

INTERETHNIC SYSTEMS AND LOCALIZED IDENTITIES: THE KHMU SUBGROUPS (*TMOY*) IN NORTH-WEST LAOS

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NOTE

For Lao place names, there is no official transcription and spelling can vary greatly from one document or place to another. For names of provinces and districts, I have used the transcription of the 1995 national census, and for other names, a transcription based on English pronunciation. For the English spelling of Thai place names, I have used the official transcription taken from the Romanization Guide for Thai Script (Royal Institute 1982). Unless specified, all translations from French documents are my own. Transcriptions of Khmu and Lao words follow phonetic English pronunciation, and do not take into account tones, vocalic length or consonant height. I would like to thank François Robinne, Guido Sprenger, Tim Wong and Mandy Sadan for their reading and comments on early versions of this paper.

INTRODUCTION

In a short article published in 1978, Robert G. Cooper radically denied the relevance and usefulness of Leachian ideas and concepts for a comparative anthropology of Southeast Asia. According to Cooper, all attempts to apply a Leachian style of analysis outside of the Kachin Hills had “*failed to uncover either social categories or mechanisms of change similar to those described by Leach*” and had led to “*false conclusions on the nature of ethnicity and interethnic relations in the area*” (1978: 56). If Cooper was right, there seems little point in questioning the topicality of Leach’s framework fifty years after Leach first published *Political Systems of Highland Burma*. However, despite Cooper’s critique, I see at least two good reasons to re-engage critically with the Leachian model. First, Cooper reviews—sometimes mistakenly—the work of various scholars who have worked in Thailand and Laos, but he does not provide us, at least in this article, with personal data gathered in the field. Following decades of social and political instability, most countries in Southeast Asia are now accessible again to researchers. This provides an excellent

opportunity to carry out fieldwork and gather first hand observations, to revisit and revise a comparative anthropology of Southeast Asia.

While Leach's 'oscillatory' model is now widely criticized, both within and outside the Kachin Hills,¹ a second and more important reason to revisit Leach's framework is that his analysis of Tai cultural and political influence among highlanders is still relevant. Leach was one of the first authors to identify the 'duality' of Taization processes:² the cultural influence of the lowlands resonates within highland groups, but the latter use their own cultural resources and systems of values to transform this lowland culture into practices, behaviours and/or ideologies. In other words, Taization does not always lead to assimilation, but may also lead to the perpetuation, transformation, and even the increase (through fragmentation into subgroups, for instance) of ethnic boundaries. An example to illustrate this point is that, despite the long period of contact with Tai culture, Mon-Khmer groups of northern Thailand and northern Laos not only continue to hold specific identities, but also are distinctively known through various localized ethnonyms, which directly express their old relationships with the lowlands.

This chapter focuses on the history of interethnic relationships and social change amongst Khmu villages (Mon-Khmer linguistic affiliation) of the Nam Tha valley, in northwest Laos. It uses three kinds of data: accounts of the area by colonial explorers or administrators, ethnographic studies, such as those of Karl Gustav Izikowitz (and recently of Guido Sprenger) on the Lamet, or of Damrong Tayanin on the Khmou, and my own personal field data collected since 1994. My purpose is not to demonstrate at all costs the validity of a Leachian model for another Southeast Asian ethnic group. Rather, I have used the model to facilitate my own understanding of the social reality and political history of the villages where I worked while researching my doctorate (Evrard 2001). In essence, I have shown that such a model holds heuristic value, through helping to find relevant facts and, through comparison, avoiding false interpretations.

What I demonstrate in this paper is that the differences between Khmu and Kachin relate mainly to their different interethnic contexts,

¹ See, for instance, the radical critique developed by Zusheng Wang (1997). For neighbouring groups, see the work of Pascal Bouchery on the Naga (in this volume).

² I borrow this term from Grant Evans (Evans 1991).

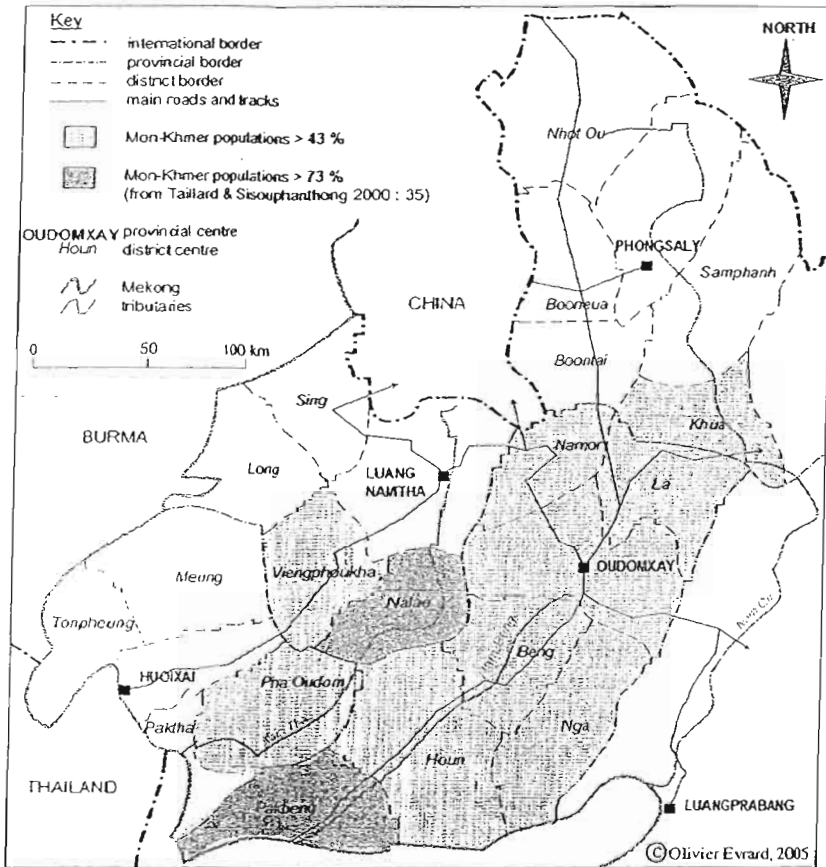
particularly their contrasting history of relations with lowland populations. Despite these differences, I argue against Cooper's critique, and in support of the continuing topical value of the Leachian framework. I assert that Leach's analysis allows a better understanding of how the history of relations with lowland populations has created cultural and political discontinuities in highland villages, which otherwise claim a common identity. I support these findings through investigating the origin and characteristics of the numerous Khmu *tnoy* (subgroups), and show how these intra-ethnic solidarities still influence local social and political dynamics.

EXTERNAL MECHANISMS OF SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE NAM THA VALLEY: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Comprising eleven percent of the total population of Laos, the Khmu are the largest minority in the country and in some areas constitute overwhelming local majorities (see map 1). This is especially true around the Nam Tha valley in northwest Laos, where they are in contact with mainly Tai populations (Lao, Lü and Yuan) and other small Mon-Khmer groups, particularly the Lamet and the Samtao. In Nalae district (the focus of this study), Khmu villagers constitute nearly eighty percent of the total population, even without considering the mixed villages where some of them live alongside Laos people (see map 2).

Khmu villages in this area share many economic and social characteristics with the Lamet dwellings of the west bank. Villages have an average size of approximately 250 people and 40 households, mainly located in upland mountain areas between 800 and 1200 meters. Most upland villages rely exclusively on slash-and-burn agriculture (with 8 to 15 year fallow periods) for their subsistence, and have periodic rice surpluses, which they barter with the neighbouring Tai populations for manufactured products. The *kaang* (house), *klor*k (local patrilineages), *ta'* (clans), and *kung* (village) constitute the basic social units of Khmu villages, with clan membership playing a mostly symbolic role (Lindell *et al.*, 1979).

From the villager's point of view, there are no real, absolute differences in status between lineages of a locality. The only exception concerns the ritual status of the lineage of the founder of the village, whose male elder has the title of *lkun* (priest), and conducts the rituals for the village spirit. While differences of status can exist between individuals,



Map 1: Mon-Khmer populations in northwest Laos.

this does not usually apply to the whole lineage to which they belong. Important decisions are traditionally taken by the village assembly, which is made up of elders from each lineage. Inheritance is based upon the principle of equal repartition of goods, though prestigious items such as bronze drums remain the property of the lineage as a whole. Parcels of land are divided equally, with a supplementary share for the child who takes care of the parents (which is usually, but not always, the youngest).

Nevertheless, historical records and ethnographic data tells us that differences in status amongst the Khmu villagers of the Nam Tha occurred through political and economic relationships with the lowlands. Three main aspects can be underlined: control over some goods obtained through trade and local specializations; temporary migrations of young males; titles of nobility given to some Khmu leaders by the Tai lords.

The Khmu interviewed during this research say that they have always been dependent upon other populations to obtain the iron bars from which they make their agricultural tools. In several myths, it is said that before the arrival of the Tai in the northern peninsula, the Khmu used to cut the forest with stone axes. The iron bars were obtained through trade with Lao boatmen or through contacts with another Mon-Khmer population known as Samtao.³ Village priests in some villages had a ritual monopoly over working these iron bars. This feature, combined with the priests' ritual privileges regarding the choice of parcels of land, must have placed them and their relatives in a favourable position within Khmu society, for they were able to exert some form of control over several aspects of the agricultural cycle.

