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Obtaining the Nha Heun "Culture" from the King: Considering a Sacred Script and Oral History in Southern Laos

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Palm-leaf manuscripts are important objects in Southeast Asia. Their value often goes beyond the meanings of the written texts. They also have historical, religious, literary, symbolic and ritual importance. This paper investigates textual materiality as it applies to a story about palm-leaf manuscripts owned by the ethnic Heuny (Nha Heun) group in Paksong District, Champasak Province, southern Laos. This story links material texts to oral history, rituals and efforts by the Nha Heun to legitimize their culture. It demonstrates how palm-leaf manuscripts can serve to legitimize claims handed down through oral traditions and ritual practice.

Keywords: Nha Heun, palm-leaf manuscripts, Austroasiatic, textual materiality, oral traditions.

Since 1995, I have been visiting ethnic Heuny (Nha Heun)[1] villages in Paksong District, Champasak Province, on the Bolaven Plateau for research (Roberts and Baird 1995, pp. 219–62; Baird 2013, pp. 241–63; Green and Baird 2016, pp. 853–73; Baird 2020, pp. 1–21). However, I only became aware of the sacred palm-leaf manuscripts of the Nha Heun in 2014, when an American who had been an International Voluntary Service (IVS) volunteer in 1969 and a US Agency for International Development (USAID) Community Development Advisor between 1970 and May 1971, William (Bill) Sage, approached me. He later provided seventy-eight photographs he had taken of a particular set of palm-leaf manuscripts he had come

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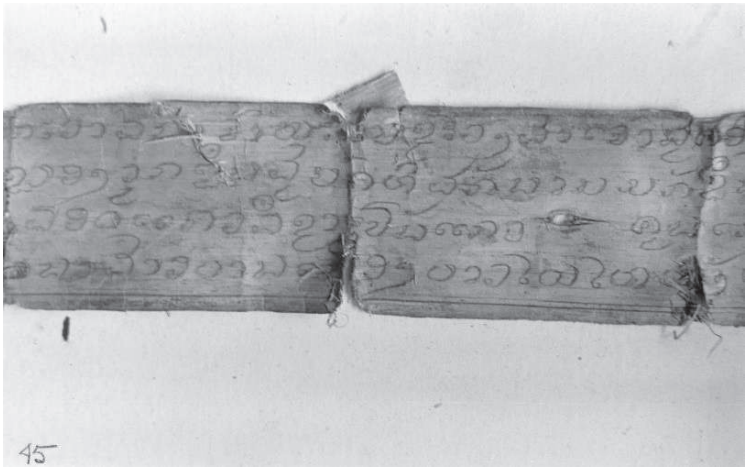

FIGURE 1 One of the seventy-eight photographs of the Nha Heun palm-leaf manuscript photographed by William W. Sage in December 1970.

across when he was working with the Nha Heun in southern Laos from 1969 to 1971. Sage was keen to learn what was written on the palm-leaf manuscript, believing that the content might be historically significant. Moreover, he understood that the original manuscript that he photographed in December 1970 had been destroyed in a village fire some years later (Figure 1). He believed, therefore, that these images represented the last surviving record of the content of those palm-leaf inscriptions. However, Sage could not read the manuscript himself and it was initially unclear whether the text was even written in standard Lao. We thought that it could be written in Toua Tham script, an older Buddhist script that I do not read.[2]

I was eager to try to determine the content and meaning of the inscriptions and I managed to recruit two Lao American men from Madison, Wisconsin who were willing to volunteer their time to help decipher the contents of the photos of the palm-leaf manuscripts. They were Bounmy Phimmasene, originally from Khammouane Province, central Laos, and Somkhit Philavong, originally from Vientiane. They diligently worked for many weeks and hours trying

to decipher the text. Early on, they realized that the writing was in modern Lao language, not in Toua Tham. That should have made it easier to read the texts, but despite much effort, Bounmy and Somkhit did not get very far. The script was extremely hard for them to read, both because of its deterioration over time and the various styles of Lao writing used. While they were able to identify some words and short phrases, the sentences were excruciatingly difficult to follow, making it extraordinarily difficult to piece the text together. Bounmy and Somkhit expressed frustration to me about the confusing handwriting and poorly constructed sentences. They were disturbed about what they understood to be the poorly written Lao language on the palm-leaf manuscripts. I was frustrated when I heard the significant challenge they faced in trying to decipher the script. I discussed the matter with Bounmy and Somkhit. They wondered if it would be possible to get anything useful out of the palm-leaf manuscripts. They also questioned if the person or people who had written the text knew Lao language well. Indeed, various Nha Heun people who were only partially literate in Lao probably wrote the text. We came to realize that the transcript does not contain the detailed content originally expected. At most, it contains words and phrases designed to remind the Nha Heun of the much more detailed oral history.

Although we started out on a quest for a historically significant written record of a particular event or era associated with the Nha Heun people, we ended up thinking more about the role of palm-leaf manuscripts in Nha Heun society, a society without much of a history of writing but with many important oral traditions and legends. For example, the Nha Heun have several legends of some length about a battle with the Jrou (Laven) and occupying land west of the Xe Namnoy. They also have a legend about the slave raids undertaken by various other ethnic groups, who carried children and men off to Kontum, in present-day Vietnam.[3]

In this paper, I consider the photographs of the palm-leaf manuscripts that Sage provided to us in 2014, the oral tradition and rituals of the Nha Heun people, and the links between oral history,

ritual culture and the textual materiality associated with a set of palm-leaf manuscripts. Examining older texts using new analysis can be a fruitful approach and that is what I intend to do here. In particular, I want to present an example of how palm-leaf manuscripts and other important written scripts in mainland Southeast Asia do not always have as much value as repositories of historical facts as they do as ritual objects and symbols of truth to the society that employs them. Indeed, texts frequently play important symbolic and ritual roles in which their materiality is much more important than the written content.[4] In this case, the story that is supposed to be written on the palm-leaf manuscripts is actually being perpetuated through oral traditions, with the scripts playing more of a symbolic role than serving as a repository of facts, as was originally suspected. It does not appear that it has been read by anyone in a long period.

This story has the potential to help us better understand the roles of palm-leaf manuscripts and other sacred texts in Southeast Asia, particularly among upland ethnic minority groups, such as the Nha Heun, a Western Bahnaric Austroasiatic language-speaking ethnic group with rich oral traditions, the focus here. Indeed, unlike the lowland Lao people whom they have long interacted with, the Nha Heun do not have their own written script, a difference that has greatly affected relations between the uplanders and lowlanders and had often given the Nha Heun and other upland groups a sense of inferiority.

