding and confirming these shifts is not always easy. On the other hand, oral histories have advantages. Sometimes people are willing to say things that they would not dare to write. The passage of time can render previously sensitive topics less sensitive. Sometimes documents are destroyed, unavailable for a range of reasons, or were simply never produced, making oral histories the only sources of important historical information. It is often useful to use a combination of written and oral sources, depending on availability and assessed accuracy. The particular contribution here is both to reveal a previously undocumented history and also to add to our understanding of the role of magic in the conflict examined.

It was not possible to locate many relevant written sources regarding this topic, since few were produced, and those that were created have either been destroyed or cannot be located. Thus, the triangulation of different sources was necessary. Time was given to carefully assess findings. There may be some small inaccuracies, but the main findings have been variously corroborated.

Oral history can also be seen as a dialogue conducted in the present, and can thus be a useful way to elicit moral accounts about the past and to access situated subjectivities during the present. This is an important aspect of the present study, as will become evident.

The photos included were obtained from interviewees and scanned with their permission.

Magic and the Lao Insurgency

Magic (*xaiyasath*) – which relates to unseen supernatural powers, broadly defined – has a long history in Laos, and is often intertwined with beliefs related to Animism, Buddhism and Hinduism. It is worth reviewing some of the beliefs and practices associated with

magic and the anti-Lao PDR insurgency, in order to contextualize the particular case study about Achan Kong and the Red Necks.

First, the ethnic Hmong who led the *Chao Fa* anti-Lao PDR insurgency, which was under the umbrella of the Ethnic Liberation Organization of Laos (*Ongkan Pot Poi Thouk Sonxat Nai Lao* in Lao) (Baird 2013a, 2014), were strongly inspired by the spiritual teachings of the late Shong Lue Yang, the so-called Mother of Writing (see Smalley, Yang, and Yang 1990). The *Chao Fa* took their own form of magic very seriously. Some aspects of Hmong magic are similar to Lao magic, but others are different. Hmong were historically Shamanistic. Shamans enter different plains and actively search for solutions to problems. Lao spirit mediums, however, are passive (at least in theory) recipients of spirits.

The *Chao Fa* flag was sacred, and *Chao Fa* soldiers who walked under it were believed to be protected from bullets (Baird 2013a, 2014). However, other Hmong insurgents, including those in the United Laos National Liberation Front (ULNLF, the *Neo Hom Pot Poi Xat* in Lao), the most important anti-Lao PDR political group, led by former Major General Vang Pao, who was also Hmong (Quincy 2000), felt that the *Chao Fa* leader, Pa Kao Her, relied too much on magic, and that an over reliance on it made believers vulnerable to danger due to being overconfident in its protective powers. Indeed, the *Chao Fa*'s heavy use of magic reduced its credibility with other more mainstream Hmong (Hamilton-Merritt 1993).[6] It was, however, not that those in the ULNLF did not engage in any magical practices themselves. For example, many insurgents, Hmong and Lao, had special amulets to protect them, and some also did not cut their hair for protective reasons.[7]

One encounter between Hmong leaders in the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) and Hmong *Chao Fa* soldiers along the Thailand–Laos border in 1989 is worth recounting. The two groups met in the forest, and the latter asked the former for military training. The CPT Hmong hesitantly agreed, because both groups were led by Hmong, but also because they were both enemies of the Lao PDR government, albeit for different reasons. However, the CPT Hmong were surprised to learn that the *Chao Fa* Hmong believed that spirits would protect them from bullets, and that through conducting a ritual that involved waving a regular washcloth, they believed that they would be protected from bullets. Adding more to their surprise, when seven *Chao Fa* Hmong showed up to receive training from the CPT Hmong, they claimed that they could not lie down in battle because if even one of them did, the whole group would end up being shot. They also insisted on conducting particular rituals before going into battle. Since these practices did not fit with the training that the CPT had received years earlier in North Vietnam, they were unable to continue providing military training to the *Chao Fa* (Baird 2018).

Some claim that the *Chao Fa* believed that if they cut their hair, they would lose some of their magical powers (Thao 2010, 93). However, according to Chong Lor Her, the younger brother of Pa Kao Her, most *Chao Fa* had long hair because they were too busy to get their hair cut. He pointed out that Pa Kao Her had long hair when he was at Phou Bia, Laos's highest mountain, in Central Laos, but that he cut it short as soon as he came to Thailand. There was reportedly no requirement for *Chao Fa* to have

[6]Vang Neng (Richard), *pers. comm.,* St. Paul, MN, 2 May 2015.
[7]Rick Wade, *pers. comm.,* Alaska, 6 May 2011.

long hair – it was a matter of personal preference.[8] However, it seems certain that magic did influence the decision of some to not cut their hair, as this was also the case for other groups, as discussed below. Crucially, some people's strongly-held beliefs differed from others', even within the same ethnic groups and political organizations.

The Lao also believe in magic and have their own ways of using it as insurgents. For example, Boualiene Vannaxay and Thit Tanh Douangmala, who had previously been Pathet Lao communist officers before they defected to the Royal Lao Government in the late 1960s (Baird 2021, 36–37), were ethnically Lao and put a lot of importance on magic as Southern Lao insurgents during the late 1970s. They emerged as key insurgent leaders in southern Laos, with Boualiene staying mainly in present-day Champassak and Attapeu Province and Thit Tanh operating in Salavan Province. Both worked closely with hundreds of insurgent soldiers.

