3 *The ruins, the "savages" and the princess:*

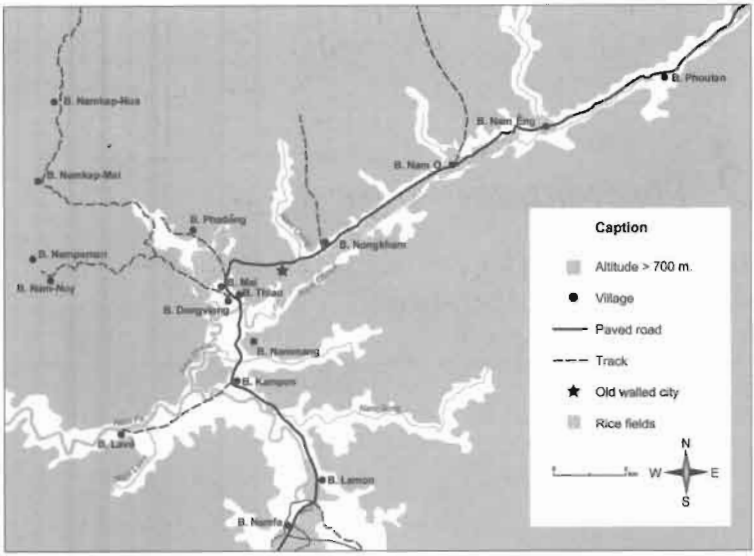
Myths, migrations and belonging in Viang Phu Kha, Laos.

Olivier Évrard
Chanthaphilith Chiemsisouraj

> *Heritage is about the process by which people use the past; a discursive construction with material consequences. (Harvey 2008:19)*

This paper intends to show that sedentism relates less to the actual permanence of a human settlement than to shared memory and symbols related to a given place. This is especially clear in areas such as Northern Thailand and Laos, where numerous migrations during the historical and contemporary periods have constantly redesigned the human landscape, mixing various populations and preventing them to settle durably in one same location. In such a context of "impeded sedentism", myths and rituals provide a common matrix for the organization and the reproduction of territorialized identities.

I take the case of a small city of North-West Laos known under the name of Viang Phu Kha. Located on a small plateau along the main road linking China and Northern Thailand, its existence is attested from the 16th century onward. Ruins whose exact origin is unknown surround it. These vestiges give rise to speculations and different interpretations among the historians and the local populations. According to the formers, Viang Phu Kha remains one of the most mysterious principalities of Laos (Lorillard, 2008:

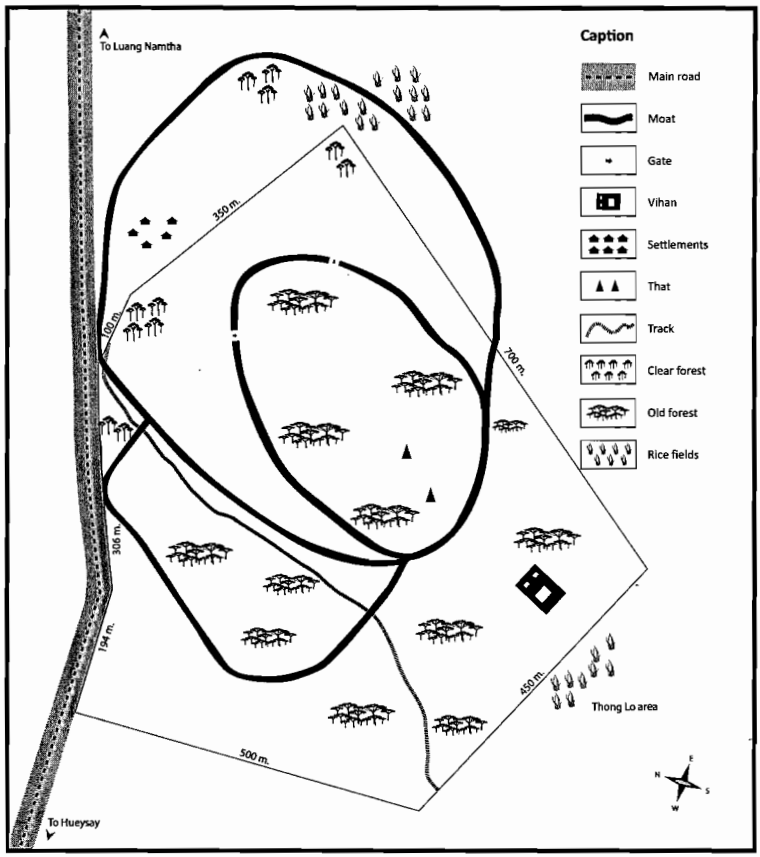


Map 1: Centre of the district of Viang Phu Kha

134), mainly because of the scarcity of the written sources available about it. The latter attribute its foundation to invaders either from Chinese (*ha*), Northern Tai (*yuan*) or Burmese (*man*[1]) origin. These uncertainties are not only due to the lack of deep genealogical memory among the contemporary inhabitants –mostly Tai (Yuan, Lue, Yang) and Mon-Khmer (Rmet, Samtao, Khmu) speaking groups. They are also a result of the continual political instability in this area during the last centuries and of the countless invasions and displacements of populations that affected it. This is also true for the recent period that saw numerous migrations during the two "Indochina wars" as well as massive resettlements of highland villages near the main road since the early 90s under the State rural development policy.

In this context, it is worth noting the existence and the relative permanence among the local populations of a rich oral literature related to the origins of Viang Phu Kha and of the ruins that lie nearby the town. This oral literature has been largely ignored until now by those who have worked on the history of this part of Laos.