The paper begins by reviewing some examples from mainland Southeast Asia that clearly indicate the usefulness of carefully considering the material ritual importance of palm-leaf manuscripts. In doing this, I include a written description of the oral version of the story told to Sage in 1970. This story was supposed to be on the photographed palm-leaf manuscript, but as already explained, the written text was not for people to decipher. More likely, the writing was symbolically important and it has served to remind people of the oral history. I have slightly revised this oral account based on the narratives provided by Nha Heun elders a few years ago. Essentially, the story that Sage heard from an elder in late

1970 is remarkably similar to what was conveyed to me by elders in 2015, about forty-five years later. I then continue by analysing the material and ritual importance of palm-leaf manuscripts, suggesting that we need to move away from seeing old palm-leaf manuscripts simply as repositories of facts, as would be expected by historians who examine old religious documents (see Archaimbault 1991, p. 5; Petit 2019, p. 50). Instead, we need to pay more attention to the symbolic and ritual importance of these palm-leaf manuscripts beyond the actual 'content' included as written script.

The Material and Sacred Importance of Scripts

Textual materiality has long been important in various parts of the world (Walker 2013), whether relating to how nuns used the materiality of their prayer-books as the embodiment of their devotion during the Medieval Ages (Lähnemann 2016), to book illumination during the Middle Ages (De Hamel 1992), or for a variety of written forms in ancient Egypt (Hoogendijk and van Gompel 2018).

Here I contend that it is important to consider textual materiality in relation to understanding traditionally non-literate Indigenous societies with animist spiritual beliefs. This includes the group that is the focus of this article, the Nha Heun, who have made use of a particular text to legitimize their position in society, especially in relation to lowland powers. However, the Nha Heun are not the only upland ethnic minority that has developed important relationships with written scripts associated with Lao-Tai centres of political, cultural and religious power. For example, the ethnic Kmhmu in northern Laos have stories about losing their written script (Proschan 2001, p. 1024), as do the Ta'aang people in southwestern China (Kojima and Badenoch 2013, p. 123) and the Kassak, a Lao-Tai ethnic group south of Luang Prabang that lives more like Kmhmu than Lao (Dore 1980, p. 60). The Akha, Karen, Iu-Mien and Hmong also have stories about how they variously lost their writing systems (Scott 2009, pp. 221–24). Writing systems can be thought of as technologies that facilitate the communication of ideas, and

they have important influences on the way culture is constructed and maintained (Veidlinger 2006, pp. 1–2), not just through the words that they convey but also through the relationships that they symbolize and legitimate.

Justin McDaniel has pointed out that scholars tend to value Buddhist texts that are easy to read over those that are ritually important, explaining that Buddhist texts are often used primarily for ritual purposes and that some are only rarely or never intended to be read. As far as he is concerned, too much of a focus has been placed on the semantic meaning and content of Buddhist texts and not enough attention on their ritual importance. Their role as technologies in ritual practice is not sufficiently appreciated. For example, birch bark was used to produce texts, but it was very brittle and thus did not survive as a result of ritual use. Moreover, the fact that not all texts are meant to be read is illustrated by sacred texts being written on necklaces, obviously without the intention of them ever being read. Instead, knowing the title or subject of the script is often more important than knowing its content.[5]

McDaniel provided a couple of personal stories to more clearly demonstrate his point. First, when he was a Buddhist monk decades ago, one of his teachers, an ethnic Lao monk in Thailand, gave him a palm-leaf manuscript. Thinking that this was a great honour, he felt obliged to spend a considerable amount of time reading it in full. However, he was ultimately disappointed that the content was not as profound as he originally expected it to be. When he mentioned this to the monk who had initially given him the palm-leaf manuscript, the monk looked surprised and suggested that the palm-leaf manuscript had more value materially than it did with regard to content. In another example, McDaniel heard of a Buddhist manuscript being cut in half, with a part being given by an abbot to another monk. Clearly, it was not intended to be read.[6] In the past, palm-leaf manuscripts were sometimes ground up to make other manuscripts, amulets and Buddhist images, indicating the importance of their materiality rather than of the actual inscriptions. Evidently, the intention has often not been to read palm-leaf manuscripts;

their value is more symbolic (see McDaniel 2008; McDaniel and Ransom 2015).

The French scholar Solange Thierry, in her book *Le Cambodge de Contes* (The Cambodia of tales), considered the role of Buddhist palm-leaf manuscripts in Cambodia. Affirming McDaniel's points, Thierry writes, "We can guess from the outset the cultural notions that are associated with the concrete existence of manuscripts: they are not just any objects, but 'deep', sacred deposits" (1985, p. 18). However, the point that she emphasizes is—in relation to legends in verse or rhythmic prose in Cambodia—that this 'literature' is for verbal communication. As Thierry put it,

> Oral expression has been written to better perpetuate itself and become part of the national tradition. And the written expression, in return, was never intended to be read silently and individually, but to be recited, modulated, sung, listened to, and sometimes even 'activated'. (1985, p. 63)

For Thierry, the performance is important. However, comparing the past to more recent times, Thierry comments that "the text has lost its character of sacred deposit.… It has gone from the state of *satra* (sacred) to that of *syebhau* (profane) a book in the modern sense, destined for sale and no longer for solemn transmission" (1985, p. 63). The point is that, like McDaniel, Thierry makes it clear that we should be careful not to assume that manuscripts are produced primarily to be read; in fact, they are often produced for other symbolic or ritual purposes, and that ritual performance gives the material objects even more sacred value.

