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# Ethnic Belonging in Laos: A Politico-Historical Perspective

Grégoire Schlemmer

## Introduction

LAOS' POPULATION OF ABOUT SIX MILLION is characterized by its disconcerting ethnic complexity. A total of 49 official ethnic groups are officially recognized—of these, the largest group, the (ethnic) Lao, accounts for just over half of the population,<sup>1</sup> while there may be about 10 times as many Lao language speakers in Thailand. It is a peculiar situation where many more members of the country's dominant ethnicity live outside its borders, while minority groups of this country, grouped together, almost form the majority of the population. Who are these ethnic groups? How can one make sense of the reality of such a diversity of people? How do they live together and how does the state manage this diversity? These are some of the questions we would like to address in this chapter, by drawing on existing studies and our own field research experience and materials.<sup>2</sup>

## “Ethnic”: An Ambiguous Category

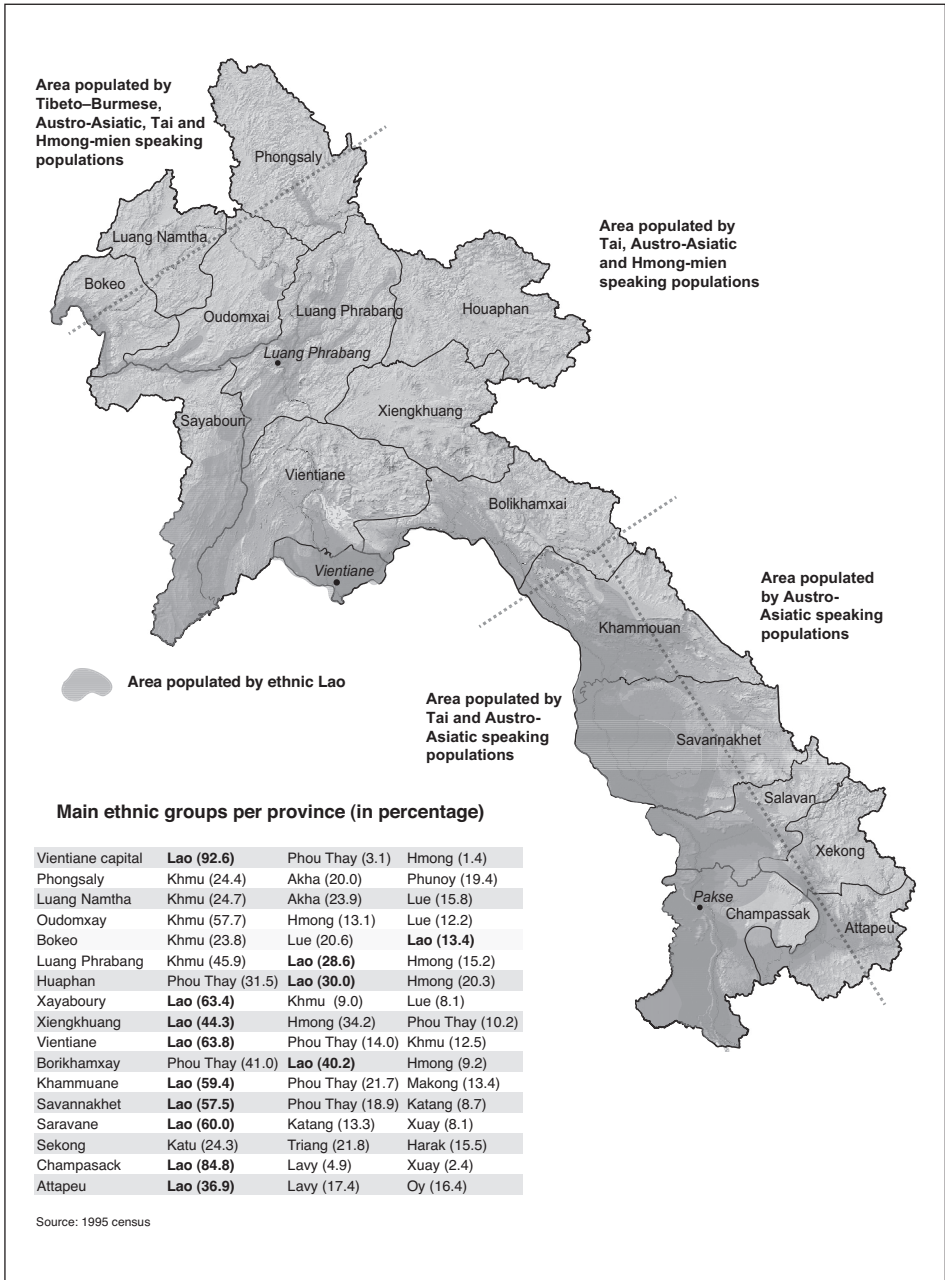
In order to discuss ethnicity, we first need to determine what the term covers. This is where the problem begins. Indeed, the meaning attributed, explicitly or implicitly, to the notion of ethnicity varies depending on audiences and circumstances. These definitions are indicative of biases and issues that are woven around the understanding and the organization of populations labeled under this term.

### Ethnic Groups, Minorities or Highlanders?

Although everyone is supposed to belong to an ethnic group, the term “ethnic” (*sonphao*), as it is used commonly in the Lao language, generally refers to all ethnic groups except the Lao. This is also true in many studies by governmental or non-governmental development organizations, which represent the main producer and source of information in Laos. Most studies dealing with ethnic issues distinguish between the (ethnic) Lao and all other ethnic groups of Laos. The same distinction is applied to the field of tourism: going to see “the ethnic groups” means going to see populations that are not ethnically Lao. In its common usage, the term “ethnicity” is then associated with the minority. But de facto, it also excludes people from different nationalities residing in Laos—primarily, the Chinese and the Vietnamese.<sup>3</sup> Implicitly, ethnicity therefore means a group with a distinctive culture that demographically, but also—and especially—politically, constitutes a minority.

The notion of ethnicity conveys a set of stereotypes formed in contrast to the dominant Lao group. There is a distinction between, on the one hand, Buddhist Lao cultivating wet rice agriculture in the plains who have been integrated for a long time into states; and the “others,” animistic shifting (or “slash and burn”) cultivators, organized in tribes and living in the mountains. Putting aside preconceptions, these stereotypes are based, as is often the case, on some facts, though each criterion must be nuanced. The most structured opposition is the one that distinguishes between lowlanders and highlanders. Many generalizations about ethnic groups are, in fact, linked with their upland location, i.e. living in remote areas (that are often border areas) and practicing shifting cultivation. This geographical isolation (from the lowlands administrative centers’ point of view) is seen as one of the factors structuring “ethnic” life, which supposedly has remained unchanged and kept its “traditional” way of life. This Lao association of “ethnic” to mountains (*phu dḗi*) and forests (*pa*), lands of “savagery,” that contrasts with the “civilized” political center (*muang*), pervades preconceptions frequently associated with the pairing of majority and ethnic groups in the eyes of most tourists and many policymakers, such as modern vs. archaic, or its reverse—peoples corrupted by modern life vs. populations that have preserved their culture and are close to nature.