[1] This last ethnonym could also maybe apply to Mon.



Map 2 : Sketch of the old walled city of Viang Phu Kha (Vat Mahaphot)

This is probably due to difficult conditions of access to fieldwork until recent times as well as to the reluctance of the historians to take into account oral sources that they consider less reliable and more difficult to interpret than the written ones. By taking these oral sources into account and analyzing them, We pursue two objectives.

Firstly, we contribute to an ethnohistory of Viang Phu Kha, that is not only to a better knowledge of the history of this place but also, and above all, to a better understanding of how people put the present in relation to the past with their own categories. We want to show how the sense of belonging, either to a place or to an ethnic group, is related to the interactive nature of myths: they are

used to interpret history but at the same time they are constantly updated by the event.

Secondly, we reflect on the common imaginary shared by the Mon-Khmer and the Tai speaking populations and what it tells us about the ethnic differences, their perception and their perpetuation in this part of Asia. More precisely, we consider that the contemporary ethnic fragmentation in Viang Phu Kha is as much a product of complicated (in and out) migration movements as a result of "dispersion" inside a common cultural matrix[2].

The origins of Viang Phu Kha: two stories

The small city of Viang Phu Kha is surrounded by ruins of stupa, temples and old fortifications which origin is still unknown. The main complex of ruins lies on and around a small hill located at the South-Western end of the plain where the city is installed, near a meander of the Nam Cuk (see map 1 and 2 in annex). This site is known under the name of Vat Mahaphot and the oral tradition says it used to be the centre of a fortified city (*viang*) organized in three concentric circles: the inner circle for the monks, the middle one for the soldiers and the outer circle for the craft workers. From the top of the hill, one can observe a series of ditches as well as the vestiges of at least three religious buildings built in bricks surrounded by a rampart covering a total surface of roughly 40 hectares. At the bottom of the hill, on its south-western side, at least five ovens have been identified but there are still probably others lying deeper in the ground or further in the plain. This part of the site is known under the name *thong lo* and it is said that it has been used for the making of bronze drums, though the remains found there suggest rather a small-scale production of potteries, ceramics and glasses objects. The absence of material proofs is less important than the legend itself and the representations it carries. The frequent mention of bronze drums production in this area is related to the role attributed to the Khmu populations in the foundation of Viang Phu Kha. The Tai acknowledges this role and said it directly explains the name of the place. However, the oral

[2] In this attempt, I am inspired by François Robinne's work on trans-ethnicity (2007, 283-297) and his reading of Michel Foucault's concept of "space of dispersion".

tradition allows two different interpretations of the name *viang phu kha* and both of them differ from the official transcription in Lao language ວຽງພູຄາ, which means "the viang of the imperata grass mountain".

The versions relating to the first interpretation tell the story of a procession of soldiers and craftsmen led by a man called Cao Muen Chin. Their supposed ethnic origin varies according to each storyteller: some say they were *ho* (Chinese), other say they were *man* (Burmese or Mon?), other again say they were Tai, either *ngiu* (a Shan population) or *yuan* (also known as *khon mueang* in Northern Thailand). Before these men could create the city of Viang Phu Kha, they had to fight three ferocious beasts that were the guardians of the place. Two Khmu men volunteered to kill the animals. In return for their help, Cao Muen Chin gave them the political and ritual control over Viang Phu Kha. However, because they had killed the spirits of the place, the Khmu could not live in the plain where the mueang was installed and they had (or chose) to remain on its periphery. Hence the name Viang Phu Kha, ("the viang of the savages" or the "viang of those who killed [the ferocious beasts]") which should then be written ວຽງຜູ້ຂ້າ where ຂ້າ is a term commonly used in the past to name the highland groups.

In the versions related to the second framework, the main character is a Tai woman called Nang On Am, who was abandoned on a raft by her father, the ruler of Mueang U. The raft arrived in Viang Phu Kha where the young princess met Khmu hunters. Three of them collaborated to kill three ferocious beasts living in the area and one of them, called Muen Chin (Lue and Yuan pronunciation) or Muen Sin (Lao pronunciation) married the princess and came in the valley to live with her. Hence the complete name of the place: Vieng Phu Kha Ya Tai ວຽງຢຸ່ຂ້າຍ່າໄທ which means "the city of the *kha* paternal grand-father and of the *tai* paternal grand-mother" or "the city of the *kha* and *tai* ancestors". This second framework has been popularized by a recent publication of the Ministry of Culture (Boualay Phengsengkham, 2008) and constitutes, in a way, the "official" version of Viang Phu Kha legend even if its content

contradicts the official transcription of the toponym, mainly because ᨴᩣ is a derogatory term in the new political context[3].

The first framework is more linked to the Khmu oral tradition while the second one appears more frequently in the tales of the Tai storytellers and has close relationships with the written tradition[4]. It is therefore tempting to consider that the differences between these two frameworks coincide with historical and ethnic ones. On one side, an old and autochthonous (Mon-Khmer) framework is narrating the foundation of the town by a foreign conqueror and legitimates the eminent right of the Khmu over the territory. On the other side, a more recent framework from Tai origin reinterprets the first one and transforms it by adding a figure commonly found in the literary traditions of Lan Na, Lan Sang and Sipsong Panna (see the classical novels of Nang Phom Om[5]). Things are however much more nuanced and complex: these two mythical frameworks have likely coexisted since a long time and both of them have fed on the incidents of local history as well as on the cultural patterns and representations shared by the inhabitants independently from their ethnic origin.

