Grégoire Schlemmer
with Saleumsack Phabouddy

ETHNIC LIFE IN NORTHERNMOST LAOS

A Visual Journey

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CONTENTS

I am very happy to preface this book, which is the result of a collective work carried out within the framework of a research project that started in 2009, built in partnership between the Faculty of Social Science (FSS) of the National University of Laos (NUOL) and the Research Institute for Development (IRD – France). This partnership is based on an agreement signed between NUOL and IRD in 1999 and renewed since then. The goal of IRD is to promote scientific research that aims to help economic, social and cultural progress in developing countries, as well as strengthening scientific capacity and cooperation. The Faculty of Social Science has the role of organizing the teaching and learning of the social sciences to train scholars and scientific researchers in the preservation and promotion of the fine arts and culture of the multi-ethnic people of Lao PDR. The collaboration could therefore only be fruitful.

Several members of the Faculty of Social Science were involved in this joint research program, which included collection of field data, fieldwork training for students, teaching and conferences, material support, conferences and publications. An important part of this program was devoted to a better knowledge of the ethnic populations of Phongsaly province. Between 2009 and 2012, the team members conducted about a thousand interviews, carried out during prolonged immersion situations in around 200 villages. These surveys also included extensive photographic documentation and audio recordings, and were complemented by the collection of statistics and the analysis of written documents. This book presents some of the results of this joint programme for a wide audience. We are pleased that there is also a Lao version so as to strengthen scientific publication in our national language. In this way, it is hoped to develop our knowledge of the history of this province, as well as the cultures and traditions of its multi-ethnic population, which are part of the Lao PDR's cultural wealth.

Dr. Phout Simmalavong,
Former dean of the Faculty of Social Science,
Vice-minister of Education and Sports

A protective talisman towering over the moutain of Samphan district

Why this book?

Bordering China and Vietnam, Phongsaly province is the northernmost and one of the most isolated provinces of Laos. A fascinating diversity of ethnic groups live here. In this Babel of fewer than 170,000 inhabitants, no less than thirty languages and dialects are spoken. Who are the Seng, the Muchi, the Pisu? One will search in vain for information on these groups. Indeed, some of these populations are totally unknown to the outside world, an exceptional fact at the beginning of the 21st Century. This alone justifies the need for such a book. It relates to the population of Phongsaly province in all its ethnic diversity. It is aimed at all curious people who are attracted by the different lifestyles of these people.

Besides, the province of Phongsaly is representative of a certain aspect of Laos. For Laos does not merely consist of its plains, mainly occupied by the majority ethnic group, the Laos. It is also, and above all, a mountainous country (80% of the territory), and ethnic minorities account for more than half (56.8% in 2015) of the population. The ethnic and linguistic diversity of the country increases from the south to the north, culminating in Phongsaly, where the greatest diversity of population is found.

Furthermore, the concentration of ethnic diversity in Phongsaly can be related to the fact that this province has always been a frontier land, which also means a cross-

roads. Here, China, Vietnam and Laos meet; while Burma and Thailand are in close proximity. It is a place between East and South East Asia, and between the Indic and Sinic civilizations. From that perspective, Phongsaly province is also representative of this large zone of mountain and forest areas that, from the Himalayas to the South China Sea, is occupied by an astonishing diversity of ethnic groups.

Unity in diversity

Presenting such a multi-ethnic area is not an easy task. The usual solution is to draw up a catalogue of the different groups, described according to their own cultural particularities, spontaneously perceived as inherited from a long history of isolation, as if these societies form autonomous entities and had been perpetuated unchanged since the dawn of time. The form that our field investigations took led us to see things differently. In a successive series of interviews and through participation in daily life, from village to village, belonging to different ethnic groups, the feeling of a shared world emerged. It may have been shaped by a common environment, living conditions and history, as well as in brief but repeated interactions. As for the differences between groups, they are a product of combined but limited choices within this milieu, such as inhabiting the lower part of the

Chatting at sunset after a working day

valley or the mountaintop, growing wet rice or dry rice or predominantly practising livestock farming, being from an area more linked to the Chinese world or one more influenced by Indian culture. Therefore, we propose to discover these groups in their entirety, revealing what makes each of them unique, but also what they share and what unites them.

Our exploration begins with a presentation of the area and its history which shaped these communities. It is followed by a broad presentation of the different populations of the province, not only grouped by the usual linguistic base, but on a series of shared features, including lifestyle, history and culture. Circles of affiliation other than ethnicity, such as clan, village, and some which even go beyond group boundaries such as adoption or ritual friendships, are also indicated. From them, the presentation is organized by theme rather than by group, specifying the differences between them when relevant.

The first part of the book is devoted to the material way of life. It shows the importance of the spatial units—the household and the village—in defining membership. It reveals the importance of agrarian and economic choices in determining lifestyles. It also presents how groups consciously distinguish themselves by a set of cultural practices—music and dance, writing, clothing—even if sometimes such practices are in fact linked to fashions or regions.

The second and final part presents intangible culture, traditions, rituals and beliefs. First comes the ritual life, very much linked to spaces and rice culture. Then there is the life cycle, which generally concerns a whole lineage or clan. Finally, Buddhism is presented, showing that it is not only espoused by the majority Lao population but also blends very well with non-Buddhist cults.

A willingness to share the knowledge

Thanks to a joint ethnological research programme conducted between the Institut de Recherche pour le Développement and the National University of Laos, an in-depth field research has been carried out between 2008 and 2012, in about 200 villages. This book is therefore based on new, first-hand information. We were eager to share this data, to give back a little of what we were given. This has led to the creation of the Museum of Phongsaly Ethnic Groups. Located in the heart of the province, it is accessible to the Phongsaly population, as well as Laotian citizens and foreign visitors. In addition to the objects on display, this museum contains many explanatory posters,

which form the material for this book, for all those who could not make it to the museum.
Taking into account the differences in knowledge and expectations between the Laotian and foreign public, two books have been written: one in English and one in Lao, with slightly different texts. Another challenge was to reconcile scientific rigour with a concise and accessible discourse. Specialized literature and scientific debates were set aside in favour of the main conclusions. Rather than a narrative, the book gives an overview of many subjects, and instead of extensive texts, favours visual illustrations. A short bibliography will help curious readers deepen their knowledge about these populations and about Laos. We hope that this will lead to a fascinating discovery of the cultural wealth of Phongsaly province's ethnic groups.

Informal interview in an Munteun village
An installation of the Phongsaly museum

A PLACE AND ITS HISTORY

Fied hut in muong Khua district

Geography

Phongsaly Province is covered with mountains and forests. It was once difficult to reach and remained underpopulated for a long time. There are only a few valleys suitable for wet rice cultivation. Thus for a long time the residents mainly practised shifting cultivation.

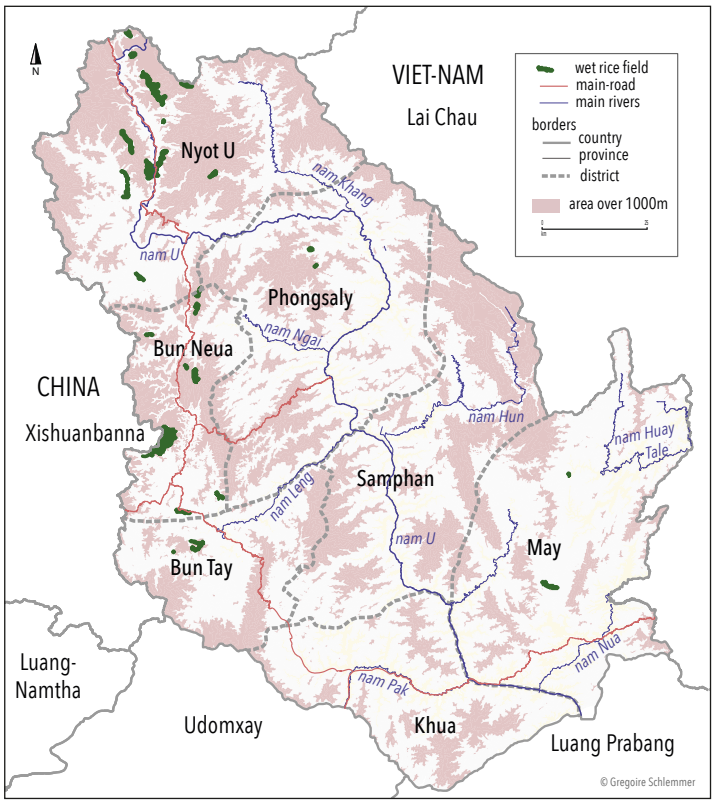
"The general character of the land is one of chaotic mountains just sticking out of the ground, their tops separated by steep ravines or narrow locked-in valleys (…) cliffs, steep mountain faces, confusing valleys, an ocean of summits, cones, mounds and pyramids for as far as the eye can see. They run into each other, stretch and sway in front of each other…"

E. Guillemet, who visited Phongsaly in 1917

From right to left: Ngai Neua surrounded by wet rice fields; Nam U river, Fields along a river in Bun Neua district

Phongsaly in Lao PDR

Province of Phongsaly



PHONGSALY PROVINCE IN NUMBER (2005)

provincial area 16270 km²
length of border with Vietnam 330 km
length of border with China 320 km
min. and max. elevation 450 m/1867 m
forest cover 65%

national park area 1520 km²
length of the U River 333 km
population 165947 (37000 in 1943)
density 10.2 ppl/km²
villages 605

urban population 12.5 %
literacy rate 43 %
farmers 92 %
area of paddy fields 5905 ha

Bordering the Chinese province of Yunnan and the Vietnamese province of Lai Châu, Phongsaly is Laos' northernmost province. It is named after its capital city. At 1500 metres, Phongsaly city is the highest provincial capital in Laos. It is also the only city to have been founded by members of a non-Tai ethnic minority.

The mountains of the region are the last foothills of the Himalayas. The forest cover is impressive on its eastern and western borders where wild tigers and elephants can still be found, while the central mountains are quite barren. The Nam U River runs through Phongsaly, and is an important waterway for transporting people and goods.

Ninety percent of the population of Phongsaly is rural. Local people live in 600 villages, many of no more than 50 households, spread over seven districts. The inhabitants make a living from the limited production of their family farms, growing and selling crops, such as rice, corn, cardamom, tea, sugar cane and rubber. The small towns are mostly inhabited by traders and civil servants.

From top to bottom:
Phongsaly city seen from Phu Fa
Forest around the nam Lan river

From top to bottom:
Farmers in front of Phongsaly city
Rubber plantation in Nyot U district

History

"We are in the middle of emptiness.
We can barely make out on a hillside on the other side
of the valley an ancient burnt field, which is already overgrown.
These regions certainly saw cities come and cities go in the past centuries.
But here, men leave no written trace of their passage in this world;
they leave no stones or monuments.
They are like a shadow on a wall and even their ancient pathways
through the forest are barely visible."
E. Guillemet

A province that has always been a frontier land, Phongsaly is a region that is also on the crossroads. It stands as witness to the political borders of ancient kingdoms and the cultural influences affecting the Chinese world and that of Southeast Asia. The province as we know it today was only formed in 1916 when the French colonial powers cut up various areas that until then had been subjected to different influences.

Ancient times

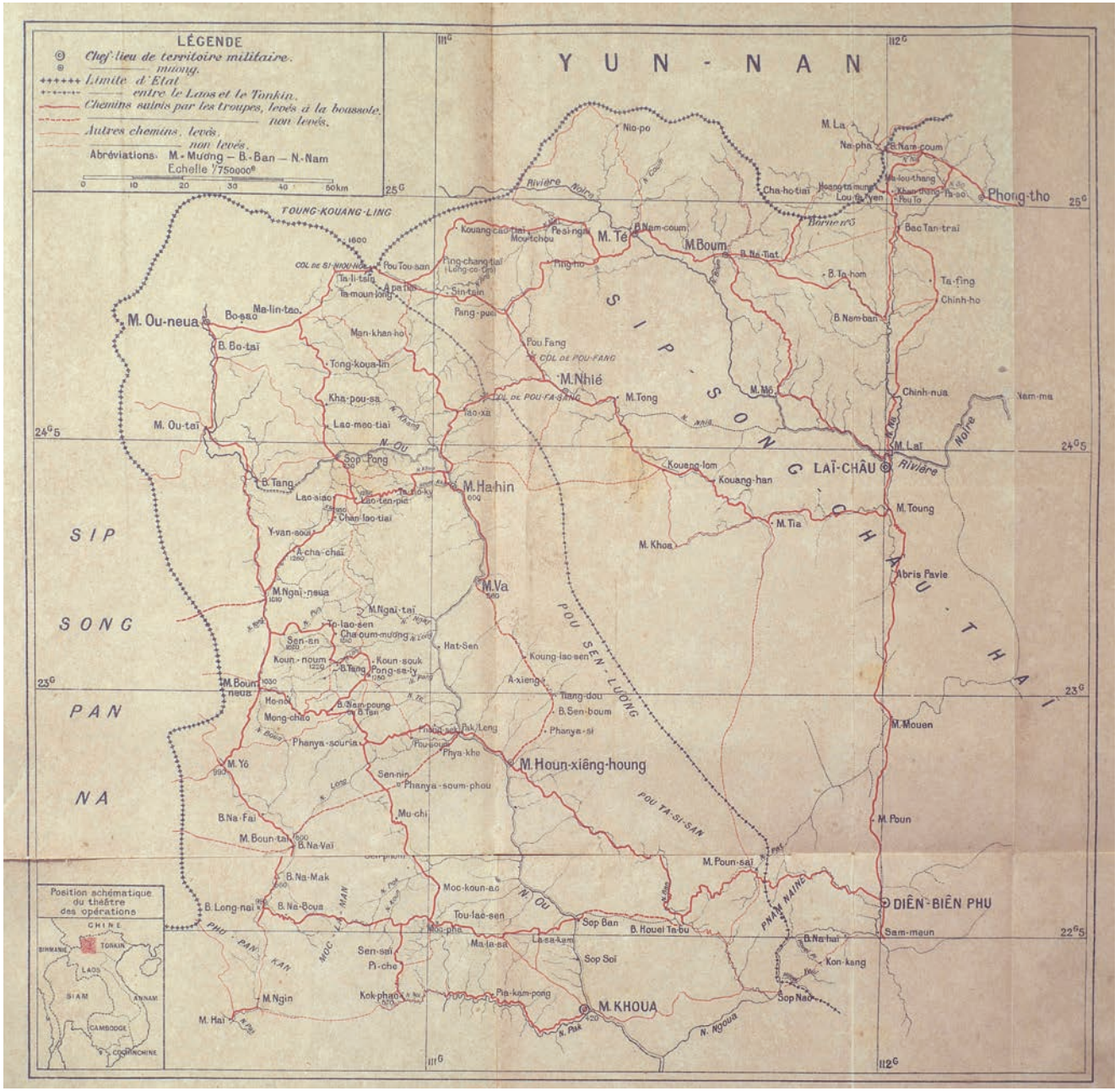
For centuries the region was under the control of Tai groups. Present-day Phongsaly Province was split into three different zones belonging to two different kingdoms. In the north, beginning in the 12th Century, Nyot U was part of the Sipsongpanna Tai Lue Kingdom ('the 12 districts', present-day South Yunnan). The provinces of Muang Hun in the centre and Muang Khua in the south both belonged to the Lan Xang Lao Kingdom which was founded in the 14th Century and later became Laos.

Inside each of these zones, small political centres, the muang, controlled the surrounding villages. Some of them even became autonomous regions for some time. People living in remote areas had greater autonomy, with muang heads collecting taxes and drafting workers, but each village dealt with its own affairs under the authority of a village council (made up of religious leaders, clan leaders and elders). This is the case in Akha, Khmu and Hmong villages. In societies with a stricter hierarchy such as the Tai and the Phunoy, one chief would rule over several central village councils.