Boualiene, in particular, strictly adhered to taboos and conducted rituals due to his strong belief in magic (Baird 2025d). For example, one of Boualiene's group commanders, Siyone, used magic to generate 'ghost soldiers' to guard the insurgents when they stayed overnight in the forest. He would go around and break branches in different locations to set up a perimeter of ghost soldiers, a type of protective magic referred to as *visa akhom*.[9]

Boualiene told me that he did not practise magic when he was with the Pathet Lao, as the communists discouraged it, but that he learned afterwards from older people and spirit mediums (*nang thiam*) he met as a soldier in the Royal Lao Army (Baird 2025d). Spirit mediums are not considered to host malevolent spirits like the human hosts of ravenous spirits (*phi pop*) (Baird 2024; Wattanagun 2017) and have long had a lot of influence in Lao society (Baird and Soukhaphon 2025). When Boualiene was in the forest as an insurgent, after 1975, he understood that the forest protected him and that he should repay it for the safety it provided. He thus honoured angels (*thep*) associated with the forest. However, when I interviewed him in 2012, he acknowledged that other insurgents had different understandings from him, even those who cooperated closely with him. For example, he stopped killing all animals in 1975, and even before then, he had already reduced his killing of animals, but other insurgents did not follow this taboo. Boualiene also explained that women asked him to sleep with them when he was in the forest, but that he declined because it was taboo (*khalam*) for him to do so. He also did not let his underlings sleep with women in the forest.[10] However, Thit Tanh, his close colleague, sometimes slept with women in exchange for providing them with passage to escape from Laos to Thailand (Baird 2025d). The two men's backgrounds were similar, but their beliefs and taboos differed. Moreover, they sometimes used magic to achieve different objectives (see also Terwiel 2012).

Boualiene told me that every person has a spirit that protects them, and that everyone's spirit is different. When in the forest, he would hear things. He believed that a type of good spirit (*phi*) protected him from *asuras* or bad spirits (*pisat*). He did not carry a gun, just pieces of wood, but he admitted that he used the wood to kill people.

[8]Chong Lor Her, *pers. comm.,* Madison, WI, 28 January 2012.
[9]Khamxay Phasaycharaen, *pers. comm.,* Green Bay, WI, 13 May 2012. *Visa akhom* is another way of saying 'magic'. The term comes from two Sanskrit words that roughly translate as 'knowledge of the *agamas* [Saiva scriptures]'. However, the meaning has shifted considerably in modern times.
[10]Boualiene Vannaxay, *pers. comm.,* Bangkok, 28 July 2012.

If there was a spy in his group, killing was necessary to protect the group. High morals were, however, also essential for receiving spiritual protection, and killing was only permitted when those killed were immoral, he claimed. In line with this, Somphone Khounbolibounsak, a former insurgent who worked closely with Boualiene, explained that when Boualiene's resistance fighters operated, they were expected to act with an elevated level of morality. They could, for example, not kill animals, even lizards (*kapome*). Nor were they permitted to take chickens from villagers, who might feel pressured or intimidated to offer them, since most insurgents had guns.[11]

Boualiene was popular with villagers, as he was considered to be honest and devoted, and this made him more successful than other insurgents. While some tolerated the stealing of cows and water buffaloes to sell in Thailand, Boualiene strongly opposed such behaviour. According to Vanhthong Keomuangtai, a former insurgent who worked closely with him, Boualiene was 'pure', including by not having any minor wives. He reportedly had 'angels by his side' and did not allow wildlife to be killed by other insurgents, except for fish. Boualiene reportedly believed in magic and thought that the wild animals had souls and were the soldiers of *chao pa chao dong*, the spirits of particular forests. Initially, Boualiene only stayed in Laos, but later he moved between Laos and Thailand.[12]

Thit Tanh Douangmala also relied on taboos and beliefs in magic. For example, it was taboo for him to eat four-legged animals, and he sometimes warned others that he would not be responsible if problems emerged due to them breaking this taboo. He believed in the spirit *me bangbot* (a forest spirit with morals) (see Kleinod-Freudenberg and Chanthavong 2024). Thus, being moral and honest was also crucial to him, but not in the same way as for Boualiene. He had long hair, whereas Boualiene did not.[13] Thit Tanh was respected by some, as if he were a hermit (*leusy*)[14] with the ability to mobilize moral forest spirits for protection.

As mentioned above, for some, having long hair was related to magic, but not for all. An insurgent leader who worked closely with Thit Tanh and Boualiene claimed that insurgents had long hair for four reasons: (1) so that the enemy could not easily distinguish if the insurgents were men or women, (2) to scare people, (3) to show others that they had been in the forest for a long time and did not have time to cut it, and (4) some people washed their hair using traditional medicine linked to magic, after which they were not supposed to cut their hair for three years.[15] Other anti-Lao PDR insurgents also sometimes allowed their hair to grow long, either for spiritual reasons or simply to make themselves look fiercer, hoping to intimidate their enemies. For example, an insurgent leader named Kycheuang, who operated in Champasak Province, southern Laos, in the 1980s, had long hair. All of his soldiers did too. This was reportedly both for magical reasons and also to scare people.[16] Some would not allow anyone but their teacher to cut their hair.[17]

[11]Somphone Khounbolibounsak, *pers. comm.*, Green Bay, WI, 22 October 2010.
[12]Vanhthong Keomuangtai, *pers. comm.*, telephone to Tennessee, 14 May 2009.
[13]Nouan Ouanlavong, *pers. comm.*, Modesto, CA, 25 September 2009.
[14]Saveng Vongsavath, *pers. comm.*, Beaverton, OR, 2 May 2009.
[15]Somphone Khounbolibounsak, *pers. comm.*, Green Bay, WI, 22 October 2010.
[16]Oudone Rattanasengchanh, *pers. comm.*, Phnom Penh, 29 October 2009.
[17]Saveng Vongsavath, *pers. comm.*, Beaverton, OR, 2 May 2009.



Figure 1. A Lao insurgent visiting villagers outside their village in Lakonepheng District, Salavan Province, Laos, 2 December 1983. Notice the various protective amulets he is wearing (courtesy of Khamphoui Sisavatdy).

There is a long history of people relying on various types of magic to protect themselves (Baird 2013b; McGovern 2024; Reynolds 2019). Therefore, it should not be surprising that Lao insurgents often relied on protective chants (*mon katha*) to protect them from being shot, and Buddhist monks from Laos that relocated to Thailand after 1975 sometimes administered these protective chants (Baird 2012; Na Champassak 2010).