Another significant process of social change has been the temporary migration of young males from this area to the lowlands, which is considered the most common way to gain prestige. Historically, most of the young Khmu and Lamet migrants went to work in eastern Burma, and after 1880, also in the teak plantations of northern Thailand. The French colonial administration became quite worried about these migrations, which they tried to monitor and control through an 'agency' built

³ This is a local name for a Palaung-related group whose members were famous blacksmiths (more on this below).

in Chiang Khong at the end of the nineteenth century.⁴ In 1930, three to four hundred young Khmu men were continuing to arrive each year in Chiang Mai, where they would stay for an average of two to three years (Lebar 1965: 8). Lampang and Nan were also common destinations for these migrant labourers, but after the 1930s, they went mainly through the border areas of Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong.

After several years in the lowlands, these young men usually brought prestige goods back to the Nam Tha Valley, such as bronze drums, gongs and buffaloes, which they used to pay bride price and to set up a family. In all the villages in which I have had the opportunity to work, the 'richest' men (the ones considered by the others as having accumulated more prestige) had spent several years in either Thailand or Burma. They usually possessed many buffaloes and gongs, and had brought at least one bronze drum back from their trip. Their wealth was confirmed and validated through rituals, as well as through the possession of larger amounts of land.⁵

Historically, it seems that in the villages where numerous young men had undertaken this kind of migration, an 'upper class' developed: the richest men received the title *pid*⁶ among the Khmu of the Nam Tha, and *lem* in Lamet villages (Izikowitz 1951: 347–352). These men often distinguished themselves by wearing symbols of Tai aristocracy, such as turbans or clothes decorated with silver. Special ceremonies were organised when a man received such a title, and in the case of the Khmu, a wooden drum was offered to his lineage by the lineage of his wife-takers (Lündström & Tayanin 1981: 175).⁷ Interestingly, such

⁴ Lefèvre Pontalis (1902: 113) wrote some few pages about the "exil des Khas [here Khmu and Lamet] de Louang Prabang et de M. Pou Kha [Viengphoukha] que l'exploitation des forêts de teck attire depuis de longues années du côté de Xieng-Mai [Chiang Mai], sans qu'ils renoncent jamais d'ailleurs à l'idée de retourner dans leurs foyers" (Lefèvre-Pontalis 1902: 113).

⁵ Increasing one's status turns economic capital into social capital. The higher the status, the better their ability to organise rituals (which implies the sacrifice of animals), and own larger parcels of land. On buffaloes, prestige goods and relations with the outside world among the Lamet, close neighbours of the Khmu in the Nam Tha area, see the excellent analysis of Guido Sprenger (2005: 291–312).

⁶ They were then called *ta pia*, *ta* being the name used for every old man (more precisely, for every man who can be considered as belonging to the generation of father's father).

⁷ Marriage with matrilineal cross-cousins (real or classificatory) is a social rule, and the symbolic opposition and hierarchy between *em* (wife-givers) and *peha* (wife takers) permeates nearly all aspects of Khmu social and ritual life. For the Lamet case, see also Sprenger, 2006.

ceremonies have also been organised more recently, when young men left their village to become soldiers throughout the Indo-China war.

These migrations not only allowed some young men to accumulate prestige goods, but also constituted powerful vectors through which many aspects of Tai civilisation were adopted, including house construction, tattoo designs, clothing norms, and also many of the values and beliefs linked to Theravada Buddhism and with Tai conceptions of social order. The changing geopolitical environment of northern Laos reinforced this process. Tai lords were often at war either with each other or against powerful invaders, such as the Burmese, and were constantly attempting to secure the mountainous margins of their principalities (*müang*). Mon-Khmer populations often played the role of guardians at the borders of the *muang*, and sometimes served as vassals in the armies of the Tai princes. As reward, Tai rulers would bestow titles of nobility (*panya*) to some of the most well-known or powerful Khmu chiefs.⁸ Some Khmu leaders even began to build pagodas in their own village, or fund the construction of pagodas in the lowlands to increase their own prestige (Lefèvre-Pontalis 1902: 147). In this way, a specific political context combined with frequent individual contacts with more sophisticated lowland civilisations, led to the creation of hierarchy networks amongst highlanders whose networks were, either wholly or partially, modelled ideologically on those of the Tai populations.

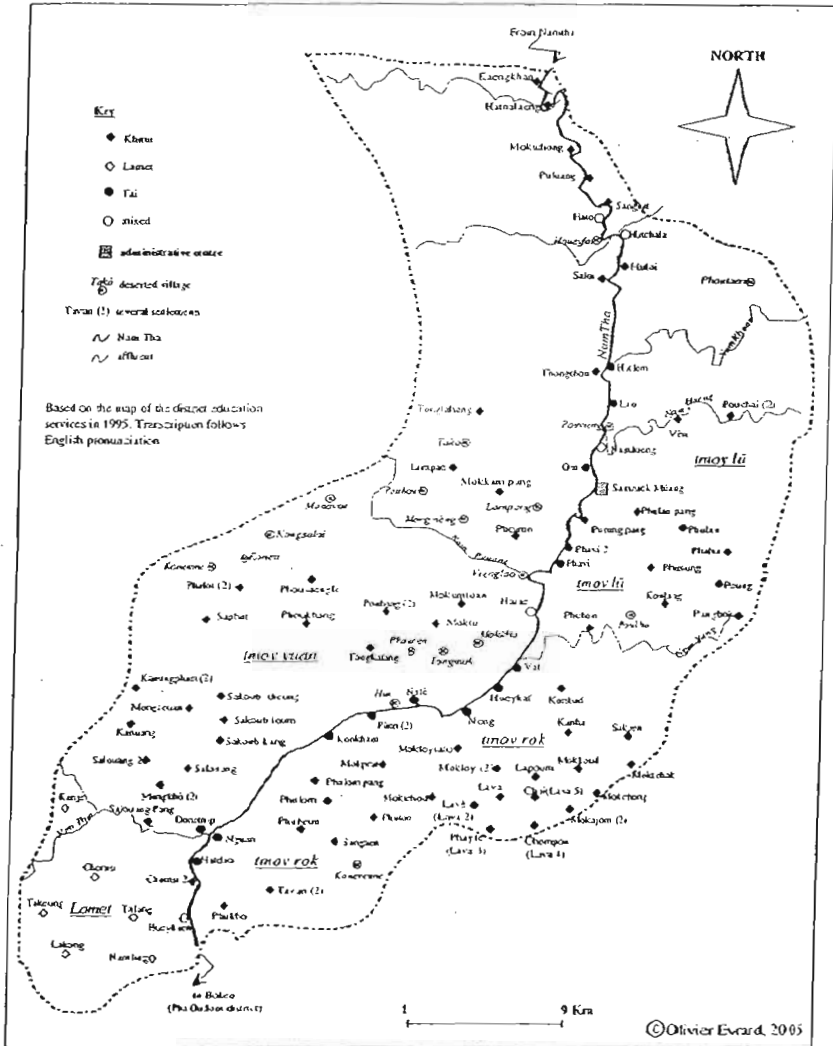
At the village level, Tai influences that were mediated through control over trade, temporary migrations or political agreements, favoured either the development of a local 'aristocracy' holding both economic and ritual power, or political instability due to tensions between these two aspects of legitimacy. During his stay amongst the Lamet in the 1930s, Karl Gustav Izikowitz (1951: 347–348) noted that in the villages where many men had the title of *lem*, the authority of the village *remia* (priest, or *lkan* in Khmu villages) was diminished, except if he himself had obtained the title of *lem*. Similar processes were also operating in Khmu villages. If the village priest was also a member of the richest

⁸ Their role as 'guardians of the edges' is commonly cited in the literature. For instance, on the Viengphoukha plateau, the Tai prince of Nan had concluded an agreement with three Khmu *panya* who were in charge of watching over the movements of the Burmese armies on the plains (Extraits du Journal de voyage de Lefèvre-Pontalis et de Macey de Louang Prabang à Xieng Khong sur le Mékong, Archives du ministère français des Affaires Étrangères, Affaires diverses et Politiques 1815–1896, tome IV, volume 11).

group of men, he succeeded in keeping political status, resulting in a relatively stable hierarchy (at least for one generation) between the local aristocracy—allied to the ritual power—and the commoners. Another situation that may occur is when ritual power conflicts arise with younger men who have sufficient prestige to contest the legitimacy of the elder, and which subsequently leads to a split in the village. I encountered two clear examples of this scenario during my fieldwork in the Upper Nam Tha valley.