The town of the "savages": foreign conquerors and highlanders allies

Viang Phu Kha used to be an important commercial crossroads as well as a contested political border zone between several regional powers (Burmese, Siamese, Chinese and Lao). In the course of its tumultuous history, conflicts, abandons, displacements and reconstructions occurred, which have nurtured and constantly brought up to date the myth of foundation by a foreign conqueror.

---

[3] Variations in the transcription of the toponyms have also most probably been facilitated by linguistic factors, especially by the fact that the Lao aspirated consonant *ph* ພ is pronounced as a non-aspirated consonant in Lue and Yuan dialects, that is, as the ᥐ in Lao language. This allows a phonetic equivalence between "mountain" and "paternal grandfather" in these dialects. For more details, see Évrard 2011.

[4] The reality is, of course, more complex and I collected many versions that mixed elements of the two frameworks independently from the ethnic origin of the storyteller.

[5] For a complete analysis of Nang Phom Hom story and variations in Yuan, Isan, Lue, Shan, Khuen, Lao and Siamese versions, see Peltier 1995. In the Tai-Yuan version of Chiang Mai, this tale is known as "Jang Prong – Nang Phom Hom, Jang Prong being the King of the elephants".

Two Tai populations, namely the Tai Yuan and the Tai Lue seem to have alternatively controlled and occupied this area. The oldest written traces indicate that Viang Phu Kha was first under the political and cultural influence of the Tai Yuan principalities located on the right bank of the Mekong. The Chiang Mai chronicle for instance mentioned that this region was one of the "outer Panna" of the principality of Chiang Saen founded in 1329 by Saen Phu (Wyatt and Aroonrut Wichienkeeo 1998, 60). In Viang Phu Kha proper, the oldest written document is a silver leaf dated of around 1509, a date which coincides with the period of greatest political and cultural influence of Lan Na (contemporary Northern Thailand). It is written in a Lan Na tham script and refers to a dignitary named Cao Nang Khoa Muang Chiang Khong, to an edict (*atya*) and to a monarch (*somdet phra chao*), "which is almost certainly the ruler of Chiang Mai" (Lorillard 2008, 134). The immigration of Tai Yuan populations on the left bank of the Mekong has come along with this expansion of Lan Na political power and extended until the city of Luang Nam Tha which the Tai Yuan have founded at the end of the 16th century (1587) according to the local chronicle, then abandoned at the 18th century (1718) before settling down again on the same place in 1890 (Inpan Chanthaphon 1997, 14). Conversely, the Tai Lue populations came mostly from the area of the Sip Song Panna in the North during phases of conflicts and deportations but there also have also been some complex trajectories which involved displacements down to the Mekong banks and later resettlements back in Vieng Phu Kha area.

The Burmese conquered this region in the 17th and 18th centuries and probably displaced a lot of its inhabitants, as they did in other areas (Grabowsky 2008, 48-49). However, in Viang Phu Kha, they also built religious monuments (both Vat Mahaphot and Vat Bo Kung are attributed to them by the locals) and brought with them new populations. Some of these are still settled today just near the ruins of the old city in a village called Ban Tiao. They are known as Samtao (but also as Tai Doi in Mueang Long district in Laos or as Tai Loi in Shan States in Burma) and they still keep the memory of their migration from the Western banks of the Mekong. Indeed, *samtao* seem to have been originally a political category used to refer to Palaung populations settled in a semi autonomous

mountainous territory East of the city of Kengtung in the Shan states. They were known for their ability to produce rifles with the iron bars brought to them by the Chinese traders. According to the information collected by the French explorer Francis Garnier during his expedition in the Upper Mekong in the 1870 they were "*producing 3000 rifles per year and giving 200 of them to the prince of Xieng Tong* [Kengtung] *as a mark of allegiance*" (Garnier 1885, 416 –my translation). Three decades later, during his stay in Viang Phu Kha, another French explorer (and journalist) Alfred Raquez noticed that Samtao men were "seriously armed" and he described a New Year ceremony where a monk blessed rifles and swords put in front of him (2000, 270).

These elements invite to consider the Samtao as a group of highland mercenaries recruited by the invaders and left in this region after their departure to keep control over it. It is noteworthy that this ethnonym is still in use despite the fact that the Samtao of Vieng Phu Kha have largely assimilated to Tai and Khmu populations up to the point where they even lost their original language. If they remain with a separate identity, this is probably due to their previous political role in this region (at least before the colonial period), their religious functions during the annual ritual for the tutelary spirit of Viang Phu Kha[6] and their practice of Buddhism, which they consider as a Burmese heritage.

While the consequences of the Burmese "invasions" in Viang Phu Kha are not well known yet, more details are available on the 19th century events. Troops from Nan principality, vassal of Siam, conducted three large-scale military operations in 1804-1805, 1812-1813 and 1830-1831 in North-West Laos, proceeding each time to huge displacements of populations (Grabowsky 1999, 238). Then, while the first Westerners arrived in Northern Laos at the end of the 19th century, they discovered heavily depopulated places. In

[6] Until the early 70s, a ritual involving the Khuaen, Lue and Samtao villages settled near the ruins of Viang Phu Kha was held each year at the beginning of the rainy season for the spirit of the muang (*phi muang*), called locally *roy samao*. It consisted of a procession around the plain of Thong Lo, the paddy core of the *vieng*, and in a buffalo sacrifice at the top of a small hill, which marks the eastern limit of this plain. The main three ritual specialists were a Khuaen (*mo taeng tai*, ritual butcher), a Lue (main priest *mo luang*) and a Samtao (*mo uen*, chanting priest). A detailed analysis of this ritual is done in Évrard, 2011.