Magical amulets were also commonly used by Lao insurgents to protect them from harm (Baird 2012), and it was common for Lao insurgents to wear necklaces with protective amulets attached to them (Figure 1). For example, all the resistance fighters with Boualiene and Thit Tanh wore protective amulets, although Boualiene and Thit Tanh reportedly had the strongest amulets amongst them.[18] Rituals were conducted to ensure that the amulets remained sacred (Figure 2). There were many stories of powerful amulets protecting Lao insurgents during the 1970s and 1980s. Some Pathet Lao soldiers also used protective amulets and talismans, but they were generally used less by communists, since such practices were often characterized as 'superstitious' (*ngom ngai*). There is no doubt that most communist soldiers had similar beliefs about magic as those fighting against them, but they generally had to be more discreet about these beliefs and practices.

Amulets could only protect when being worn. Illustrative of this, one insurgent leader in northern Laos, Col. Khamphay Vilayphanh, had a strong protective amulet, but he reportedly removed it from around his neck not long before he stepped on the landmine

[18]Somphone Khounbolibounsak, *pers. comm.,* Green Bay, WI, 22 October 2010.



Figure 2. Insurgent soldiers in southern Laos ritually bathe their protective amulets at their base, 13 April 1982. The Lao language caption states 'Ritual for bathing "protective things" on Songkan at the headquarters camp of Division 4, 1982'.

in the late 1970s, which caused him to lose one of his legs.[19] Thus, there was a particular geography associated with amulet protective value.

One former Lao insurgent reportedly obtained a sacred tiger tattoo to protect him from being shot. He also had a sacred object that had a *mon katha* spell put on it. Women were not allowed to touch it. The insurgent also wore various amulets when he was in the forest. He was shot at many times, so he felt that he needed protection. He claimed that other insurgents had similar magical protective objects.[20] In another case, an insurgent in southern Laos had wild boar tusks on a necklace that he wore to protect him from bullets. His younger brother, who was a Buddhist monk, had given the protective tusks to him.[21] A few also hoped to use magic against their enemies,[22] but this appears to have been much less common than using magic to protect against harm.

Boualiene and Thit Tanh also reportedly inserted (*sak*) sacred items magically into people's bodies using a massage method known as *sabou leuat* (blood soap). They relied on various kinds of sacred items.[23] However, according to Somphone Khounbolibounsak, Boualiene did not have special sacred items himself, but reportedly just relied on being a good person. Somphone claimed that Boualiene would just use flowers, put up

[19]Touane Baccam, *pers. comm.*, Madison, WI, 5 October 2018.
[20]Phoukhong Douangdara, *pers. comm.*, Janesville, WI, 6 May 2012.
[21]Seuam Sopha, *pers. comm.*, Madison, WI, 19 December 2010.
[22]Seng Saiyavong and Lan, *pers. comm.*, Kinnewick, WA, 19 July 2010.
[23]Vanhthong Keomuangtai, *pers. comm.*, telephone to Tennessee, 14 May 2009.

his hammock, and that he also conducted a particular type of prayer (*athithan*) in the forest, one that relies on one's accumulated merit to ask for a miracle (see McGovern 2024, 184–192).[24]

The neutralist insurgent leader, General Kong Le, who was best known for his *coup d'etat* in Laos in 1960 (Sidwell 2020), also believed heavily in magic, which he used to protect insurgents working with him.[25] For example, after he went to the US in 1988 to promote his neutralist anti-Lao PDR political organization, Le Mouvement de Révolutionaire de la Résistance du Peuple Lao Neutraliste, he cured health ailments through chanting *(mon katha)* over the telephone, based on a combination of Animism and Buddhism.[26] He was observed talking on the telephone in his room with a spirit, allegedly *Phagna In* (Indra, demonstrating Hindu influences). Kong Le claimed that he was doing a planning exercise with the spirit.[27] Indeed, magic was believed to play an important role in success, thus increasing the confidence of believers, which was crucial for conducting the insurgency.

It should, by now, be clear that magic was important amongst many of those involved in the anti-Lao PDR insurgency in Laos, but that the views of different insurgents about magic differed. I now turn to the history, beliefs and practices associated with Achan Kong Manychanh and the Lao insurgency.

Achan Kong and the Red Necks

One of the ethnic Lao insurgent leaders, especially associated with magic during the second half of the 1970s and 1980s, was Achan Kong Manychanh, who was known by his title, Phagna Vongkotsatasin. Another name that he sometimes went by was Khampon Khensaisan.[28]

Born around 1940, Achan Kong was previously a communist Pathet Lao soldier in Thakhek District, Khammouane Province, central Laos.[29] He had strong Buddhist millenarian beliefs, including that a future incarnation of the Buddhist – Phra See-an, an honorific term used in Thai and Lao to refer to Bodhisattva Metteyya (Pali) or Maitreya (Sanskrit) – would be born as a human in the new cosmic era and then become the Buddha 5,000 years after the time of the last Buddha. He also believed, somewhat surprisingly, that Phra See-an would support the resistance against the Lao PDR government.[30]

Achan Kong turned against the Pathet Lao, and in 1975, when the communists took over the government of Laos, he initially stayed in Laos and secretly helped organize political and armed resistance. He stayed in Phanaliang Village. Some insurgents went secretly to see him, and he recommended attacking certain Pathet Lao military camps. He had many followers in the villages and towns. However, in around 1977, his secret was revealed, and he quickly crossed the Mekong River to Thailand, where he stayed in a house in Buengkan District, Nong Khai Province, for a few years. When Achan

[24]Somphone Khounbolibounsak, *pers. comm.,* Green Bay, WI, 22 October 2010.
[25]Khamsaeng Keosaeng, *pers. comm.,* Richmond, CA, 25 September 2009.
[26]Kong Le Sibounheuang, *pers. comm*., Paris, 25 June 2009.
[27]Bounliane Rajphoumy, *pers. comm.,* Milwaukee, WI, 31 December 2014.
[28]Khamxay Phrasaycharoen, *pers. comm.,* Green Bay, WI, 13 May 2012; Sangthong Phaipranom, *pers. comm.,* Chiang Mai, 15 September 2023.
[29]Sith Phetphrakhian, *pers. comm.,* Bangkok, 9 July 2011.
[30]Sangthong Phaipranom, *pers. comm.,* Chiang Mai, 15 September 2023; 13 February 2024.