The first such example occurred in a Khmu village named Konkud that split some sixty years ago. Two of the oldest and most respected men of this village in the present day, Ta Mom and Ta Tchoy, were at that time coming back from several years of work in the lowlands, the former in Thailand, the latter in Burma. Both were members of the lineage of the founder of the village and were potentially in a position to succeed the *lkun* after his death. Their return coincided with the split of their lineage into two branches. The 'youngest' branch, led by Ta Mom and Ta Tchoy, led the followers of several houses of other lineages to settle a new village, and did not return to Konkud until several years later. It would seem that these young men had accumulated sufficient economic power to contest the ritual power of the *lkun*. By founding a new locality, these two men tried to acquire a ritual position that they could not otherwise acquire in their own village. The name of the village indicates that this was not the first time that such a scenario had occurred, as this name (*kon*, child; *koud*, return, come back, enter) is said to symbolise the impossibility that villagers will leave forever, and that any split in the village population is only temporary.

Data gathered on the other side of the Nam Tha, in a Lamet village, shows that such conflictual relationships between young migrants and old ritual authorities still occur in the present day. In Ban Chomsy, for instance, a thirty-five year old man who had worked in Thailand for five years had returned and encouraged the other villagers to change their way of life by modifying their agricultural practices by growing cash crops. In February 1995, this man, one of the richest in the village, was the only one to possess a fishpond and a large irrigated orchard. He was helping to convince the villagers to move downhill (as the local administration was requesting), but a majority of villagers, led by the previous chief of the village (who also had the title of priest), were still refusing to move. Finally, after a few months the young 'progressive' took his family with him and settled alone near the river. Two years



Map 2: Villages of Nalae district: names and ethnic affiliation

later, many other households had followed him to settle a new village, for which he remains the *naiban* (administrative chief) today.

These two biographies offer examples of how Taization processes occur in Mon-Khmer villages of the Nam Tha valley. If some of the external mechanisms (namely, migrations of young males) described here are not mentioned by Leach for the Kachin, their impact at the village level has led to similar trends, namely to the appearance of traits of a class structure and to political instability, sometimes with the splitting of villages. However, what is relevant at the village level can be misleading on a wider scale, and, as such, we must examine to what extent Leach's framework is relevant for an ethnohistory of the Mon-Khmer populations of the whole Nam Tha valley.

LEACH'S FRAMEWORK AND ITS ADJUSTMENT TO THE LOCAL INTERETHNIC CONTEXT

Two key points should be made here. Firstly, it should be stressed that social inequalities do not 'crystallize' into the social structure of the Khmu to the same extent as Leach described for the Kachin. Indeed, nowhere amongst the Mon-Khmer populations of this area can linguistic categories such as "gumlao" or "gumsa" (Izickowitz 1969: 148) be found. Nor do we find Khmu words to designate a domain or a domain chief. When rich men received specific titles, such as *lem* in Lamet villages or *pia* in Khmu villages, they obtained specific prerogatives, such as the possibility of choosing the best parcels of land (better orientation, better soil quality, closer to the village, etc.) or receiving a proportion of the fines that were paid during the resolution of conflicts. Yet, this research has found that their titles were not hereditary from one generation to another, and that upward and downward mobility took place.

Secondly, the idea of "vicious competitions" (Leach 1986: 194)—political competition for power and wealth—has less relevance to the Khmu, either from an economical or a political viewpoint. In the economic and ritual spheres, the concept of fertility and abundance takes precedence over the idea of surplus. In the case of the Khmu, (and this could be applied to other Mon-Khmer societies as well), it would then be excessive to speak about competitions between the houses of a village or about calculations aiming to maximise either the yields or the merit. This was one of the criticisms formulated against the theo-

retical models elaborated by Friedman (1979) and Kirsch (1973). They, for example, did not take into account the possibility of rapid reversal of fortune through demographic recession or other events.⁹ From the political viewpoint, the differences appear even more striking: violent contacts between Mon Khmer populations were rare, and neither the stories told by the Khmu elders nor any written document mentions competition between famous Khmu leaders supported by armed partisans carrying out vendettas.

A number of additional differentiating factors must be sought to describe the interethnic context, and more precisely, its political and economic characteristics. In northern Burma, the Kachin have played the roles of turbulent allies or 'political parasites' (Leach 1986: 254) of the Shan. In some areas, they have even driven Shan communities from their homes and enslaved these groups to work lowland paddy fields. Conversely, the Khmu populations of northern Laos were driven forcibly from the lowlands (where they had probably already created some small kingdoms) in the fourteenth century following Tai usurpation of political power, despite the fact they had most probably been in contact with the Tai for a long period prior to this. This spoliation, then, gave birth to a ritual and hierarchical formalisation of interethnic relationships,¹⁰ which is not the case in areas where the Shan and the Kachin are in contact. Moreover, unlike the Kachin, the stability of this hierarchical relationship has not been threatened since the time of the foundation of the Lao kingdom.

From an economic viewpoint, in several of the areas studied by Edmund Leach the Kachin were dependent upon the Shan for their supply of rice (especially in what Leach called 'Zone B', 1986: 235). However, the opposite situation often prevails in northern Laos. Because of the scarcity of flat land, the political domination of the Lao could not be everywhere confirmed and secured by the development of large areas of paddy field. On the other hand, some of the Khmu populations kept control over large and fertile upland territories, where slash-and-burn agriculture produced quite good yields. This is especially true in

⁹ On the other hand, status change of an individual house by impoverishment is no argument against the *notion* of a status structure. In capitalist societies, high class families may drop out of their class the same way and just as quickly, but this does not change the fact of the class structure itself (Guido Sprenger, personal communication).

¹⁰ About the interethnic structure as it appears in New Year rituals in Luang Prabang, see Ajmer 1979 and Archaimbault 1973.

the Nam Tha valley, which became, as written by Lefèvre Pontalis 'the granary of Luang Prabang' (1902: 140). Lao boatmen paddled upriver at the end of the monsoon to exchange iron bars, salt, clothes or jars against paddy, cotton or forest products. This trade of manufactured goods against natural products was well in favour of the boatmen. In fact, it was so much so that some upland villagers, especially those settled near the mouth of the river and near the main Lao centres were short of paddy for several months before the harvest. They had to borrow paddy from the Lao who, conversely, speculated on the price of the paddy that they had bought a few months beforehand. However, this was not the case everywhere, and until quite recently in the upper valley of the Nam Tha, most Khmu villages did not regularly suffer from shortages of paddy.

In spite of these differences, it is still possible to adjust the model elaborated by Leach. From a geographical viewpoint, the dynamics described above gave birth to three different trends. Firstly, differentiation occurred between remote areas, usually higher in altitude, and regions that were closer to the economic networks of the lowlands. Such dynamics are already documented for the Chin (Lehman 1963), the Lamet (Izikowitz 1951), and the Wa (Scott & Hardiman 1900, cited in Lehman 1963: 27). Leach (1961) considered that his model could be applied to all upland regions of Southeast Asia. Lehman, for instance, showed that the Chin, who lived close to the lowlands and the Burmese populations, had peaceful relationships with neighbouring groups. In contrast to the "remote" (or northern) Chin, they did not need to develop complex social organization or hierarchical political systems to secure their access to the goods and technologies of the lowlands (Lehman 1963: 44-46). This does not mean that highland villages have a more 'elaborated culture' (Leach, 1961, cited in Lehman 1963: 45), as the proximity of the lowlands can also have a positive influence, which does not necessarily imply an impoverishment of the culture of the highlanders.

In northwest Laos, before the massive resettlements of the last thirty years (more on this below), the social organization of Lamet villages was more hierarchical in the remotest communities, and more egalitarian in those lying near the caravan path of the Viengphoukha Kha plateau. In the former villages, temporary migrations of young males were more numerous, and the numbers of individuals who had acquired the title of *lem* was accordingly higher (Izikowitz 1951: 99,

114, 347-348). I personally observed a similar trend in the Khmu villages on the east bank of the Nam Tha. Going further from the main river, and to higher elevations, villages are generally bigger, agricultural land is more intensively cultivated, and differentiation in status amongst villagers is more obvious. These villages, at least in the Nam Tha area, are also more prosperous, for the yields are better on the higher ridges of the mountains.¹¹ Paradoxically, the cultural influence of the lowlands is often more obvious in these remote villages than in those settled at mid-distance from the river or the main roads, which have usually kept more 'traditional' ways of life.

A second trend concerns the merging of segments of lowland and highland villages, and the creation of multi-ethnic settlements along the main transport routes. This feature, also acknowledged by Leach, for instance in the area of Myitkyina (Leach 1986: 243-244), is a very old trend in the Nam Tha valley, and most probably occurred in the main fluvial valleys of northern Laos and Thailand. Historically, seasonal trade in the lower Nam Tha valley encouraged some Lao boatmen to settle more or less permanently near their Khmu or Lamet suppliers and customers. Small trading posts developed, which were then progressively established upriver and further into the valley because of concurrence between the Lao boatmen (Izikowitz 1951: 27). At first, such localities were usually multi-ethnic: Lao boatmen married Khmu or Lamet wives, and the latter brought with them some relatives to settle near the river. When the locality became properly established, additional Lao migrants would come to settle. A pagoda was then constructed and the multi-ethnic origin of the locality was then completely forgotten. Such processes are still occurring today in most upper sections of valleys, where one can observe quite recent villages that were founded by Lao boatmen who are married with Khmu women, and followed by several houses from each ethnic group (the Khmu usually being more numerous). The Lao houses commonly specialize in trade, while the Khmu practise slash-and-burn agriculture in the surrounding hills. The political context in which such villages are created today differs markedly

¹¹ In Nalae, usually the higher the village is, the better the yield. One can also observe that the ratio of early/late species of paddy is much more in favor of the latter in the upland villages, meaning that villagers have less problems with food security between harvests.

from earlier periods,¹² however, the basic interethnic organization remains the same as it was in past centuries.