The linguistic anthropologist James Chamberlain conveyed to me one case in which material palm-leaf manuscripts had taken on particular spiritual or religious meanings well beyond what is written on the manuscripts. In 2006, he visited a Buddhist ethnic Phong village originally from Houaphanh Province, in the far north of Laos, but resettled in Phoun District, Xieng Khouang Province at the time he visited them. According to Chamberlain, villagers reported that they had important palm-leaf manuscripts, but to his surprise the manuscripts were not available as readable text but as neatly folded

geometric balls placed on the offering tray during a rite, possibly an ancestral ceremony of some sort. As it turned out, they were thought to contain the legal justification for a Phong movement from China and resettlement in Houaphanh (see Petit 2019).[7]

Northeastern Thai villagers often use scripts for magical purposes (Tsumara 2009, p. 76). A relevant craze—because it links scripts with magic—that overtook Thailand for a while and effectively severely reduced the palm-leaf manuscript inventory was the destruction of Buddhist manuscripts on the orders of a Buddhist monk to make sacred Buddhist amulets. One episode occurred many years ago involving a regional abbot of a Buddhist temple—living in the north of Thailand, perhaps in Chiang Rai Province—who sent out word to all of the temples that he oversaw that they had to bring all of their palm-leaf manuscripts to the main temple. There, they were placed in a huge pile on the temple grounds and burned, but not with the intention of destroying written records; the ashes were instead carefully collected and made into protective votive amulets, ones that were believed to be powerful because of the sacred power of the texts that produced the ash. The abbot clearly believed in the power of the sacred words once they were transformed into ash by fire. This practice may well have been officially sanctioned. One of the outcomes is that many scholars, such as David Wyatt, an important scholar of twentieth-century Thailand, concluded—although without evidence to support the claim—that there are now more extant manuscripts in the little country of Laos than in all of Thailand.[8] The ash is seen as powerful because it contained the words of the Dharma, but it becomes even more powerful when the ashes of amulets are combined with Buddha relics and monks' robes or the remains of monks (their hair clippings, etc.).[9]

Manuscripts are also used in other ways. For example, Buddhist monks in Thailand sometimes chew manuscripts (mostly the mulberry paper ones) and use the cud to make Buddhist amulets.[10] Another example that demonstrates their sacred nature relates to old palm-leaf manuscripts in Northern Thailand being installed within stupas and sealed up. They are sealed away because they have power and

they fulfil the Dharma portion of the triple gem (the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha), which is a common formula for making material objects powerful.[11]

Another scholar of Southeast Asian religion, Richard Fox, addresses the idea of 'textual materiality' in his recent book, *More Than Words*, although he investigates everyday engagements with texts in parts of southern Bali, Indonesia (Fox 2018). He usefully begins the book as follows:

> Most who study religion in Southeast Asia will have come across uses of writing, and of scripture, that exceed their expectations. Eating sutras. Meditating on the alphabet. Making offerings to manuscripts. Wearing bulletproof tattoos. The regional scholarship points time and again to the idea that writing is *more than words* and that the expert handling of script may confer power and protection. (Fox 2018, p. 1; emphasis in original)

Fox then goes on to raise some intriguing questions:

> Yet, with some notable exceptions, scholars have tended to devalue such nonliterary uses of writing as secondary to a more conventional model of "the text" understood as a medium for the transmission of religious ideas and ideals. What would happen if we inverted this assumption and approached ostensibly literary objects as if they were amulets, or even living beings? Would it really be such a stretch? Is there not already a certain "word magic" at work in the commonsense notion of *meaning* as an ethereal substance passing between minds? (Fox 2018, p. 1)

These are questions that I, too, am interested in. However, I deal with a different intellectual tradition than what Fox considers. He writes:

> From modern-day Burmese sorcery to Old Javanese curse inscriptions, these "other" uses of writing are crucial for our understanding of Southeast Asian iterations of Buddhism, Brahmanism, and Islam. (Fox 2018, p. 1)

From the brief literature review above, it should now be evident that palm-leaf manuscripts and other sacred texts in various parts of Southeast Asia frequently have important value that goes well beyond the content of the written text itself. In addition, and importantly for this paper, upland ethnic minorities often have complicated

relationships with written scripts, especially those that politically link them to lowland centres of power. Now we turn to providing some background information about the Nha Heun.

The Nha Heun of the Bolaven Plateau

The Nha Heun[12]—or Heuny in their own language—are an Indigenous upland ethnic group with a long history of living on the eastern portion of the Bolaven Plateau in what is now Paksong District, Champasak. The Nha Heun speak an Austroasiatic language in the Western Bahnaric branch of the Mon-Khmer family.[13] They often live 800–1000 metres above sea level (Khamin 2000, p. 1). The Nha Heun people are almost all animists, believing in various malevolent spirits, which they must appease through rituals (Baird 2013, pp. 257–58). The Nha Heun were historically non-literate and do not have a script for their own language. However, in the nineteenth and especially the twentieth centuries, many of them learned Lao. In the 1800s, the Nha Heun were relatively independent, but they did exchange tribute with lowland Lao rulers in Attapeu. During the French colonial period, however, from 1893 to 1954, they gradually came increasingly under government control, although they still lived in relatively remote mountainous areas (Wall 1975, p. 27).

In 2015, the national census indicated that the total Nha Heun population was just 8,976 (Lao Statistics Bureau 2016, p. 121). The vast majority are rural farmers who mainly conduct swidden agriculture, collect non-timber forest products (NTFPs), hunt and fish. The Nha Heun historically shared the Bolaven Plateau with another Austroasiatic language-speaking group, the Jrou (Laven), who live on the western part of the Plateau. The Nha Heun have a long history of interaction with lowland Lao groups in Attapeu, which is east of the Plateau and adjacent to the Sekong River (Baird 2013, pp. 249–50).

In the 1960s and early 1970s, much of the Nha Heun population aligned itself with the Royal Lao Government and joined Special Guerrilla Units (SGUs) organized, paid for and directed by the

US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The primary job of the Nha Heun was to conduct covert operations to collect intelligence about the Ho Chi Minh Trail to the east at the foot of the plateau and to disrupt this supply route (Conboy 1995, p. 86; Briggs 2009, p. 56). Despite heavy fighting in the area during the Second Indochina War in Laos (1962–73), few Nha Heun left their homeland area, although a small number relocated to live near Pakse, the capital of Champasak Province. In the mid-1990s, however, many Nha Heun faced resettlement because of the development of the Houay Ho and Xe Pian Xe Namnoy dams (Baird 2020, p. 6; Baird and Shoemaker 2008, p. 294; Delang and Toro 2011, p. 574; Baird 2013, pp. 245–53; International Rivers Network 1999, p. 43). Approximately forty per cent of the global Nha Heun population in southern Laos were relocated and resettled as a result of dam development in the late 1990s (International Rivers Network 1999, p. 43). Prior to being resettled, the Nha Heun largely subsisted on swidden agriculture along with fishing, hunting and the collection of NTFPs. Some also had small coffee plantations. As Barbara Wall (1975) showed in the only detailed ethnography of the Nha Heun so far conducted, these people were not nomadic 'slash-and-burn cultivators' who damaged primary forest. Instead, they lived in largely fixed settlements near flowing water, where they conducted well-organized swidden agriculture. In 1970, the Nha Heun villages were small, with an average of just sixty-eight inhabitants per village (Sage 1970, p. 28). This allowed for sustainable swidden agriculture.