Kong was in Buengkan, Thoum Manychanh, another refugee from Laos, stayed with him in the same house. Although many of his former students were soldiers and policemen, Achan Kong had a plan to fight against the communist Pathet Lao.[31] It was even reported, although not confirmed, that General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, the future commander of the Royal Thai army, bowed to Achan Kong when they met.[32] This story was conveyed to me to indicate that Achan Kong was highly respected for magical reasons (Figure 3).

Achan Kong claimed to have special magical abilities, such as powerful *katha* (spells) that he used to protect resistance soldiers who crossed into Laos. He was secretive, and only some of what he said to others was true. However, he had a devoted following on both sides of the Mekong River, and many of his students frequently visited him.[33]

Buddhism was important for Achan Kong's magic. For example, he believed strongly that Phra See-an was associated with three 'brothers': Khampon Khensaisan, who was none other than Achan Kong, Achan Wilai (also known as *phou viset* [magical person] and Chiengkham Fadeuandeng) and Thongdam Linkan, who was called the grandfather or Pou Salounkoun. Thongdam Linkan's nickname came from one of his eye sockets not having an eyeball and one of his arms being deformed, only having bone at the end. They became the key spiritual leaders of an anti-Lao PDR political party that they called *Phak Lao Kou Xat* (The Lao National Rescue Party).[34] The Party's military wing was known as the Red Necks (*kho deng*).

Achan Wilai was also sometimes known as 'red foot' (*teen deng*), although he wore socks almost all the time so that nobody could see his feet. However, one day, a former insurgent saw him take off his left sock. Achan Wilai then tapped the bottom of his foot with his hand, and a *kongchak* (saw-like round blade) symbol on the bottom of his foot brightened up and became visible.[35] Achan Wilai claimed that he could not remove his right foot sock, as if he did, the world would be destroyed.[36]

On 6 May 1980, Achan Kong and Achan Wilai reportedly met for the first time in Sawang Daen Din District, Sakon Nakhon Province, northeastern Thailand. They were considered to be brothers in justice, not real brothers. They therefore had never met on earth before. But they were said to have the same teacher, although the name of their teacher in another *yan* (plane of existence) was not mentioned. The first time they met, it was announced that the two had previously connected to each other through their meditative powers in another *yan*. In addition, on that same day, the former Royal Lao Army soldier, Lieutenant Prasong Phommalet, also met Achan Wilai for the first time, although he already knew Achan Kong.[37] Prasong was the military leader of the Red Necks.

Achan Wilai was reportedly originally from Chonburi Province, in central Thailand. According to one account, when he was seven years old, someone mysteriously told him to go to Vientiane, the capital of Laos. He did as he was told and ended up working at a

[31]Thoum Manychanh, *pers. comm.,* telephone to Kitchener, ON, 19 February 2024.
[32]Sangthong Phaipranom, *pers. comm.,* Chiang Mai, 15 September 2023.
[33]Sangthong Phaipranom, *pers. comm.,* Chiang Mai, 15 September 2023; Thoum Manychanh, *pers. comm.,* telephone to Kitchener, ON, 19 February 2024.
[34]Sangthong Phaipranom, *pers. comm.,* Chiang Mai, 15 September 2023; 13 February 2023.
[35]Sangthong Phaipranom, *pers. comm.,* Chiang Mai, 13 February 2024.
[36]Sangthong Phaipranom, *pers. comm.,* Chiang Mai, 15 September 2023.
[37]Sangthong Phaipranom, *pers. comm.,* Chiang Mai, 13 February 2024.



Figure 3. People involved in the insurgency, from left to right: Khamxay, Lt. Boun Ome, Synou Hatxana, Somsak Manychanh (Achan Kong's son) and Achan Kong Manychanh on the far right.

shoe factory there. Later, before 1975, when he was just eleven years old, Wilai was told to walk with an unknown person. He followed this person but got lost near a cave and met a hermit, who reportedly told Wilai that he should look for Achan Kong. Wilai was also told to look for his mother, who was said to be in Sawang Daen Din. Later, Wilai met his 'mother', but she was not his birth mother. They had reportedly previously stayed together in a different dimension (*yan*).[38] On 8 May 1980, two days after Achan Kong and Achan Wilai met at Sawang Daen Din, a string-tying soul-calling ceremony was organized to align the brothers. However, the third brother, Thongdam Linkan (Salounkoun), was not yet present.[39]

On 16 May 1980, a little over a week after Achan Kong and Achan Wilai first met, a man known as Uncle Phanh, whose hands had been severed by lightning when he was working in a rice field,[40] brought Salounkoun, who was older and was therefore considered to be the spiritual leader of Achan Kong and Achan Wilai, to meet the two. Before 1975, Salounkoun had reportedly studied magic at Phou Khao Khouay Mountain in central Laos. When in Vientiane, before studying at Phou Khao Khouay, Salounkoun had reportedly encountered a water buffalo that had been brought to a butcher to be slaughtered. When Salounkoun saw the buffalo, he claimed to have known it from a

[38]Sangthong Phaipranom, *pers. comm.*, Chiang Mai, 13 February 2024.
[39]Sangthong Phaipranom, *pers. comm.*, Chiang Mai, 15 September 2023.
[40]Some said that Loung Phanh had lost his hands to pay the price for bad karma during a previous life.

previous life, and announced that he had previously ridden it across the Mekong from Thailand.[41]

After meeting, Salounkoun, Wilai, Wilai's 'mother', and a driver then travelled from Sawang Daen Din to Buengkan.[42] There, Salounkoun, Kong and Wilai were united in the present world for the first time (Figure 4).[43] They became spiritually and politically aligned against the Lao PDR government and the Vietnamese. They started working closely with Prasong Phommalet and his allies, including another insurgent and former Vientiane teacher, Sith Phetphrakhian.[44] It was Achan Kong's popularity that allowed Prasong to recruit many people to join him.[45] Prasong, as a Catholic, was not particularly attracted by Achan Kong's magic, but he was impressed with Kong's ability to recruit people.[46] Prasong received some limited private support from a right-wing donor from Japan.[47]