A well-informed public would say that there are officially 49 ethnic groups in Laos, divided across three broad categories—(i) Lao Lum or “lowland Lao”; (ii) Lao Theung or “Lao residing on the slopes of mountains”; and (iii) Lao Sung or “upland Lao”—or into four “ethno-linguistic groups”—(i) Mon-Khmer (or Austro-Asiatic, mainly the former Lao Theung); (ii) Tai-Kadai (former Lao Lum); (iii) Tibeto-Burmese; and (iv) Hmong-Mien or Meo-Yao (former Lao Sung). One may read in the general literature on the topic that the Mon-Khmer people, coming from India perhaps 3,000 years ago, are the indigenous people of Laos. They are divided into many small groups in the south and the center (Katang, Makong, Xuay, Ta Oy, etc.), and are mainly represented by the Khmu in the north (in addition to Phong, Lamed, etc.). Some of these groups have preserved their cultural particularities due to their remoteness, and others (in higher numbers) are seen as more marginalized groups that have been acculturated, following a long period of domination by the Lao. The Tai-Kadai (Tai, Phu Thay, Lue, Nhouan, etc.) are the dominant population, mostly occupying the plains and valleys bottom, where they live from wet rice agriculture. They are said to have come from South China around the first millennium, to have created several small kingdoms now incorporated into Laos (such as Xieng Khuang, Xieng Kheng, Sipsong Chau Tai, etc.) and to be mainly Buddhist (except the Black, White and Red Tai). This ethno-linguistic family includes the Lao people, who gave their name to the country. The Tibeto-Burman (Akha, Lahu, Phunoy, etc.) and the Hmong and Yao recently came from China (mostly in the second half of the 19th century) and reside on the mountaintops. Easily identified by their costumes, these groups (especially the Hmong and Yao) are supposedly characterized by their pride and independence, and even their bellicosity. This is the type of information one can find in the few books offering a sort of cataloguing of ethnic groups in Laos. For each group, information is given on their name, their history (which is basically a history of origin and their period of arrival in Laos), and a set of selected criteria (according to the Soviet ethnographic orthodoxy that Lao ethnographers inherited via Vietnamese anthropologists; these main criteria are language, territory, culture, and economy). Main distinctive cultural traits of each group (e.g. baskets for the Mon-Khmer, weaving for the Tai, colorful embroidery for the Tibeto-Burman, etc.) are also depicted in these books.



**Map 10.1** Linguistic families distribution in Laos.

This way of naming and classifying groups is the result of a long history based on how states have perceived the groups they have incorporated. This history therefore has varied depending on the nature of these states, and the type of relations these states have maintained with their subjects. Let us now briefly examine the main stages of this process.

### Genealogy of Ethnic Classification

Ancient kingdoms and principalities that once controlled the region did not seek to produce written reports on the populations they ruled. Ethnonyms may be found here and there in their chronicles. However, their use seems imprecise and many of them are no longer in effect today. Nonetheless, a structuring dualistic classification has emerged from these chronicles, marking a distinction between “Tai” and “Kha.” Skin color was used as a marker of difference and hierarchy in this classification: a common myth tells that the Kha and Tai emerged from a gourd, the former appearing black because they came out from a hole made with a firebrand, while the latter were white because their hole was made with a punch (Archambault 1973). However, the Tai/Kha is less a racial than a civilizational or ethno-political classification (as already noted by Lefevre-Pontalis 1896). The term Tai describes people sharing similar languages, culture and, more importantly, a way of life (based on wet rice cultivation located in plains and valleys) and a political organization based on *muang* chieftaincy. In relation to the Tai, Kha represented the others, who lived from shifting cultivation in the mountains and were, or potentially were, subservient to the *muang* chieftaincy power (see below).<sup>4</sup> We can see this opposition between Tai and Kha as the origin of the current Laotian representation associated with the majority and the ethnic minorities.

The French colonial administrators conducted the first ethnographic investigations in order to identify their new “protected” populations. They faced many ethnonyms and found it difficult to organize them. They took over the generic categories Tai and Kha, and had the tendency to “racialize” them. The Kha were sometimes called Indonesian and proto-Indo-Chinese, and the French used the terms “race of Mongolian origin,” or “Chinese race” or “Chinoisants” to refer to people coming from China (Hmong, Yao, Akha, and so on). In the end, as long as the colonial rule lasted, the lexicon was imprecise

(terms of race, tribe, type, and finally ethnicity—that gradually imposes itself—stand and blend differently according to the authors, even within the same book), and no precise ethnic classification was established. In any case, these classifications had very little effect on the populations concerned; except for the distinction between Tai and Kha, ethnic belonging had no legal or concrete impact. Still, these early attempts to formulate a comprehensive classification based on supposedly objective criteria, associated with the emerging racial interpretation of human groups, would have a promising future in Laos and elsewhere in the world.

The desire to simplify these classifications and use them as a unifying instrument generated a tripartite classification after the independence of Laos in 1953 (there is debate among researchers over whether this classification was initiated by the royalists or the communists). It distinguished between lowland Lao(tian), midland Lao(tian) and upland Lao(tian): Lao Lum, Lao Theung, and Lao Sung. This classification has been a great success; although officially abolished, it is still in effect. It had the advantage of being simple, neutral (removing the old pejorative term Kha “slave”—e.g. Kha Kheu and Kha Bit became Lao Kheu and Lao Bit), based on a logic of habitat and inclusivity (all had the common denominator “Lao” that designates them as citizens of the same country), while having a certain continuity since it encompassed the former division (Tai/Kha + “aliens” from China).

This tripartite classification was however criticized by President Kayson Phommvihane because of its unscientific nature and was replaced in the 1980s by linguistic categories and ethnic terms gradually established by the Institute of Ethnography of Laos, which was its main task.<sup>5</sup> The population did not adopt this new “ethno-linguistic groups” classification in day-to-day language. In contrast, it is well accepted by development agencies and most researchers because of its supposedly more scientific basis. Besides having the advantage of overlapping with the previous classification, this classification in linguistic families provides (like racial classifications, of which it is the descendant) an apparently coherent picture of ethnic groups in Laos based on a single criterion.<sup>6</sup>

From a political classification based on hierarchy (Tai/Kha) to a “scientific” classification based on race or language, through an inclusive classification on a geographical basis (between Lao Lum/Theung/

Sung), these attempts to understand the diversity of human groups in a given area tell us more about how states think about groups that live on their territory than the nature of these groups. Moreover, it is now accepted by the scientific community that the project to list a set of groups on identical criteria, placing all of them on the same level and identifying them definitively, is a modern state technology of control (note that ethnic identification in Laos is mentioned on identity cards). For some authors, ethnic identities are themselves creations of the state, and first and foremost, of the colonial state (Evans 1999a; Keyes 2002; Saleminck 2003). Moving away from the state level, let us now turn to how people classified as ethnic minorities think and express their own ethnic belonging and membership, as well as those of their neighbors.