William Sage's Story

William W. Sage did community development work for USAID in forty-two villages, of which thirty-five were Nha Heun villages, populated by 2,730 people. At the time, all were located in Sayasila District, Attapeu Province, on the eastern region of the Bolaven Plateau.[14] On 21 December 1970, Sage interviewed Tasseng Vong—sub-district chief in Lasassine Village—about an important story (Sage 1971, pp. 1–11). The following is an account of that story, based

partially on Sage's interview, but amplified somewhat, based on an interview I conducted in Lao language with Nha Heun leaders Thing Noyounmuang (66 years old) and Dot Laounmuang (71 years old) in Xe Namnoy Village, in Paksong District, Champasak Province on 21 July 2015. Thing was the retired sub-district chief in the Nha Heun area and Dot was the retired head of the Agriculture Office of Paksong District and a District Party Committee member. Both are also considered cultural experts within their communities.

According to the accounts that Sage recorded in 1970, and what I heard in 2015, during the time of the reign of *Chao* Anouvong (Anou),[15] between 1804 and 1828, the lowland Lao in Attapeu town governed the Nha Heun. At the time, relations between the highland Nha Heun and the lowland Lao were strained as the Lao were trying to force the Nha Heun to abandon many of their customs and cultural practices. The ethnic Lao apparently visited the Nha Heun on the Bolaven Plateau periodically, but could not enter the Nha Heun villages because they were 'closed' to outsiders, meaning that the village posted symbols indicating that outsiders should not enter, the assumption being that there was a health problem or a calamity that had taken place in the village. The Lao were frustrated that they could not enter the villages when they came to collect taxes, or sometimes just to pilfer the pigs and chickens of the local people. At the time, it was normal for Nha Heun villages to be closed to strangers six months of the year, or villages were closed during certain seasons such as the planting or harvesting seasons, or during burial ceremonies and other life cycle or agrarian rituals. This tactic could be seen as a 'weapon of the weak' by an oppressed group of people who wanted to be left alone (see Scott 1985). Indeed, the Nha Heun were subjugated by the Lao in Attapeu and they were less powerful than the Jrou (Laven) ethnic group, the most dominating Austroasiatic language-speaking group in the area.

The Lao became so frustrated that they sought administrative mandates to prohibit the Nha Heun from shutting down their villages so frequently. Indeed, they accused the Nha Heun of deliberately closing their villages to prevent the Lao from entering to fulfil

administrative duties. The Lao claimed that the Nha Heun would never develop if they did not open up their villages, and that communications between the Lao and Nha Heun would suffer if the villages remained closed so often. The Lao also accused the Nha Heun of closing their villages to avoid going to Sok Village, located at the foot of the eastern edge of the Plateau on Route 16, to pay their taxes.[16] The Nha Heun denied the accusations, and to support their position they showed the Lao officials their tribal laws and customs, which were written on long palm-leaf inscriptions. According to Sage (1971, pp. i–ii), although the Nha Heun explained that the inscriptions were given to them by the spirits, the Lao denied their legitimacy and burned them to show that they were farcical and that the Lao administration would always prevail over any laws that came from the spirits. In mainland Southeast Asia, it is common for ethnic minority groups with oral traditions to have stories about previously being able to write. In these accounts, however, they somehow lose the skill to write, with the reasons ranging from a dog eating the buffalo skin that the language was written on to being betrayed by the dominant ethnic group (Dore 1980, p. 60; Proschan 2001, p. 1024; Kojima and Badenoch 2013, p. 123; Scott 2009, pp. 221–24). This situation is another way in which written language is understood by one of these groups. However, according to two important Nha Heun elders and retired government officials, Thing and Dot, the Nha Heun villagers killed the old *khayawng louang* (‘great leader’—the top position in Nha Heun societal hierarchy) because he was too forceful with the people. He would apparently use a walking stick to knock rice plants down when he walked through rice fields, which made many Nha Heun angry. They initially shot a crossbow arrow into his ear, but it did not kill him. They eventually killed him by cutting his throat, so he could not use his special magical powers to protect himself. They then burned his laws, since they disliked him so much. Thing and Dot claimed that the Lao did not burn the laws; the Nha Heun had done so. This story is important, as Wall writes that “The Nya Hon are men without leaders”, and only “with the arrival of the French, the Nya Hon were

then obliged to attribute political power to a few men" (1975, p. 27). Indeed, Austroasiatic peoples frequently have very egalitarian social systems. It could well be that the *khayawng*[17] system was set up in cooperation with or under the direction of the Lao or Siamese so as to make it easier for those governing to maintain some level of structure and control over them. Oddly, Wall makes no mention of the *khayawng* system among the Nha Heun at the time, although it almost certainly existed in 1967 when she did her main fieldwork.

In any case, the Nha Heun were upset and decided that they had to do something to preserve their culture and traditions. At the time, there was a young Lao girl living in Sok Village who could speak Nha Heun and got along very well with the Nha Heun. The Nha Heun knew her as they sometimes visited Sok Village to trade, buy goods or pay taxes. Her name was Nang Khayawng Ban Boung (the female leader of Boung village) and she was the daughter of Nang Oung Touk. Ban Boung agreed to help the Nha Heun since she got along very well with them and felt sorry for the Nha Heun. She may have previously commercially interacted with the eight Nha Heun villages located in the foothills of the Bolaven Plateau and possibly learned to speak Nha Heun through these interactions.[18]

Ban Boung agreed to take the Nha Heun to Vientiane to see the king, *Chao* Anou. The delegation would include her along with four Nha Heun village leaders and four Nha Heun coolies to carry supplies. Once organized, the group started on its long walk to the Mekong River town of Pakse in the lowlands. Ban Boung had advised the Nha Heun not to ask the *lam* [interpreter], the lowland contact of Attapeu (the one who acted as the intermediary or translator between the uplanders and the lowlanders), to accompany them because she feared he would try to prohibit the Nha Heun from seeking an audience with the Lao king in Vientiane. Ban Boung and the eight Nha Heun therefore made the long walk along the old footpath route that went from the eastern part of the Bolaven Plateau, where the Nha Heun lived east of Xe Namnoy River, or Dak Miih in Nha Heun language. They reportedly travelled through the ethnic Jrou (Laven) villages on the south side of the plateau and

along the route leading off the plateau to Pakse. The trip took four days and four nights.