A third phenomenon manifests itself more specifically with the Khmu and is less well documented. Through political alliances with different Tai chiefdoms, and exposure to different regional economic influences Khmu populations of the Upper Nam Tha valley acquired cultural peculiarities that led to the creation of subgroups named *tmoy*. This word may have little geographic meaning outside of the Nam Tha valley but, in this area at least, it can be demonstrated that the *tmoy* clearly constitute a territorial system or, more precisely, a kind of cultural and political continuum (Évrard 2003). It seems that the *tmoy* of the western banks of the Nam Tha, which were more influenced by Tai culture acquired more stratified social systems than on the eastern banks and this feature played a significant role during and after the Indochina war. The next section of this chapter goes into further detail, showing the history of the *tmoy*, and describes how their contemporary fate is a pertinent example to approach the topicality of Leach's analysis for highland Southeast Asian peoples.

THE KHMU SUBGROUPS, *TMOY*, IN THE NAM THA VALLEY: DEBATES AND FACTS

In Khmu language, the word *tmoy* has several inclusive meanings. It can designate guests, or strangers, or, more generally, people who share a common culture but who have different customs, language or peculiarities. This word is used to create specific ethnonyms by adding the name of a river (*tmoy khong* or *khmu khong* for those living near the Mekong; *tmoy ou* or *khmu ou* for those living near the Nam Ou) the name of an area (*tmoy luangphrabang*), a Tai population (*tmoy yua*.

¹² Traditionally, the banks of the river in the uppermost parts of the valley were empty. Numerous rapids prevented traders from reaching the town of Luangnamtha by boat. After the war, and following the introduction of motorized boats, local officials encouraged the creation of new villages, both to develop trade with the Mekong valley and to avoid the infiltration of some guerrilla groups, which were still active in this area until the end of the 1980s. The current policy of the Lao State encourages and sometimes forces upland villagers to move downhill, and to mix with already existing lowland villages. This now constitutes the main factor leading to the creation of *multi-ethnic* localities in this part of the valley. These policies have directly contributed to the depopulation of the highlands, which has in turn reinforced the instability of the remaining upland villages.

or *khmu yuan*; *tmoy lū* or *khmu lū*), a linguistic characteristic (*tmoy me* and *tmoy khat* following the kind of negative particle that is used), or even a detail of dress (*tmoy treat* for those wearing short vests; *tmoy vang* for those wearing long shirts). Other Mon-Khmer groups such as the Lamet (*tmoy lamet*) can be included in this classification by opposition to the Tai, whom the Khmu pejoratively name *tchae*. William Smalley, an American missionary who conducted some linguistic fieldwork in Luangphrabang Province between 1951 and 1953, first mentioned this word in 1961, and identified several *tmoy*, or 'subgroups', amongst the Khmu populations (Smalley 1961 and 1965).

A debate has arisen amongst specialists of Khmu culture concerning the nature and origin of such subgroups. For Kristina Lindell, who conducted research on Khmu culture at the University of Lund for thirty years, the *tmoy* constitute localised subgroups that can be viewed as vestiges of old territorial organisation prior to the establishment of the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang in Luangphrabang (Lindell, Samuelsson and Tayanin 1979). Lindell identified seven *tmoy* and drew a map of their location in the northwest part of Laos (Lindell 1982). However, she does not provide any similar map for other parts of Laos, nor does she mention that Khmu people can name many other *tmoy* beyond those few she considered in her analysis. Finally, she does not acknowledge that one can identify cultural variations, especially from a linguistic viewpoint, that do not exactly match her classification. For instance, while all belonging to the so-called *tmoy rok*, villagers of Houn district (Oudomxay Province) use *khat* as a negative particle, while villagers from Nalae, Pha Oudom and Paktha districts mostly use *phe*. In Luangphrabang, some Khmu people use the term *al*, and others use *am*.

Conversely, an American linguist, Franck Proschan (undated: 55), convincingly demonstrates that it is illusory to attribute a precise territory to each *tmoy*. Drawing on a list of *tmoy* names that he collected during his research among Khmu populations of Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and even America, he showed that it was impossible to account precisely for the total number of such terms. Indeed, instead of a simple relation between a subgroup and a name, one can observe that the same subgroup can be designated by different names according to the chosen criteria (type of housing, clothes, dialect) or that the same name can refer to mutually exclusive and geographically distant groups. Moreover, people may consider themselves as belonging to a different *tmoy* than the one attributed to them. Most of the time, people can easily tell which *tmoy* their neighbours belong to, but have difficulties in labelling

themselves with a specific *tmoy* identity. Proschan (1997: 98–99) thus asserts that the specific *tmoy* term should relate to the local and conversational context in which it is used. Paradoxically, however, Proschan's analysis does not completely invalidate the data of the Swedish scholars of Lënd mentioned previously. On a local scale (i.e. the Nam Tha valley), the *tmoy* clearly constitute a system of territorialized identities.

Villagers of the upper part of the Nam Tha valley are able to designate six *tmoy*, four of which are Khmu: *tmoy yuan* (Khmu *yuan*), *tmoy rok* (Khmu *rok*), *tmoy lü* (Khmu *lü*), *tmoy kwaen* (Khmu *kwaen*), and two others belonging to Palaung-Wa related languages: Lamet (*tmoy rlamet*) and Samtao (*tmoy samtao*). The territories of these *tmoy*—the Samtao excepted—are quite precisely delimited (see maps 2 and 3): on the right (west) bank of the river, the *tmoy kwaen*, *yuan* and *lamet* are arranged from north to south; on the left (east) bank, are arranged the *tmoy lü* and *rok*. The territories of each *tmoy* are expanding into neighbouring districts: the Khmu *kwaen* and *yuan* as well as the Lamet are also to be found in Viengphoukha and Huoixai districts, while the *tmoy lü* and *rok* occupy the entire mountain range separating the Nam Beng and Nam Tha valley (which includes the districts of Nalae, Beng, Houn and Pa Oudom). Geographical borders between each *tmoy* are quite well known by villagers themselves, and usually coincide with tributaries of the Nam Tha river. In many cases, these border areas are empty zones that take a full day to cross on foot. Indeed, the footpath that links Khmu villages to the valley are often in better condition than those linking villages belonging to different *tmoy*.

Members of these *tmoy* used to distinguish themselves¹³ especially by their clothing: short white double-breasted jackets for the Khmu *yuan* (men and women); short blue jackets for the Khmu *lü* (men and women); short blue jacket with colourful stripes amongst the Khmu *kwaen* (men and women); long indigo shirts reaching the ankles (as a levite) for the Khmu *rok* (only for men). The hairstyle also varied from one *tmoy* to another: in Nalae District, the Khmu villagers say that the Khmu *yuan* men were the only ones who wore their hair twisted into a bun, while the Khmu *rok* used to shave their heads entirely except for a small tuft on the top of the head. Other distinctive features included the form of housing, basketry, and even the construction and function of some iron tools. The features described above allow people to designate the

¹³ This is still true today in some remote villages especially for clothing, but to a lesser extent than before.

tmoy using different criteria. For instance, instead of speaking about the Khmu *lū* and the Khmu *yuan*, a Khmu villager can sometimes talk about the *tmoy klok* (those who wear a white shirt) and the *tmoy lūn* (those who wear an indigo shirt). Similarly, someone could speak about the Khmu *rok* by using the term *tmoy vang* (those who wear long shirts) comparing them to *tmoy treal* (those who wear short shirts).

Despite the multiplicity of 'identity labels', and the various forms of classification that it allows, there is a definite consensus amongst Khmu villagers of the Nam Tha valley about the territoriality of such subgroups. It seems very doubtful, however, (and not grounded in any ethnographic or historical evidence), that following Kristina Lindell's hypothesis, such intra-ethnic boundaries constitute the remnants of a political organization of the pre-Tai era. Rather, the *tmoy* should be viewed as both the imprint of Tai political systems in these mountainous borderlands, and as indicators of the intensity of the relationships between Khmu and Tai populations.

THE *TMOY* AS AN IMPRINT OF THE TAI POLITICAL SYSTEM

The Khmu population of the Nam Tha valley are called the *Kha Kao* (the old *Kha*) in the Lao chronicles (official historical texts of the Lao Kingdom). They were chased away from Muang Swa (the old name of Luangphrabang) when the Lao seized power in this city, and took refuge in the area of Paktha. Later, the Lao king Fa Ngum resettled some of the *Kha Kao*, and asked those who stayed in the area to protect his kingdom from invaders (Pavie 1898). As mentioned previously, such alliances between Tai Kingdoms and their mountainous borderlands were quite common in northern areas, where they echoed, at least in Laos, the geographic fragmentation of ethnicities and the economic interdependency between the highlanders (who produced most of the paddy) and the Lao boatmen. Consequently, and despite the fact that the mountainous margins of the *mūang* kept intact their own internal political dynamics, the Khmu became 'connected' to the Tai political system and eventually became subsumed within it. In this historical and political context, two main geopolitical divisions appeared amongst the Khmu populations of the Nam Tha valley and constituted the basis of the *tmoy* system.