### Local Perceptions of Ethnicity

In fact, all individuals encountered during our investigations identified themselves with a named group, being or not officially recognized as such in the national classification (classification that most people were not aware of, which greatly relativizes its impact). We also noticed a frequent use of endogenous generic categories comprising a wide range of groups, such as those used by state agents or dominant groups. Thus, if the Lao do not differentiate the many groups they designate by the term “Lao Sung,” similarly, Akha include all Tai groups, together with Lao, under the name Bice, while Khmu grouped them under the category of Tje. Many people also share a story, explaining that each ethnic group was formed by the offspring of a brother and sister who survived a flood and/or emerged out of a gourd (Lemoine 1987a; Proschan 2001). These stories are accompanied by an open and contextual list of groups. This logic, which means that each level of membership comes from splits occurring at different stages of the same genealogy, is also mobilized to explain the existence of sub-groups, clans, and lineages that make up a group. Finally, it is also important to note that, to illustrate their differences, people select a few practices for themselves that contrast with the practices of their neighbors. Language is the first criterion that is put forward, while for two very close groups, it is often the minor details (costumes, rituals, etc.) that are mobilized for differentiation purposes. All groups thus produce a discourse about themselves in order to stand apart from



**Table 10.1** Ethnic groups in Laos.

1950 <	Classifications		Official list of ethnic groups*	Population (2005)	% in total national population	% living in Laos (estimation)**			
	1950–1980	<1980							
Tai	Lowland Laotians (Lao Loum)	Lao-Tai	Lao	3 067 005	54,6	n/a			
			Tai	215 254	3,8	16			
			Phou Thay	187 391	3,3	22			
			Lue	123 054	2,2	16			
			Nhouan	29 442	0,5	n/a			
			Thay Neua	14 799	0,3	2			
			Yang	6 160	0,1	n/a			
			Xaek	3 733	0,1	25			
			Kha	Midland Laotians (Lao Theung)	Môn-Khmer	Khmu	613 893	10,9	86
						Katang	118 276	2,1	99
Makong	117 842	2,1				63			
Yrou (Laven)	47 175	0,8				100			
Xuay	42 834	0,8				9			
Ta Oy	32 177	0,6				63			
Triang (Talieng)	29 134	0,5				100			
Tri	26 680	0,5				32			
Phong	26 314	0,5				100			
Brao (Lavae)	22 772	0,4				71			
Katu	22 759	0,4				31			
Oy	22 458	0,4				100			
Pray (Thin)	21 922	0,4				49			
Harak (Alack)	21 280	0,4				100			
Lamed	19 827	0,4				99			
Pakoh	16 750	0,3				50			
Kriang (Ngae)	12 879	0,2				100			
Yae	10 570	0,2				38			
Xing Moun	8 565	0,2				32			
Cheng	7 559	0,1				100			
Gnaheun	6 785	0,1				100			
Khmer	5 829	0,1				0			
Toum	4 458	0,1				100			
Samtao	3 533	0,1				27			
Bid	1 964	0,0				80			
Lavy	1 193	0,0				n/a			
Sadang	938	0,0				6			
Ngouane	722	0,0				n/a			
Oedou	649	0,0				100			
Moy	534	0,0				n/a			
Thaen	514	0,0	n/a						
Kri	495	0,0	65						
	Upland Laotians (Lao soung)	Sino-tibetan	Hmong	451 946	8,0	22			
			Iumien (Yao)	27 449	0,5	3			
			Akha (Kor, Khir)	90 698	1,6	16			
			Phunoy (Singsili)	37 447	0,7	100			
			Lahu (Musir)	15 238	0,3	3			
			Hor	10 437	0,2	n/a			
			Sila	2 939	0,1	81			
			Lolo	1 691	0,0	0			
			Ha Nyi (Hayi)	848	0,0	0			

\* Ethnic names and their spelling are the ones used by the State and the 2005 census (names in brackets are those used in the 1995 census).

\*\* Estimations based on censuses from neighboring countries (China, Vietnam, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia) and on data compiled from the website <http://ethnologue.com>. Since these censuses were carried out in different years and since ethnic classifications vary from one country to another, these data are purely indicative.

other groups (and not necessarily from the state). It thus appears that naming, classifying, and thinking of groups as natural entities based on objectively measurable criteria (including linguistic and cultural criteria), is not specific to state officials or scholars. To see a group, your own group, as a species, naturalizes and subsequently reinforces feelings of belonging.

Locally, criteria forming the group are apparently simple: a group is an ensemble of individuals sharing the same language and the same traditions, living and marrying each other, and between whom a certain degree of solidarity is expected. These criteria are articulated amongst themselves. The feeling of forming a community under a common origin (real or perceived) is based on the cultural heritage of ancestors, and creates a sphere of understanding and interactions based on sharing the same language and the same customs that justifies exogamy (marriage does not occur between close relatives) and group endogamy.<sup>7</sup> What then complicates the establishment of a list of clearly bounded and culturally distinct groups in the country?

The most obvious answer is that there are different levels of inclusion. Groups tend to perceive themselves according to a segmental logic, and an individual can identify himself with different levels of segmentation. Just as I can choose to identify myself as Parisian, French, or European, it is the same for a given individual who can call himself Pusho, Akha, and Hani, or Tai Bam, Tai Dam, and Phutai. Identification that is selected as relevant may vary depending on who is being addressed (Proschan 1996). A Pusho would describe himself as such in interaction with another Akha, and as Akha in contrast to another Hani; but with a Khmu, for example, he will present himself as Lao Ko (the term used by the Lao to designate all the Akha and Hani). Some exogenous names—based on toponymy (Kheu), former status (Prai), linguistic features (Tai Kaleu), etc.—given to a group or a set of heterogeneous populations can be adopted by these peoples, and contribute progressively toward making the latter consider that they constitute a real group (Bouté 2010).

However, it is not merely a matter of nomenclature and a level of inclusion. We have mentioned that group identification is justified by a common origin and is characterized by the same habitus. This membership becomes less clear when these two criteria, which usually go together, are disconnected. Many situations show this, such as interethnic adoptions. An adopted child belongs to his adopting

parents' group, but can keep in touch with his biological parents and have a sentimental attachment to his birth group. During periods of unrest and migration, such phenomena may also concern adoption of entire families of other groups seeking asylum in a community (and they can give rise to new clans). This illustrates that descent, which creates a sense of community, is not necessarily genealogically true. In fact, a group can be formed in various circumstances: disparate group of migrants, assigned identity by more powerful groups, inclusion under a single authority, or through territorial sharing, and so on. One can also mention the case of interethnic marriages, however infrequent. In this case, ethnicity is transmitted through the father, but it is actually where they will live (in the village of the bride or with the groom's parents) that takes precedence. In many groups, a family without boys has the possibility of marrying a daughter to a man of any ethnic group. In exchange for the legacy of her in-law, this man will be considered the legitimate son of the bride's family. He will honor the spirits of his in-laws, and sometimes will even adopt the clan of his stepfather, even changing his own ethnicity if the stepfather comes from another group.