Phunoy headmen and French administrator about 1920

Bun Tay Fort about 1920

Tai Lue stele reused by the Chinese around 1840



Phongsaly map in 1916, from Guillemet

Some historical dates

1180	Foundation of the Lue Kingdom, later to be named Sipsongpanna.
1353	Foundation of the Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang by Fa Ngum.
1710	Division of Lan Xang into 3 kingdoms and the beginning of political and military instability.
1860-1889	Violence in Phongsaly: incursions by armed Chinese gangs (the Yellow and Black Flags), popular uprisings known as the Tjeuang War, and the arrival of Siamese armed forces.
1893	The French occupy Laos.
1916	Armed struggle against Chinese gangs and the creation of the 5th Military Zone, which later became Phongsaly.
1945	Japanese occupation. First Lao declaration of Independence and the beginning of the Isala, or Freedom Movement which would become the Neo Lao Isala in 1950 and the Neo Lao Hak Sat in 1954. Most commonly known as the Pathet Lao, this communist group went on to liberate and rule the country.
1953-1954	Viet Minh victory at Dien Bien Phu. The Viet Minh liberate Phongsaly Province and the French leave Indochina following the Geneva Agreements. In Phongsaly power is shared between the Pathet Lao and the royalists.
1959	Right Wing coup-d'État. The Pathet Lao only maintains two small zones: Muang Naten and Muang Mai. Violence erupts between the communist Pathet Lao and the Santiphap Pen Kang neutralist party, allied with the Right.
1961-1968	The neutralist party joins forces with the Pathet Lao. Violent clashes occur between the Pathet Lao and royalist forces supported by the Americans. Battles rage in Muang Khua, Samphan and Nyot U regions.
1975	The Pathet Lao takes control of the entire country. The Lao People's Democratic Republic is established.
1979-1983	Tensions are high between Laos and China and borders are closed. Farms are collectivized. Schools are built in every village.
1986-2000	Economic opening (1986), new Lao constitution (1991) and Laos' integration in Asean (1997).
2000-2010	Opium eradication policy, development of commercial agriculture, electricity and road infrastructure are developed.

Colonial times

France took possession of Laos in 1893. The Nyot U region, which was part of the Sipsongpanna Lue Kingdom, was annexed to Laos by the French in 1895. The rest of that kingdom became the Xishuangbanna prefecture in Yunnan, China. The French administration preserved the old political organization but drained off some tax money and free-exempt work for its own benefit. In 1916, following incidents caused by Chinese armed gangs, the colonial administration set up a military zone in order to maintain control, which gave the province its present boundaries. The region was renamed the '5th Military Zone', the four others being along the Chinese-Vietnamese border. It officially became Phongsaly Province in the 1940s.

From top to bottom:
Chinese and Franco-Lao soldiers on the borderline, about 1920
Former Tai Lue ruler of Muang U Tay and his suite about 1910
Phongsaly city about 1920

Today

After Phongsaly was controlled by Viet Minh forces in 1953, the province was split in two. On one side were the Pathet Lao communists who received help from the Vietnamese and on the other were the royalists along with the neutralists supported by the Americans. Following several battles, the neutralists went over to the Pathet Lao and the region was unified in 1965.

The new Pathet Lao regime traced new district boundaries and set up popular communist organizations, such as the Lao Front, the Youth Union, the Women's Union, the police and the army. These were set up in each village and district. Village heads are, till this day, elected from a list of candidates chosen by the Party.

Various photos of the activities of the Pathet Lao during the war of liberation

Settlement

Among the ethnic groups living in Phongsaly today, many came from elsewhere, particularly southern China. Before migrating they sometimes inhabited areas where they were the majority population group, living sedentary village-based lives and practising wet rice farming. Migrating due to conflict or looking for new lands, they settled in uninhabited mountain areasand adopted a new way of life based on shifting cultivation.

"In the beginning we lived in China. Our ancestors came to Laos to flee wars and taxes. The first group came through the forest, making their way among the wild banana trees and eating boiled crabs. A little while later, the rest of the group followed to join us. But they saw that the banana trees had grown back and that the crab shells were red, as though they had been in the sun too long. They did not know that banana trees grew very quickly and that crabs turned red in water. They thought we had left too long ago and they would never catch up with us so they turned back.Since that time we have been divided and do not even know where our relatives are."

Akha elder

Ancient times

Little is known about the region's human settlement. Môn-Khmer-speaking people, notably ancestors of the Khmu and the Bit, presumably came from east India around 4000 years ago. Then Tai-speaking people came from south China in waves between the 7th and 12th centuries. Finally, people speaking Sino-Tibetan languages came from south-western China during the 18th and 19th centuries. Unlike the other groups who settled throughout Southeast Asia, this last ensemble of groups travelled no further south. It is safe to say that 200 years ago Phongsaly Province was already settled by the Lao, Tai Lue, Khmu and Bit, as well as certain Sino-Tibetan-speaking groups, such as the Seng and some Akha groups.

19th Century

The deadly wars and famine caused by rebellion in China in the 19th Century were the origin of massive southward population movements. This is when most of the Akha, Hmong, Mun, Ho and others arrived in Phongsaly. This was a difficult period for Laos as well, and many wars and revolts led to other migrations. Some of these migrations took place within the province as well as migration out of Viet Nam into Phongsaly. This is the case for the Tai Yang, the Tai Dam, the Bit and some Khmu and Seng.

Laichau chief Deo van Tri

Ho chief Phanya Somphu

Chinese Black Flag soldiers, about 1880

Boat trip on the nam U

Leaving. Deserted village of Sumkham

Settling in. Building house, Ban Huayvay

Moving. Relocation of a building structure

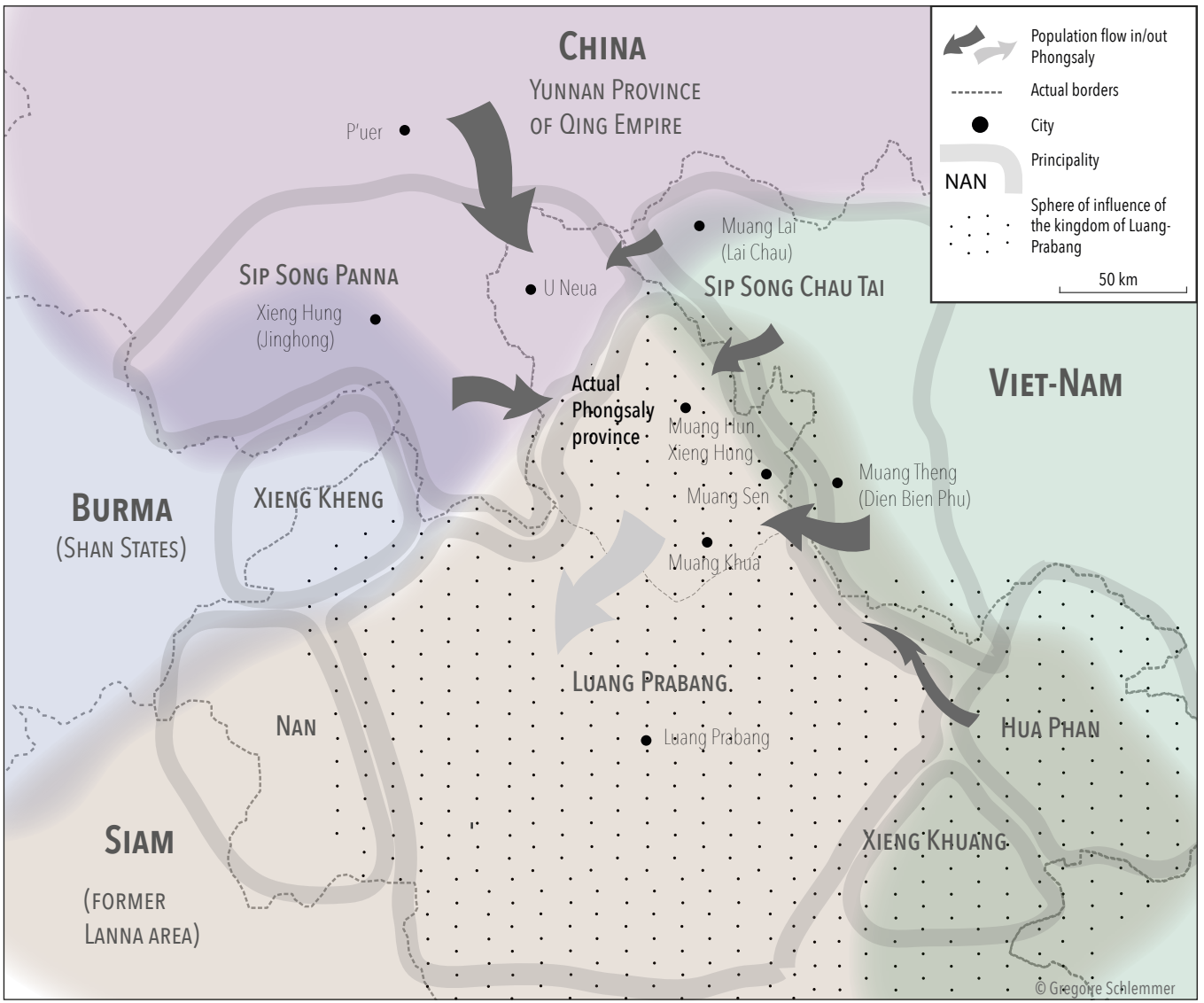
20th Century

Migratory movements became more complex. People moved to escape colonial taxes, local conflicts and wars of liberation. They also went in search of better land. This movement caused some internal migration and population exchanges with China, and continued well after Independence in 1975, with a national migration policy of moving peoples from their villages in the mountains to the plains and valleys. This was to make it easier to administer them, improve their access to public services, and increase wet rice and commercial farming production.

The ancient kingdom of Muang Xieng Neua

Near the Vietnamese border there is a village named Muang Sen Xieng Neua (or Muang Hun Xieng Neua) that refused to recognize the authority of the king of Luang Prabang in the 19th Century and founded its own kingdom. According to legend, this tiny kingdom was able to control the eastern part of Phongsaly Province by using magical powers. The king of Luang Prabang sent a spy who sacrificed a cat – a most respected animal – to the spirit that was giving the kingdom its occult powers. Thanks to this trick, the armies of Luang Prabang were able to neutralize these powers and attack the kingdom, forcing many people to flee. Some Tai Yang, Seng, Bit, Ho and Akha are said to come from this area.

Surrounding kingdoms in the 19th Century



MULTIPLE BELONGING

Ethnicity

"We call ourselves the Suma, but we don't know which ethnic group we belong to: the Phunoy? The Akha? The State is also looking into it but they haven't found the answer yet."

Thao Siso, Namnyone Village

Phongsaly Province has a great diversity of ethnic groups and languages. According to official classifications, there are 15 distinct groups, but if we were to count them in the way the people identify themselves, there would be more than 40. Even though most people share the same livelihoods, differences can be seen in their traditions, social organizations, clothing, and architecture.
Until very recently, two ethnic groups would not inhabit the same village.

The ethnic trinity (plains, hills and mountaintops Laotian) plus Phunoy on a picture of the former Phongsaly museum

Ethnic groups

For these populations, ethnicity is mostly defined by 'living together'. In this way, an ethnic group is a collection of people who consider themselves linked, who speak the same language, obey the same laws and follow the same traditions. Because of this, most marriages take place within the same ethnic group.

Adoptions do exist, however, and families or even entire clans can change ethnicity. Moreover, members of different ethnic groups meet each other on market days or during festivals. Two friends who appreciate each other can become blood brothers (sieo), thereby creating unbreakable ties between their two families. Finally, wars, population movements, State activities, education and new roads have instigated new ways of life, which surpass ethnic differences.

Creation myths and relations between groups

The Tai and the Khmu say that different groups of humans came out of a broken gourd in single file. The Akha and the Hmong believe they are the fruit of a union between a brother and sister, the only survivors of a terrible flood. All these myths communicate the same idea – the common ancestry of man.

From top left to bottom right: Vanyeu (Muchi), Bit, Mun (Yao Lanten), Tai Dam, Phunoy, Khmu, Hmong, Loma, Akha Puli

Classifications

The 15 official ethnic groups of Phongsaly are: Lao, Tai Lue, Tai, Tai Yang, Tai Neua, Khmu, Bit, Hmong, Iu Mien, Akha, Phunoy, Sila, Hani, Lolo and Ho. These groups have been classified in different ways over the years.

Under the monarchy they were divided into Kha — peoples who have been dominated and forced to do unpaid labour, and Tai— free peoples. In the 1960s, they were divided into Lao Lum, people of the plains, Lao Theung, people of the hills, and Lao Sung, people of the mountaintops. Today ethnic groups are classified along linguistic lines.

The ethnic trinity on a banknote

By taking into account cultural and linguistic similarities, the population of Phongsaly Province can be divided into five main categories:

- Tai groups corresponding to the Lao Lum and the Tai-Kadai linguistic group.
- Khmu and Bit corresponding to the Lao Theung and the Mon-Khmer linguistic group.
- Pisu groups including Phunoy, Seng and others, who were sometimes classified as Lao Theung and sometimes as Lao Sung, speaking Sino-Tibetan languages.
- Akha and related groups classified as Lao Sung, speaking Sino-Tibetan languages.
- Other groups including the Ho, Hmong, Mun and Lolo, classified as Lao Sung, speaking Sino-Tibetan and Hmong-Yao languages. They share a cultural link with the Chinese sphere of influence.

Ethnic groups and categories

ethnic categories			ethnic groups			
before 1960 (political)	**1960-1980 (topographic)**	**1980- now (linguistic)**	**official group**	**local group**		**subgroup**
Tai	Lao lum (lowland lao)	Lao-Tai	Tai Lu	Tai Lu		
			Lao	Lao		Tai Phongteu,Tai Bam
			Tai/Phutai	Tai Dam		
				Tai Deng		
				Tai Khao/Tai Don		
			Tai Yang	Tai Yang		
			Tai Neua	Tai Neua		
Kha	Lao theung (upland lao)	Mon-Khmer	Khmu	Khmu		
			Bit	Bit		
	Lao soung (highland lao)	Tibeto-chinese	Ho	Han		
			Lolo	Lolo/Alu		
			Hani	Hani	Hani/Lomi	
			Akha		Munteun	
				Akha	Akha Oma	
					Akha Chepia	
					Akha Eupa	
					Akha Puli	
					Akha Pusho	
					Akha Nuheu	
				Vanyeu	Ko	Loma, Khema, Eushi
					Vanyeu (Muchi)	
					Baza (Pusang)	
					(Kheu) Laya/Kaso	
					(Kheu) Bami/Baling	
					(Kheu) Zimleu	
					Kheu) Pape	Khalung, Puma, Bokhie
			Sila		Sila	Koeug, Zeuteu, Soso
			Phunoy / Singsili	Pisu	Phunoy	Pisu, Phongkhu, Phongsek
					Laopan	
				Seng/Banie		Pangla, Konghi, Chaho, Yeusa, Namsen, etc.
				Tang		
				Samkhong		
		Hmong-lu Mien	Iumien / Yao	Mun		
			Hmong	Hmong		

Khmu & Bit

The Khmu and the Bit, some of the region's earliest inhabitants, live throughout northern Laos. Their livelihoods are based primarily on shifting cultivation around their mountainous villages and they have long-established commercial relations with the Tai who live down in the valleys.

Who they are

The Khmu are the largest group in the province and the second largest group in the entire country after the Lao. The Bit are a small group culturally closed to the Khmu, and mostly living in their native Muang Mai district. The Khmu and Bit languages are easily recognized by their rolling 'r's. The two languages are different but related, much like the languages of many ethnic groups in southern Laos, as well as the Khmer and the Viet.

A bit of history

These peoples are the oldest in the region. The Khmu claim they are descended from Thao Nyi Thao Tjeuang, a hero associated with the Plain of Jars in Xieng Khuang province. However, many of the region's Khmu came from northern Vietnam in the 19th Century.