The first division is between the east and west side of the valley. The Nam Tha river used to be the western border of the Lan Xang kingdom. At the confluence of the Nam Tha and the Mekong, the

village of Paktha was used as a customs post. Downriver, the Mekong was subdivided into segments called *mün* and was controlled by the Lao administration, while upriver it was under the control by the Siamese (Lefèvre-Pontalis 1902: 100).¹⁴ Consequently, the Nam Tha basin was, for a long time, a kind of buffer zone, where Khmu populations gave allegiance to different Tai princes. Khmu of the right bank were linked politically to the Tai Youan of Nan kingdom (itself a vassal of Lan Na and then of Siam), hence the name Khmu Youan or *tnoy yuan* used to designate them. The Khmu of the left bank were under the control of Lan Xang, hence the term *kha lao* that was used to name these people in the past. This opposition predominantly concerned the lower part of the Nam Tha valley, while, in its upper part, Lao influence was much weaker, due mostly to immigration of Lü populations from *Müang La* [Mengla] at the end of the eighteenth century. These populations, who settled near the banks of the uppermost part of the river, sometimes refused to pay taxes to Louang Prabang (Pontalis 1902: 142), as they were trying to create their own independent chiefdom.

Consequently, the second geopolitical division to be taken into account is between the lower and the upper areas of the Nam Tha basin. The geographical limit of these two zones coincides more or less with the rapids that separate Louang Namtha plain from Nalae district (created only in 1983 and called *tasseng nua* in the nineteenth century). Downriver from this point, the Lao (or Lü) paddlers were still able to navigate to and from Paktha and the mountains, which were controlled by Khmu populations owing allegiance either to Nan or to Louangphrabang. Upriver, there were no possibilities for water-based transportation, and trade was carried out using mule tracks. In these areas, the Khmu owed allegiance to Sip Song Panna chiefdoms. However, a sense of opposition remained in place between the populations of the east and west sides of the Nam Tha. In the mountains lying west of the river (between the Nam Tha and Viengphoukha), Khmu villagers belong to the *kwaen* subgroup. The *kwaen* (as the *tasaeng* in Lao politics) were administrative subdivisions of the mountainous margins of the *müang* in the Sip Song Panna chiefdoms (Lemoine 1997: 187).

¹⁴ One *mün* corresponds roughly to the distance that boatmen were able to row upriver, while a *mün* of wax (12 kilogrammes) burned. Today, Paktha is still a major military and customs checkpoint. There are still fifteen *mün* between Louangphrabang and Paktha (called Lok, Seuang, Han, Tau, Hang, Nang, Phat, Krong, Teuan, Tèt, Lè, Sit, Teun, Tôm, Dài) and two others (Dan and Than) have been added between Paktha and Huoixai.

They were given a great deal of autonomy, and were controlled by tribal leaders named *ho kwaen*.

Conversely, in the mountains east of the river, Khmu villagers were considered as belonging not to the *tmoy kwaen* but to the *tmoy lü*. If, in these two cases, the Sip Song Panna influence was predominant, the Khmu *kwaen* were placed under the control of Müang Sing, while the Khmu *lü* owed allegiance to the principality of Müang La [Mengla]. The influence of Müang La extended much further south than Müang Sing, since Khmu villagers in Nalae district still consider today that the *tmoy lü* includes all the villages on the left bank until the river Yang (*huay yang*), located in the centre of the district (see map 2). Indeed, Müang La used to control a great part of the Nam Beng valley (currently Oudomxay province) and this factor, added to the migration of Lü villagers towards the Nam Tha valley at the end of the eighteenth century, probably explains the geographical extent of the *tmoy lü* today.

THE *TMOI* AS AN IDENTITY CONTINUUM

While the political history of Tai polities gives clues to understanding how the *tmoy* came to constitute a kind of territorial system in this area, it proves to be of little use in grasping the meaning of two other *tmoy* names, *rok* (one finds also the transcription of *hoc* or *hok*) and *samtao*. While the first name designates a Khmu population, the second one is applied to a group linguistically related to the Palaung-Wa family, which is found in Laos and Thailand, but especially in the Shan States of Burma (Howard & Wattana Wattanapun 2001: 46).

The word *rok* is still used today to designate the Khmu populations that are settled in the mountainous area at the intersection of the Houn, Beng and Pha Oudom districts. Few Khmu of this area would identify themselves as *rok*, for this name has a pejorative meaning of 'savage', 'backward' or 'inferior'. Consequently, outsiders can delineate a '*rok* area', but the relevance of this is lost when asking inhabitants of the *rok* community.¹⁵ Most of the criteria commonly used to identify subgroups in a given culture have not proven to be satisfactory in the

¹⁵ However, most of them acknowledge the use of this name by their Tai neighbours and some even tell proverbs in Khmu language about the so-called 'rok' subgroup. In one Khmu village of Houn district, an elderly man said once "*Cüang mork, rok lang/ Cüang mork rok hor*", which more or less means that Khmu *rok* are the people who are the servants of Cüang, the mythical Khmu hero.

case of the Khmu, except maybe the forms of basketry that seem to be quite distinct from the other Khmu subgroups.¹⁶ If one tries to examine the criteria that are usually linked with the so-called *rok* identity, one sees that they often refer to an emptiness, absence or poverty. In other words, the *rok* identity is often defined relative to other subgroups by stressing its inferiority: the architecture is said to be more primitive; the women do not weave or embroider; silver jewels are scarcer than amongst other *tnoy*, etc.

If some of these assumptions are wrong (architecture, for instance, can prove to be no less sophisticated than in other *tnoy*), others were certainly true, as I observed. For instance Khmu *rok* women do not weave, contrary to Khmu *lū* and Khmu *yuan* women. This is of great concern for local officials who are trying, with little success, to get a weaving school established in the Khmu *rok* area as part of a rural development project. In addition, iron or silver carved objects—pipes, for instance—are very scarce amongst the Khmu *rok*. Such pipes are mostly to be seen in the Khmu *yuan* area, where they are now considered as female objects and inherited from mother to daughter. Among the Khmu *rok* villages, traditional pipes were made of roots and only their extremities were sometimes decorated with iron or silver.¹⁷ It is most likely that pipes made from roots were quite common in the past and that silver pipes appeared progressively as a symbol of affluence and social sophistication amongst populations where outside activities had favoured the acquisition of silver coins. Conversely, their absence among the Khmu *rok* is probably the consequence of their isolation and their lack of economic integration within regional networks.

A map of the *tnoy* and one of the main commercial routes of the nineteenth century (see map 3) clearly shows that the areas of the *tnoy kxæen*, *lū* and *yuan* were criss-crossed by several mule tracks. The main one linked Viengphoukha to Mūang La through the small hamlet of Sop Ngim, which was lying near the confluence of two major tributaries of the Nam Tha, one coming from Viengphoukha, the other one from Namor. Sop Ngim was not really a major crossroads of regional

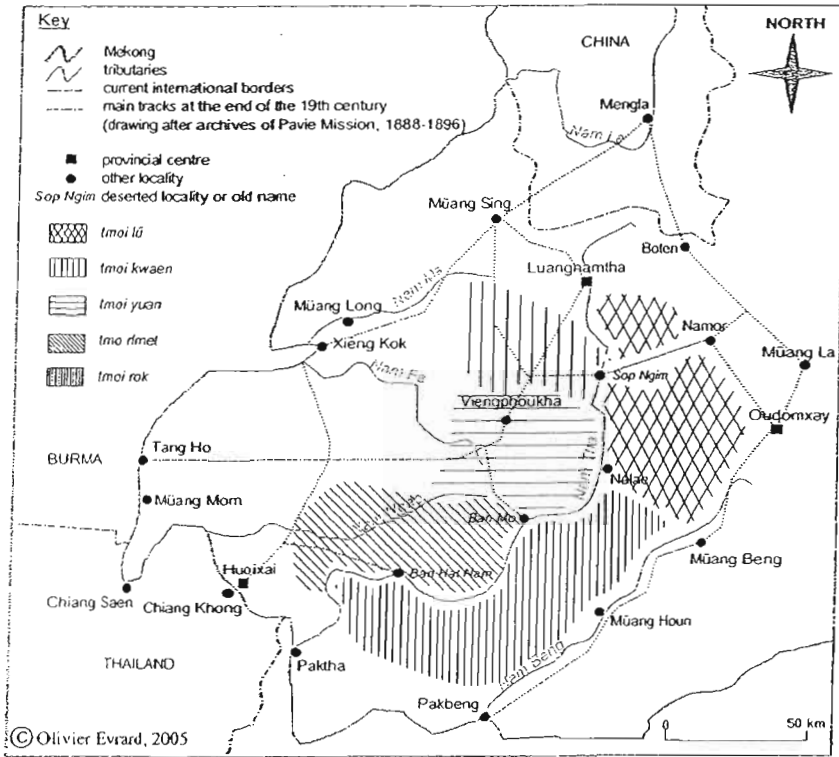
¹⁶ As much as weaving or embroidery, basketry is a meaningful identity marker, especially among the Mon-Khmer populations, and as such would deserve an in-depth study.