When they reached Pakse, Ban Boung sought out her friend Nang Bouning and asked her to join the group on their trip to Vientiane. Nang Bouning was too busy to go with them, but, as she was a member of the Champasak royal family, she agreed to write a letter of introduction to the king in Vientiane, from royal to royal. The letter was expected to be enough to grant the group an audience with the king.

The trip to Vientiane took many days and nights and the group was very tired by the time they reached their destination. Upon arrival, Ban Boung suggested that they look for a guesthouse to stay in and then seek out the king of Vientiane.

The residents of Vientiane, however, were very surprised to see the Nha Heun, as they had never seen people like them before. People whispered things like, "Where have these strange people come from? We have never seen anything like this before." They had apparently never seen people wearing bright red loincloths, with brass earlobe plugs, or donning colourful beads and brass chokers that decorated their bodies. Soon word spread throughout the city that a strange group of people had arrived. Eventually, the news reached the royal palace and King *Chao* Anou decided to go to see the Nha Heun at their guesthouse.

Ban Boung acted as an interpreter for the Nha Heun. She helped explain to *Chao* Anou that the Nha Heun wanted to retain their customs and cultural practices, but that the Lao in Attapeu were trying to force them to abandon their customs. At first, *Chao* Anou did not seem very sympathetic, and so the conversation with Ban Boung was short. As *Chao* Anou was leaving the guesthouse, however, he paused for a moment. It happened that, at the time, *Chao* Anou's family was stricken with tragedy and grief. Only three days before the arrival of the Nha Heun, a large naga, a water serpent creature (*ngeuak* or *phayanak* in Lao; the two often used interchangeably),[19] had caught and devoured *Chao* Anou's daughter as she was bathing near the banks of the Mekong River. *Chao* Anou was grieving over

the loss of his daughter and spent many hours inventing schemes to capture the naga and dislodge the body of his precious daughter from its stomach. But *Chao* Anou's court advisors counselled against each of the proposed plans, fearing that none was ingenious enough to defeat and destroy the wicked creature. Therefore, as *Chao* Anou was preparing to leave the guesthouse where the Nha Heun were staying, he turned around to speak with the Nha Heun again. "I may be able to help you with your grievances if you are able to help me to return my daughter to me." "You see", he continued, "only three days ago a serpent-like creature devoured my daughter as she bathed on the riverbank.… I should be most grateful and deeply sympathetic to your grievances if you should be able to slay the naga." Interestingly, similar stories are found in Laos, including those of other Austroasiatic peoples, such as the Kmhmu (Évrard and Chiemsisouraj 2011, pp. 67–96).

Upon hearing *Chao* Anou's proposal, the Nha Heun were initially hesitant to give a definite response as they did not have any weapons with them and they had never killed a naga before. They imagined that the task would not be an easy one. Rather than respond too quickly, they asked for a few days to consider *Chao* Anou's proposal before providing a definite answer. The king agreed and departed for his palace.

The Nha Heun were confronted with the choice of either having to relinquish their customs by failing to receive help from *Chao* Anou or devising an intelligent plan to slay the Naga and hence gain the sympathy and esteem of *Chao* Anou. They huddled in a small circle smoking tobacco wrapped in banana leaves and discussed plan after plan until, on the fourth day, they finally came up with a scheme that they hoped would work.

They decided that they would ask for thirty arm lengths of *seuak nang nieu*—thick rope made out of the hides of cows and buffaloes—a special 'three *song*' metal to fabricate a hook from, and a small puppy. The Nha Heun then went to see *Chao* Anou to present their plan and to request these three things. *Chao* Anou granted their requests immediately.

Soon after, the Nha Heun returned to their guesthouse with the rope, the metal and the puppy. Using the metal, they fabricated a large hook, which they intended to attach to the puppy. They then gave the puppy a good meal of rice that they had carried with them from their villages. The idea was to fatten up the puppy so that it would tempt the naga. The Nha Heun then established a small spirit house near the water, as was their practice. The spirit house was constructed simply, with strips of bamboo and decorated with two small wax candles the length of rice blades at two weeks of growth. A few green leaves and fragrant flowers were put on top of the spirit house, and forty grains of rice they had brought with them from the *khayawng louang* were placed inside the house. The spirit house was then placed beside the Mekong River.

While the Nha Heun were devising their scheme, the Lao were themselves trying to kill the naga, but without success. They tried to shoot crossbows at it, but the arrows would not even pierce the skin. Others hurled spears and swords at the naga, but they were unsuccessful as well.

Finally, the Nha Heun were ready to implement their plan to slay the naga. First, they went to the riverbank where they had placed the spirit house and lit the candles. They then tied the rope to the metal hook and tied the puppy securely on to the hook with two strips of bamboo. They pitched the hook deep into the river and let it sink. After three days and three nights, they did not see any sign of the naga, so they returned to their lodgings to wait.

On the third day, when the Nha Heun were huddled around their morning fire, a messenger arrived from *Chao* Anou's palace. The messenger brought news that they had been summoned by *Chao* Anou to go to the location at the Mekong River where they had sunk the rope, metal hook and puppy. According to the messenger, *Chao* Anou had ordered that several hundred men be assembled to pull the Naga up so that it could be slain, but the men could not do it. The king therefore wanted the Nha Heun to go there as soon as possible.

The four Nha Heun leaders and four coolies said to the messenger, "We shall come directly, but first we must make another spirit house that we shall place on the shores of the Mekong. Lest we forget our spirits, which have been very good to us, we shall not have the strength to pull the Naga in." The messenger returned to send the message to *Chao* Anou.