Over time, the Red Necks gradually became more organized and stronger, and in October 1980, they started launching full-scale missions into Laos.[48]

Achan Kong had an altar at his house in Buengkan that he used for rituals, and three young women were assigned to look after it. Some thought that they were Achan Kong's wives,[49] but he actually had just one wife, another woman altogether. The three women were crucial for sacralizing his ritual items; however, they were not specifically chosen by Achan Kong. One was sent by her parents to help Achan Kong look after his house and to learn magic from him. The three women would wear black clothing at night, and the exact rituals that they conducted were secret.[50] However, according to Sith Phetphrakhian, a former insurgent, the resistance had a lot of young women with them. He claimed that the Thai military sometimes recruited women for the resistance fighters to have sex with.[51]

In any case, it was believed that if the three brothers, Kong, Wilai and Salounkoun, came together, they would be victorious in defeating the Lao PDR government and their Vietnamese allies.[52] Later, Wilai died from tetanus after being cut with barbed wire. Before his ailment was diagnosed, he reportedly had a premonition and told others that he would die soon.[53] His ability to know about his coming death further added to perceptions that the spiritual grouping was strong, even though one of its leaders had died.

There were reportedly three Lao insurgent camps on the Thai side of the Mekong River in the Buengkan District, which was at the time in Nong Khai Province. One was run by Sayaphone, another by Master Sergeant Vanh, who commanded 300 soldiers,

[41]Sangthong Phaipranom, *pers. comm.,* Chiang Mai, 15 September 2023.
[42]Sangthong Phaipranom, *pers. comm.,* Chiang Mai, 15 September 2023.
[43]Sangthong Phaipranom, *pers. comm.,* Chiang Mai, 13 February 2024.
[44]He was later often referred to as Sith Dongdok.
[45]Somxay, *pers. comm*., Nakorn Ratchasima, 12 June 2012.
[46]Thoum Manychanh, *pers. comm.,* telephone to Kitchener, ON, 2 January 2025.
[47]Sith Phetphrakhian, *pers. comm.,* Bangkok, June 27, 2011.
[48]Sangthong Phaipranom, *pers. comm.,* Chiang Mai, 15 September 2023.
[49]Sangthong Phaipranome, *pers. comm.,* Chiang Mai, 15 September 2023.
[50]Thoum Manychanh, *pers. comm.,* Kitchener, ON, 19 February 2024; Sangthong Phaipranom, *pers. comm.,* Chiang Mai, 13 February 2024.
[51]Sith Phetphrakhian, *pers. comm.,* Bangkok, 9 July 2011.
[52]Sangthong Phaipranom, *pers. comm.,* Chiang Mai, 15 September 2023; Thoum Manychanh, *pers. comm.,* telephone to Kitchener, ON, 19 February 2024.
[53]Sangthong Phaipranom, *pers. comm.,* Chiang Mai, 13 February 2024.



Figure 4. Achan Kong, Salounkoun and Achan Wilai (left to right).

and Master Sergeant Phimpha led the third, which was north of Buengkan and comprised over 100 insurgents. All three bases were effectively under Prasong's control: their commanders had taken orders from Prasong when they were in Paksane before 1975, and he reportedly maintained control until May 1981.[54]

In 1979, when the Sino-Soviet split blew up, leading to a one-month war between China and Vietnam, the Third Indochina War began, with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the Lao PDR and the People's Republic of Kampuchea on one side, and the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Khmer Rouge, anti-Lao PDR and communist Vietnam insurgents and the Royal Thai Government on the other (Chanda 1986; Chang 1983; Funston 1979). This resulted in the PRC providing weapons, supplies, training and other support to many anti-Lao PDR insurgents operating in northern and southern Laos, which helped strengthen some Lao insurgent groups, although many groups did not receive Chinese support. Indeed, it does not appear that the Red Necks received any direct material support from the PRC, and neither did Vang Pao's ULNLF. However, Pa Kao Her's *Chao Fa* did (Baird 2013a, 2014), as did various insurgents operating in Savannakhet, Salavan and Champasak Provinces (Baird 2024).

By the beginning of the 1980s, Prasong had gained a strong reputation as a capable insurgent leader, and with this reputation came considerable power along the Thailand–Laos border. He reportedly had influence over 3,000 people who were working with him in the Tha Ly and Pak Houay areas in Bolikhamxay Province, central Laos.[55]

[54]Sith Phetphrakhian, *pers. comm.,* Bangkok, 9 July 2011.
[55]Sith Phetphrakhian, *pers. comm.,* Bangkok, 9 July 2011.

One former insurgent, who crossed the Mekong River to Laos with over ten other young male insurgents from a camp on the Thai side of the river, explained that once they were in Laos, they met an insurgent leader named Khamta Kouxay, who stayed in an ethnic Lao Village near the Mekong River in Hinboun District, Khammouane Province. He had previously been under Achan Kong when both were still in the Pathet Lao. Khamta's wife was also involved in the insurgency, and they both carried guns and led forces in Hinboun District. One group of insurgents, headed by Siyone, who was originally from Thakhek, operated in Hinboun District.[56] Prasong originally operated in Bolikhamxay, but it was harder to cross back and forth and operate there as compared to Khammouane Province, so they became more active there.[57] The insurgency was reportedly popular with villages in the district during this period (Figures 5 and 6). Achan Kong himself was originally from Thakhek, and provided the spiritual protection that was crucial for emboldening,[58] recruiting and building the confidence of insurgents. He also provided advice on where to attack. Approximately 70% of the villagers reportedly supported them at the time.[59] According to Symuang Chantharangsy, an insurgent leader in Savannakhet, Achan Kong had a lot of special magical skills, including being able to climb steep mountains with ease.[60] Indeed, he wanted to take over Laos using magic.[61] Years later, however, some lost partial faith in him, as his untruthful statements were revealed, especially when he was not able to lead the insurgents to victory.