At that time, Khmu and Bit villages were under the authority of Khmu chieftains who were recognized by the king of Luang Prabang.

Many of the Khmu participated in the War of Liberation (1953-1975) and are still very active in the civil service and the army, even though most have remained farmers. After the Liberation, many villages near mountaintops were resettled down near the riverbanks and roadsides. Some migrated to other provinces.

Khmu women around 1920

Bit man weaving rattan

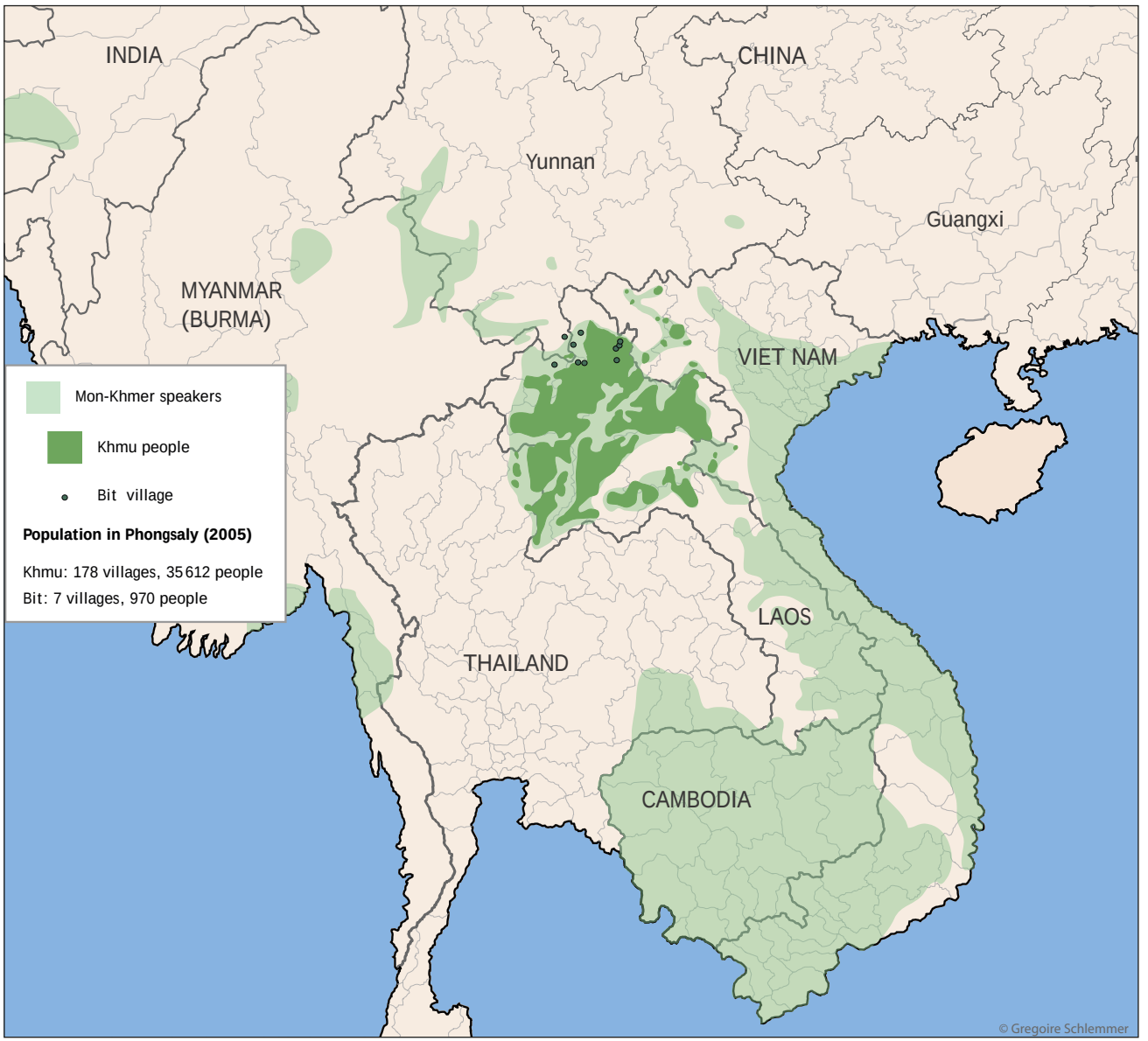
Sentha, a Bit village from May district

Bronze drums

The very first bronze drums were made in the North Vietnamese region of Dông Son between 800 and 200 BCE. Later, they spread throughout Southeast Asia, China and Indonesia. They were produced in various places and periods until today. Although the drums were used by several different groups, such as the Lolo in China or the Yao in Viet Nam, in Laos they were mostly used by the Khmu. They were status symbols and were sometimes part of a dowry. The drums were beaten during the Khmu New Year after a sacrifice. They have almost completely disappeared today, although some Khmu villages still preserve older pieces.

Honoring a bronze drum in a Khmu village

Localization of the Khmu and the Bit



Decoration for the Greu *festival*

Way of life

The traditional Khmu livelihood is dry rice cultivation on mountain slopes and the collection of forest products. Their produce was traded for salt and clothing with the Lao in markets held on riverbanks. Even though the Khmu have no tradition of textile weaving, they are experts in the weaving of baskets which are also traded.

From the 1800's to the 1960's, many Khmu men left to work in Thailand. They came back after several years with prestigious articles such as bronze drums and silver knives. These would be used to pay the "the bride price", obligatory gifts from a groom's family to a bride's family.

What's in a name?

- *The Khmu and the Bit are often called Phu Theung or Lao Theung by the Tai — "people of the slopes". More generally Lao Theung designated all non-Tai groups living in Laos for a long time, that is principally the Môn-Khmer speaking groups.*
- *During the monarchy, they were specifically called the Kha Khmu, or Kha Kao, 'the ancient Kha'. The derogatory term of 'kha', or serf, is no longer used.*
- *The Akha call them the Habeu and the Chinese call them the Chaman, a term possibly derived from the Tai words Xa (Kha) and Man (barbarian).*
- *The Khmu are divided into loosely defined sub-groups, known as tmoy. Some are based on geographical divisions. There are, f or Khmu Lue, Khmu Yuan). The Khmu also distinguish between sub-groups according to the accents and pronunciation of certain words. All those living in Phongsaly call themselves the Khmu U.*

Greu *festival in Phyalek, Bun Tay district*

Khmu chief and his family (about 1890)

Traditions

The Khmu practice spirit worship. Their main festival is the *bun greu*, which takes place in January and marks the New Year. Until recently, each household offered a red flower, tubers, and other food to its ancestors and would invite neighbors for a feast. This festival is now celebrated collectively in the village centre. During the 1930's some Khmu began to practice Buddhism.

The legend of the separation between the Khmu and the Bit

A story is told that at the beginning two brothers lived together. The first brother, the Khmu ancestor, killed a short haired elephant while out hunting and shared it with the second brother, the Bit ancestor, who later came back from hunting with a porcupine. When he shared this, the first brother got angry and thought, "If the hairs of this animal are so long then the animal must be have been huge, and yet he gives me so little!" For this reason the first brother forced the second brother into exile and ordered him to speak a different language. The second brother did so. He settled down next to a waterfall and the sounds of running water gave him the inspiration to create his new language.

Khmu women during Greu *festival*

Lao & Tai

The Lao — the dominant population of Laos — and other Tai groups are linguistically and culturally related. They practise lowland rice paddy cultivation and trade, while other peoples of the province live on the mountains and practise shifting cultivation. Lao and Tai identity is also tied to a principality (muang), since their lords have long controlled the region. Buddhism also characterizes the Lao and Tai Lue.

Who they are

Most Tai (not to be confused with Thai, the people of Thailand) from Phongsaly belong to one of seven groups: the Tai Lue, Lao, Tai Dam, Tai Deng, Tai Khao, Tai Yang and Tai Neua. Their languages have shared roots which make them mutually understandable. The Lao have long been navigators, and they settled along the U River and its navigable tributaries. Other Tai groups live on small rice-growing plains; the Tai Lue and the Tai Yang in the north-west, and the Tai Dam, Tai Khao and Tai Deng in the east.

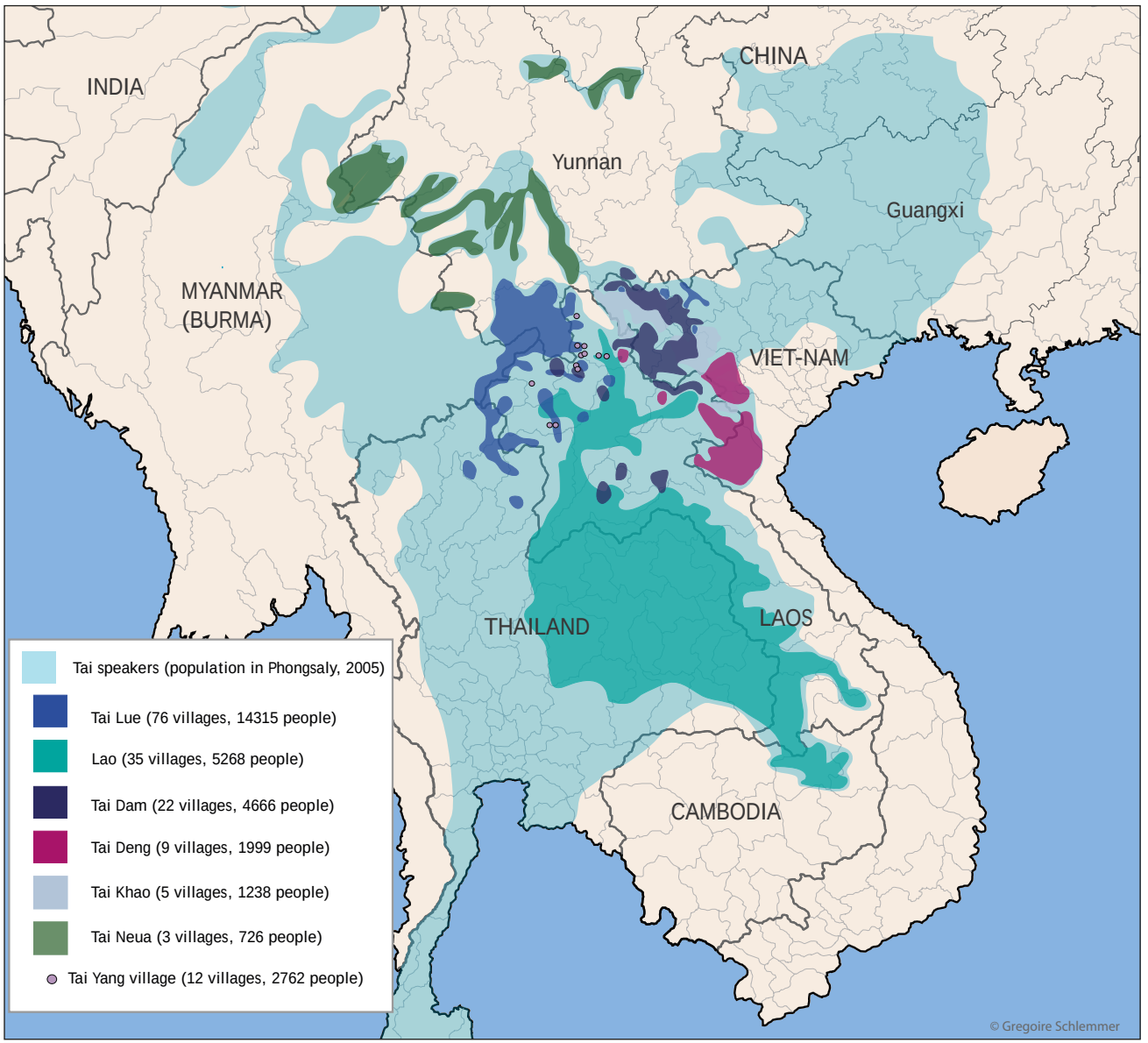
A bit of history

The Tai are said to have entered Southeast Asia between the 7th and 12th Centuries. The Lao and Tai Lue populations of Phongsaly came during that time, and the province was divided into their respective kingdoms. Smaller Tai groups arrived more recently, mostly in the 19th Century, from Huaphan Province (the Tai Deng), from China (the Tai Neua) and from Viet Nam (the Tai Yang, Tai Dam and Tai Khao). Many Lao left the province for more developed areas during the 20th Century while many Tai Khao and Tai Dam arrived in the 1950s.

Rice field in Nam Ngeun district, on Phongsaly border

Ginning cotton by Tai woman

Localization of the Tai speakers



Way of life

The Tai live in valleys and on riverbanks. They are a water people: the Lao have long prospered from river commerce. Thanks to their dominant position in Laos they enjoyed, until the Liberation, a monopoly in political and administrative functions. Even today they are still very powerful in the administration. Other Tai still depend on rice paddy cultivation and raising buffalo, although the Tai Lue sometimes engaged in trade and salt production. They are also proficient fishermen.

This way of life requires their villages to be placed at strategic points, on flat lands for rice production and on the river for navigation, places where they have stood for centuries. Like the Khmu, their homes are on stilts, although they are often larger and higher off the ground. Women used to sit and weave silk and cotton under the house, producing clothing for their families and for exchanges.

Traditions

All the Tai groups practise spirit worship. Particular respect is paid to the spirit of the principality, the phi muang, which guards over all the villages that were once under the control of the ancient Tai lords. The Lao and the Tai Lue are influenced by Indian civilization through Buddhism, while the non-Buddhist Tai are more influenced by Chinese and Vietnamese culture. Despite these differences, their traditions are quite similar and marriages often occur between the different groups.

Boating on Nam U river

Ethnicity and political affiliation

The separation of the Tai into different groups is not chiefly based on linguistic differences, but on early political affiliation to a muang. Muang is a term that not only designates a principality, but also kingdom, country, capital city and district — this last translation is its actual primary meaning. Each group belonged to a principality:

- the Lao = Lan Xang; the Tai Lue = Sipsongpanna;
- the Tai Khao and Tai Dam = Sipsong Chau Tai;
- the Tai Deng = Muang Deng;
- the Tai Yang who consider themselves to be descendants of either the Tai Khao or a Chinese father and a Tai Dam mother = Xieng Neua.

Tai Dam woman

Offering for the temple

Lue women from U Tay around 1930

What's in a name?

- *Tai is a generic term referring to both a culture and the ancient political status of a free man, as opposed to a Kha. The word is written 'Tai' to distinguish it from Thai (someone from Thailand, the name given to the Kingdom of Siam in the 1930s). Prior to that, the Thais were known as Tai Siam.*
- *The term is often used today to refer to people of any ethnic group. For example, to ask someone which group they belong to, you would ask, 'What Tai are you?' A Phunoy could then answer, 'I am a Tai Phunoy' or 'I am a Tai Phongsaly' since identification can stem from geographic as well as ethnic considerations.*
- *Three Tai groups are named for a colour, which may be associated with their geographical origin — the Black River or White River for the Tai Dam (black) or Tai Khao (white), or the Deng (which can also mean red) principality for the Tai Deng. Laos gets its name from the majority group, the Lao.*

Harbour on the Nam U river

Pisu groups: Phunoy & Seng

The little known Pisu groups (Phunoy and Seng) live almost exclusively in Phongsaly Province. Despite their small numbers, the differences between Pisu groups can be great. They are linguistically close to the Akha, to the Khmu in terms of their way of life, and some of them are close to the Tai in that they have adopted Buddhism.

Who they are

The Phunoy and the Seng share the same origins and speak similar languages. Most of these groups called themselves Pisu, an obsolete term since the different groups now define themselves more specifically. There are some Pisu villages in Viet Nam, Thailand, Burma and China. Most Pisu, however, are in Phongsaly.