Shortly after, the eight Nha Heun emerged wearing bright red loincloths decorated with beaded designs and red fringes, brass earplugs and red cloth bands that they wore on their heads like turbans. They walked proudly to the riverbank, picked up the rope and gave it a few forceful tugs. After a struggle, they finally dragged the naga on to the riverbank. The Lao were in a state of amazement that these strange people from so far away, and wearing such strange clothing, should be so strong. Their astonishment was based on existing stereotypes about the wild forest-dwelling '*kha*' (Austroasiatic minorities). Interestingly, this part resembles the story of how the famous Buddhist image in Champasak, named Phra Keo Phaleuk or Phra Ong Khao, was lost in the Mekong River and could only be retrieved by the ethnic minorities who originally found it (Baird 2017, p. 366).

After the Naga had been pulled completely out of the water and some distance up the riverbank, *Chao* Anou ordered the Nha Heun to cut open the stomach of the creature to remove his daughter. The Nha Heun coolies took a sword and slit the stomach of the Naga open. They also cut out the liver of the naga for *Chao* Anou to eat, since the naga had eaten his daughter. Inside the stomach they found the body of the princess in a foetal position, but she was still as beautiful as the day the naga had consumed her. She was not breathing, however, and *Chao* Anou was very sad.

The Nha Heun also found inside the stomach of the naga a beautiful piece of wood with words written in Lao, "*mai ken long, 8 liem, you nai thong khe*" (a piece of hardwood with eight corners are in the stomach of a crocodile),[20] and on one side was written, "*mai ken, douang lat, thong kee*", which meant, "hard wood, flat piece, hard as copper". On the other side of the two-sided piece of

wood were four categorical rules[21] directed to the Nha Heun to be followed stringently by the tribe or ethnic group.

The first rule dictated that the Nha Heun *muang* (ethnic group community) could only close down the overall 'Nha Heun *muang*' to outsiders for six months once every seven years. Anyone (outsiders) who violated the rule would be fined six buffaloes and 600 pieces of silver by the *khayawng louang*. Similarly, if a Nha Heun person left the village, a fine of equal size would have to be paid to the *khayawng louang* of the Nha Heun.

The second law allowed that, on occasion, separate villages could be closed once a year for a period not exceeding a month. If a denizen of that village were to leave or a stranger were to enter the village and disregard the closure of the village, that person would have to pay a fine of three water buffaloes and 300 pieces of silver,[22] or 300 '*lien houa nam*' (coin with pointed head) silver coins.

The third ordinance was directed to the Nha Heun family. It stated that if there is a death in the village, the village could be closed from five to ten days depending on the importance or status of the deceased person. To any person who left the village or any stranger who disregarded the closure of the village, he or she had to compensate the family of the deceased with two water buffaloes and 200 pieces of silver.

The fourth and last law pertained to the conduct of each Nha Heun individual. Here, specific cultural taboos were explained. For example, if a person were to hit someone else and draw blood, the aggressor would be fined 100 pieces of silver, one water buffalo, one jar of rice beer[23] and one pig. There were many laws pertaining to the Nha Heun, and these were broken down into a large number of individual rules and taboos.

The Nha Heun showed *Chao* Anou the tablet of laws given to them. *Chao* Anou read the laws and said that the *muang* of the Nha Heun must observe them to the letter, and that any violations would result in the intervention of the Lao in forbidding all forms of cultural practice. The Nha Heun agreed to follow the laws and asked for permission to return this tablet to Nha Heun lands. However,

Chao Anou did not consent. Instead, he kept the tablet but instructed his scribe to duplicate the laws on a palm-leaf manuscript. At the same time, *Chao* Anou gave one of the Nha Heun leaders some coins or seals made from sticklac resin (*khi khang* in Lao) from insect-infested trees. Similar seals existed in other parts of mainland Southeast Asia during the 1800s. The first coin had the picture of an elephant on it. *Chao* Anou explained that this signified that there was one government and one king. The second had a picture of Vat That Phanom, which is located across the river from Thakhek in present-day Nakorn Phanom Province, Thailand; on the reverse side was an inscription. In addition, a third coin was given to Thao Yain, who was the leader of the Nha Heun delegation and the person who received the laws and coins from *Chao* Anou.[24] On the coin was the insignia of Khayawng Nak (see Figure 2).

Some days after the scribes had transcribed the writings on to the bamboo strips[25] and *Chao* Anou had presented the coins to Thao Yain, the Nha Heun began their long journey back to the land of



FIGURE 2 Sticklac coins or seals of (A) an elephant, (B) That Phanom, and (C) the insignia of Khayawng Nak. Photograph by William W. Sage.

TABLE 1
Clusters of Nha Heun Villages during *Chao* Anouvong Period (1804–28)

Cluster (mouat)	*Location/Villages*	*Administrator*
Khayawng Louang Cluster	Previously including Tasseng Din Deng, in the Nam Ham and Nam Chick areas	Administered by Khayawng Nak
Cha Louang Cluster	Previously in Tasseng Din Deng, and especially in Khum Kham Village	Administered by Khayawng Bao
Oupasa Cluster	In the Nam Sia Village areas, in the Nam Tiang area	Administered by the assistant of Cha Louang
Meun Louang Cluster	In Nong Hin Village area, in Nong Mek area	Administered by the assistant of Oupasa
Khamvongsa Cluster	Including the southeast village on the Plateau, including Nam Leng and Lasameui Villages	Administered by the assistant of Meun Louang
Keo Khoun Muang Cluster	Including Nam Louak Village, and included villages east of the Xe Namnoy Village to the eastern edge of the Plateau	Administered by the assistant of Khamvongsa

waterfalls, abundant wildlife and fertile soils, carrying with them the laws for all the Nha Heun people.

The laws of the Nha Heun mentioned above divided up the Nha Heun into six clusters or *mouat* groups, with the *khayawng louang* having the highest status and other clusters following in ranked order. The *khayawng louang* was under the *chao muang* (district chief) and took orders from the deputy *chao muang*.

Each of the clusters included a number of small villages. The groupings existed until the French colonial period began, at the end of the nineteenth century, at which time the six groupings were reduced to four *tasseng* or sub-districts. Still, these groupings remain religiously and administratively relevant for the Nha Heun today.

It is hard to know how to assess this story. Some parts do not seem plausible. But is it possible that it has some historical value? Possibly. But what is important about the story is that it indicates the type of relationship that the Nha Heun had with lowlanders and

the type of legitimation that they wanted from them. This contradicts James Scott's (2009) Zomia thesis, which stipulates that upland minorities generally tried to escape from lowland state power, not gain legitimacy from lowlanders, as is the case of the Nha Heun in this story.