As already mentioned, Achan Kong and his insurgent followers worked closely with Khamta Kouxay.[62] Together, they reportedly obtained guns from the younger brother of an important Lao PDR general from Khammouane Province, General Singkapo Singkhottamaly.[63] Synou Hatxana was one of Achan Kong's students (Figure 7), and he too was reportedly deeply involved with using magic to support the insurgency.[64] He led a company of insurgents that provided security to Achan Kong when he travelled from village to village.[65]

Eventually, in around 1980, after the Nong Khai refugee camp was closed, Achan Kong decided to cross back into Laos to join with insurgent soldiers there, accompanied by the three young women who looked after his sacred things. They moved around frequently, staying with the insurgent soldiers in the forest for an extended period until 1983 (Figure 8). One of the three women who looked after his sacred things returned to Thailand before Achan Kong, but he eventually returned as well.[66]

Achan Kong reportedly encouraged his soldiers to wear red scarves (*pha deng*), upon which he had put spells (*mon katha*) for protective purposes. In one case, an observer saw eighty of Prasong's soldiers, led by Siyone, visit Soubin Phanthourat's insurgent group; all had red scarves around their necks.[67] Those who joined would first go to see Achan

[56]Sangthong Phaipranom, *pers. comm.,* Chiang Mai, 15 September 2023.
[57]Thoum Manychanh, *pers. comm.,* telephone to Kitchener, ON, 2 January 2025.
[58]Sangthong Phaipranom, *pers. comm.,* Chiang Mai, 15 September 2023.
[59]Thoum Manychanh, *pers. comm.,* telephone to Kitchener, ON, 2 January 2025.
[60]Symuang Chantharangsy, *pers. comm.,* Ypsilanti, MI, 3 August 2021.
[61]Sangthong Phaipranom, *pers. comm.,* Chiang Mai, 15 September 2023.
[62]Sangthong Phaipranome, *pers. comm.,* Chiang Mai, 15 September 2023.
[63]Sith Phetphrakhian, *pers. comm.,* Bangkok, 9 July 2011.
[64]Khamphoui Sisavatdy, *pers. comm.,* Vancouver, WA, 6 April 2023.
[65]Thoum Manychanh, *pers. comm.,* telephone to Kitchener, ON, 2 January 2025.
[66]Thoum Manychanh, *pers. comm.,* telephone to Kitchener, ON, 19 February 2024.
[67]Khamxay Phasaycharaen, *pers. comm.,* Green Bay, WI, 13 May 2012.



Figure 5. A Red Neck insurgent with villagers in Khammouane Province, 1982.



Figure 6. Red Neck soldiers eating dinner in a 'safe village' in Laos.



Figure 7. Synou Hatxana, a student of Achan Kong, who also used magic to support the insurgency in Laos.

Kong, and once they agreed to act morally, he would give each of them small sacred items. These items changed from year to year, but included small stones, small pieces of wood and small pieces of beeswax. The new members would sew these items into their shirts so that they would not be lost. Achan Kong gave the insurgents black scarves, which they wore on a daily basis, but when they went on missions in Laos, he would give them the red scarves to wear. Thus, villagers came to know them as the Red Necks. They changed the ways that they wore their scarves on a daily basis, including tying red clothes around their necks or across their chests on the right and left sides. They had a code for what days scarves should be worn in particular ways, so that they would recognize imposters. If two groups of insurgents met each other, and one group was wearing the scarves incorrectly, the other would know it was a trap and immediately start shooting.[68] The scarves also had symbolic value, as they demonstrated the power of their spiritual leader's magic.[69]

When insurgents or others prostrated to Achan Kong, he would touch their heads and bless them. Red Neck insurgents were not allowed to take off their scarves when having sex. The idea was that the red scarves, if used properly, could protect the insurgents in

[68]Thoum Manychanh, *pers. comm.,* telephone to Kitchener, ON, 2 January 2025.
[69]Khamxay Phasaycharaen, *pers. comm.,* Green Bay, WI, 13 May 2012.



Figure 8. Red Necks in the village in Hinboun District, Khammouane Province. From left to right: Kham (political worker in villages); Khamtao; unknown; Synou Hatxana; Khamphouvanh; kneeling in front, unknown.

battle, but that the scarves had to be treated with respect.[70] Insurgents needed to be moral and follow the particular rules associated with their sacred power, and it was believed that those who lapsed would face grave danger. The power of magic could help them if the users were moral and followed the rules, but it could hurt them if they failed to do so.

The Red Necks were supposed to mainly follow the five Buddhist precepts. They were not allowed to force women to have sex, and were not permitted to touch women sexually without their permission. They were also not allowed to steal – i.e. from villagers.[71] The only precept that they did not always follow related to killing. Achan Kong explained that if they did not kill their enemies, their enemies would kill them, so they had no choice but to break the precept.[72] This indicates how Kong's magic was mixed with Buddhism.

The Red Necks had their own flag, which had a red moon in its centre, a white band in the middle, and narrow red, blue and yellow bands above and below the red moon. The flag reportedly also had magical powers (Figure 9). The soldiers were not supposed to cut their hair when they were on missions in Laos.[73] Some Red Necks kept their hair long

[70]Chanpheng Lymontry and Toy Namathao, *pers. comm.*, Milwaukee, WI, 6 January 2013; Thoum Manychanh, *pers. comm.*, telephone to Kitchener, ON, 2 January 2025.
[71]Chanpheng Lymontry and Toy Namathao, *pers. comm.*, Milwaukee, WI, 6 January 2013.
[72]Thoum Manychanh, *pers. comm.*, telephone to Kitchener, ON, 2 January 2025.
[73]Chanpheng Lymontry and Toy Namathao, *pers. comm.*, Milwaukee, WI, 6 January 2013.