A bit of history

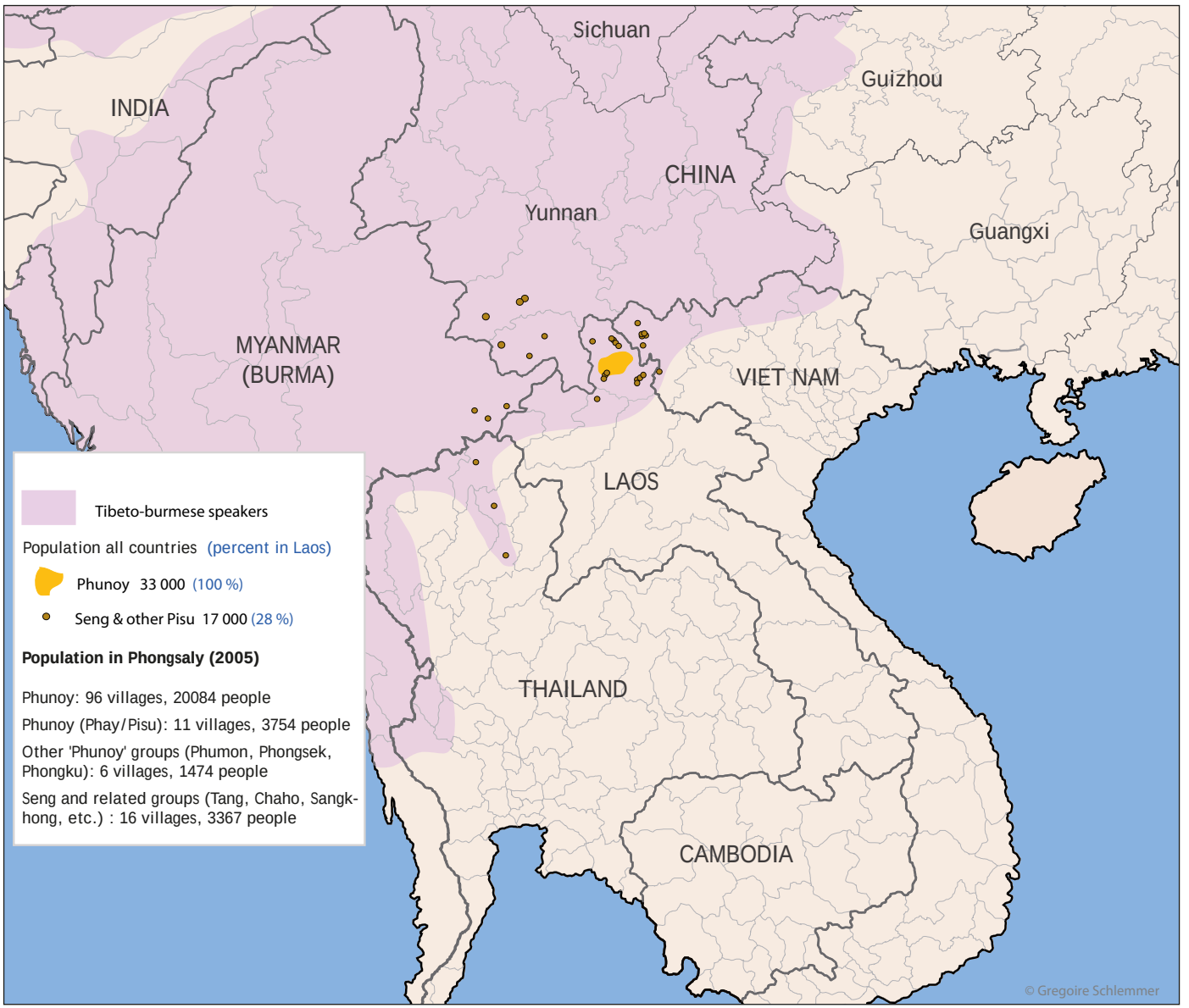
Some of these groups, such as the Laopan, came from China in the 19th Century. Others, such as the Phunoy, probably came from Burma in the 18th Century. Most, however, have been in the province for far longer. Kings of Luang Prabang made many of the villages responsible for patrolling the region's borders. They also recognized their title deeds by giving them 'Books of the Land', a kind of land tenure act. Each village was a community unto itself, with its own name and dialect. Some were politically and culturally close to the Lao or Tai Lue.

The 19th Century was a troubled time in the region, and many Seng villages moved (mostly towards Muang Mai). During these migrations, the different groups mixed with each other. The Phunoy villages, on the other hand, did not move. The kings of Luang Prabang even issued titles of nobility to five Chiefs, or phanya, giving them the power to organize their territory into small principality-like units.

Seng village in May district

The Phunoy suit

Localization of the Pisu (Phunoy and Seng)



Way of life

These groups live in stilt houses in mountainous villages — most of them around the U River — where they primarily practise shifting cultivation. Their proximity to the provincial capital, the poor quality of arable land and a willingness to integrate into larger society have led the Phunoy to work in government administration. This has also made it easy for them to settle in other provinces, such as Udomxay and Luang Namtha.

Traditions

Some Pisu groups have held on to their ancient religious practices of spirit worship, while others have adopted the Lao or Tai Lue style of Buddhism. In these cases, Buddhism was practiced side by side with local traditions until these traditions were abolished by the religious reform at the end of the 1960s.

Sengpongsimun

At the beginning of the 19th Century, there lived a Phunoy hero by the name of Sengpongsimun, a Buddhist who is said to have had extraordinary powers. Because of these, he was able to give chase to armed Chinese gangs and fight the Tai Lue king of Sipsongpanna. Some Lue villages still honour him. He illustrates the long-standing ambivalent relationship between the Phunoy and the Tai Lue, who both fought and influenced each other.

Collecting tea leaves on the '400-year-old' trees of Komen village, Phongsaly district

What's in a name?

- *Phunoy (meaning: 'small mountain' or 'people with low status') and Seng ('branch', 'family line') were called Phay ('subject') for a long time. The Akha called them Tjalo.*
- *Most of the Pisu groups call themselves by the names of their subgroups or even their village name. Nevertheless, there are two generic names. One is 'Pisu', which includes the Phongkhu, the Phongsek, the Phumone, the Laopan and others. The other is 'Manie' (or 'Banie' or 'Mengcheng'), which includes the Holong, the Ugna, the Yeusa, the Mangla, the Konghi and several dozen other groups. Finally, there are groups that are not part of another larger group, such as the Tang, the Chaho or Mangseng and the Sangkhong.*
- *The only group which is well defined and culturally homogenous is the Phunoy, but this remains a relatively new name to designate the Pisu groups that were part of the Phunoy principality. While they formerly called themselves Pisu, the Phunoy also used to call themselves by their village or clan name.*

From top to bottom:
Phunoy women around 1920
Phunoy woman in 2005

Buddhist festival in Phongsaly town

Akha & related

The many Akha and related groups have maintained a strong sense of identity, an autonomous lifestyle and a respect for their customs in their mountaintop villages since migrating from China. Each group can be differentiated by their specific colourful clothing, especially that of the women.

Who they are

Only seven of the large diversity of groups which used to be called Ko and then were officially known as Akha, recognize themselves as Akha. The other groups have no generic term to describe themselves and only use the name of their own group. Five of them nevertheless recognize Su Mi O, the Akha ancestor (going back about fifty generations) as their own ancestor. Another dozen groups are very similar to each other but are linguistically and culturally quite different from the Akha, and say they are descendants of Temiu. All these groups speak languages that, even if they stem from the same linguistic group, are unintelligible to each other. In China, where most of them live, all these groups form the 'Hani Nationality'.

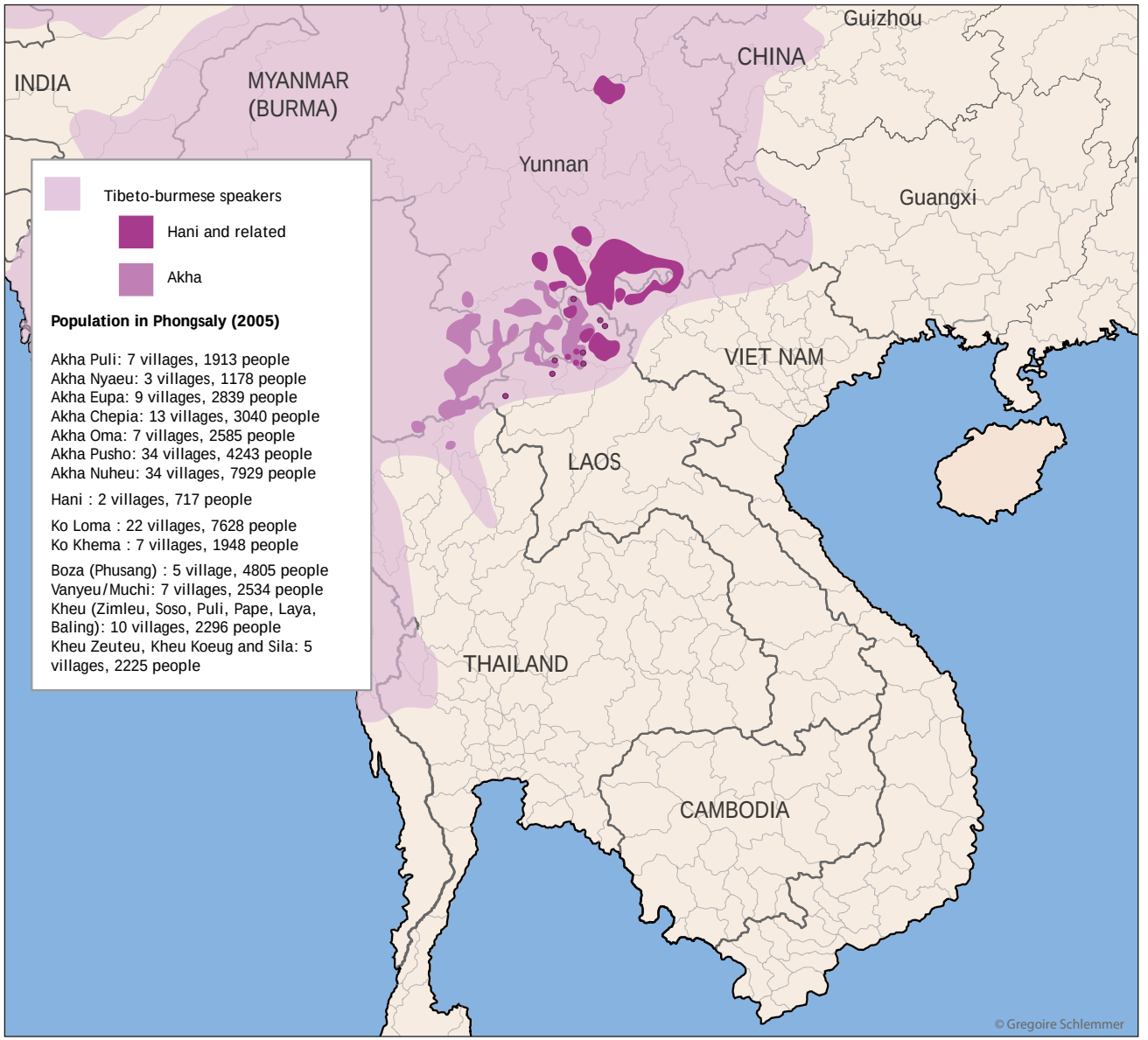
A bit of history

These groups arrived in scattered numbers over time. The first to arrive were the Hani and the Kheu, several centuries ago. Most of the other groups came more recently, during the second half of the 19th Century, and the last arrived in the 1950s. All the groups came from China. Many of these groups recall an ancient kingdom, Chante, where they ruled supreme before it was beset by internal strife and armed conflict, forcing the population to scatter. Some centuries ago many of them settled in the ancient kingdom of Sipsongpanna, where they lived under Tai Lue domination.

In the market:
Akha Nuheu women around 1920
Loma in Paknamnoy around 2010

From top to bottom:
The old Loma fashion
The new Loma fashion

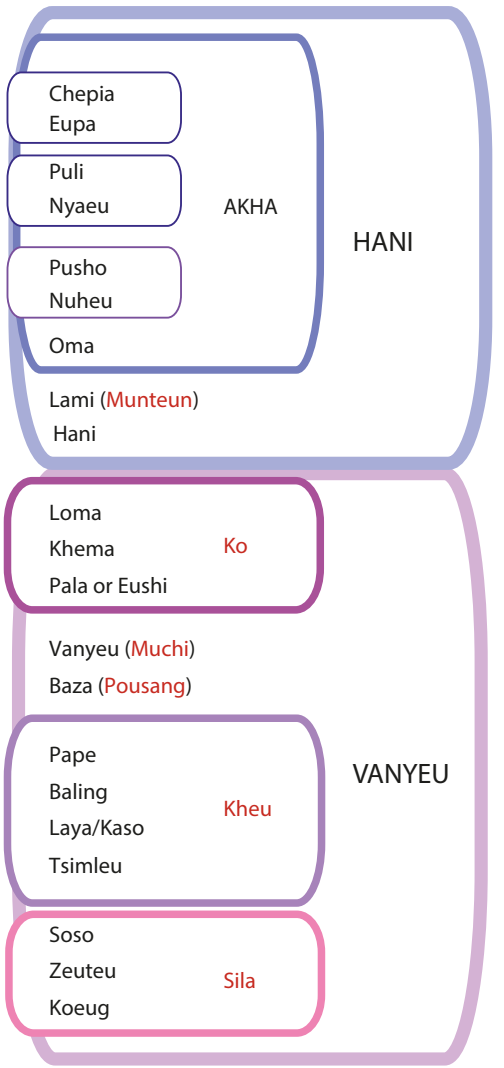
Localization of the Akha and relatives



What's in a name?

- *In Laos, as well as in Myanmar and Thailand, they are often called Ko (or Kaw, Kor, Iko). Though the Akha consider these terms insulting and they were officially replaced b y Akha, Ko is still used by outsider. Moreover, not all groups known as Ko consider themselves to be Akha and so they still prefer to be called Ko (Loma, Pala, Eushi).*
- *In China these groups were often called the Woni, and today they are part of the Hani nationality. Hani refers to the entire nationality as well as being the name of one of the specific groups of this nationality.*
- *Some groups which do not consider themselves Akha are called Kheu (a river name) or Sila by their neighbours, but they call themselves Vanyeu (probably a similar origin to Hani).*

Self classification of groups officially designated as Akha



Names in red: exonyms

From top to bottom:
Akha Puli village gate
Akha ritual swing

Way of life

These groups mainly live on the tops of the mountains, practising shifting cultivation and raising livestock. They used to live in houses built partially on the ground and partially on stilts (although now some are built entirely on the ground and most are entirely on stilts!). In the past, many villages moved every ten years or so in search of better land. However, most of them have now settled permanently near roads. Within the villages, houses are grouped together by clan. These clans play an important role in the organization of society.

Traditions

All these groups practise spirit worship. There are many different ritual festivities by which the various groups can be identified. The decorated gates at the village entrances and the wooden swings used for ritual reasons are typical of Akha villages, as are the women's colourful d and silver ornaments.

Family trees

Akha groups recite the family tree, sometimes going back fifty or more generations of the deceased, during funerals. The names can be recalled because the last syllable in a father's name is taken as the first syllable in his son's name. For example, the sons of Mr. Pulu will be called Lupi and Lutu and the sons of Lutu will be called Tupo and Tula. By comparing their family trees, two Akha can find out when their two branches broke away and formed separate groups.

Akha Oma women around 1920

Hmong, Mun, Ho & Lolo

The Hmong, Mun, Lolo, Ho… these groups have very different languages and traditions and all arrived more recently from China. They have all been greatly influenced by Chinese civilization and large numbers of their groups have remained in China.