Viang Phu Kha center remained only "one or two empty huts" (Lefèvre-Pontalis 1902, 153) with abandoned rice fields (Mc Carthy 1994, 156; Lefèvre-Pontalis 1902, 153) and local people were living under the fear of the tigers (Raquez 2000, 237). They also insisted on the instability of the settlements and on the numerous displacements of Tai Yuan and Tai Lue villages. For instance Pierre Lefèvre-Pontalis noticed that the Tai Yuan populations who had settled down again in Viang Phu Kha just before his first visit in 1893 were already gone away again few months later and were being replaced by Tai Lue migrants coming from the Muang U area through the Nam Se (Lefèvre-Pontalis 1902, 153-155).

As a consequence of all these migrations and wars, Viang Phu Kha has been a place of "impeded sedentism" where the political context has rarely allowed a long use of the same lands. The main plain at the center of the district was periodically emptied of its inhabitants, who were replaced either by enslaved people (*kha*: the term points out more a status than an ethnic identity) brought by the conquerors, or by refugees fleeing war zones. The alternation of depopulation and repopulation phases gave birth to a profusion of ethnonyms, each of which relate to a specific geographic origin or migratory story and also often to linguistic mix. For instance, when Pierre Lefèvre-Pontalis crosses Ban Yang Nuea village in 1894, he noticed that the villagers were Lue refugees (1902, 153) while in Ban Yang Tai village a few kilometers away, villagers told him that they were "Kiorr people whose ancestors were Kha from Xieng Kheng [Chiang Khaeng] who had taken refuge in Viang Phu Kha to escape a Burmese invasion" (1902, 290, my translation). Alfred Raquez, who visited the same area few years later wrote that people of Ban Tha Khat village are "Kha Tiol" that is "Kha belonging to no race" arrived in 1870 from Chiang Khaeng and speaking a dialect mixing Khmu and Lue words (2000, 237). These constant movements of populations may be seen as one possible origin for the name Viang Phu Kha, or at least one factor that contributed to popularize it. However, the term *kha* in the oral tradition refers primarily to the Khmu highlanders, not to the displaced population of the lowlands.

Wars and resettlements were affecting heavily the lowlands but were obviously having much less impact on the Khmu highland villages settled on the surrounding hills. Their inhabitants did not use the lowland fields near the main roads, even when they were left fallow, and practiced instead only swidden agriculture on the slopes (Mc Carthy 1994, 156; Lefèvre-Pontalis 1902, 153). Political instability had contributed to reinforce the political autonomy granted to some of them, especially those known in the past as Kha Khuaen and today as Khmu Khuaen. Despite their relative cultural and geographic homogeneity, Khmu populations in this area are indeed subdivided into various subgroups, called tmoy in their own language[7]. I have shown elsewhere (Évrard 2007, 140-159) that these subgroups shall be viewed as an imprint made by the Tai political systems in this borderland area where various Tai principalities (Lan Sang for the Lao, Lan Na and then Nan for the Tai Yuan, Sip Song Panna for the Lue) were competing for control.

The case of the Khmu Khuaen is especially interesting because their villages are to be found only around Viang Phu Kha. The *khuaen* were administrative subdivisions of the mountainous margins in the Sip Song Panna chiefdoms or *mueang*. They were given a great deal of autonomy, and were controlled by tribal leaders named *ho khuaen*. In Viang Phu Kha, Khmu Khuaen are still said to be the guardians of the territory and their position in the local interethnic system here contrasts strongly with the position and the reputation of other Khmu subgroups, such as the Khmu Rok further in the East. The Khmu Khuaen have a long history of collaboration with the Tai chiefdoms, the Lue chiefdoms of the Sip Song Panna but also the Yuan chiefdoms under Lanna authority. Some of their leaders received titles of nobility from Tai princes and were in charge of surveying the movements of population and troops in this strategic area at the periphery of Burma, Sip Song Panna, Lanna, Siam and Lan Xang territories. Their autonomy and their political importance was underlined by the first French colonial explorers at the end of the 19th century who noticed that the Khmu Khuaen had sometimes

[7] These sub groupings coincide, at least in this part of Laos, with geographic, dialectal, technical and even religious differences. Other non-Khmu Mon-Khmer groups such as the Rmet (often written Lamet) and Samtao are sometimes included in the tmoy list by Khmu informants.

conflicting relationships both with the Tai Yuan of Luang Nam Tha and the Tai Lue from Mueang Sing. They sometimes refused to pay taxes to the former and opposed the latter when they tried to move the boundary stones to control more tightly the territory of Viang Phu Kha. Conversely, the Khmu Khuaen could also help some migrant populations and accept them as lowland neighbours, such as in the case of the Lue people arrived at the end of the 19th century from the Mueang U and who are still currently living in Viang Phu Kha district (in Ban Viang Mai). Today, Khmu Khuaen people still differentiate themselves from other Khmu populations by their traditional costumes, the shape of their baskets and above all by their religious practices which often include the presence of a medium as well as references to Tai tutelary spirits not found in other Khmu subgroups, or not to the same extent.

All these elements show that Viang Phu Kha has been conquered, abandoned and rebuilt several times in the course of its (recent) history. Enslaved populations or refugees settled down here only to be later on moved again by new invaders. Simultaneously, Mon-Khmer populations, either immigrant mercenaries (Samtao) or autochthons (Khmu) played a role of allies, guardians of the territory and semi-autonomous observers depending on the circumstances. In this context, the myth of the foundation of the city by a foreign leader who later on left it in the highlanders' protection has been literally "enacted" several times. It has crystallized a series of similar events in one single frame, which became a common reference (a way to conceive history and ethnicity as much as a product of it) for all the inhabitants of the place.