Figure 9. Red Necks under Prasong Phommalet's command meeting in a village in Laos. The flag of the Red Necks is shown in the photograph. Mr. Kham is sitting beside the flag.

when they went on missions inside Laos, but would have it cut when they returned to Thailand. Others, however, chose not to cut their hair.[74]

During this period, Achan Kong went back and forth between Laos and Thailand, but he mostly stayed in Laos, while Lieutenant Prasong mainly stayed on the Thai side of the border. Achan Kong moved around often with insurgents. Kham was in charge of delivering political messages to villagers, in villages or in nearby forests.[75]

Although there was a large group of Vietnamese soldiers based at Nam Thone, in Savannakhet Province, there were no Vietnamese soldiers operating in Khammouane and Bolikhamxay Provinces, where Prasong and his troops mainly operated.[76] However, they would often refer to the Pathet Lao communist soldiers as 'Vietnamese', since they considered them to be Vietnamese puppets.

The insurgents especially operated in villages in Hinboun District, Khammouane Province.[77] They travelled back and forth between Buengkan and Khammouane. When they were in Laos, they focused on raising villagers awareness. They mainly spent time in villages in Hinboun and Thakhek District.[78] Other groups operated to the north in Bolikhamxay Province, but they were not able to do as much there.

[74]Chanpheng Lymontry and Toy Namathao, *pers. comm.,* Milwaukee, WI, 6 January 2013.
[75]Thoum Manychanh, *pers. comm.,* telephone to Kitchener, ON, 2 January 2025.
[76]Chanpheng Lymontry and Toy Namathao, *pers. comm.,* Milwaukee, WI, 6 January 2013.
[77]Somxay, *pers. comm.,* Nakorn Ratchasima, 12 June 2012.
[78]Thoum Manychanh, *pers. comm.,* telephone to Kitchener, ON, 19 February 2024.



Figure 10. A villager giving Red Necks rice in the Xe Bang Fai District area, Khammouane Province, 1982.

When the Red Necks operated in Laos during long missions, they moved between different areas, where they tried to meet villagers in the forest or in villages in order to spread their anti-Lao PDR and Vietnamese politics. However, they typically ran short of food and had to collect rice from villagers (Figure 10). How much of this rice was given willingly, as opposed to having been coerced, is uncertain.[79] Sometimes villagers would bring rice to them in the forest, and sometimes insurgents would surround a village and then send some of their soldiers into the village to contact the village headman, who was assigned the job of collecting rice from each family. People gave each what they could spare; often a bowl of rice. The rice would then be given to the insurgents, who would divide it up and carry it away for future consumption. Sometimes, insurgents would threaten the villagers not to report that they had been there, and the villagers mainly kept quiet. However, in some cases, insurgents would tell cooperating village leaders to report that the Red Necks had been there, so as to prevent the headman from getting in trouble with authorities if he was found not to be reporting about them.[80]

To supplement the rice that they received from villagers, the insurgents collected bamboo shoots and other forest products, and they had a small flint rifle for shooting small animals. They did not have the same taboos about killing wild animals as Boualiene Vannaxay and Thit Tanh Douangmala had (see above). They put out some traps and used other methods to catch wildlife to eat,[81] spending considerable amounts of time in the forest (Figure 11).

[79]Chanpheng Lymontry and Toy Namathao, *pers. comm.,* Milwaukee, WI, 6 January 2013.
[80]Thoum Manychanh, *pers. comm.,* telephone to Kitchener, ON, 2 January 2025.
[81]Chanpheng Lymontry and Toy Namathao, *pers. comm.,* Milwaukee, WI, 6 January 2013.



Figure 11. Group of three Red Necks under Lt. Prasong Phommalet's command in the forest in Laos.

Prasong had previously been in contact with Hmong insurgents in Laos, particularly Vang Kai Vue, who had 300 Hmong fighters in the Phou Ngou area of Bolikhamxay Province.[82] Vang Kai Vue was originally from Moke District in Xieng Khouang Province and was one of the strongest and best-known insurgent leaders in Laos until he was killed in battle in the late 1970s.[83] Xiong Lee and Xiong Her were the Hmong insurgents in Bolikhamxay Province who worked the closest with Prasong. Prasong would collaborate with them when he crossed into Laos. Later, Prasong contacted other Hmong insurgent leaders and their supporters, including Moua Nhia Long, a *Chao Fa* leader, and Luang Pho Chamroon, the abbot of Thamkrabok Buddhist Temple in Saraburi Province, both of whom were heavily involved with the insurgency (see Baird 2013a).[84]

The Red Neck insurgents worked in many villages on the Lao side of the border. They obtained most of their weapons from village militias, with whom they sometimes collaborated. The village militia leaders would secretly inform the insurgents when to surround a village and then come in to confiscate their guns. Later, the village militias would not get in trouble for losing their weapons.[85]

The Red Necks sometimes, however, had problems with villagers. One important issue was that there was a group of thieves, not insurgents but just opportunistic thieves, who were crossing over from Thailand to steal livestock from villagers. This hurt the

[82]Somxay, *pers. comm.,* Nakorn Ratchasima, 24 July 2011.
[83]James Chamberlain, *pers. comm.,* Vientiane, 11 February 2009.
[84]Sith Phetphrakhian, *pers. comm.,* Bangkok, 9 July 2011.
[85]Thoum Manychanh, *pers. comm.,* telephone to Kitchener, ON, 2 January 2025.

reputation of the insurgents,[86] including the Red Necks, as it played into the government narrative that the insurgents were simply robbers out for their own benefit (see, for example, Lê Huy Mai 2021a, 2021b; *Vientiane Domestic Service* 1980, 1988). However, the Red Necks were never able to identify those stealing from the villagers. If they had, they would have killed them.[87]

Some other insurgent leaders are critical of Achan Kong, as he was said to have given insurgents many things that were supposed to be sacred but ended up being ineffective. Somphone Khounbolibounsak, an insurgent leader with Boualiene Vannaxay, for example, claimed that many people died due to Achan Kong. In his own words, 'Achan Kong was a liar and a stealer'.[88] Others, however, continued to believe in Achan Kong's magical powers and morality.