Who they are

These groups include the Ho, who call themselves the Han and are the ethnic majority in China; the Hmong; the Mun (usually known as the Yao Lanten); and the Lolo. The vast majority of these groups still live in China and only a small number of their people came to Laos, Viet Nam and Thailand. Their languages are very diverse. The Lolo language belongs to the Tibeto-Burmese family; the Ho language to the Sinitic family; while the Hmong and the Mun speak related but mutually incomprehensible languages.

A bit of history

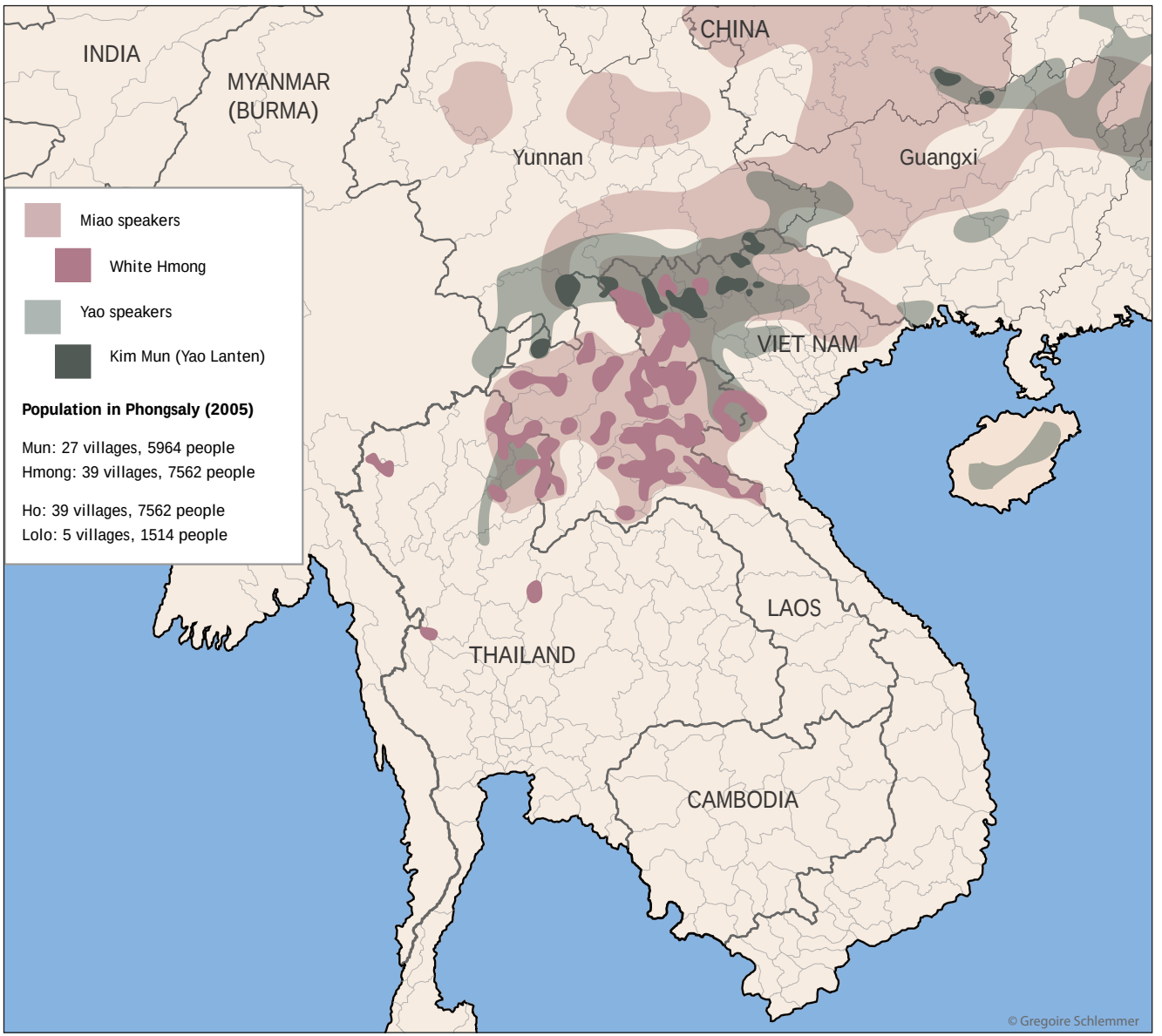
The Lolo migrated from northwest Yunnan, where their ancestors had founded several kingdoms. The Mun and the Hmong came from southeast China, perhaps in the 18th Century for the Mun, while the Hmong came through Lai Châu in Viet Nam around 1870. Both the Hmong and the Mun have a long history of struggle against Chinese imperial power. This had a great impact on their culture; both in their rejection of China and in the way Chinese civilization influenced them. Some of the very first Ho, from the Fu family, came at the beginning of the 19th Century under orders from the Emperor of China. They were followed by merchants and farmers from Yunnan. This migration continued until the 1960s.

Alu/Lolo woman

Mun (Yao Lanten) painting

The Ho village of Houangtaye

Localization of the Hmong and Mun



Way of life

The Chinese cultural influence on the lifestyles of these peoples can be seen in many ways. For example, they eat white rice and build their houses directly on the ground. The way they dress and their use of spoken and sometimes even written Chinese is also evidence of the Chinese influence.

In China, these groups practise wet rice farming, whereas in Laos they live primarily on shifting cultivation. They are also skilled animal breeders, raising pigs and cattle. Among the Ho there were also merchants, some of them horses caravan drivers. Until recently Hmong villages were very mobile, with new clans and branches splitting off and looking for new lands.

Ho altar for the god of the soil

Mun women (Yao Lanten)

Traditions

All these peoples worship spirits; a form of Taoism is practised by the Mun, who frequently use Taoist texts. Apart from their language and their use of a mouth organ, the Lolo are very similar to the Ho, with whom they sometimes cohabit. Hmong religious life is mainly based on domestic rituals performed by a shaman.

The Hmong, the Mun and the Chinese

The Mun, like the other Yao/Mien, tell the story of how they managed to conquer 'half of China'. An emperor promised to give half of his lands to the man who could deliver his daughter from the hands of an evil demon who

What's in a name?

- *The Hmong are sometimes locally known by their Chinese name of Miao (or Meo, in Vietnamese), but they consider these terms derogatory. In China, the Miao nationality comprises many different groups and languages, of which the Hmong are only a part. The Hmong are subdivided into groups according to their language and dress. In Laos, there are White, Green, Striped and Black Hmong.*
- *The Mun, known locally as Lanten ('indigo' in Chinese) or Lao Huay ('river folk' in Lao), are a group belonging to the Iu Mien ethno-linguistic family. They are known as Yao by the Lao, Dao by the Vietnamese, and Yao or Man Yao by the Chinese, which used to refer to barbarians who cannot be forced into unpaid labour.*
- *The name Ho, or Haw, may come from the term Hoa, the ancient name of the Chinese emperor's subjects. The term Haw is also used in Myanmar and Thailand, although they are called the Hoa in Viet Nam. Some wrongly associate this name with the Hui, used to identify Chinese Muslims. Ho call themselves Han, that is the ethnic Chinese.*
- *Lolo refers to a specific group, but is also a generic term used for many groups in Yunnan. In China they are now part of the large Yi nationality. The Lolo of Laos are sometimes called Alu.*

Hmong family about 1920

was holding her captive. The clever emperor then kept the flat plains for himself but kept his promise by giving the man, a Yao, the mountain lands, but he also gave the Yao a written promise that they would not be taxed through unpaid labour. The Yao would later be forced to defend this right on the battlefield against successive governments who demanded their unpaid labour.

The Hmong say that they ruled China benevolently for centuries. The Hmong and the Han Chinese went to war after an argument which led to armed conflict between them. The Hmong were defeated by the greater numbers of the Chinese, and they had to flee towards Southeast Asia, burying their dead in the Chinese fashion so the Chinese would not destroy the tombs.

A bird hunter Hmong

Relatives & neighbours

Ethnic ties are an important element in the lives of the people, but there are others. Where they live (in which house/area/village), as well as their family relationships (household, lineage clan), are as important in their daily lives since they determine their social networks.

"I am from the Ly clan. This is something we cannot change, nor forget. All people called Ly, whatever ethnic groups they belong to, are my parents. I will call them brothers. A Ly cannot marry a Ly, but among Ly people, we will help each other."

Khamla, Sila ethnic group

Phunoy family, about 1920's

Home, lineage & neighbourhood

The household, revolving around a couple and their children, is the main building block of life as well as the economic and ritual foundation of society. Households belonging to the same lineage have many occasions to work together.

A lineage is defined as the male descendants of one common living ancestor and their wives. With the Khmu and Akha, common deceased ancestors are often worshipped collectively at the home of the lineage elder. Among the Hmong, we can still find households composed of one entire lineage which can include up to 100 members.

Married sons tend to settle near their parents so that neighbourhoods are often a family affair. Whatever the case may be, relations between neighbours are important and exchanges between them are frequent.

Distant & fictitious relatives

Distant relatives and those on the woman's side of the family are part of the second circle. When they do not live in the same area, it creates an opportunity to visit other villages.

This second circle can also encompass fictitious relatives. Among several groups, the first stranger to enter a home after the birth of a child is considered a second father. Friends can be called brothers or sisters of the heart, regardless of their ethnicity, and their children are considered siblings.

A Hani family in festival costume

Phunoy family, about 2000's

Clans

A clan is a group of people belonging to several lineages who all have the same name, a common ancestor and often respect a shared taboo. Solidarity between clan members is expected.

At one time, all the groups in the province were organized by clan, but for the Tai Lao, the Tai Lue and the Phunoy this is no longer the case. Clan membership is determined by one's father's clan, except in the case of the Khmu. There are two main types of clan:

- In the first type, it is forbidden to marry someone of the same clan, yet clan taboos are of little importance; this characterizes the population influenced by the Chinese world (Hmong, Akha, etc.).

- For the second type of clan, it is forbidden to marry outside the clan and the clan taboo is taken seriously; this characterizes the Tai and Môn-Khmer (Khmu and Bit) populations.

Neighbours chatting
Welcoming guests during a wedding

Clans and taboos

Most groups forbid marriage within the clan. Among the Tai Yang it was said that if two people of the same clan married, it would upset the spirits. The only way to repair this offence was for the unfortunate couple to eat from the hogs' trough on their hands and knees.

There are different sets of taboos for each clan; for example, forbidden foods which cannot be eaten or even touched if one doesn't want one's teeth to fall out. These taboos can concern an animal, a plant or an object. There is no mystical connection between a clan and the forbidden object; the origin of the taboo is always explained by some random event. For example, the Laopan tell the story of how one of the ancestors of the Langda clan wanted to take the eggs of the great barbet bird which had nested high up in a tree. In order to do so he had the clan form a human pyramid, but the man at the bottom collapsed and the pyramid fell, killing the man on the very top. Since then it has been forbidden for members of the Langda clan to eat that specific bird.

Hmong house for an entire lineage group (74 people)

Village & *muang*

The village is the main reference point for the people. It is a political unit, with its village chief, group organisations and police. It is a religious unit with its many rituals. It is a territorial unit with its boundaries and land uses. It is a family unit since numerous marriages occur within the village. It is also a place where one can find support and a strict set of rules. On a larger scale, the *muang*, an ancient political unit somewhat smaller than a district, plays a similar, though less important role.

Women during preparation for a ritual
Tai Deng ritual game : women vs. men

A large Tai Lue family around 1920

MATERIAL CULTURE: MAKING A LIVING

Afternoon in a Khmu village, Khua district

Villages

Because it brings all its inhabitants together under a common destiny, the village is the main reference point. It is where they feel protected, supported, constrained by social order and where they learn the rules of society. The village is a political, religious and land-use unit, which is often named after a particular geographical feature or its founder. Be it on a newly cleared mountaintop or on the plains, a village is always near a water source. Generally villages are designed along the same main lines.

Types of villages

We can distinguish three main types of villages: rice-growing villages, forest-clearing villages and roadside villages.

- Villages which practise wet rice agriculture are often found in the province's few irrigable valleys. Thus, these are usually old villages, which can be easily seen by their many fruit trees and bamboo groves, making them islands of green in stark contrast to the flat uniformity of the rice paddies.
- Shifting cultivators' (forest-clearing) villages are often on a mountaintop, near a spring. In contrast to paddy rice-growing villages, they are islands of earth in a sea of green. Before the village's establishment, the land is cleared and all vegetation is cut down. Village trees do not have time to grow because the population has to be on the move somewhat regularly. Only a small number of shifting cultivators' villages are permanent and enjoy the shade of fruit trees and better infrastructure (paths, water fountain, etc.).
- An increasing number of villages are developing on roadsides, usually due to the access to transportation, markets and amenities, or the village resettlement policy. These villages don't have much room to expand, and houses are lined up on either side of the road. Many of these villages contain more than one ethnic group, and some become small towns with shops and administrative centres.

An Highland village: Munteun

A lowland village: muang Nyot U

Evening life in the Mun village of Phadeng

VILLAGES IN NUMBERS (2005)

Average size of villages
45 houses - 265 inhabitants

Larger villages
200 houses 1 000 inhabitants

Minimum/maximum villages altitude
362 – 1 664 m (more than one-third of the villages are above 1 000 m)

Ethnic composition
80% of all villages are mono-ethnic

Wet rice cultivation as main production
10% of all villages

Villages without road access
more than 50%

From top to bottom:
Ho style rice granary, Samphansai
School behind village gate, Chalongmai

Village design

The village is organized along two lines: upstream/downstream and centre/outskirts. Houses are built at a 90° angle along the hill slope. The top of the village contains the village altar and, if it is a Buddhist village, the temple. Usually, the school is also found there. The village centre generally has a public square where informal meetings and festivals take place.

The village limits are marked by gateposts and sometimes a barrier for animals. Rice granaries can be built outside these gateposts in order to protect the harvest in case of a fire in the village. The bushes surrounding the village are used as toilets and garbage dumps. The water source, a spring or a river, is situated below the village. Early morning and late afternoon, it becomes the centre of village life: people meet to do dishes, bathe, fish and watch their children play. The cemetery is located downstream from the village.

From top to bottom:
Longnai village (Tai Yang)
River life, Huayva

Vanyeu (Muchi) and Akha Oma village gate

Village gates

Most groups set up 'gates' at village entrances. These are often simple wooden cross-beams adorned with a talisman, but some have more elaborate ornamentation. The gates are often arches over or beside the main path into the village, protecting it against bad influences. They mark the edges of the protected area and are the village equivalent of house doors, which are also protected by talismans. Their annual repair or replacement during the village spirit festival is often accompanied by a sacrificial rituals.

The heart of the village

*Tai, Phunoy and sometimes Khmu villages have a "heart" or "village post" (*lak ban, jai ban*) which marks its founding. It is usually a large stone or a pile of stones placed there when the village was built and marking its centre. These are now being added to by cement stupas. Be neath them are buried lucky objects in gold and silver, Buddhist incantations, and other items thought to provide blessings. Offerings are made there every year during Buddhist holidays, the New Year, or if there is a problem within the village.*

Honouring the heart of the village, Bun Tay

The Akha village of Pangkhai in the morning mist

Houses

Built on the ground or on stilts, out of wood, bamboo or rammed earth, the house is the place for the family to rest and eat. It is a well-ordered place where, under the same roof and near the cooking fire, its inhabitants feel comfortable and protected by their ancestors.

Construction of a house frame

Composition of the household

Above all, the house is a couple's living space which they share with their unmarried children and often other family members: parents who need to be taken care of, a recently married man who has come to work for his in-laws for a few years, a daughter-in-law staying with her husband family while their own house is being built, and not forgetting the ancestors in their family altar! Generally each son builds his own home, except for the son who stays with his parents to take care of them.

Construction and orientation

Building on stilts ensures the house will be protected against animals and floods, but building on the ground is easier and cheaper. More than any other consideration, however, culture will determine the choice: those influenced by China will build on the ground; the Southeast Asian method is to build on stilts.