Other practices create relationships expressed in terms of kinship at a supra-ethnic level, e.g. the widespread tradition of the adoptive father (the first foreigner going inside a home during the week following a birth will become the adoptive parent of the new-born) or *fidéjurées* friendships (two people of the same age deciding to declare themselves siblings and acting accordingly). Note also the surprising idea that clan membership can cross ethnic boundaries. Locally, clans (named groups of related people claiming to be descendants of a common ancestor) are defined by a name and/or a ban, and many argue that anyone having that name or respecting the same ban are relatives, regardless of their ethnicity.

Finally, let us recall one obvious fact: everything that defines the life of a group does not necessarily refer to ethnicity or intersect with ethnic divisions. This is true up to the level of what is supposed to form the basis of each group's specificity: its traditions. No rite is ever carried out at the level of the entire ethnic group, and rituals beyond the village level are rare, even among small groups. Traditional healers can be summoned by patients that do not belong to the same ethnic group. A number of rituals are borrowed from elsewhere, and claimed as such. Many other rituals are performed on a territorial basis (be it



**Plate 10.1** Costumes are not always an ethnic marker. Indeed, only the belt worn by this woman enables us to recognize her as Lolo. Lolo clothes are similar to the Ho/Chinese population's (and vary according to localization as much as ethnic belonging), and come from Yunnan, where they were fashionable in the 19th century.

a field, a village, or a region) and thus transcend ethnic boundaries. All this makes it possible to identify a common ritual logic to a vast and diverse set of people.<sup>8</sup> Finally, relationships drawing on ethnicity are rarely mobilized and have little practical effect: ethnicity defines a set of relations of possible communications, unions, and solidarity (sometimes more expected than real). But in practice, the vast majority of interactions and exchanges that makes up the daily life of groups occurs at the village or county level.

To sum up, if ethnicity can be precisely defined at a theoretical level, the reality is much more complex. The different levels of possible inclusions, intermingling between groups (group compositions which change over time by fusion, distinction, dissolution, etc.) and the existence of supra-ethnic realities greatly complicate the situation. The views that we call “primordialist”—i.e. ethnicity is a stable classifiable unit that can be clearly defined by distinctive criteria—are shared both by members of these groups and by the state. But this does not make it a reality. No list of criteria will ever be sufficient to clearly define an ethnic group, for ultimately what makes a group is the fact of naming it. It is a feeling of belonging, shared by a number of people who claim that they form a group. This therefore leads one

to question the phenomena and circumstances that guide a group of individuals to share the same membership. Why do some not recognize any membership superior to the village entity, while elsewhere, millions of people see themselves as sharing a common belonging? On what basis do individuals group themselves and form a common social space? What creates the sense of belonging? These questions steer us on a political level (in the large sense of the term) and lead us to provide a historical approach to the formation and evolution of these entities called “ethnic groups.”

## **Historical Formation of Ethnic Belonging and Interaction with the States**

It would be impossible to reconstitute the history of the formation of each group. Nonetheless, we can present some structural patterns of integrative and differential factors that participated in forming, structuring, and changing ethnicities and interethnic relations. Uncovering these long-term trends, as well as sudden changes, allows us to paint in broad strokes the regional history of this land that would become Laos.

### **Precolonial Times: Tai, Kha, and *Muang***

We begin with what we know or can assume about the constitution and the relationship between Tai and Kha categories of people, by illustrating that they cannot be solely explained by referring to linguistic groups.

#### ***Tai and Kha***

The presence of Austro-Asiatic speaking populations in Laos seems dates back to thousands of years. Especially under the influence of Indian culture, some of these peoples have developed a state organization. Southern Laos was incorporated into the proto-Khmer kingdom of Chenla; the Tai royal chronicles mention a “Kha King” who was present upon their arrival in Luang Phrabang and Chiang Mai, while northern Laos was possibly under the influence of the kingdom of Nan Chao, controlled by populations speaking Tibeto-Burmese languages (Coedes 1964; Archaimbault 1973; Tanabe 2000). We can assume that there was an early contrast between plains populations

integrated into kingdoms and those of the mountains, regardless of their linguistic family (as is the case in Cambodia, where Khmer of the plains and Phnong of the mountains speak related languages).

The end of the first millennium (around 7th–10th) sees the arrival of the Tai-speaking populations. Their lifestyle was based on flooded rice cultivation and organized into principalities (*muang*). While influenced by those civilizations that were already present, they would gradually dominate the entire region. A religious unity appeared with the development of Buddhism and the *tham* writing system among western Tai (Keyes 1995; Grabowsky 2011b), and Tai groups progressively launched the path to the new dominant civilization. We can assume that the populations previously inhabiting the plains were progressively assimilated to the Tai, others taking refuge in the mountains, a process that contributed toward the formation of the Tai/Kha distinction, which must be seen as socionyms based on economical and political facts rather than on an ethnic or racial reality.

### *Wet Rice and Shifting Cultivation*

While it is possible to moderate the contrast between plains and mountains that he draws,<sup>9</sup> the fact remains that James C. Scott (2009) clearly shows the possible correlations between political organization and agricultural techniques. Flooded rice fields allow high productivity and therefore the potential release of surplus, but their constrained locations (flat and irrigable land) cause fixity of settlements, which exposes them to raids and requires water supply organization at the supra-village level. All these factors favor some form of centralization and control. While limiting the production of surplus, shifting cultivation allows more autonomy. The low level of required labor skills favors production at the household or lineage level. It requires, at most, internal village cohesion in order to ensure field monitoring and the execution of time-consuming work (planting, weeding, harvesting), and to decide the agrarian land management. It therefore suits relatively autonomous communities, which may explain why the village unit is often the most important one among the shifting cultivators.

As both types of farmers produced most of their subsistence food products, local trade was relatively undeveloped. Until recently, lowland and upland villages only exchanged a few products (such as river products against forest products or Tai fabric against upland basketry). The professional traders exchanged fabric, iron, salt, and

a few manufactured goods against forest products (which formed the basis of long tribute), surplus crops, cotton, and later cash crops such as opium. Traders were mostly Lao, who organized outlets on the riverbanks they navigated with their pirogues, but could also be from other groups, such as the Yuan in the west, or the Ho and their caravans of horses traveling along ridge lines in the north. These trade routes gave the mountainous villages chosen as caravan stops some importance. These commercial exchanges created partial interdependence between Tai and Kha populations and made both of them actors in international trade networks. In addition, the role each group played in this trade intensified their distinctiveness (Goudineau 2008; Salemink 2008).