The town of the kha and tai ancestors: the myth of a common descent

The second mythical framework comes on top of the first one and brings a theme well known by historians and anthropologists in this part of Southeast Asia: the marriage between members of two different ethnic groups as the first step of the creation of a new political entity. However, the case of Viang Phu Kha is quite unique: while the usual pattern is the marriage of a Tai prince with an aboriginal (Mon-Khmer) woman, it is here a Tai woman who

marries an aboriginal (Khmu) man. In the following paragraphs, I show that this reversal shall be understood as the consequence of a long-term coexistence and cross-contamination of several mythical and literary frames shared both by Tai and Khmu populations as well as their interactions with at least two historical events.

At first stance, it would seem that the introduction of this mythical framework is quite recent since it is found mainly in the oral tradition of the Lue populations currently settled in Ban Viang Mai (see annex 1), who arrived in Viang Phu Kha from U Nuea and U Tai at the end of the 19th century. Here is one of the versions collected in Viang Mai.

> *"Our village used to be called Ban Viang Phu Kha Ya Tai because it has been founded by a Tai woman married with a Kha man, eh, I mean a Khmu. She was a Lue, daughter of the Chao Mueang U. Her name was Nang On Am. Since she was born with 32 teeth, she was banished and abandoned on a raft. The raft went down the Nam U, up the Mekong, up the Nam Fa, up the Nam Chuk and finally ran aground near the cave that is located near the old site of our village. All the Kha were crowding around her but their chief said that any man wanting to marry the princess first had to kill the three ferocious beasts, a tiger, an elephant and a snake which at that time were haunting the area. Three hunters collaborated and succeeded in killing the animals. A buffalo sacrifice was organized and a big eater competition took place among the three men. The hunter called Chao Muen Chin was the winner and became Nang On Am's husband. The old Thong Si, who is the chao cham of our village, is their descendant."*

In the area of Bun Nuea, where the Viang Mai villagers say they originated from, Vanina Bouté (2005: 120) has collected the following version, in Ban Yo village.

> *"The King of the Sipsong Panna had two daughters. The younger one had perfumed hairs and therefore was called Nang Phom Hom. One day, she cut a tuft of her hairs and let it floating on the Mekong. The tuft reached Luang Prabang and was collected by the prince of Lan Xang. Captivated by the perfume, he looked for the owner of those hairs and learned that they belonged to the daughter of the king of the*

Sipsong Panna. He sent an emissary to ask the princess's hand. The king was reluctant to marry his younger daughter before his elder and he therefore decided to use a stratagem. He decked his elder daughter out with his younger daughter's hairs and sent her to Luang Prabang with a large escort of weavers from Ban Yo and numerous slaves. After a few months however, the hairs lost their perfume and the prince, understanding that he had been fooled, repudiated his wife. The princess left Luang Prabang with her escort, went upriver on the Nam U and settled down in Ban Yo".

Between the area of origin and the point of arrival of the migration, the myth is altered by a series of inversions and displacements. While the Ban Yo version tells the story of the failed marriage of Nang Phom Hom's elder sister with a Lao prince, the Ban Viang Mai version explains the successful marriage of the Lue princess (here called Nang On Am) with a local *kha* hero. In the former, the exile on the river is the ultimate consequence of a usurpation of identity and of a broken alliance (facts of culture) while in the latter it is the consequence of a physical trait (fact of nature) and the prelude to a fruitful alliance[8]. Besides, the version collected in Ban Viang Mai also transforms the above "original" (Khmu) version of the myth of foundation of Viang Phu Kha: Chao Muen Sin, the foreign conqueror is presented as one of the Khmu hunters (they are now three instead of two) and as the husband-to-be of the Lue princess. These transformations convey obviously the necessity for the Lue migrants to link two very different mythical frameworks, the first one imported from their area of origin and the second one found when they arrived in Viang Phu Kha. However, several indications suggest that some elements of the new version were already present in the local culture. In other words, Lue immigrants succeeded in creating a new mythical framework (which became later on the "official" legend of Viang Phu Kha written and published by the Lao Ministry of Culture) not only because they were ingenious storytellers but also because they shared part of their imaginary with the populations already settled in Viang Phu Kha.

[8] The exile of Nang On Am on a raft echoes other Tai myths, such as those of Chao Fa Ngum who was abandoned adrift on the Mekong because he was born with 33 teeth; or Chao Fa Dek Noi, son of the King of Chiang Rung who had to leave his native land on a raft and married an aboriginal kha princess (Grabownsky, 2008).

The figure of the princess exiled on a raft can be considered as the local version of a theme common to many regions of Southeast Asia: a female character whose power exerts first over the aquatic world and then over the human (Przyluski 1925, 283). This idea has a great resonance in the Tai world but it is also found in the oral literature of some highland societies. Among the Khmu populations of the Nam Tha and Viang Phu Kha area, it gave birth to the myth of Ya Phan Phaeng. The many versions I collected during the last years would deserve a full analysis, which would largely exceed the space allocated here. In short, Ya Phan Phaeng is presented as a foreign woman with benevolent magical powers (contrary to her brother and her sister, who, when they are mentioned, are presented as warriors and destructors) who arrives in this area by going upstream the Nam Tha River. She sets up (*paeng*) the landscape and shares (*phan*) the territory out the many villages. She also establishes the seasons, the agrarian calendar and the sexual division of tasks. During her encounter with the locals, she takes part to the feast they organize for her and she challenges them with riddles (often bawdy ones), which only the villagers of Mok Klang (a village located near the Nam Tha river) are able to answer. In return, she gives them a piece of bronze, said to be her helmet, as a present and therefore becomes the tutelary spirit of this village.