Elder Nha Heun, Forty-five Years Later

On 21 July 2015, I interviewed Thing[26] (Figure 3) and Dot (Figure 4) at Xe Namnoy Village on the Bolaven Plateau, in Paksong District, Champasak Province. Thing was the *khayawng louang* of the Nha Heun, and according to him was responsible for all six of the Nha Heun groupings (*mouat*) mentioned above. Thing explained that each grouping has, up until now, its own palm-leaf manuscript, with its own 'laws' (or rules) written on it, called *khanh kha khaw* (the name for ethnic group law) in Nha Heun. According to Thing and Dot, each cluster grouping has its own laws and prescribed punishments.



FIGURE 3 Thing and his wife and children in Lassasine Village, 1970. At the time, he was working for a USAID-funded project as a medic. Photograph by William W. Sage.



FIGURE 4 Dot, Bolaven Plateau, 1970. Photography by William W. Sage.

According to Thing, each group leader has the authority to penalize people at different levels, with the *khayawng louang* being able to fine up to twelve *tamleung*[27] of gold, while the Cha Louang can fine up to ten, Oupasa up to eight, Meun Louang up to six, Khamvongsa also up to six, and Keo Khoun Muang up to four.

Thing and Dot confirmed that Tasseng Vong had indeed been the *khayawng louang* at the time Sage interviewed him in late 1970 (Figure 5). They also provided some more context. According to them, Tasseng Vong and his wife were both originally from the Oupasa cluster. They explained that Tasseng Vong was the assistant chief of the Tasseng (Sub-district) of Oupasa beginning in 1942, and that he later became the chief of the Tasseng in 1950. He held the position of *khayawng louang* between 1968 and 1971, apparently because he had more knowledge of Nha Heun traditions than anyone else at the time. However, Thing and Dot thought that Tasseng Vong did not know the entire origin story of the Nha Heun. Others knew more, they implied. In any case, Tasseng Vong fled to live in Pakse without a position after the Vietnamese overran Attapeu Province and Paksong in 1971, and in 1972 he moved to Houay Sai



FIGURE 5 Tasseng Vong and his wife, Oupasa Village, Sayasila District, Attapeu Province (now Paksong District, Champasak Province), 1970. Photography by William W. Sage.

in northern Laos with his wife. In 1974, however, he returned to live with an adopted daughter in Pakse. He stayed there until 1975 when he returned to live in his old village of Lasassine, where he eventually passed away. According to Thing and Dot, the position of *khayawng louang* was vacant between 1971 and 1977, even though Tasseng Vong was still alive at that time. In 1977, Teun took up the position, even though he was already of an advanced age. In any case, he held the position until 1985 when he resigned because of old age. Seum replaced Teun in 1985 and subsequently retired from the position in 2000. Seung replaced Seum and held the position

until he retired in 2010. Thing became the *khayawng louang* in 2010. The Cha Louang presently lives in Khoun Kham Village; the Oupasa lives in Oupasa Village; the Meun Louang lives in Nong Mek Village; the Khamvongsa is in Houay Soi Village; and the Keo Khoun Muang is at Xe Namnoy or Keo Khoun Muang Villages.

Thing and Dot explained that the *khayawng louang*, even up to the present, has twelve assistants (*sayna* in Nha Heun), while the Cha Luang has ten, the Oupasa has eight, the Meun Louang and Khamvongsa have six each, and the Keo Khoun Muang has four.

Thing and Dot confirmed that, as they understand it, the Nha Heun wanted to go to Vientiane to find *Chao* Anou, and not to see Champasak royals. It is not clear if the king of Champasak at the time was *Chao* Manoy (king #5) or whether the delegation went later, after Champasak had been burned down by the thousands of mainly ethnic minority followers of Ay Sa Kiat Ngong and *Chao* Manoy had been forced to flee (and later mysteriously died in Bangkok). It could also have been after 1821, when the son of *Chao* Anou, *Chao* Nho, took over the reign in Champasak because of his ability to stop the rebellion, capture Ay Sa and return peace to what is now southern Laos (Baird 2007, pp. 129–30).[28] In any case, Thing and Dot reported that the Nha Heun went to see *Chao* Anou because the *khayawng louang* had died and the rituals of the Nha Heun had been destroyed. They therefore went to Vientiane to try to obtain new rituals.

They originally received a piece of wood (*mai ken lone* in Lao) with the rules for the *khayawng louang* written on it. All eight corners of this piece of wood had writing on them. Thing then explained, however, that the palm-leaf manuscript for the *khayawng louang* was now in a very poor condition. Thing explained that the community used to bring the palm-leaf manuscript out when they held important rituals at the cluster level, such as at the end of the agricultural season when all the villagers come together in the village for the most important ritual of the year. He said, however, that this could only be done when 200,000 kip of Lao currency was

provided, along with a jar of jar-beer, and a chicken to sacrifice to the spirits. In other words, the material textuality of the scripts can only be displayed for money, thus symbolizing its value.

Thing and Dot also confirmed that the Nha Heun have long had the habit of closing their villages. *Dak bra* water spirit rituals were often conducted in the villages between April and October, and villages were shut down at those times.

Conclusion

This paper offers several important observations. First, important information is provided about the political and cultural structure of the Nha Heun people in Paksong District, Champasak Province, especially in relation to the *khayawng* system and its link to a particular text—something that has not been clearly documented. In particular, it provides a better idea of how the Nha Heun were governed before the arrival of the French in the late 1800s.

When Sage first provided me with the photos of the palm-leaf manuscripts, he told me that some time after he had photographed them he heard that they had been burnt in a fire. That may have been true, but Thing and Dot reported that this was not a problem since other clusters still had their own palm-leaf manuscripts. This suggests that the palm-leaf manuscripts of the Nha Heun are seen as having symbolic value rather than as transmitters of written knowledge, as might be expected. They are also crucially important for understanding the historical relationship between the Lao and the Nha Heun, and the power relations between them. The Nha Heun crucially wanted to legitimate their cultural practices through lowland Lao royal power.