### *Muang and Commerce*

These commercial transactions were accompanied by political relations with numerous Tai lords (from the king of Lan Xang to the small local lord), whose wealth was based on a multi-tiered system of taxation (from the village to the local lord, who gave a part to a superior lord and so on), the use of forced labor, the control of strategic locations (intersections of communication roads, saline mines), and capture of labor (through wars and slavery—in order to increase a kingdom's manpower and subjects, which could lead to significant population displacement). In this organization, Tai and Kha held different roles (Lemoine 1987b). Tai subjects participated in public life and owned rice land, but paid taxes and had to participate in wars. The Kha did not participate in the political life of the *muang*, even though they were integrated in them to varying degrees. These degrees ranged from de facto autonomy (more common in the south, where the mountainous areas remained out of direct control of Tai kingdoms for a long time) to subservience, leading to a high degree of acculturation, inducing a form of "taization" (more common in the north, where Tai kingdoms were numerous). Other Kha populations could also play an intermediary role in business networks and/or policies between Tai and other more distant or belligerent Kha. The indirect rule of the *muang* applies differentiated taxes according to status, which fits well with cultural differences. The *muang* therefore is more or less inclusive, but not an assimilating model. This political organization has maintained the differences that justify or concretize the ethno-political division that structured the Tai social space. Thus,

forms of integration, depending on the type of economy and degree of network integration, political domination, cultural influence of the dominant population, and spatial inscription (villages' fixity or mobility, anteriority on the land), have all contributed to shape the different ethnic groups in Laos.<sup>10</sup>

### **Integration into Empires and the Emergence of Modern States**

Throughout the 19th century, English and French colonial empires and the Siamese kingdom established themselves in the area. Combined with the disintegration of Manchu China following the Opium Wars and the many internal revolts that happened there, these events disrupted the population of Laos and led to major political changes. The most important of these was the progressive establishment of a political entity based on the model of the nation-state.

#### *The Upheavals of the 19th Century*

The Lan Xang kingdom, established in 1354, is perceived as the precursor of present-day Laos. It was the most important kingdom in the area for a period and it founded the Lao identity. After it broke up in 1707, the three kingdoms that resulted from its dislocation (Luang Phrabang, Vientiane, and Champasak) suffered numerous attacks, leading to a long period of unrest and political disintegration. The Burmese first perpetrated these attacks; then throughout the 19th century, the Siamese gradually extended their influence on the country. A history of the Siamese impact on Laos remains to be written, but we know that they appointed local leaders and organized the territories in a more uniform and administrative way; these measures foreshadowing the changes made by the French colonization. They also organized a massive deportation of Tai people (Phuan, Phutai, Lao) to the current northeast of Thailand, where they now form the majority of the population (Smuckarn and Breazeale 1988).

Meanwhile, various revolts (Taiping, Nien, Panthay, Dungan, Miao, etc.) that bloodied Southern China between 1850 and 1870 and resulted in massacres of tens of millions of people caused a large migration to the south, including Laos (Culas and Michaud 2004). At the same time, northern Laos was the setting of a major "Kha revolt" and of the devastating raids carried out by irregular armed troops from China (the "yellow," "black," and "red flags"), which led



to significant population movements within the country. Many small groups operating in northern Laos were formed during this migration period. This partially explains their small size (sometimes one original village and those who split from it). In contrast to Tai and Kha inhabitants, these immigrants (Hmong, Yao, Akha, etc.) stood out because of their common cultural references to the Chinese world (a strong patrilineal clan system, consumption of non-glutinous rice, houses built on soil, and so on). This, sometimes coupled with a strong sense of independence fostered by their flight, made their subservience harder to achieve. The depopulation of Tai people operated by the Siamese, in parallel with the influx of people from the north, changed the balance and the relationship between Tai and non-Tai people, and altered the entire ethnic composition of Laos.

### *The French Colonization*<sup>11</sup>

After taking control of Vietnam, the French gradually expanded their influence on Laos to ensure the safety of their colony, to halt the Siamese advance, and in the illusory hope that the Mekong would serve as a gateway to the Chinese market. In 1893, Laos became a French protectorate. The French rapidly lost interest in this expensive territory that never fulfilled its economic potential. Their intervention was limited, especially in the ancient kingdom of Luang Phrabang; here they operated, with few men and little means, an indirect control over the court.

The overall impact of the colonial period was primarily the establishment of the state in the modern sense. French colonial power aimed to pacify and control the territory by border monitoring, a precise contouring of borders and a single politico-administrative network reducing the power of local leaders. They also attempted (albeit to limited effect) to generalize market economy (via fighting against the clearing and exploitation of forests, and development of commercial agriculture), and to establish basic schools and public health services. The juridical and political transformations implemented by the colonial power contributed to the gradual transformation of subjects, once under the rule of a multitude of lords, to citizens of a state in making.

Relations between the French government and ethnic minorities varied depending on contexts. In the north, the colonial administration sought to win their sympathy to counter the hostility generated

by the loss of power of the former dominant populations (Lao, Tai Lue). Hence, in particular, the abolition of slavery and attempts to break the bonds of vassalage of the Kha, in the name of freedom and in the hope that this would benefit the colony. The colonial administration also promoted the appointment of leaders from local groups regardless of their ethnicity (while maintaining—or expanding—the system of taxes and *corvées* for both Lao and non Lao people), which resulted in the emergence of an embryonic ethnic elite. To the south, the situation was tenuous: the colonial administration had to fight against the “unruly people” and/or against the “losers” of the abolition of slavery (this abolition had led to a significant shortfall in the whole region, and this contributed to motivating significant rebellions for decades (Moppert 1981; Gunn 1983). We should also mention the great and new interest in border areas. The colonial administration focused on these formerly neglected margins, first by necessity—to pacify the forefront of a growing empire (Walker 2008)—and subsequently in order to develop cross-border trade and opium cultivation, on which it attempted to create a monopoly (which never really worked). This transformed border areas into places of smuggling, and the attempts to stop it permanently burdened the colonial administration.

The colonial power possibly had more impact on Lao ethnicity than on that of the ethnic minorities. During this period, the flexible term of “Lao” (used to refer a wide range of people in the northern and eastern peripheries of the Siamese world) was gradually used to specifically name a people bound to a nation: Laos (Briggs 1949; Evans 1999a). Furthermore, the French colonialists’ will to pull Laos away from Thailand, coupled with the rise of a strong pan-Tai movement (which led Siam to rename itself Thailand in 1939) pushed the Lao of Laos to develop, with the support of French colonial authorities, a cultural nationalism. It played a part in naturalizing the idea of a nation and Lao people, as well as forging a national spirit (Ivarsson 2008). Such nationalism caught on, especially within the small nascent class of civil servants, the small Lao aristocracy (Goscha and Ivarsson 2007), and an urban elite that developed gradually during the colonial period and became agents of political nationalism following the takeover of the country by the Japanese and its independence in 1945.

## Beginning of the Communist Regime to the Present

From the wars for independence (1945–75) to the present day, ethnic minorities in Laos faced some dramatic changes that substantially affected their livelihood. The first was the civil war and the division of the population into two camps (the communist camp and the royal camp), which transcended ethnic divisions. People from different ethnic origins sometimes fought together (intentionally or not) and faced enemies belonging to the same ethnic group—the Hmong case being the most famous one (Lee 1982). During this period, the peripheral highlands became the main scene for the conflicts and new strategic sites. Members of the Lao Issara (the communist liberation movement), who first took refuge in the mountainous areas during the first decade of the “Liberation war,” largely succeeded in implementing their strategies among the minorities as they included the latter in the new model of society they were fighting for (Rathie, this volume).