In the early 1980s, Prasong faced various problems when the Thai military tried to force him to come under the control of the ULNLF, which had allegedly paid the Thai military to have control over the insurgency along the border. Prasong initially refused, and the Thais detained Sith Phetphrakhian and other insurgents for three days to try to convince them to comply. Moreover, the Thai military reportedly tried to get Prasong and Thonglith Chokbengboune, the military leader of the ULNLF, to resolve their differences. The two met in Buengkan for a meal. Thonglith arrived with Thai officials, while other Thai officials from Sichiangmai District accompanied Prasong. However, Thonglith reportedly fled from the restaurant and later claimed that Prasong had threatened to kill him, but that was not actually the case. The Thais reportedly created a situation that led to tensions between the two.[89] The ULNLF also intimidated others opposed to coming under their command (Baird 2025a).

Although the Thais could not easily jail Prasong, as he had a Thai identification card,[90] he eventually left Buengkan, frustrated and discouraged by the changing circumstances. In 1986, he settled in Strasbourg, France, as a political refugee.[91] In 1987 or 1988, not long after Prasong went to France, Achan Kong decided to become a political refugee in the US,[92] where he stayed with his son. However, in the late 2010s, he moved to Alaska; he died in the mid-to-late 2010s, reportedly of frostbite after the vehicle he was driving got stuck in the snow.[93]

Making sense of the role of magic in the Lao insurgency

From the accounts presented above, it should be evident that magic played a significant role in the ethnic Lao anti-Lao PDR and Vietnamese insurgency that occurred along the border in Khammouane and Bolikhamxay Provinces of Laos between 1975 and the early 1990s. After this time, cross-border insurgent activities significantly declined (Rosett 1990), largely due to the government of Thailand no longer allowing insurgent groups

[86]Farther south, in Ubon Ratchathani Province, some insurgents were reportedly involved in stealing water buffaloes and cows from villagers on the Lao side of the border, and bringing them to Thailand to sell (Baird 2025a).
[87]Chanpheng Lymontry and Toy Namathao, *pers. comm.*, Milwaukee, WI, 6 January 2013.
[88]Somphone Khounbolibounsak, *pers. comm.*, Green Bay, WI, 22 October 2010.
[89]Khamphoui Sisavatdy, *pers. comm.*, Beaverton, OR, 15 May 2009; Sith Phetphrakhian, *pers. comm.*, Bangkok, 27 June 2011.
[90]Sith Phetphrakhian, *pers. comm.*, Bangkok, 27 June 2011.
[91]Khamphoui Sisavatdy, *pers. comm.*, Beaverton, OR, 3 May 2009.
[92]Chanpheng Lymontry and Toy Namathao, *pers. comm.*, Milwaukee, WI, 6 January 2013.
[93]Thoum Manychanh, *pers. comm.*, telephone to Kitchener, ON, 19 February 2024; 2 January 2025.

to establish base camps on the Thai side of the border, in line with the 'battlefields to marketplaces' policy that Thai Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan adopted in late 1988 after he formed a new elected government (Bangkok Post 1989; Dommen 2001; Evans 2002).

It might not be surprising that Lao people put so much faith in magic during this volatile and uncertain economic, political and militarized period, as there is a history of this sort of behaviour in Laos, as mentioned in the introduction. While the foundational beliefs associated with magic were already present amongst the Lao people, reliance on magic especially emerged strongly due to the crises that they were confronting, even if people used magic or understood it in different ways. Apart from dramatic political and economic changes occurring in Laos, it was widely believed that their country was facing an existential threat from Vietnamese colonization. Moreover, many insurgents felt stateless, since they did not feel safe in Laos, but they were also not officially allowed to stay in Thailand, rendering them essentially stateless. Finding ways to support their families also put a lot of pressure on many.

Those who took up arms against the government in Laos were certainly scared of dying, as many insurgents were injured and killed in battle over the years. Therefore, it is of little surprise that they looked to magic for protection, including through receiving sacred spells (*mon katha*), keeping sacred protective items, or abiding by particular precepts and taboos. Achan Kong provided insurgent soldiers with the hope of being protected through these various practices during a time of particular danger. Magic also helped with recruitment.

Teachers like Achan Kong were, however, not the only ones who provided this hope. Buddhist monks who were sympathetic to the insurgents also offered very similar types of protective services (Baird 2012; Na Champassak 2010). Hmong soldiers with the *Chao Fa* and, to a lesser extent, the ULNLF, also sought out magical protective hope, albeit in some different forms, based on ethnic traditional practices (Baird 2014). So, while the details of the practices were largely based on different ethnic and religious beliefs, the overall frameworks for incorporating magic into insurgent activities were often similar, since they were typically intended to provide protection from bullets and bombs.

Although Buddhism is inherently oriented towards non-violence by such fundamental principles as not killing, in times of great conflict and uncertainty, Buddhism has often been used to justify conflict, or to protect soldiers in combat, as has been seen in such countries as Japan (Victoria 2010), southern Thailand (Jerryson 2009), Myanmar (Schober 2006; Sussman and Jones 2008), Sri Lanka (Bartholomeusz 2002; Kent 2010; Schober 2006) or of course Laos (Baird 2012).

Magic has, however, only rarely been used for offensive purposes and has mainly been focused on providing protection. This might be because acknowledging that one was capable of using magic to hurt or kill other people could lead to harsh accusations from others, including that the users of offensive magic are dangerous ravenous spirits (*phi pop*) (see Baird 2024). Indeed, Achan Kong apparently only used magic for protective purposes. However, having good protection was crucial for effective offensive action.

It is notable, however, that different people believed and relied on magic protection to varying degrees and in somewhat different ways. For example, most insurgents wore protective amulets, with greater or lesser protective qualities, and even if one had an amulet that was believed to be particularly efficacious, that person might be more or less

confident in amulets actually being capable of saving their lives, depending on an array of factors.

Ultimately, everyday beliefs in magic were accentuated during this time of great danger. Although there were many different beliefs, degrees of belief, and practices associated with magic and the political and military struggle against the Lao PDR and Vietnamese insurgency after 1975, there is no doubt that these beliefs were crucial for the political and military resistance in Laos.

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