Everybody, however, builds parallel to a slope, with the opening generally towards the river's source. After patiently collecting building materials, the house is generally put up in one day with the help of the entire community who are rewarded afterwards with a festive meal. A house can last a few years or a few decades, depending on the materials.

The stages of the housing: building, installing, dwelling

Elements and organisation

Roof, pillars and walls. Above all, a house is a roof. If this is made of thatch, it has to be changed every three years. It can also be made of wood, bamboo or clay tiles, leaves or longer-lasting corrugated steel. The pillars hold up the structure; the number, height and materials (wood or cement) can be a sign of prestige. As for the walls, they are made of bamboo, either pressed or braided into panels, planks and sometimes of rammed earth.

Central room. The main area of the house is the central room, which is sometimes the only room. The walls are used for hanging commonly used objects such as tools, clothing, bags, etc., and they are sometimes decorated with paper and posters which also serve to protect against the wind. Cushions, stools and mattresses are stored to welcome guests.

Kitchen. The kitchen is at the end of the house. In stilt houses it always opens on to a terrace. Following the

Different kinds of kitchens: Seng, Hmong

present Lao style, kitchens are increasingly being built in a special room attached to the house. In houses built on the ground, the kitchen often has a second cooking fire for pig feed, whereas a separate fire is sometimes reserved for discussions and rituals.

Bedrooms. Facing upstream, a private space is reserved for sleeping. This is where everyone has a basket for storing personal belongings. In stilt houses, the mattresses are lined up on the ground and partitioned by mosquito nets, but they are all separated from the central room by a cloth wall or a plank. In houses built on the ground, people generally sleep in closed rooms on wooden beds.

Annexes. Annexes are built around the house or under the stilt floor: tool shed, garage, chicken coop, pigsty, wood shed, loom, a kitchen garden and —often outside— a rice granary. The ground underneath a stilt house can be walled in and transformed into a ground floor.

House interior (Tai Lue)
Tai Dam bedroom

Talismans indicating the state of confinement of this Hmong house

Rites and home building

The location of a home is frequently chosen by divination: three grains of rice are placed under a bowl in the chosen location. One grain is for the inhabitants, one is for domestic animals, and one is for the rice harvest and material possessions. If the grains have not moved by the next morning, then the location is propitious. The central pillar(s), the father pillar and sometimes also a mother pillar, is raised in a ceremony, followed by the rest of the house. At the very end, the ancestor altar is installed in an inauguration ceremony, and good luck is conjured up with incantations followed by a communal meal.

Talismans

Talismans are used to protect particular areas. The most common of these is the taleo*, or 'eagle eye', a sort of bamboo star. Many eyes keep watch over the area, and also create an intermingling of pathways in order to disorient any evil spirits. A* taleo *can be replaced by another object representing the same principle: a part of a hive or a fishnet. Other talismans are more directly evocative: brooms, wooden knives or guards cut out of paper. The talisman can also be wrapped up in a leaf containing a magic product or a Buddhist formula and worn around the neck, especially by of children.*

Various talismans protecting houses and villages

House garden in Nanten village

Houses Diversity

Bun Neua (Tai Lue)

Nale (Bit)

Phumang (Ho)

Chomcheo (Seng)

Hongtaye (Ho)

Koungluk (Khmu)

Nabua (Tai Deng)

Navai (Tai Lue)

Phonxay (Tai Dam)

Chakhampa (Akha Nuheu)

Kong (Tai Lue)

Namak (Tai Yang)

Munteun (Munteun)

U Tai (Tai Neua)

Phadeng (Mun/Yao Lanten)

Livelihood activities

Work in the fields, especially for rice cultivation, sets the rhythm for the entire year. Gardening, husbandry, hunting, fishing and picking wild plants only supplement the main field activities. These livelihood activities involve individual households, witha division of labour along gender and age lines. Work tools are simple and few: in fact, a machete would be sufficient to ensure one's survival.

Rice

Rice paddies. Valley bottoms have often been converted to serve as flooded rice paddies. The presence of water eliminates the need to weed, and the alluvium deposits provide the necessary fertilization. This cultivation method is less time-consuming and more efficient than that of shifting cultivation. It does, however, require a certain amount of material and an irrigation system which then involves collective management. And above all, it requires suitable flat areas which are rare. A rice paddy gives one harvest a year, possibly two if the irrigation system functions well, although farmers have recently begun to grow commercial crops, such as beans, watermelons, chillies and tobacco during the dry season.

From top to bottom :
Wet rice field alongside a stream
Ploughing, harrowing, transplanting

Baskets to winnow rice

From top to bottom :
A cleared plot of land in the forest
Burning a shifting rice field
Weeding a shifting rice field

Shifting cultivation. Shifting cultivation can be practised on all types of land. Wooded, mountainous areas are slashed and burnt to fertilize the soil. Rice is planted in holes made with a stick or a hoe. Only the Ho and some Akha groups work the land; the others use a dibble stick. After one, or sometimes two seasons, the field is left for reforestation. Although this gives the impression that farmers are burning the forests, shifting cultivation in fact re-uses fallow land that has been cultivated for generations. There is no danger to the forests if the fallow time is long enough. This method is simple, although time-consuming since the fields are far apart and weeding is labour intensive.

Changes. Rice-growing methods greatly influence the group's way of life. Rice paddies require permanent villages in the valleys. In the past, this was inconvenient since it meant living in a malaria zone, having few escape routes in times of war, and taxation, which could be evaded with shifting cultivation. Today, due to demographic pressure, available land for shifting cultivation is limited and fallow times are shorter. Irrigated rice paddies are looked upon favourably by the government and by villagers who can afford to buy it.

Other activities

Other crops Corn and cassava are planted on specific cleared land called 'gardens'. This is how perennial commercial (rubber, teak, sugar cane) fields are designated and they are slowly taking over from shifting cultivation. This type of agriculture requires a certain investment —buying plants, fertilizers and pesticides— and needs large areas.

Animal husbandry. Like cows in the hills, buffaloes in the valleys graze in the surrounding forests. Pigs, chickens and ducks are raised by women in the villages. One also sometimes finds goats, and certain Akha groups raise horses as beasts of burden or for funeral rites.

Hunting, gathering and fishing. Hunting, gathering and fishing are practised during any free time or during the down-season. Women gather food in groups, either on riverbanks, in rice paddies, on fallow land or in forests. Hunting is practised by the men, either alone or in small groups, using locally produced rifles, crossbows or different types of traps. Fishing is done by everyone using various techniques: fishing rods, cast nets, long nets, landing nets, etc.

From top to bottom :
Buffaloes resting under a rice granary
Preparing alga cakes
Feeding domestic animals

From top left to bottom right:

Temporary riverside gardens on rich loamy soil

Tai Dam tending his sugar cane field

Chinese merchant who came to harvest watermelons planted in the rice fields during the dry season

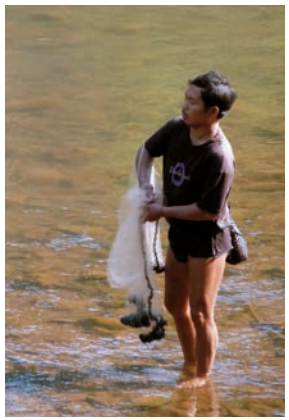
Commercial cultivation under plastic in rice fields during the dry season

Hevea fields seen from the sky

Akha Chepia women fishing with landing nets









Task sharing

Most domestic and repetitive tasks, including cooking, taking care of the children and farm animals, and hauling water and firewood, are often left to women who never seem to rest. In addition, they work in the fields and gather food. Forest-related work, such as hunting and herding which are considered to take physical strength, is done by the men, as is clearing land, cutting wood and building houses. Children contribute as much as they can and the elderly participate in collective decision-making. Most work is done within the family unit, although getting outside help is necessary for major tasks, such as planting or harvesting.

Preparing the rice transplanting

Subsistence & commerce

Work in rural area is above all aimed at meeting the needs of one's family, and the village economy is still characterized by subsistence agriculture. Rice is the primary food crop and is accompanied by other products which are either grown or found in the forest. However, trade and commerce have always existed and continue to grow with the expanding road network and the farming of crops destined for the marketplace.

Home consumption

Vegetables. Meals always include white or sticky rice, accompanied by different vegetables, especially bamboo shoots and mustard leaves, as well as many garden vegetables (chillies, zucchini, cucumbers, sugar cane and cassava) or those gathered by women on uncultivated land or on riverbanks. Fruits are picked in the forest or in village orchards.

Meat. Sometimes a bit of game will spice up the daily fare. Almost every animal can be eaten. Until recently, domesticated animals were only consumed during holidays or to honour guests, or sold in the market to earn cash. Nowadays domesticated animals are a more common part of the meal as game has become rare and hunting rifles outlawed. Insects, including beetles, bamboo worms and grasshoppers, are still consumed as a treat and rivers yield snails, crabs, frogs and fish.

Handicrafts. Most furniture, utensils and tools are made by the villagers themselves, mainly from wood and bamboo. Rattan is used for basketwork. Textiles are produced from cotton, while mattresses are stuffed with kapok. Tools are made from iron, which is not mined but wrought in villages, giving smiths a special social and sometimes religious position.

From top to bottom :
Collecting chillies
Trapped birds
Cooking on fire

Loading of cargo on the port of muang Khua

Commerce

Products. The region has always been integrated to some degree in commercial networks. Trade occurs between villages, with the exchange or sale of bamboo shoots or mushrooms, alcohol, and bamboo or rattan woven objects. Cattle and rice are sold in the province. For a long time, the most common products for external trade were cotton, opium and forest products such as cardamom and wax. With the opening of international markets, commercial crops such as tea, sugar cane and most recently rubber, corn and dry-season vegetables are grown, mostly for the Chinese market.

Exchange. For a long time, commerce was controlled by Lao riverboat operators, who would organize small markets on riverbanks, and by the Ho, who would travel on horseback along mountain ridges. Both bartered with

From top to bottom :
Blacksmith at work
Basket weaving

villagers, exchanging fabric, tools, cooking utensils and other manufactured products for opium, cotton or forest products. The boatmen would bring their merchandise from Luang Prabang, while the Ho imported theirs from China. Most commercial activity today takes place in district capitals, although small picturesque markets still exist. Chinese caravans have made way for hawkers peddling everything from medicine to photography to hair.

Earnings. Income is mostly spent on basic necessities: education, clothing, healthcare, tools and the payment of taxes. Any disposable income is used to buy cell phones, a TV or a scooter. Savings are used for important events such as weddings, funerals or hospital bills. If worst comes to worst, money can be borrowed, and loans between family members are common.

From top to bottom :
Coming back from market
Selling vegetables in a market

The salt of life

Among the basic necessities of life is salt, as rare as it is vital for people and animals in this mountainous environment. During the dry season, villagers set out in groups of a dozen or more to barter their products for salt, either on foot or with horses or other beasts of burden. Coming together at the salt mines of Bohe, Bun Tay, or U Tay, these groups form a long human chain. These gathering places once facilitated exchanges between people from remote villages. The limited amount of iodine in local salt resulted in many cases of goiter until the local salt was replaced by manufactured salt after the War of Liberation.

Stove for salt evaporation in a salt works

Village shop

Street hawker collecting women hair

Looking for clothes at the market

A fair along Nam U river

Stimulants

Tobacco

Imported during the 17th Century from America, tobacco use is widespread throughout the province. Be it in a collective water pipe, a bang, or rolled in corn leaves or paper, it is smoked everywhere, even by some women of the Khmu, Bit, and Seng groups. Many smoke their own home-grown tobacco, some buy it, and since 2010 it has been farmed commercially.

Alcohol

The most commonly consumed alcoholic drink in the region is made by the local distillation of rice. Another popular alcoholic drink is made by a fermentation process in clay jars, and drunk through straws. This is not popular with the Chinese-influenced groups. As yet, the consumption of Beer Lao is not widespread since it is expensive. Although alcohol can be used as a stimulant or in medicine (steeped

with plants or animal products), it is mostly used during friendly gatherings. It is drunk with friends, given to guests, consumed on all festive occasions and given to the spirits as an offering. For Chinese-influenced groups, alcohol and rice must not be mixed: one drinks with meat and vegetable dishes, but the glass is put down to eat rice.

Opium

Ever since it was imported from China during the second half of the 19th Century, opium farming has remained important in the region. In mountainous and isolated regions, its high price per kilo made it a particularly well-adapted cash crop. The colonial government attempted to create a monopoly, but smuggling continued unabated. Part of the crop was sold to Chinese caravans or Lao merchants, a portion was consumed, mostly by the aged, and a smaller quantity was used in medicine. It has since been outlawed. This, and the development of roads at the beginning of the 21st Century permitting the transport of commercial crops, has led to its progressive demise.

From top to bottom :
Consumption of jar liquor with bamboo straw
Opium smoker

Tobacco mincing

Betel

Betel is a light stimulant chewed by women as an alternative to tobacco, leaving them with red stained teeth. The betel leaf is chewed with an areca nut (sometimes crushed in a small mortar), lime and occasionally tobacco. Although it is less commonly used today, it is an ancient practice and is often associated with marriage ceremonies. Its use is widespread throughout the Indian world, Southeast Asia and southern China all the way to the Pacific Ocean.

Tea

Tea is mainly drunk by Chinese-influenced groups. Boiled in a small kettle, dense and strong, it is served in cups. Its use is widespread among other groups, but they drink it after it has been infused in a glass of hot water. It is offered to guests or used to enliven men's late-night talk sessions. Tea bushes from Komaen village, which are said to be 400 years old, point to an ancient tea tradition in the province; moreover, Phongsaly is close to the large, old Chinese plantation of Pu'er tea. Commercial tea farming, however, only dates from the beginning of the 21st Century.

From top to bottom:
Packing tea in sticks
Tea field near Phongsaly city
Baking and drying tea

Clothes & Ornaments

The beauty and diversity of the costumes worn by the women in Phongsaly is known far and wide. Embroidered or woven, sober or flamboyant, their different styles indicate the woman's ethnic origin while the style of her head covering shows her marital status.

Male & female

Men used to wear similar clothing regardless of their ethnic origin: trousers and an indigo coloured cotton vest, with little or no pattern. They could mostly be identified by their hairstyle, be it a pony tail, long or short hair or by their wearing of a turban. Among certain Akha and related groups men wear a specific costume only for festivals or funerals. Nowadays they may only wear a bag decorated with group-specific patterns. Women's wear, however, varies greatly from one group to another and is often worn on a daily basis.

Munteun

Vanyeu/Muchi

Tai Dam

Baza / Phusang

The costume

Groups which emigrated most recently from China (such as the Akha, the Mun, the Ho, the Lolo and the Hmong) usually wear their costumes every day. This custom is dying out, however, as the women are increasingly using the traditional Lao skirt (sin) and wear their ethnic costumes only on festive occasions or during ceremonies. Amongst the Tai groups, only the Tai Dam women have preserved the use of their traditional costumes. Other groups, such as the Khmu and the Seng, have never had a tradition of weaving and have traditionally had to buy their fabric from other groups. Because of this, they have never had a specific costume of their own.

Ko Loma women dressed for a festival






Top left to bottom right:
Akha Nyaeu
Akha Pusho
Tai Lue
Lao
Mun (Yao)
Khmu

Fashion elements

Women's costumes comprise many elements. Headwear is often the most complicated and remarkable part of the costume. A long or short skirt or large trousers are worn, or sometimes a bodice doubled with a long or short vest. Leggings are often worn, as is a bag with markings specific to each group. In addition to this are various pieces of jewellery, such as necklaces, belts, bracelets, earrings, a hair clasp or pin, a pin cushion and other accessories. Stylised baby carriers are either woven or embroidered and vary from group to group.