After the war, there followed a period of socialist construction (from 1960 or 1975, depending on the area, to 1986) by the new regime of the Lao PDR. This was a time of rapid and strong implementation of the new regime’s policy. Concerning minorities, it was accompanied by a desire to control what was, for the Communists, an advantage during the war, but potentially a threat for them after the war: autonomy and mobility of ethnic minorities, and the borders permeability. There was and still is a strong fear of potential ethnic antagonism among the national authorities. This fear was partly the result of the political strategies of ethnic dissension driven by the French, the Americans, the Thai, and the Chinese during the war (Gunn 1983). Since then, one of the government’s key priorities has been the security (especially on the borders) and integrity of the territory, as well as the control of any possibility of dissension in the country. Since the launch of the New Economic Mechanism (1986), the country has been experiencing a relative decrease in political control. But at the same time, important economic transformations related to the opening of a market economy have created conditions that provide further integration of the highlands and their inhabitants.

The Lao Government’s perceptions of the ethnic minorities varied during these different periods (i.e. wartime, socialist reforms, and economic liberalization). But it remains based on a dual objective

which appears contradictory: on the one hand, the recognition and fulfillment at the national level of ethnic and cultural diversity; and on the other hand, the search for national unity which involves a much stronger integration policy. In other words, the government's objective was not only to promote the Lao cultural pluri-ethnic diversity, but to exceed it to reach the ideal of the "Lao socialist people"—which would progressively shift to the model of "development" (*patthana*)—conceived as a way to overcome ethnic differences. This approach was then based on increased government involvement in ethnic issues and paved the way for integration and even assimilation. This dual objective is expressed both in the 1981 and 1982 Resolutions, two main texts regarding ethnic issues, and in the 1991 Constitution's almost contradictory formulation, "the Lao multi-ethnic people" (*pasason lao banda phao*). The first of the Constitution's nine uses of the term "ethnic group"—"a sovereign and indivisible multi-ethnic state"—can suggest a link between ethnicity and the possible threat of social disension. Indeed, ethnicity appears here as an inferior, but also competitive, form of belonging than the national community, and even as a possible competing membership. However, in this Constitution, ethnicity is also linked with some positive elements the nation should preserve and promote—such as material and immaterial heritage—and with development patterns to improve livelihood, education, and economy, among other things. We now take a closer look at all of these elements.

### *Culture and Religion*

The tension between recognition and integration/assimilation is reflected in the cultural and religious policies carried out by the Lao government. It acknowledges and emphasizes features of national diversity, including: the recognition of the ethnonyms (discussed above); radio and television programs in Khmu and Hmong languages and an attempt to find a text transcription of them; a strong visual representation of the country's ethnic diversity in the media, mainly during official parades. All these elements are appreciated by members of the ethnic minorities and understood as the state's recognition of their identity. But these elements generally remain aesthetic and "folklorized": they are dances, costumes, songs, handicraft, etc., and as such they appear largely non-political and as an expression of what a "correct" culture should be. Indeed, the government has always



**Plate 10.2a–b** The two sides of the Boun Tai district signboard (Phongsaly province) show two representations of Lao citizens. One side expresses ethnicity by displaying the ethnic diversity of the district through images of women wearing “representative” dresses and united around the woman of the dominant ethnic group (usually the Lao, but since there are no Lao in this district, a Tai Lu woman is instead being depicted). The other side embodies social class, represented by various professions united for the development of the country.

fought against what it has considered to be “bad” cultural practices and beliefs (such as ritual sacrifices of buffaloes, local therapists, or extravagant expenditures for funerals or weddings). This kind of cultural repression was strong during the 1960s and extended to the Lao ethnic group itself. After that, these actions began to be more isolated or targeted, but they still continued until the end of the 1990s.

The economic opening of the country has seen an easing of these policies. There is still a willingness expressed in the official speeches for an eradication of the “bad” ethnic habits, but it is less coercive in practice (with the exception of Christianity, and especially Evangelical churches, which are still very unwelcome by the government). There is even an emerging promotion of some ethnic practices as a way to improve cultural tourism. An ethnic Akha explained to me, for instance: “Before, the authorities used to tell us not to wear our traditional clothes, but we didn’t agree. Now, they ask us to wear them again, but we don’t want to anymore!” Indeed, the pressure applied for more than two decades, coupled with transformations of social relations, have had significant direct or indirect (internal reforms, gradual acculturation) effects on these populations.

On the other hand, this liberalization of cultural practices has been accompanied by the state’s clear desire to seek a new ethno-nationalistic legitimacy. This legitimacy is based on the recognition and investment in two major symbols of the dominant group: its royal past and Buddhism. These nationalist policies have re-appropriated sources of authority that were potentially competing with the political authority, and have given some legitimacy back to a regime that has abandoned its socialist policies and must face the gradual disappearance of memories of liberation and the struggle for independence.<sup>12</sup> Yet, Buddhism, which the state promotes as a marker of national identity, officially concerns only 67 percent of the population in Laos (even if it does not compete with any other religion, the sacrificial practices and local cults—known as “animism” in Western literature—are not recognized as “religion” in Laos).<sup>13</sup>

### *Politics and Education*

The fear of ethnic dissension, coupled with the idea that the socialist man had to transcend all affiliations, pushed the state to an inclusive policy that did not differentiate any ethnic group, positively or negatively. The government has never supported ethnic autonomous areas

(even if this has never been an important claim, perhaps because such a request would have been almost unfeasible due to the absence of areas of contiguous homogeneous ethnic population). It is also in the name of ethnic equality that the government refuses the use of concepts such as “indigenous people” and even tends to deny any historical anteriority to any ethnic groups.<sup>14</sup> Such a notion of indigeneity could indeed be synonymous with land and political claims, possibly backed by international support. There is also no official quota policy, even if a representation of ethnic diversity sometimes seems to be favored (in provinces where ethnic minorities account for a significant share of the population, there is sometimes an unofficial alternation of leaders from different ethnic groups).

Yet minority populations sometimes see politics from an ethnic angle. Each community is proud of the number of its members holding positions in the district, provincial or central government. A story circulating among multiple groups explains their lack of political representation following a curse. For them, the state is perceived as being essentially in the hands of the ethnic Lao. Still, if this low political representation may cause regret, even a little bitterness, it hardly leads to the rejection of national belonging. Except for a very tiny minority group of Hmong, there is no separatist movement, nor even any palpable ethnic tension.

Integrative policy promoted by the communist regime largely operated through schooling. Since the war, communists quickly focused on school construction—gradually implemented in all villages—as well as colleges and high schools in the districts. While being an end in itself, the development of mass education was motivated by multiple goals and had consequences in different fields. The school was an important factor in ethnic mix, simply because the teacher was often from a different ethnic group from the village where he taught. A respected figure in the villages, he represented the outside world and a model of social ascension. The school has fostered inter-ethnic unions via the teachers themselves (often young, many teachers get married where they teach) and the secondary school students (high schools only exist in the districts where students from remote villages have to stay in the dormitory, which further promotes ethnic diversity). Schooling also promoted the spread of the Lao language, which has become the vehicular language almost everywhere. Although

not prohibited, the government did not promote education in minority languages.