How should we understand these circumstances? What is the real meaning of the palm-leaf manuscripts in question? The palm-leaf manuscripts of the Nha Heun are not really intended to provide evidence of their laws and customs, even if that is explicitly the value of them, as articulated by the Nha Heun. However, the manuscripts have become valuable in a society where documented written evidence is deemed important because it symbolizes power and

validates the customs that the Nha Heun society practise as a unique ethnic group. Therefore, for those who doubt the oral history, there is always the palm-leaf manuscript to verify it. In reality, however, the palm-leaf manuscript is not expected to be read to verify the story. Rather, its materiality is critical. Indeed, the text seems more like notes intended, at most, to remind those who already know the oral history of its content. It also has political power, however, because of who provided it to them, how the Nha Heun received it, and the form in which it was provided. This story, on the one hand, legitimizes Nha Heun claims to their cultural rules when it comes to local government officials, but it also paradoxically concedes power to the former Lao king far away in Vientiane. Moreover, the palm-leaf manuscript has taken on ritualist value as a sacred object, using the power of written evidence to legitimize the oral history of the Nha Heun, an animist Austroasiatic group subjected to lowland Lao power.

The story told in this paper speaks to the ways that palm-leaf manuscripts are understood and used by the Nha Heun, who see them not so much as repositories of information to be read or even as a written record, but rather as material and ritualistic objects that represent such repositories, and that also have sacred value. Indeed, they are used in important annual group rituals and they symbolize the legitimacy of Nha Heun culture and identity. This understanding goes beyond what most people believe is the value of palm-leaf manuscripts. Indeed, these sorts of accounts deserve much more attention, as does the topic of textual materiality more generally. It also demonstrates a more nuanced view of literacy for Austroasiatic language speaking peoples. They value written documents, even if oral traditions remain crucially important.

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NOTES

1. Heuny (*hɐɐɲ*) is how the people pronounce their name in their own language, but Nha Heun is the term commonly used by Lao people to refer to them. They also commonly use this term to refer to themselves when speaking with outsiders. For ease of understanding, I use Nha Heun (*ɲaa hɐɐɲ*) here.
2. Toua Tham is a religious script for writing the sacred texts of the Lao, Northern Thai and related Tai peoples. It is used to write texts in Pali language (liturgical language of Theravada Buddhism) but also in vernacular languages. The earliest texts were written in the fifteenth century in Lan Na and the form spread to Lan Xang and elsewhere (email correspondence with Ryan Wolfson-Ford, 8 August 2020). See also Iijima (2009, pp. 15–17).
3. Email correspondence with William W. Sage, 1 May 2020, New York.
4. See Charles Archaimbault (1991, p. 5) on the ritual use of scripts in Xieng Khouang; Vanina Bouté (2018, p. 156) provides an example of the symbolic value of *kongdin* manuscripts given to the Phounoy by the Kingdom of Luang Prabang; and Pierre Petit (2019, p. 50) argues that written documents are often used to symbolically support historical narratives in Houaphanh Province.

5. Interview with Justin McDaniel, 2 February 2016, Wisconsin, United States.
6. Ibid.
7. Email correspondence with James Chamberlain, 7 February 2016 and 13 April 2019, Vientiane, Laos.
8. Email correspondence with James Chamberlain, 7 February 2016, Vientiane, Laos.
9. Email correspondence with Anthony Irwin, 24 April 2020, Michigan, United States.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Also spelt Nya Heun (Baird 2013, p. 241; Green and Baird 2016, p. 856; Lawrence 2008, p. 73); Nya Hon (Wall 1975, p. 1); Gna Hon (Khamin 2000, p. 1), and Hune (Conboy 1995, p. 86).
13. Other Western Bahnaric languages are Brao (Lave), Kreung, Kavet, Lun, Cheng, Jrou, and Jrou Dak (Sou).
14. This area is now all part of Champasak Province.
15. *Chao* Anouvong was the king of Vientiane until he was captured in November 1827 and executed in January 1828 by the Siamese for rebelling against Siamese control of Lao people (Baird 2014, p. 59).
16. Vong told Sage that he worked on the road in 1939 to provide corvée labour to the French (email correspondence with William W. Sage, 1 May 2020, New York, United States).
17. *Khayawng* appears to be a Lao loan word, although its exact meaning in Lao is unclear. In Nha Heun it means something like the main pillar of a group (*lak muang* in Lao). Thus, *khayawng louang* means the main pillar of the group, or the great leader. Sage observed, in the early 1970s, that the principle tree in a Nha Heun village was used to communicate with the spirits. These trees had ribbons tied around them and had sticky rice offerings placed at their bases, sometimes with fruit and small candles. One of these was near the house where he lived (email correspondence with William W. Sage, 1 May 2020, New York, United States).
18. Email correspondence with William W. Sage, 1 May 2020, New York, United States.
19. *Ngeuak*, however, means mermaid in Thai.
20. It is notable that it was said that the piece of wood was inside the "stomach of the crocodile", indicating that the serpent was referred to as a crocodile.
21. Thing and Dot claim there were eight categories of rules, not four.
22. In 2015, Thing and Dot claimed that since being relocated to make way for the Xe Pian Xe Namnoy dam, the Nha Heun have gone from closing

their villages seven days a year, to three days a year, to one day a year, to no days at all. If someone's ear was pierced, according to tradition the village would have been closed for seven days, but only for three days if no earlobes were pierced. Ear-piercing ceremonies are still done now for children above eight years old. According to Brian O'Connor, he observed an ear-piercing ceremony of a girl of 13 or 14 years in the late 1960s, but in that case the village was not closed, and the ritual was quite simple (email correspondence with Brian O'Connor, 9 May 2020, Virginia, United States).

23. Commonly referred to as rice wine.
24. Thao Yain passed the responsibility to his son, Thao Souy, and he passed the mantle to his son, Thao Seung. Thao Seung did not have any children, and so passed it on to an adopted son, Thao Siang. Thao Siang also had no children, and he passed the mantle on to a close friend, Thao Seum. It was then passed to Thao Sem, who handed it to Tasseng Vong in around 1968 (Sage 1971, p. 18). The *khayawng louang* in 2015 was Thing, whom I interviewed.
25. These are likely to have been palm-leaf inscriptions/manuscripts.
26. In 1970 most Nha Heun only had a single name, except for some more-educated ones living in Houay Kong who had adopted family names (email correspondence with William W. Sage, 1 May 2020, New York, United States).
27. One *tamleung* is equivalent to sixty grammes.
28. *Chao* Nho was captured between Champasak and the Bolaven Plateau after *Chao* Anou's forces were defeated in battle at Nong Bua Lamphu in 1827. He was subsequently executed in Bangkok (Baird 2007, p. 130).

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