¹⁷ A picture taken by the French traveller and journalist Alfred Raquez (1902: 227) shows Khmu *rok* people smoking such pipes.

trade, but was still important enough for Chinese traders to set up a permanent post there, where men and mules could rest (Lefèvre-Pontalis 1902: 44). Besides this main axis, several secondary tracks also connected Viengphoukha to Ban Nalae or Ban Mo (now called Ban Donethip) on the right bank of the Nam Tha. During the rainy season, these secondary tracks allowed Chinese caravans coming from Müang Sing to fork east after Viengphoukha and to use fluvial transportation to reach either Siam or Louangphrabang. In this context, the *tnoy yuan* and *kvaen* and even the Lamet (*tnoy rlnet*) were connected to regional trade, while Khmu populations from the east side of the Nam Tha were more isolated. This isolation and its consequences more likely explain why the name *rok* was attributed to them.

The *tnoy samtao* constitutes a kind of opposite case compared to the *tnoy rok*. First, the identity does not correspond to a precise area in northwest Laos and has only a few members, most of whom are scattered in different villages. Secondly, it designates a population that used to be famous for its political and economic integration. Samtao themselves claim the name *toumok* (highlanders) and consider that *samtao* used to be mostly a political category. Indeed, during the nineteenth century, this term referred to a semi-autonomous political area linked to the chiefdom of Xieng Tong in Burma and inhabited by Palaung populations, known on the Lao side of the Mekong as Doi [Doi, Doy], who were found mostly in Long district, Louang Namtha province. As noted by the French explorer Francis Garnier, the main area of the Samtao in Burma was inhabited by around 10,000 people and was quite famous for its production of rifles made with the iron brought by Chinese traders. "*The Doi Samtao were producing 3,000 rifles a year and were giving more or less 200 of them to the prince of Xieng Tong for their allegiance*", wrote Garnier (1885: 416). The fact that some of the Samtao settled in Nalae district shows that their reputation as blacksmiths and ironworkers extended a long way from their place of origin. Nevertheless, this never constituted a massive migration in the Nam Tha valley; rather, Samtao seem to have followed the main commercial axis, and become mixed with other Mon-Khmer populations. Today, for instance, some Samtao families in Nalae district are still living in Ban Hatnalaeng, but only the oldest men still claim such a name, as their children and grandchildren now consider themselves to be Khmu.

These two examples clearly show that the *tnoy* acquired a territorial meaning mostly through their relations with the locally dominant Tai identity, with which they become more or less imbued. In other



Map 3: Khmu sub-group areas and old commercial networks

words, areas of variable size emerged by formalizing their relations in specific ways with the political environment, and by developing (or not) economic specializations or distinctive features. The case of the *tnoy rok* may seem different, but, indeed, it belongs to the same relational structure, named only in a negative way: this *tnoy* is defined by what could be called a 'deficit of relations', or through a lesser influence of the political and economic environment. Conversely, the label *tnoy samtao* refers to the propensity of this group to interact with their external environment, and their reliance on economic specialization. Beyond their linguistic differences, the so-called *rok* and *samtao* populations can be seen as two symmetric cases inside the same territorial and relational system, or, in other words, as two ends of a continuum that, if represented as a line, would include the other *tnoy* (*rlamet*, *kwaen*, *li* and *yuan*) in intermediary positions.

TMOY AND HIERARCHIES: GEOGRAPHICAL AND POLITICAL VARIATIONS

Due to the lack of ethnographic studies conducted in this area, it is difficult to know with certainty how various types of relationships with the lowlands influenced local forms of social life. Conversely, we can only guess about how the latter reinforced and perpetuated the differences between the *tnoy*. Despite the fact that all the Mon-Khmer populations of this area possess the same social¹⁸ and economic (swidden agriculture) organisation, some clues indicate that local hierarchies were more obvious on the right bank, amongst the Khmu *yuan* and *kwaen*, than on the left bank, especially amongst the Khmu *rok*. Firstly, the villagers of the *rok* area clearly affirm that none of their ancestors had ever obtained the title *panya* from the Tai princes, while this title had been granted to several leaders of the Khmu *yuan* area. This is confirmed by the data gathered by the first European explorers in this area, especially Pierre Lefèvre-Pontalis who visited the Nam Tha valley in 1893 and met three *panya* in the Khmu *kwaen* region (1902: 145-166). It was here that the Tai influence had a great impact upon both territorial organization and the spread of Buddhism amongst local leaders, some of whom either constructed pagodas in their own

¹⁸ Local patrilineages, preferential alliance with matrilateral cross cousin, lack of political authority beyond the village level, etc.

villages, or made donations to the pagodas of their Tai neighbours (Lefèvre-Pontalis 1902: 147; Raquez 1902: 241).¹⁹

A second clue lies in the toponymy of the highlands in the upper Nam Tha valley. I have already mentioned that the emergence of rich individuals in a village could lead either to a conflict with the ritual power of the priest, or to a more or less stable hierarchy, where the priest and the rich jointly held political power over a population of commoners. In this second case, the hierarchy could influence two or three neighbouring villages, with one of these being the historical and ritual centre. In such situations, one usually finds that the *kung* (villages) have the same name, being differentiated only by opposing adjectives:²⁰ *tal* (low), *trá* (middle), and *phé* (high); *prim* (old) and *me* (new), *nae* (small) and *nam* (big) for instance. One also sometimes finds these toponyms embellished with images, such as in the example given by Damrong Tayanin (1994: 45–48): the two satellites or peripheral villages are distinguished by their size (Kon Salai *koung nam*: the big Kon Salai; Kon Salai *koung nè*: the small Kon Salai) and the ritual centre compared to a source, or more precisely to an ‘overflow’ (Kon salai *koung piak*).

All the lists available²¹ regarding the villages of the upper part of the Nam Tha valley suggest that the tendency towards the creation of small sets of villages with a common name is traditionally more frequent in the *tnoy yuan* and *khuen* than amongst the *tnoy rok*. For the Khmu, if a village keeps the same name as the village it has been created from, it means either that it does not yet have an altar for the *roy kung* (village spirit) and an *lkun* (priest) to propitiate it (meaning that it is not yet considered to be a permanent hamlet),²² or that it stays under the ritual power of the *lkun* of the mother village. In this latter

¹⁹ Unfortunately, the Khmu *kvaen* area is now completely empty since the massive resettlements that were undertaken by communist troops after 1975.

²⁰ The names are given here in Khmu language but the toponyms are most often in Lao language.

²¹ Data of the 1995 census and of the survey done by the Ministry of Transport (IRAP, Vientiane, 1997) can be compared with those given by Damrong Tayanin (1994, 45–48). Damrong quotes from memory the villages he crossed during a survey done on behalf of the Lao government in 1968. His data have the great advantage of respecting the Khmu toponymy and give a transcription in international phonetic script. Karl Gustav Izikowitz (1951, 39–40) gave the list of the Laniet villages registered in 1938 in the province of ‘Haut Mekong’ and in the principality of Louangphrabang.

²² In this case, the name of the village is usually followed by a specific term (*pang* in Lao, *re* in Khmu) that indicates that the settlement is growing as an offshoot of the older village on one of its swidden fields.

case, the ceremony for the spirit of the village will take place in the ritual centre and will be conducted by the priest for the whole set of villages. Ritual hierarchies are then likely to be more developed in *tmoy yuan* than among *rok* villages. This feature coincides, as shown above, with the deeper political influence of the Tai polities, and more regular connections to regional economic networks.

Conversely, in the area less concerned by the Tai influence, such as the *tmoy rok*, sets of villages could also be constituted, but following a different process and without an obvious hierarchy. This is the case, for instance, in the so-called *tasaeng* Sakaen, a subdivision of the district of Nalae that includes seven villages (Konkud, Mokud, Sakaen, Lapoum, Lava, Mokchong, Mokchak). During pre-colonial times, the *tasaeng* were semi-autonomous networks of villages in the mountainous edges of the *müang*. These groups of villages had always belonged to the same ethnic group, meaning that due to the numerous migrations and scattering of different peoples in these areas, the word *tasaeng* did not always have a territorial meaning. The colonial administration territorialized the *tasaeng*, which then became a subdivision of the district *müang*. Officially, the *tasaeng* as subdivisions of the district no longer exist in Laos and have been replaced since the end of the 1990s by entities called *khet*, which are usually larger than the previous *tasaeng*. What is important to our understanding here, however, is that the villagers of the *tasaeng* Sakaen consider that they have formed a single territorial entity for a very long time, certainly from well before the colonial period. A myth collected in Konkud village explains that these seven villages came to consider themselves as part of the same territorial unit, not to copy a Tai political model but precisely because they rejected it:

Before building their dwellings, all the inhabitants of the *tasaeng* joined together at the top of the Head of Wild Buffalo Mountain to sacrifice a buffalo. The blood of the buffalo spread on the slope of the mountain and its meat was shared among all the participants. The villagers took one buffalo's rib and an old woman, Ya Phan Pheng, wrote an oath on it. By this oath, the villagers swore always to oppose themselves to the power of the *lam*. The buffalo's rib was then buried on the top of the mountain. The villagers went to build their houses and to share the land by using the bamboo crosses, *talae*. Later on, however, the rib was discovered and stolen. That day we lost the knowledge of writing and we have since then suffered from the power of the *lam*.