Even if the education provided was—and continues to be—of poor quality, school habitus (discipline, schedules, uniforms, interactions, submission to state authority) is enough to instill the idea of a new authority and legitimacy, different from the elders and tradition. By promoting collective investment, self-criticism, and the values of solidarity and sacrifice for the nation, the school has become a place where a feeling of the new respect for the authority of the party developed (Halpern and Clark 1966; Langer 1971). Above all, the school developed an important body of officials (six percent of the active population in 2005), and the small political elite who originated from it. In the early days of revolutionary schooling, a basic knowledge such as mastery of reading and writing helped to train all personnel (soldiers, nurses, local executives, etc.) necessary for the implementation of the new system, and allowed it to evolve in the emerging bureaucracy. Initially these posts were unpopular because they were poorly paid, but gradually these administrative positions were in demand. Public service is now the most accessible alternative to the peasantry. It is also through school (where the Party recruitment began, via the youth section of the Party), and by climbing the ladder of the administration, that one obtains positions with political responsibility. Although limited, the possibility of access to positions of power by members of any ethnic group is an important area of progress made by the communist regime. It was previously reserved for a small elite composed exclusively of members of the Lao group.

### *Economy and Land Occupation*

Among the recent transformations affecting ethnic minorities in the country, those in the economic field may be the most important ones. In singular continuity with that of the colonial and royal regimes, the communist regime's goal is to achieve greater integration of the mountainous areas to the economy of production (first in a socialist and then in a market economy framework).

The central point of this model is the eradication of shifting (“slash and burn”) cultivation and relocation of villagers to plains, valley bottoms, or roadsides. By removing this agrarian technique based on self-production and consumption that allows dispersal and





**Plate 10.3** Schooling in Lao language (here, of Hmong pupils), aimed at national integration, instructing respect for state rule, and favoring inter-ethnic interactions, as well as the opening up of possibilities to integrate state administration.

mobility of villages, exploitation of forest resources, sometimes smuggling (including cross-border forays) and prohibited crops such as opium, the objectives are multiple: preservation of forest areas from clearing, fixing populations, development of rice and cash crops, securing border areas emptied of their population, and infrastructure development (schools, dispensaries, markets, roads)—which include the ability to raise taxes, as well as greater control over the country's natural resources (timber, minerals, agricultural land). There is thus a convergence of developmental, security, environmental, social, and political objectives, one or the other being more or less highlighted as the government promotes its policy among the population, businesses, international donors, or NGOs.

It is difficult to say to what extent these policies are motivated by a strong integration of minorities. Nonetheless, they disproportionately

affect ethnic minorities (Ireson 1991; Pholsena 2005). They also seem to suggest a lack of interest in culture, as if “development” policies do not have to care about the respect of group identities. Indeed, cultural specificities are rarely taken into account in the development plans, both by the state and by NGOs, despite their claims to the contrary (Ovesen 2002). And consciously or not, government policy favors Lao and Tai fixed villages located in the plains: almost all the political centers of the provinces and districts of the country that attract infrastructure are located in these villages.

In any case, the changes induced by these policies have important implications for highlanders, and as such for a large proportion of ethnic minorities. In contrast to neighboring countries (especially Vietnam and China), which promote massive immigration of the dominant ethnic group to mountain areas, in Laos, it is the highlanders who have to go down to the plains. These massive relocations disrupt settlement and uproot populations, leading to an important phenomenon of acculturation (Goudineau 2000). The transition from subsistence farming to cash crop cultivation goes along with land dispossession. Indeed, farmers sometimes lack the capital to invest in such crops. Some become sharecroppers or wage laborers for large Chinese and Vietnamese farms, while many migrate to the plains, and settle in multi-ethnic villages and cities. These phenomena have a strong effect on the social cohesion of the community: the break-up of the group and the collapse of village cohesion, the development of internal inequalities, and so on.<sup>15</sup>

These phenomena of displacement and land dispossession, combined with the development of a class of officials, have led to the expansion of administrative villages in the districts, with small traders and marketplaces (made possible by the appearance of employees not subsisting on their own production). In these areas, the inhabitants are experiencing a new way of living together that emerges as the model for the future. In these ethnically mixed villages, the inhabitants are no longer bonded by a village common ritual cycle. Instead, sociability is organized into networks of colleagues and neighbors who do not necessarily belong to the same group. In this new sociability, offering feasts in order to gain prestige (e.g. banquets, payment of compensations, marriages, etc.) is becoming increasingly important. There is then a change from village/ethnic solidarity to class solidarity

that transcends ethnic lines. There is insufficient data on the feeling and expression of ethnicity in urban areas (30 percent of the national population lives in cities), which nevertheless forms an increasing reality. But we find that there are few groups that maintain their particularities in urban areas, except for a few exceptions such as the Ho (because of their connection to Chinese culture) or the Hmong. Being a people with a strong spirit of independence, Hmong people earn some respect with their fierce reputation. Coupled with their connection to the Hmong diaspora that bring both money and self-esteem, this respect allows them to more readily assert their differences. Note also that globally, children of mixed couples living in cities, which are growing in number, tend to be discreet about their ethnic origins, and often present themselves as ethnic Lao.

\* \* \*

Viewing ethnicity not as an obvious given, but as a product resulting from a complex process, allows us to nuance excessively reified and fixed representations of ethnic groups. It also warns us against the desire to preserve at all costs cultural characteristics of ethnic groups in the name of aesthetic love of cultural diversity. Having consideration for these populations implies respect for their aspirations of preserving a legacy, as well as for their commitment to change. Like any multi-ethnic state, the policy of the Lao state oscillates between the following: integration, operated on the model of the dominant population which therefore tends to lead to assimilation; and autonomy, which often means excluding these groups with only limited access to state services and economic development. It has to deal with the difficulty of reconciling the inclusion of ethnic particularities and promotion of disadvantaged groups as mentioned in the constitution, versus the desire to forge a sense of national identity and to give priority to state interests and internal security. For a time, communism offered an alternative model by proposing a new and inclusive society. This model could not be reduced to a simple Lao-cization since the Lao themselves had to comply with it. It allowed a better presence of ethnic minorities in its representation of the nation, as well as better access to education and to political offices, although in reality minorities are statistically much poorer and much less integrated



**Plate 10.4** This picture, whose style is very common in northern Laos, is a cutout image of an Akha Pusho couple; in the background is a picture selected from a large choice of images depicting how “modernity” is appreciated.

than the Lao majority. This top-down model of civic nationalism (addressing all citizens regardless of their ethnicity) has gradually evolved into a more flexible model, though based on ethnic nationalism focusing above all on the sole Lao culture (Evans 2003b). At the same time, minority groups are gradually opening up to the members of their communities living in other countries—notably, through the circulation of cultural goods (CDs and DVDs from China, Vietnam, and Thailand) and by visiting relatives that have emigrated to Western countries (the United States, France, Australia, etc.). Time will tell how the country will evolve following this new path.