Functions

Costumes are easy to recognise since, like uniforms, they help us distinguish to which group the wearer belongs. Not all parts of the costume serve this purpose, however, since some accessories are there for aesthetic reasons. Just like any other fashion accessory they change with time. Other accessories are there for practical reasons, such as leggings to prevent scratches or children's bonnets to protect them from the evil eye. Some are social markers and show which girls are ready to get married. Others show who are married, widowed or have children.

Top left to bottom right:
Munteun
Koeug/Sila
Kheu Phape
Akha Nuheu
Ko Eushi

You can't tell a book by its cover

Costumes don't always tell you what ethnic group the person belongs to. Some indicate generational diffe-rences. In this way, the flamboyant costumes of young Loma and Khema women are in contrast to the more conservative clothing of their elders, but are the samebetween the groups. Others may show regional differences, like the Ho 1 and Alu 1 costumes in the Yaofang area which are almost identical, but different from the Alu 2 and Ho 2 costumes from the Malithaw area.

Top left to bottom right:
Ho 1
Alu 1
Alu 2
Ho 2

Cotton

Phongsaly province sold a lot of cotton to Chinese caravans before the advent of industrial fabrics. Today many women buy woven cotton, although some make their clothing from scratch. The preparation of cotton is laborious; once it has been harvested the cotton must be ginned, threaded and spun. It is then dyed with boiled indigo leaves to achieve a blue-black colour and woven.

Weaving

There are two types of looms. The first is a large loom fixed on a frame with pedals, used mostly by the Tai. The second is smaller, with the cotton stretched from a hook and attached around the weaver's waist, used mostly by the Phunoy and the Akha. Some groups do not weave cloth at all, such as the Khmu, who only make bags. The Muchi and certain Lao Seng and Kheu groups do not weave although some are accomplished embroiderers.

Cotton rewinding

Top to bottom:
Akha, Phunoy and
Tai Lue loom

Embroidery & patterns

Certain Tai groups have made weaving into a fine art, producing textiles with stylized flora and fauna motifs. The Akha and the Hmong generally embroider their motifs onto the cloth using a colour band, a braid or a frieze. They also employ the applique technique, superimposing fabrics of different colours. In this case, the motifs are often geometrical patterns, such as circles, triangles or diamonds. They also sometimes use abstract shapes, although floral motifs can often be detected.

Ornaments

The Akha and related groups wear costumes that may include, other than embroidery, applique and silver, decorations or objects of various sorts. Necklaces using multi-coloured pearls or red coral are frequently used. Horse manes, dyed red and white, are often added to the headdresses of the Akha Puli and the Akha Nyaheu. The Loma often wear a red painted wicker belt. The Muchi are great fans of coloured pompoms. Others use coloured eggs as decoration. All groups use grains and sometimes shells in their costumes, or even daily objects such as keys, nail cutters, flashlights, or ear cleaners.

Vanyeu (Muchi) girl

Tai Yang weaving pattern

Jewellery

Jewellery was a woman's pride and joy, and even men (mainly Hmong) sometimes wore a bracelet or a necklace. Antique jewellery was made by village smiths, bartered to travelling salesmen, bought in marketplaces or brought home after a stint working far from home. Husbands presented jewellery to their wives and the family used this to beautify their marriageable daughters. The jellewery was often passed down from mother to daughter. Much was sold during the difficult post-war years. Silver and the silversmiths became rare and the antique jewellery gradually disappeared. Now Chinese vendors sell imitation pieces, and some Akha smiths are still making jewellery using aluminum taken from Vietnamese pots and pans.

From top to bottom:
Akha Pusho headdress with colonial coins
Lolo jewellery

Silver & coins

The use of silver coins to decorate their clothing is widespread among Akha groups. Before colonial times, plain round pieces of metal or cowry shells, which were the currency at the time, were used. Later, French piastres with their certified silver content became immediately popular. Given by a bride's parents, they became part of her inheritance. This showing how attached they were to their daughter and demonstrating that she would not have to depend solely upon her husband. Women are buried with their costumes, but after any silver decorations have been removed before. Now that they are hard to come by, the piastres have been replaced by coins from other countries or by glittering copies.

From top to bottom:
Hmong blacksmith
Ho jewellery

Music & Dance

Music, song and dance are all integral parts of festivals and ceremonies in Phongsaly, and have important roles leisure and courtship. Local musical traditions, even if they are being increasingly replaced by CD's and DVD's, endure as treasures of the province's cultural heritage.

Akha Chepia 'orchestra'

Instruments

There are many types of percussion instruments. Some are made of animal skin, metal (gongs, cymbals, bronze drums and bells), or bamboo sticks. There are also wind instruments, such as flutes, mouth organs of various regional styles and Jew's harps. Finally, there are string instruments, such as fiddles.

But the most impressive instrument of all is the voice. Each group has specific songs in its own language. Everybody enjoys singing, although musical instruments are most often played by men. Certain percussion instruments, such as hollow bamboo sticks or gongs, are occasionally played by women.

Top left to bottom right:
Drum, Lao
Oboe, Tai Yang
Viele, Lao
Guitare, Akha
Flute, Tai Dam

Occasions

Although often performed during festivals, music is also a form of entertainment performed around the fireside. Lullabies are also widespread. Music is also part of the game of seduction with boys and girls singing back and forth, or as a romantic serenade sung under the house of a desired mate.

Music also has ritual uses, as among the Tai Dam and the Tai Yang where the flute is at the heart of shamanistic ceremonies. For Buddhists, temple processions often employ drums, cymbals and mouth organs.

Dance

Music and song are sometimes accompanied by dances which are both for enjoyment and for show. Dancing mostly occurs at festive occasions, such as the New Year or at weddings, but there are exceptions since the Loma have special funeral dances.

Dancing is usually performed by young women who take advantage of the opportunity to show off their attributes. There are also male dances, such as the circling Hmong mouth organ (khen) dance or the sword dance, which is common to several different groups (Lue, Khmu, Phunoy and Lao). This dance is very impressive as the performer quickly turns two swords around his body to the sound of beating drums.

Top to bottom:
Lolo/Alu dance
Sword dance by a Khmu
Dance during Loma funerals

Tai Lue dance, about 1950

Mouth organs

The mouth organ is made up of reeds with holes for the fingers. The reeds are stuck into the calabash or wooden sound box which has an opening in which to blow. Outside of Laos, they can only be found in Thailand, China (from where it spread to Japan and Korea) and Bangladesh. There are four types of mouth organs in Phongsaly: the Lolo (top right), the Hmong (bottom right), the Lao and Khmu (left), and the Phunoy (center). The Phunoy one looks like that of the Lao except for the number and size of the reeds.

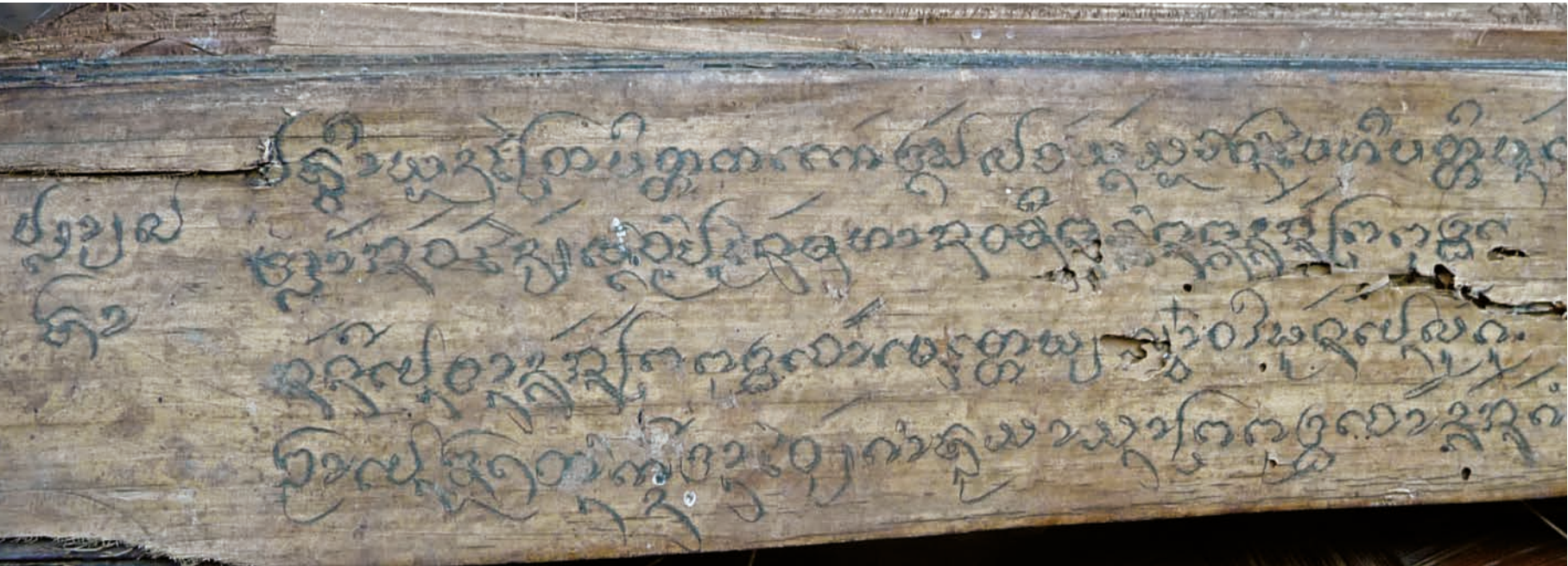
CDs and DVDs

Thanks to small outboard motors generating electricity at small waterfalls, electricity has reached most villages, spreading the use of television as well as DVD players. Some groups can now watch DVDs of their own song and dance, most of which come from outside the country. This reinforces cultural ties beyond national borders. On the other hand, these recordings have often replaced live performances

From top to bottom:
Local electrical generator
Collective television session

Writing

Most groups in Phongsaly pass on their traditions orally and speak languages without written form. There are, however, a certain number of written languages in the province, reflecting its cultural diversity. There are six different writing systems with three origins: Pallava from India, Chinese and Latin. These writing systems are mostly reserved for specialists and are rarely used in daily life. Books and documents can still be found, either on mulberry paper or Latanier palm leaves, which were written for administrative, religious, fortune telling or historical purposes. Unfortunately, many documents were destroyed in fires.



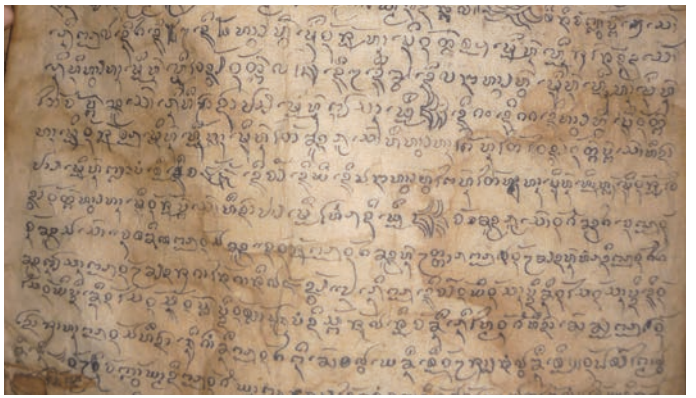
Lao & Lue scripts

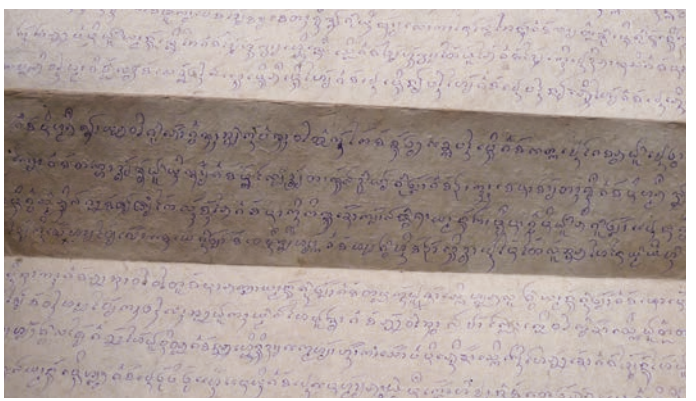
The most widespread writing system is that of Lao. This is the official national script and its use is common thanks mostly to the school system.

Under the monarchy it was used only by the political elite, who received an education. In some non-Lao Phunoy or Khmu villages ancient royal edicts have been found, known as 'books of the land' (kongdin), written in Lao and given by the king to village chiefs.

The Lao language has a script for ordinary use and a specific alphabet for religious texts, known as tham Lao. This is learnt by all Buddhist monks, whether Lao, Seng or Khmu.

The tham Lue script of the Lue and Phunoy monks was also used for historical records or books on astrology and medicine. Even though its practice has declined, the tham Lue is still used for religious purposes.