The word *lam* refers to a specific politico-administrative position (which was often hereditary) in Tai polities. The *lam*, who were sometimes

called *pho lam* (*pho*, father, protector, patron and *lam*, translator, go-between) were appointed by the local Tai ruler to keep control over the population of the *müang*. The *lam* had real power (tax collection, settlement of disputes) and constituted a kind of parallel power that facilitated relations between the ruler and his vassals (Lemoine 1997: 180). They were also in charge of relations with the highland populations in the margins of the *müang* (Reinhorn 1970: 1780).

The myth above refers to the *lam* of Müang Beng and Müang Houn, two little *müang* of the Nam Beng valley (East of the Nam Tha river), and from where the main attempts to control the *rok* area seemed to have occurred. The refusal of the Khmu *rok* to accept the power of the *lam* finds interesting echoes in the *Nithan Khun Borom* (the Lao Chronicles), in which it is written that Fa Ngum, the first Lao king, found support among the *kha kao* while fighting against the *lam* of Müang Hun (Hoshino 1986: 110–111 and Pavie 1898). The end of the myth may refer to the colonial period, during which the power of the local Tai notables was bolstered by the French administration.²³ One can also interpret this as an influence of the Marxist historical analysis introduced and spread by the Pathet Lao during the war (on this issue, see Halpern 1964: 93–95 and 156–157, and also Guido Sprenger in this volume). This myth is also mixed with older mythical frameworks explaining how the Khmu were dispossessed of their power by the Lao: in another version, a dog eats the buffalo skin on which the Law was written, resulting in the loss of the written Khmu language.

This example shows that Tai influence did not follow the same pattern everywhere. In many cases, it allowed the creation and perpetuation of status inequalities amongst highlanders, while in other areas, such as the Khmu *rok*, it gave birth to local mythologies or territorial organizations based precisely on its negation. In other words, there was both acceptance and rejection of Tai influence by the Khmu in different areas and such variations from region to region have played a crucial role in the recent history of northern Laos.

²³ Most of the *tasaeng* in Northern Laos were then regrouping several highland villages under the control of one Tai village, a situation that contributed to exacerbating tensions between the highlanders and the lowlanders.

THE TOPICALITY OF THE *TMOY*: THE WAR, THE STATE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY IN LAOS

In past decades, numerous migrations and resettlements of Khmu villages in the lowlands, most of them implemented by the communist Lao State,²⁴ have weakened, and sometimes nearly erased, the territorial basis of the *tmoy*. Highlanders have abandoned their previous territories and settled along the banks of the Nam Tha, or on the dusty edges of the main road linking Luangnamtha and Viengphukha, where one can now find villages with mixed populations of different *tmoy*, sometimes containing both Khmu and Tai populations. This is especially true for the *tmoy kvaen*, whose previous territory is now entirely empty. In the meantime, however, *tmoy* identities have been treated as separate ethnicities and these identities promoted accordingly for tourists. For instance, it is quite common today to see hotels of Huoisai displaying signs indicating that the tourist who will boat up the Nam Tha river to reach Luangnamtha town (2 days trip) will “encounter numerous ethnic tribes, *Lü, Yuan, Lamet, Rok and Kvaen, recognizable by their costume and the shape of their basketry*”.

It would go too far, however, to conclude that the *tmoy* remain only as essentialized folklore entirely emptied from any territorial and political content. Membership of a *tmoy* greatly influenced the course of the 1945–1975 war at the regional scale, but to varying degrees depending on the geographic area and period. Khmu men got involved either with the communist troops or with the Royalist Troops backed up first by the French (1945–1954) then by the US (1960–1975). Local geopolitics have then undoubtedly contributed to define relations between the villagers and the new State, their involvement in new local political structures, and their autonomy in the face of rural development policies implemented by the provincial administration. In other words, members of some *tmoy* have directly suffered from the new social and political order, while others have been able to profit from the dynamics of this transformative process.

Between 1945 and 1975, almost the entire area of Laos became involved in wars at some time or other. Heavy bombing, artillery duels

²⁴ On the issue of resettlement as the main tool for rural development policy in Laos, see Goudineau 1997 and 2000, or Évrard and Goudineau 2004. For a good overview of all the reports and articles written on that subject, see Baird and Shoemaker 2005.

and infantry skirmishes were more numerous in the east along the Vietnamese border, but also occurred in the northwest throughout this period. Between 1946 and 1954, during the so-called first Indochina War, battalions of Lao Chasseurs commanded by French officers were patrolling in the then-named 'IVth Military Territory' (covering more or less the current Luangnamtha and Bokeo province) to fight and disarm small 'Lao-Issara-Vietminh' groups (or LIV, in the language of the French officers). The latter were very mobile and were regularly attacking mule caravans (for opium), or Lao garrisons (for weapons). They found support amongst some of the highland populations, especially Akha and Khmu groups, among which they were diffusing nationalistic ideas and discourses.

One interesting point underlined by some of the mission reports given by French officers to their superiors, concerns the methods used by colonial troops in the field. They leaned on local hierarchies, and especially on the positive attitude of most of the *panya* towards the French, to progress in mountainous areas and to surround guerrilla groups. This strategy did not work everywhere, however, and some areas were entirely beyond the control of the French. This was notably the case for the Khmu *rok* of Müang Hun, known locally as *kha khat*,²⁵ who were renowned for refusing any collaboration with colonial authorities. Interestingly, however, the Khmu of this area had welcomed and helped some French officers in 1945 while they were escaping the Japanese forces and helped organize guerrilla actions to regain control over the Lao territory (Caply 1966). It seems, then, that this Khmu subgroup, thought of by many as being more 'backward' than other Khmu, have always taken sides with guerrilla movements against regular forces.

During the 1950s and the 1960s, a frontline progressively appeared on each side of the Nam Tha with the Nam Ha valley (tributary of the Nam Tha, on its right bank) as a northern limit. On August 13th 1950, a communist resistance front called Neo Lao Issara was created, subsequently renamed Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS) in 1955, along with a 12-point political program adopted by its leaders. From this time, military actions of communist troops were backed up with attempts to influence directly the everyday life of the villages that they

²⁵ This surname refers to the linguistic particularity of the Khmu of Müang Hun area who, or some of them, use *khat* as a negative word while Khmu living in Nalae or Vieng Phou Kha usually used *phé*.

had succeeded in controlling (e.g., initial attempts at agrarian reform, building of schools), and to spread Marxist-Leninist ideology amongst inhabitants. Fox (1986: 20) states that in 1953: "twenty-seven zones of operations had been established throughout Laos, mainly in frontier areas inhabited by tribal minority peoples, among whom Pathet Lao recruitment was particularly effective." In northwest Laos, three zones covered some parts of the Viengphukha plateau, the core of the Nam Beng valley, and the area of Namo (Deuve 1984: 35). In the following years, royalist forces took back control over the Viengphukha plateau, but the Nam Beng and the Namo areas came to constitute a single "rebel" zone, covering the Khmu *lū* and *rok* territories and entirely controlled by the NLHS troops (Deuve 1984: 96, 166 and 210).

The success of communist forces in these areas, and their ability to recruit many of the young men living there, can be explained by the conflictual relationships between the Khmu *lū* or *rok* (and some of the Hmong populations of Namo) with the *lam*, whom I have mentioned previously. These *lam* were the Tai administrators—most of whom were Lū or Phouan—who were exercising their power over these areas in the name of the King of Lan Xang. The tax and territorial reforms introduced by the French in previous years had given more power to these Tai nobles, even though Tai villages were largely in a minority in these areas.

The profound resentment against these reforms manifested itself first in a kind of passive resistance (for instance, through a systematic underestimation by the highlanders of the number of inhabitants in each village in order that they should pay less tax), and was then transformed into open conflict following the increasing presence of NLHS troops and Vietnamese military advisers. In 1953, one of the local Tai administrators of Müang Beng was killed in an ambush while he was trying to go to some Khmu villages, despite the warning sent to him by Khmu leaders who had let him know that they would not accept additional attempts to collect taxes or to search for escaped prisoners in their territory. In July 1954, a telegram sent by the governor of Luangnamtha to the French Commander of Louangphrabang, informing the latter that the mountainous area between the Nam Beng and the Nam Tha (the area of the *lmy* *lū* and *rok*) was "100 % Viet" and that "access to the highland villages is forbidden for lowland people" (Military Archives of Vincennes, file 10H5650).