The detailed analysis of the many recorded versions shows that this "core story" evolves in the Khmu villages nearer from Viang Phu Kha, especially Khmu Khuaen, and tends to merge there with the tale of Nang On Am as given by Viang Mai villagers -though never going up to the point where Ya Phan Phaeng would actually marry to the local Khmu hero. This connection between the two myths has been facilitated by the fact that the idea of a powerful female ancestor was present in both Khmu and Tai tradition even before the arrival of the Lue migrants. On the Khmu side, the myth of Ya Phan Phaeng echoes other stories which attribute to an old woman or a widow (or sometimes just to women in general) the invention of housing, rearing, funeral myths as well as meat and fish sharing (Lindell and al. 1995, 12-18).

Similar ideas are to be found in the Northern Tai tradition too and they are often more specifically related to the foundation

of a city. The legend of Suvanna Khom Kham (on the eastern bank of the Mekong, just in front of Chiang Saen) for instance attributes to a woman named Nang Indapatthana the creation of a city called Mueang Indapatha Nagara Kroem Luang, the invention of wet-rice agriculture and the sharing of steamed rice. In the region of present-day Nan and Uttaradit provinces, oral tradition also mentions a lost city (Mueang Lap Lae) run by a woman (Cholthira 1991, 302-303). The idea of an extraordinary woman who establishes a city and civilizes the populations she encounters is also found in the Camdevi legend, composed in the 15th century by a monk of Lamphun (Swearer and Sommai, 1998). Closer to Viang Phu Kha, a Tai-Yuan legend mentions the role played by two sisters, Nang Khan Kham and Nang Suthamma in the foundation of Luang Namtha city. They perished while cutting a giant liana that was blocking the flow of the Nam Tha River and they became the tutelary spirits of the mueang. Finally, a last element is worth mentioning here: in the Isan and Yuan version of the classical novel Nang Phom Hom (which structure is similar to the Nang On Am tale of the Lue village of Viang Phu Kha), the heroin has a sister whose name, Nang Phuen Phaeng, is strangely close from the Ya Phan Phaeng of the Khmu oral literature[9].

In sum, figures such as Nang Phom Hom, Nang On Am and Ya Phan Phaeng shall be considered as localized elements of the same imaginary or, to use the vocabulary of structural anthropology, as "*mythèmes*" (elementary units of a myth) whose combinations vary in time and space. Taken together, they are part of a common cultural background that has nurtured the contemporary Tai and Khmu identities and the display of their differences. They constitute the two faces of the same literary tradition, one purely oral, mythical and sometimes saucy, the second one mainly associated with writing, manuscripts and Buddhism. This, of course, does not exclude the possibility of independent and localized transformations, rediscoveries and mutual borrowings in the course of history. Indeed, this is most likely what happened when the Lue ancestors

[9] In the version given by Anatole Peltier, Nang Phom Hom and her sister Nang Phueng Phaeng are the daughters of the Queen Sita and of the King of the elephants. One day, they meet their father in the forest and have to walk on his tusks to prove him that they are his daughters. Nang Phueng Phaeng fails and ends up devoured by the animal (Peltier 1995, 23-24).

of the present day Ban Viang Mai villagers arrived in Viang Phu Kha from U Nuea at the end of the 19th century. The myth that they imported and adapted to the local context was, to some extent, already available in the literary traditions of the local populations (both Tai-Yuan and Khmu).

Why had this idea of a power exerted or devoted to a powerful woman such a great resonance among Viang Phu Kha inhabitants? We have seen that the first mythical framework, based on the character of the foreign conqueror, reflected the many layers of migrations, conquests and resettlements that had occurred in Viang Phu Kha since its foundation. Similarly, one has also to postulate that the intermingled versions of the powerful female ancestor could not have been so meaningful if they had been entirely disconnected from historical events. Albeit not being an historian myself, I would like to point out two interesting elements here. First, the already mentioned silver leaf inscription found in Viang Phu Kha and dated of around 1509 (see above) refers to the visit of a female dignitary named Chao Nang Khua Mueang Chiang Khong. It confirms the influence of the principalities of the West banks of the Mekong over Viang Phu Kha at that period. It also seems to indicate that noblewomen could play a political role even as emissaries in remote regions.

A second and more recent historical evidence is given by Pierre Lefèvre-Pontalis when he passes in Viang Phu Kha in 1893-94. A Khmu Khuaen leader tells to the French explorers that according to tradition, Viang Phu Kha and Mueang Sing had once "obeyed the same queen" (1902: 290). The Mueang Sing principality has indeed exerted a political influence over Viang Phu kha in the course of the 18th century and a road was linking the two towns without going through Luang Nam Tha, which was abandoned during most of the 18th and 19th centuries. The remark of the Khuaen leader seems to allude to the widow of Chiang Khaeng's ruler, Nang Khemma, who, in 1792, took the lead of the group of colons who repopulate the Mueang Sing plain which had been deserted after a first occupancy in the course of the 16th century. The local tradition indicates that under her leadership, a fortified town named Viang Fa Ya was built five kilometers on the Southwest of the current city

of Mueang Sing. She also supervised the building of That Chiang Thung, a locally famous Buddhist monument where a yearly festival is organized during the first full moon of November (Grabowsky, 1999, 235).