## Notes

1. According to the 2015 census, the Lao represented 53.2 percent of the country's population. Other numerically significant groups include: the Khmu (11 percent), Hmong (9.2 percent), Tai (3.1 percent), Phou Thay (3.4 percent), Lu (2 percent), Katang (2.2 percent), Makong (2.5 percent), and Akha (1.8 percent). The remaining 11.6 percent is divided among 41 other officially registered groups. Many of these groups are numerically larger outside the borders of the country (among the nine groups listed, only the Katang, the Makong and the Khmu are mainly found in Laos). Note also that a group that forms a minority group in one country may be a majority elsewhere. The Ho, a small ethnic group in Laos, refer to themselves as Han, the largest population on earth. The Lolo (2,203 in Laos according to the 2005 census) form one of the largest nationalities of China (more than 8.7 million, according to the 2010 Chinese census).
2. Since 2009, I have been researching on issues of ethnicity, and conducting field surveys for over four years in Phongsaly province. Part of the data presented and the views expressed in this chapter are the result of this research. Phongsaly is distinguished by the fact that ethnic diversity is the largest in the country, and the number of representatives of the ethnic Lao is one of the lowest. That makes this province not fully representative of Laos. Nevertheless, it remains illustrative of the situation of northern Laos, and reveals some recurring trends at the national level. But I still have to apologize for the "Nordic" prism of this chapter.
3. That is why I will not talk about Vietnamese and Chinese origin communities. Their members are not categorized in terms of ethnicity (*sonphao*) but nationality (*sonsat*), if they have kept their original nationality; or they are classified as "other" if they took up Lao citizenship. Many came in the 20th century as civil servants (Vietnamese) and businessmen (Chinese). These communities are characterized by their urban lifestyles and often higher economic level.
4. On the concept of Tai, see: Briggs (1949) and Pain (2008); on the notion of Kha, see: Chamberlain (1992) and Proschan (1996); concerning the relations between Tai and Kha, see Turton (2000).
5. The Institute of Ethnography was founded in 1988, following the Committee of Nationalities, created in 1976. Due to a lack of resources, training, and field survey activities, but also to the influence of Marxist orthodoxy and the obsession with classification, a Laotian ethnographic tradition never really emerged (there is also virtually no literature but a few catalogs of ethnic groups). The main job of the Institute of Ethnography was to operate and adjust a classification of ethnic groups

in Laos (partly borrowed from French—but in changing name perceived as derogatory—and from Vietnamese ethnographers). This leads us to put into perspective the view that behind the official classifications and their evolution, there is a cynical and conscious adjustment at the service of a strategy of control; it is not certain that these ethnographers and state officials had the means to do that. About these classifications, their history and issues, see: Trankell (1998), Evans (1999c, 2000, 2003), Goudineau (2000), Pholsena (2002, 2009), and Ovesen (2004).

6. If most of the groups named Kha were speakers of Mon-Khmer language, this is only by chance, and there are exceptions, such as the Phounoy or Kheu. These groups speak languages related to the Tibeto-Burman family, but because they have lived in Laos for a long time, they were called Kha (and then, for a while, considered Mon-Khmer speakers). In addition, speaking a language of the same origin does not involve sharing common social or cultural traits: the Bid (Mon-Khmer) and Seng (Tibeto-Burman) sometimes say they are relatives as they share many sociocultural similarities. For a defender of language classifications, see Chamberlain (1996); for a critical view, see Matisoff (1983) and Evans (1999a). For an overview of the use of such criteria, sometimes intersected with genetic data as a basis for historical reconstruction, see Edmonson and Gregerson (2007) and Enfield (2011).
7. In Phongsaly province, exogamous marriages are still rare, and 80 percent of villages are mono-ethnic (i.e. over 90 percent of the population belong to the same group). The argument often given to justify group endogamy is that women from other groups would not know how to properly honor the ancestors, because they do not share the same traditions.
8. On the openness of rituals on the outside, see Tapp (2000,) Culas (2004), and Sprenger (2011); on territorial rituals, see Condominas (1975), Bouté (2012), and Schlemmer (2012).
9. One should not differentiate too much between plains and mountains, by thinking of these areas and their populations as two worlds cut off from each other, and see only the first as the natural place for development of the state, while viewing the second as areas of refuge for “democratic societies.” The contrast is not as radical; note, for example, that the wet rice field-based villages politically organized at the supra-village level and villages living from shifting cultivation on the slopes often live on the same mountainside and can be only a few hours’ walking distance apart. We must also not over-emphasize either the determinant of agrarian policy: flooded rice fields do not necessarily require the creation of centralized societies (see Hani and Hmong in China), and unequal

- relationships can be based on other resources (e.g. salt, slave caravans, taxes); see Katchin in Burma or Phounoy in Laos.
10. For diachronic approaches that illustrate these points, see Bouté (2006, 2010), Goudineau (2008), Évrard and Chiemsisouraj (2011), and Badenoch and Shinsuke (2013). Concerning the “taization” process, see Izikowitz (1969), Condominas (1990), Evans (2000), and Évrard (2008).
  11. These paragraphs are mainly based on information extracted from the Commissariat de Luang Phrabang archives (Archives d’Outre-Mer, fonds INDOCHINE-Gouvernement général de l’Indochine, Aix-en-Provence, France).
  12. On this point, and more generally on cultural and religious policies of the socialist period and their effects, see Evans (1998b), Goudineau (2001), Bouté (2008), Ladwig (2008), and Petit (2013).
  13. There is no Lao term to qualify “animism.” Indeed, animism is nothing but a catch-all term designating all groups with religious practices that do not fit in one of the world’s dominant religions. While *sasana phi* (“religion of spirits”) is widely used today, the expression is not officially accepted. Until recently, these two terms were unthinkable together, *sasana* referring to Buddhism and all that precisely does not deal with spirits. Buddhist and spirit cults form two domains, but one should not perceive as two opposing religions. Being Buddhist is less a profession of faith than the respect of specific practices (going to the temple during festivals) perfectly combinable with other religious practices, such as feeding a spirit to drive away a disease. Actually, many non-Buddhist rituals are also performed by the Buddhists. Finally, note that Buddhism is not the prerogative of Lao: Lu, Phounoy, part Khmu, Phong, Samtao, Xaek, and Xuay also honor the Buddha and represent 20 percent of the Laotian Buddhist community.
  14. De facto, this term may not be used instead of “ethnic groups” or “minorities”: if some groups are from very ancient settlement, the majority of the Sino-Tibetan and Hmong-Mien speaking groups does not exceed two centuries. Moreover, locally, anteriority is defined on a very small scale (such valley, such river bank). Finally, there is neither logic nor moral evident link between anteriority on an area and special privileges. For a different view on this point, see Baird (2008b).
  15. On the impact of socio-economical changes on ethnic minorities, see Cohen (2000), Lyttleton (2008), Évrard (2011), Bouté (2013), Diana (2013).

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