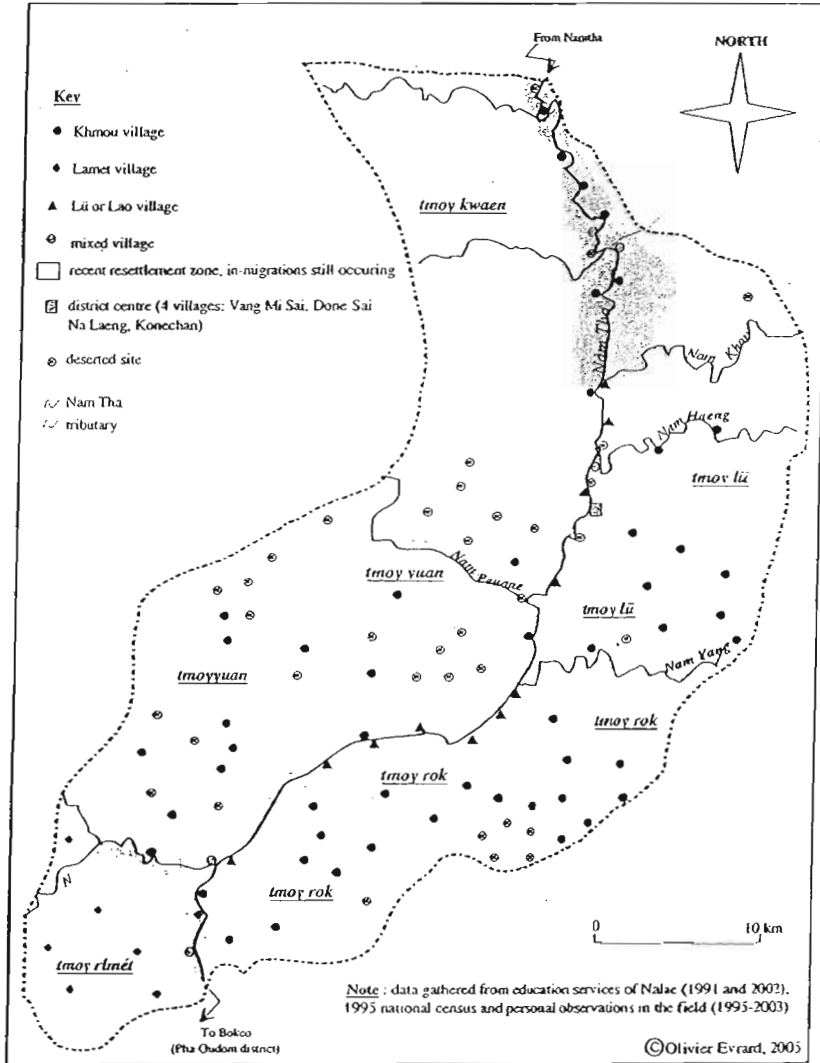
The political and military opposition on the two sides of the Nam Tha valley became increasingly obvious during the 1960s. Royalist

forces settled several military camps near the right bank of the river and, following the takeover of Luangnamtha by communist troops in 1962, received much stronger military backing from the United States. Several Khmu *lū* and *rok* villages were bombed by the US Air Force during this period, and US Green Beret instructors actively recruited Lahu, Hmong, Khmu *yuan* and Lamet men of the Viengphukha plateau to train them in guerrilla fighting and commando techniques. Those paramilitary and *multi-ethnic* groups conducted several ambushes against NLHS troops, and even won back control of Luangnamtha town for a short period at the end of 1967, before being driven back by the NLHS and Vietnamese forces.

It would be an overstatement to say that all Khmu and Lamet men living west of the Nam Tha river supported the actions of the royalist troops and anti-communist commandos. Commonly, only a few men in each village became soldiers, and their enlistment was motivated more by a pragmatic analysis of the local geopolitics, and sometimes by financial motivation, than adherence to a real political project, such as the case of Khmu *rok* and *lū* in the eastern part of the valley. However, old cultural and political contrasts between the eastern and the western *tmoy* were brought 'up to date' and transformed by the course of the conflict. A broad distinction was made by the new communist state between the *vilason* (heroes) and the *satu* (enemies) of the revolution, which still directly affects the relations of these populations with local administrations.

One of the consequences of the conflict in the Nam Tha area concerns the reversal of the 'values' or 'images' attached to the *tmoy*. Those who were considered as the most 'enlightened', because they were most influenced by the Tai way of life, are treated as enemies by the new regime, whilst those previously considered the most 'backward' are given a new respectability through their association with the victory of the communist troops. Such a hierarchical reversal has obvious implications at the local level. For instance, in Nalae district, all the *cao mūang* appointed since 1975 came from the *tmoy lū*,²⁶ while at the

²⁶ Things are changing, however, and for the first time since the end of the war, a *cao mūang* with a Khmu *yuan* origin was appointed in Nalae district in 2001. Some locals commented upon this nomination by saying that the period of 'insecurity' is now over on the east side of the valley and that the Pouthin area, where this man is from, will be a development focal zone in the next few years. Indeed, a track has been reopened there and it is now possible to link Vieng Phou Kha and Nalae in less than one day during the dry season.



Map 4: Resettlements and *tnoy* affiliation in Nalae district

provincial level, the Khmu *rok* have kept the most influential positions. Between 1975 and 1998, two provincial governors were appointed in Luangnamtha and both of them came from Ban Mokkaud, a village from the left bank that was bombed three times by the US Air Force during the 1960s. In the neighbouring provinces, especially Bokeo and Oudomxay, Khmu *rok* men also received high positions in the provincial administration. Conversely, it is still unusual to find high-ranking local officials recruited from Khmu *juan* or *kwaen*, or even Lamet populations.

Such political reorganization led to particular directions for policies on rural development, and, especially, ways in which the resettlement of highland villages was conducted. From the end of the 1960s, communist leaders offered material and logistical support to 'allied' highland populations who would agree to go down to the valleys and cultivate rice fields abandoned by those of the Tai-Yuan and the Tai-Lü populations who had fled to Thailand. Several hundred Khmu *rok* and Khmu *lū* families were then able to settle in the lowlands of Hun, Beng, Xay and Namtha districts. Some years later, the return of some of the Tai owners gave rise to land conflicts in these areas. Most of the Khmu migrants had to give back their land, but they usually received some compensation from the provincial administration in the form of cattle, buffaloes or even rural development projects (Évrard 2002).

During the same period, the continuation of an anti-communist guerrilla movement on the Viengphoukha plateau led to the authoritarian resettlement of numerous Khmu *juan* and *kwaen* populations, along with Lamet, Hmong or Yao villages. Unlike the resettlement mentioned previously, these involved the forced relocation of entire villages, which were obliged to move under pressure from the Lao army. Most of these migrations took place between 1975 and 1985, and were especially numerous in 1977, when Lao troops, backed by Vietnamese forces, launched a vast security operation following the assassination of the governor of Viengphukha district. Most of the Khmu villages that are found on the banks of the Nam Tha river, or along the road near Viengphukha, were resettled under these circumstances. Unlike the Khmu *rok* or *lū* migrants, those who were forcibly removed did not receive any aid during the initial years, and most of them experience very difficult living conditions (Évrard 1997).

The division of Laos into two opposing camps during the war led to a blurring of ethnic identities between different ethnic groups. In the case of the Khmu populations of the Nam Tha valley, these groups

drew upon previously existing intra-ethnic solidarities, which were 'crystallised' through their involvement with the war and transformed through political affiliations with prevailing power structures in war and post-war contexts. The *tnoy yuan* and *kwaen* experienced brutal and significant reductions in their territories, while the *tnoy rok* and *lū* have until recent times kept quite autonomous highland territories connected to the lowlands via familial and institutional networks.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has shown how Leach's framework can still be used accurately for a contemporary anthropology of highland populations in Southeast Asia. If the concept of an 'oscillatory model' is misleading both inside and outside the Kachin Hills, the interactionist kind of analysis on which it relies appears well suited to the analysis of other groups, provided the specificities of the local interethnic contexts are taken into account.

Political and cultural influences of the lowlands bring deep changes into the lives and cultures of highland groups, but are nonetheless subject to a form of appropriation that is mediated and encoded through specific cultural and cognitive grids in order to be understood and adopted by the group concerned. Added to geographic, historic or economic features specific to each area, this leads to the creation of cultural discontinuities, specific 'labels' and intra-ethnic solidarities among populations that still claim a common identity. Brought about through historical processes, such phenomena can be well seen amongst the Khmu populations of the Nam Tha valley.

Similar analysis can be conducted nearly everywhere in northern Laos, where hybrid ethnonyms are often derived from the Lao language to name highland groups or subgroups, either from Mon-Khmer or Tibeto-Burmese linguistic backgrounds. Instead of considering each of these populations separately, and trying to define their cultural characteristics, Leach invites us to consider them as pivotal categories in a single interethnic context. What is especially interesting in the case of the Khmu is that, as in the case of the Kachin, such sub-groupings acquired opposing political meanings or values during the war. Thus, they allow a better understanding of how the Lao communist State came into being, and how it used and transformed, rather than erased, such intra-ethnic solidarities.

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the Khmu subgroups (tmoy) in North-West Laos

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