Conclusion

Origin or foundation myths do not allow us to reconstruct the past but they give crucial insights on the way local people imagine it. They constitute "interpretative schemes" (Sahlins 1989) or interactive tales: they offer frameworks to interpret history and, simultaneously, they are constantly altered by it. They also play the role of "common operators" (Robinne 2007) at a trans-ethnic level, allowing the positioning and the display of ethnic differences in reference to specific markers, events or issues.

In Viang Phu Kha, two mythical frameworks have obviously coexisted for a long time. Both of them attribute the creation of the viang and the development of the paddy fields around it to an encounter with a foreigner who later becomes a tutelary spirit. In both cases, there is no mention of a violent conquest. Rather, we find here the idea expresses by James Scott of "cultural models", organized around a paddy core, "*opened to all those who wished to conform to their religious, linguistic and cultural format*" (Scott 2009, 28). However, while in both cases the Khmu and Tai populations claim to be related to the founder of the original viang, the exact nature of this link tends to differ according to the position in the local ethnic system: male conqueror, patronage and separation of the settlements for the former; female ancestor, direct biological link and merging of the settlements for the latter. In that sense, the myth acts as cartography of the social order; it either ratifies or abolishes a genealogical and geographical distance.

Claude Levi-Strauss was comparing the myths to a "chess game" and was writing that a new contest occurs each time they are told. Likewise, the two mythical frameworks analyzed here relate to two possible readings of local history: the first one insists on the tendency toward dissimilation (creation of distance inside a same society) and inclusion (hierarchical positioning and subsuming) while

conversely the second framework insists on the "domestication" of the highlanders and their assimilation by the lowland culture. Unsurprisingly in a contemporary context of massive resettlements from the highlands to the lowlands under State guidance, it is this second framework which has been put forward and which constitutes from now on the core of the "official" legend of Viang Phu Kha.

References

Boualay Phengsengkham (stories compiled by), 2008 — *Tamnan Vieng Phu Kha / Legend of ViengPhukhaa*, Vientiane, 17 p.

Bouté Vanina, 2005 — En miroir du pouvoir. les Phounoy du Nord Laos : ethnogénèse et dynamiques d'intégration, PhD dissertation, Paris: EPHE, 529 p.

Cholthira Satyawadhna, 1991 — *The Dispossessed. An Anthropological Reconstruction of Lawa Ethnohistory in the Light of their Relationship with the Tai*, PhD thesis, Canberra, Australian National University, 484 p.

Évrard Olivier, 2007 — "Interethnic systems and localized identities: The Khmu subgroups in North-West Laos" in François Robinne & Mandy Sadan (ed.) *Social Dynamics in the Highlands of Southeast Asia. Reconsidering Political Systems of Highland Burma by E.R Leach*, Leiden: Brill, p. 127-159.

Évrard Olivier, Chanthaphilith Chiemsisouraj, 2011 — « Les ruines, la princesse et les "sauvages" », *Aséanie* n°27, p.67-99.

Garnier Francis, 1885 — *Voyage d'exploration en Indochine*, Paris, Hachette et Cie, 662 p.

Grabowsky Volker, 1999 — "Introduction to the history of Muang Sing prior to French rule: the fate of a Lü principality", *Bulletin de l'Ecole Francaise d'Extrême Orient* 86 (1) 233-291.

Grabowsky Volker, 2008 — « The Tai Polities in the Upper Mekong and Their Tributary Relationships with China and Burma », *Aséanie*, n° 21, p. 11-63.

Inpan Chanthaphon, 1994 — ประวัติหย่อ: เผ่าลาวยวน [Summary of Lao Yuan History], unpublished document, 14 p.

Lorillard Michel, 2008 — « Pour une géographie historique du bouddhisme au Laos », in Yves Goudineau & Michel Lorrilard (eds.) *Recherches nouvelles sur le Laos*, Études thématiques n° 18, EFEO, Vientiane - Paris, pp. 113-181.

Peltier Anatole, 1995 — *Nang Phom Hom, La femme aux cheveux parfumés* (classique lao), Vientiane, Ambassade de France au Laos, 376 p.

Lefèvre-Pontalis Pierre, 1902 — *Voyage dans le Haut-Laos et sur les frontières de Chine et de Birmanie* (Mission Pavie, tome V), Paris, Ernest Leroux, 326 p.

Mc Carthy James, 1994 — *Surveying and Exploring in Siam*, Bangkok, White Lotus, 215 p. [1st edition 1900].

Lindell Kristina, Swanh Jan-Öjvind, Damrong Tayanin, 1995 — *Folktales from Kammu V: A Young Story-Teller's Tales*, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Monograph Series, n° 66, Curzon Press, 122 p.

Przyluski Jean, 1925 — « La princesse à l'odeur de poisson et la Nagi dans les traditions de l'Asie orientale », *Études Asiatiques*, tome II, Paris, École française d'Extrême-Orient, p. 265-284.

Raquez Alfred, 1902 — *Pages Laotiennes*, Hanoï, F.H. Schneider éditeur, 537 p.

Robinne François, 2007 — « Conclusion » in François Robinne & Mandy Sadan (eds.) *Social Dynamics in the Highlands of Southeast Asia. Reconsidering Political Systems of Highland Burma by E.R Leach*, Leiden: Brill.

Salhins Marshall, 1981 — *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Scott James C., 2009 — *The Art of Not Being Governed. An anarchist history of Upland Southeast Asia*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 442 p.

Swearer Donald K., Sommai Premchit, 1998 — *The Legend of Queen Cāma. Bodhiramsi's Cāmadevīvamsa, a Translation and Commentary*, New York, State University of New York Press, 205 p.

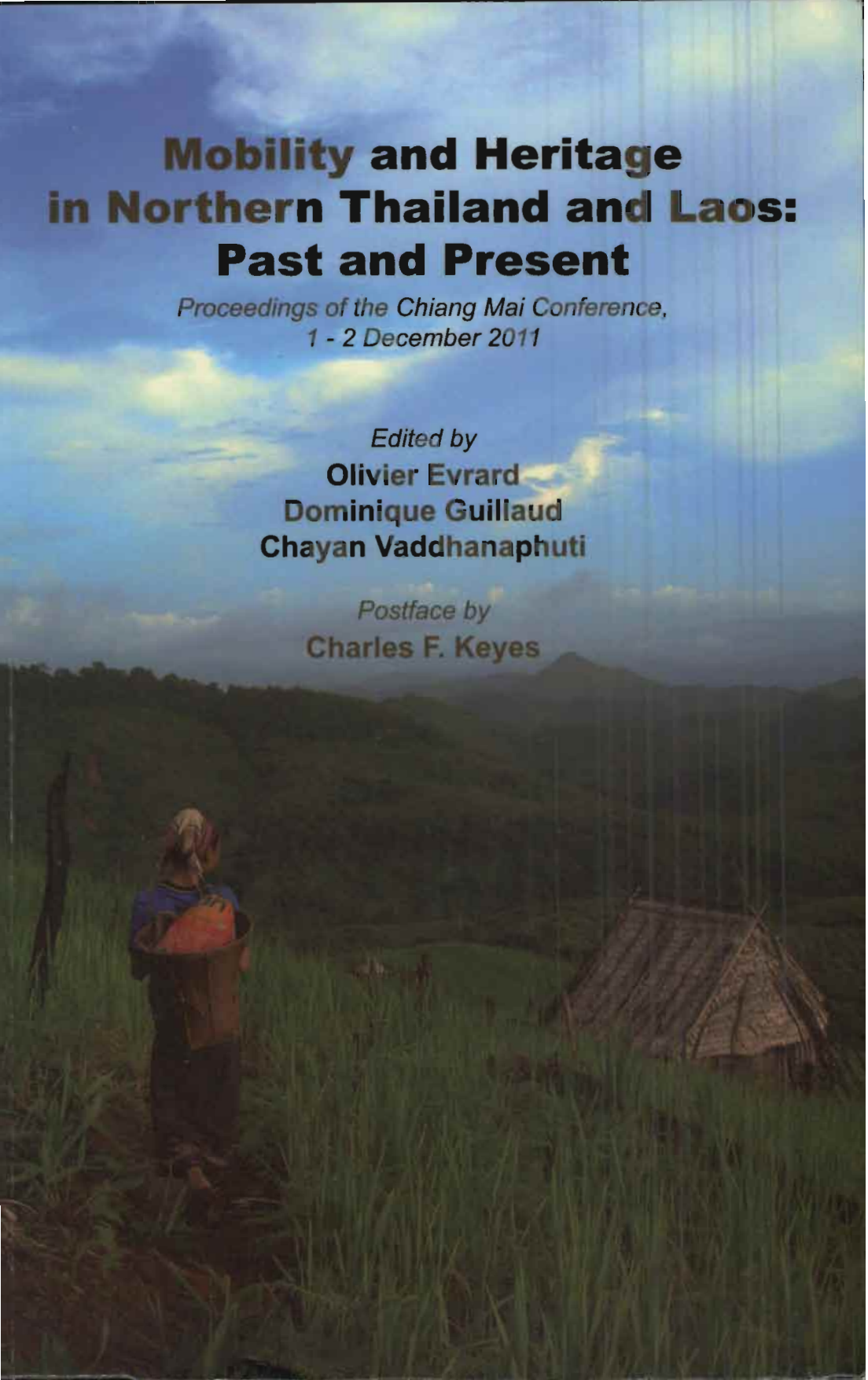
Wyatt David K., Aroonrut Whichienkeeo, 1998 — *The Chiang Mai Chronicle*, Chiang Mai, Silkworm Books, 234 p.

Mobility and Heritage in Northern Thailand and Laos: Past and Present

Proceedings of the Chiang Mai Conference, 1 - 2 December 2011

Edited by
Olivier Evrard
Dominique Guillaud
Chayan Vaddhanaphuti

Postface by
Charles F. Keyes



Mobility and Heritage in Northern Thailand and Laos: Past and Present

Proceedings of the Chiang Mai Conference, 1 - 2 December 2011

Edited by

Olivier Évrard,
Dominique Guillaud
Chayan Vaddhanaphuti

Postface by

Charles F. Keyes

Printed in Chiang Mai at Good Print.

National Library of Thailand Cataloging in Publication Data

Évrard, Olivier.

Mobility and Heritage in Northern Thailand and Laos: Past and Present.-- Chiang Mai : Center for Ethnic Studies and Development, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, 2013.

302 p.

1. Thailand--History. 2. Laos--History.

I. Guillaud, Dominique, jt. auth. II. Vaddhanaphuti, Chayan, jt. auth.

IV. Billault, Laurence, ill. V. Title.

959.3

ISBN 978-974-672-822-5

Cover picture © *Olivier Évrard*
Lamet woman walking toward her field hut.
Ban Takrong, Pha Oudom district, Bokeo province, Lao P.D.R.

Layout : *Laurence Billault*
Illustration & cartography : *Laurence Billault, Elisabeth Habert*

Institut de Recherche pour le Développement :
http://www.ird.fr/

PALOC :
http://www.paloc.ird.fr/

Center for Ethnic Studies and Development,
Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University.
http://www.cesd.soc.cmu.ac.th/