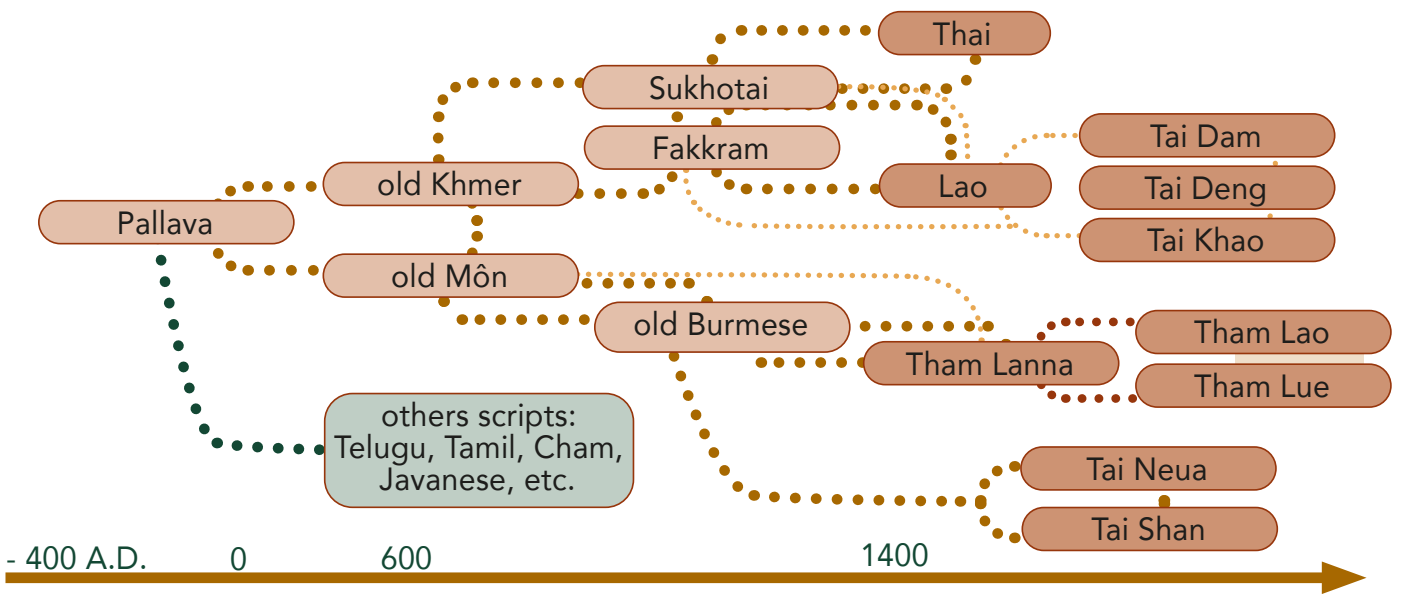


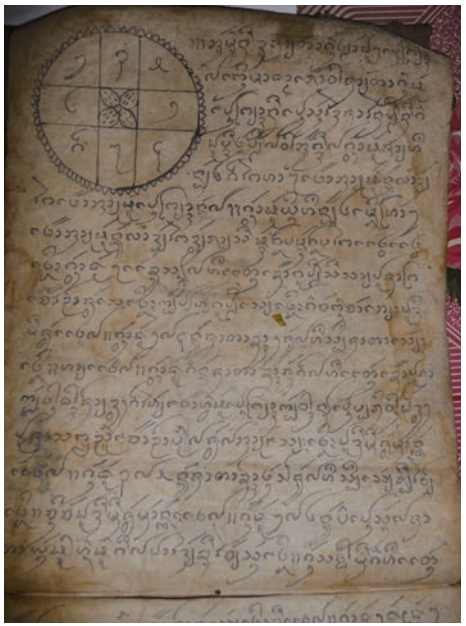


Top to bottom:
Tham Lao script
Tham Lue script
Writing on palm leaf

Old Phunoy manuscrit on palm leaf

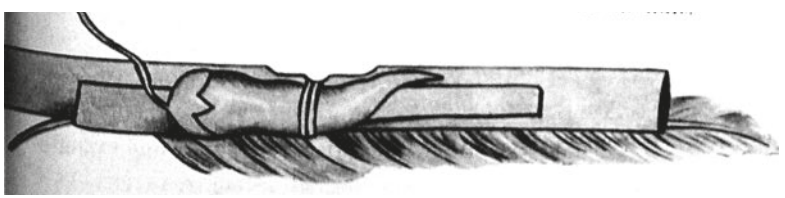
Origin of Tai scripts





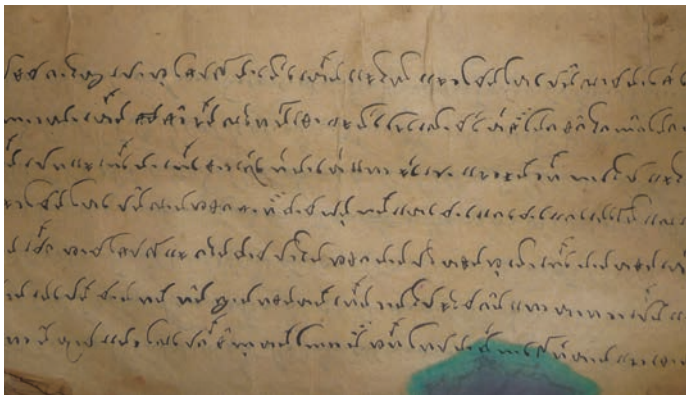
Astrological book

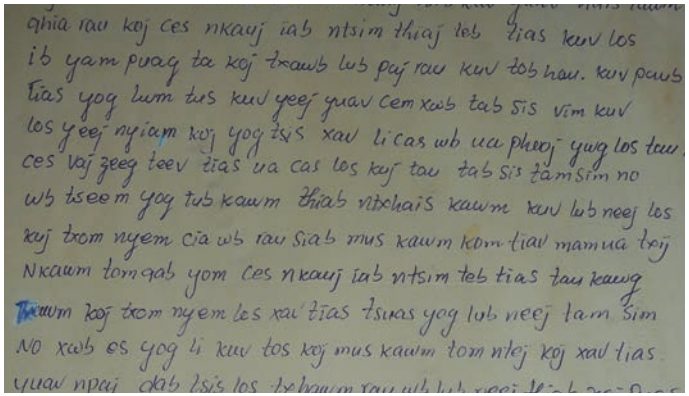
Mun (Yao) magic book

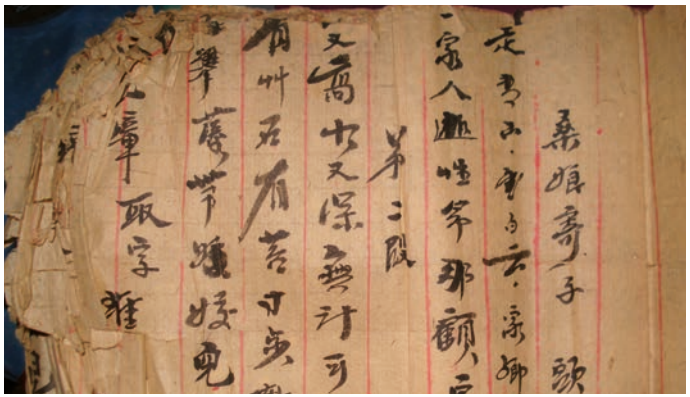


Symbols

Several groups which have no written alphabet use boards on which meaningful objects are placed. Commander Roux, who was in the area in the 1920's, made a sketch of one such board and Guillemet explains it as follows: "One night an express messenger came to us (…). The messenger was carrying a small piece of wicker on which were stuck bird feathers, an extinguished piece of charcoal and two red chilli peppers. This symbolic collection, which we were seeing for the first time, has a clear meaning in this land where writing is not yet used. The feathers meant that the courier had to be as rapid as a bird, the charcoal meant that he had to walk day and night and use a torch if necessary and the peppers (…) meant that he had to transmit the burning nature of his message. Finally, the wicker, looking like Damocles' sword meant that any negligence on his part would be met with punishment." (Guillemet, 1917)







Scripts of other Tai groups

The Tai Dam have another alphabet which is unrelated to Buddhism. They have several types of books, mostly recording religious or secular songs. The Tai Deng, the Tai Khao and the Tai Neua also have their own scripts, although there is no example in Phongsaly.

The Latin alphabet

A Latin alphabet-based script is used to write the Hmong language. It use became widespread amongst the Hmong in the 1960's. It is taught informally by parents and friends and is mostly used by the young. A transliteration of the Akha language into Latin is also in progress.

Chinese script

Chinese writing is used by the Ho, mainly for writing their ancestors' names on the household altar and on tombs. It is especially used by the Mun (Yao Lanten), who possess a veritable written culture. Mun villages contain many books written in Chinese, which are necessary for ritual purposes. Other groups, such as the Tai Yang and the Akha, also have a few texts in Chinese, such as land deeds, dating from before their migration to Laos.

Top to bottom:
Tai Dam manuscript
Hmong writing
Ho genealogy

Tai Lue illustrated manuscript


RTL

IMMATERIAL CULTURE: DEALING WITH THE UNSEEN

Tai Yang healing ritual

Ritual Life

The most important collective rituals that punctuate the village life are the New Year and the one honoring the village's spirit. During these festivities, community members gather under the protection of the ancestors, in a quest for prosperity.

New Year

All groups are celebrating the New Year, but its date varies according to the ethnic group: April for the Lao; November for the Hmong; December for Akha and Khmu; around January - February for Ho, Tai Yang and Tai Khao.

After a year of hard work, the granary is filled and the villagers allow themselves a festive rest period. This is an opportunity to evacuate the misfortunes and sorrows of the past year, and to begin the New Year under the ancestors' good auspices.

Each family honors its ancestors by offering them a meal on the domestic altar. This is also an opportunity for families to visit each other and share common meals. Sometimes they all meet at the village priest's house to share a large banquet. Preparing the conditions for a good year ahead, New Year is an occasion of music, dance, competitive games: rope challenge or top game, seduction: ball-throwing game between boys and girls, and sociability around alcohol sharing.

Top to bottom:

Feeding the dead (for the Lolo) and the living (for the Loma)

Offerings to the elders first for the Muchi

Khmu new year ceremony

Village spirit

This entity partakes both of nature and society. The village spirit is often a fusion of the 'spirit master of the place', inhabiting the land where the village community settled, and of the ancestors of the village's inhabitants. This double nature makes it the master of the forces of nature and the guardian of the collectivity. The village spirit is honored once or twice a year on an altar located at the foot of a large tree, often in a small forest above the village, which must always remain pristine.

The priest performing the ritual is the descendant of the village founder or he is elected among the village elders. In every case, he represents the entire village community. The ritual is forbidden to outsiders and, during its performance, people are not allowed to enter or leave the village. This is often an occasion to remake village gates that demarcate the boundaries between the inside and the outside. Women play a minor role in the ritual, while men collect money to offer an animal sacrifice (pig, buffalo) and gather to ask for prosperity, health and fertility for the village. The rite may terminate with a banquet at the priest's house, which expresses the group's cohesion. In more recent and multi-ethnic villages, this ritual tends to disappear.

Top to bottom:

Altars of the village spirit (Tai Lue, then Akha Chepia)

Sharing the sacrificial meat

Agricultural rites

Several rituals might be performed at some crucial moments of the agrarian calendar, in order to placate the places' spirits through offerings, the "soul of rice" and the ancestors. Before the field clearing, a ritual may be performed to prevent accidents and ensure that the tools will not hurt anybody. At the time of rice sowing or maturation, a ritual promotes rice growing and assures the removal of diseases and predators (this is often the opportunity to perform the village spirit ritual or the Akha swinging ceremony). When the harvest time comes, incantations may be sung for calling the "soul of rice", which is said to augur a plentiful granary. Each family thanks their own ancestors by offering them the first grains of the new rice crop. This is a very important festival for many groups.

Feeding the spirit of the field

Bridge to help lost souls return

Occasional rituals

If lightning strikes a field, the rice dries out, or an epidemic strikes the village, one must react by attempting to pacify the angry powers that would cause such misfortunes. Individual or collective rituals may then be performed in order to chase away evil influences.

Calendar

Propitious days for performing rituals or any other important activities are determined according to the day of the week. Months are lunar and start with the new moon (the ascending period being the most auspicious). According to an old Chinese and South-East Asian calendar, days are counted by combining a cycle of 12 days (associated with an animal) and a cycle of 10 days. Nevertheless, locally most groups count days on the 10-day cycles (Khmu, Lao, Tai Dam, etc.), while some others prefer the 12-day cycles (Akha, Hmong, Mun, Tai Neua, etc.). In every cycle, the village takes one day off. It is also bad to work the day the householders' parents have died. Calendar

Mun (Yao) astrological book

New year traditional game in an Akha village

Divination & Healers

There are many remedies in the face of illness: medicinal plants, modern medicine, divination, and faith healers. Indeed an illness can be linked to an imbalance in one's corporal principles, to an angry spirit, or a biological problem. The origin of the problem is therefore inherent to the healing method and is more important than ethnic belonging, even if each ethnic group does have its own specific interpretations and healing techniques. Finally, a certain pragmatism comes into play: all types of treatment are valid, as long as they work.

Plants and pharmacopoeia

Nature provides any number of medicinal plants, which were the only medication available for a long time. There are specialized herbalists who learnt with a master or from a book how to recognize a large number of plants, as well as how to pick, prepare, and perform charms on them. However, in every family, someone, usually an elderly woman, knows some of these plants.

It is also important to note that resorting to pharmacopoeia does not exclude simultaneous treatment with manufactured medicines, and several courses of treatment may be pursued for the same illness.

From top to bottom:

Tai Lue healer and his medicinal products and sauna

Healing ritual with a monk

Possessed woman (nang thiem) *divining*

Divination and spirit sacrifices

If plants and medication are not successful, the patient may ask a healer or an elder to perform a divination ceremony in order to identify the spirit responsible for his suffering and to determine which sacrifice that spirit would require to satisfy it. Most often these spirits live in nature and have been accidentally disturbed. The spirit then seeks vengeance by stealing the guilty party's soul, which must then be redeemed by a substitution sacrifice or it will enter into the unfortunate person's body. It can also be the lonely wandering spirit of a dead person looking for company or that of a hungry ancestor. Divination can also be practiced as preventive medicine by using a divining calendar to determine which days are propitious to either perform or avoid certain activities. Monks can then perform healing rituals in the temple.

Divination and expulsion of bad spirits

Forms of Divination

There are many forms of divination. One can, for example, consult a divination table (like the kala *from Omphia village, a rare specimen of bone carved tablet), analyse the contents of an egg, examine the claws of a chicken, or look in the direction of a man's arm as he is seated on a turning plank. One can also use various techniques to get answers to a specific question: throwing rice (do they come out as odd or even numbers?), tossing cow horns cut lengthwise (are the sides facing upwards convex or concave?), measuring a plank (did it grow or shrink after the question was asked?).*

Kala, divination tablet

Bad luck platter

Song kho, *the 'distancing of bad luck', refers to a ritual designed to distance bad luck from a person's body, a house, or even a village. An elder or a monk will build a platter out of 1, 9, or 12 boxes and place food on it to 'attract' bad luck. He then pronounces magic formulas to lock them in before throwing the platter outside the village. It can also be in the form of a raft which is thrown into a river.*

Healer Altar

In addition to the ancestor altar, healers have in their house a special altar for honoring their guardian spirits. The altars of the Hmong healers are recognizable by their cut-out paper cover. Like other Tai and Khmu groups, the Tai Yang healers exceptionally (sometime every 12 years) carry out the great pang festival, in honor of these spirits. A new altar is built, as well as a tree of life in the middle of the house, and it's the occasion of an important festivity. All the people who have benefited from the healer's care come to pay homage to him.

Shamans and the possessed

Some healers enter into direct contact with the spirits in order to identify and heal the illness. Their power comes from their relationship with a tutelary spirit who chose them by making them sick until they accepted to worship it. Such healers can be men or women and may exist in every ethnic group, although they are not many. It is possible to call upon the services of a healer from a different ethnic group.

We can make a distinction between the possessed, those whose bodies serve as a support for the spirits who speak through their mouths, explaining the illness (Tai Lue, Khmu, Lao), and shamans who undertake a spiritual journey into the spirit world in search of the patient's soul (Tai Dam, Tai Yang, Akha, Hmong).

Khmu healer possessed by a spirit

Life Cycle

The path from birth to full admission into the community is marked by milestones such as being named, getting married, setting up a home and acquiring the status of being a parent: all of these steps can be marked by a ritual which will place the individual firmly within the group.

Birth

Pregnancy brings with it dietary restrictions for the mother. After a Lao, Tai or Khmu mother has given birth on a bed heated by coals, the new mother stays at home, near the hearth, and must avoid any contact with cold water. The placenta and umbilical cord are sometimes placed in a bamboo stick and hung from a tree which in full fruit is a symbol of fertility.

Depending on the ethnic group, the baby is given its name within one month of its birth, either by the parents, grandparents or the elders following an act of divination. The giving of a name or the first bit of rice given to a baby for eating is an occasion for a feast followed by a *baci*, the 'soul calling' ritual. Only then is the child considered to be fully human; if it dies before that, it will be buried apart from the others, without a ceremony.

From left to right:
***A 'name giving'* baci**
Playing to work

Carrying babies

Adolescence

With the Mun (Yao Lanten), every man undergoes an initiation rite. In other groups, adolescence is not marked by a specific ritual; however, a young girl's coming of age can be celebrated by the wearing of a specific costume.

Adolescence is the time to look for a soul-mate. In most cases, young people decide for themselves who they wish to marry, with their parents' approval. Not all marriages are permitted, however: those who are related on their father's side with a three generation span or those of the same clan can never wed. Almost all couples are formed within the same ethnic group and often within the same village.

From top to bottom:
Initiation rite of a Mun adolescent
Headdress for a Munteun adolescent

Marriage

Marriage cements the union of two people and also two families. The groom's family makes the request of the bride's family, using go-betweens. The negotiations can take some time, especially those concerning the 'bride price', a sum of money the groom's parents will pay to the bride's parents to compensate them for when the bride goes to live with her husband. This amount can be important, as with the Tai or the Khmu, or purely symbolic, as is the case with most of the Akha.

The initial ceremony takes place at the bride's house and marks her separation from her parental home. The groom's family then comes to get her with great fanfare and the ritual continues at their house. The couple is then presented to the ancestors' altar to which the bride, who changes clans by marrying, now depends.

From top to bottom:
Lao couple sharing the egg
Married women in husband's clan welcome the new bride
Styles of wedding pictures

Building a house and inauguration ceremony of a new house

Setting up a home

Other than Chinese-influenced groups who recently came from China, the groom must live with his in-laws — either before or after the marriage ceremony — and work for a while (some months or some years) for them to compensate them for the loss of productivity they will suffer as a result of their daughter leaving home. The couple will then go and live with the groom's parents while they save money and material to build their own house — unless the groom has the responsibility for taking care of his parents. It is at this point that the groom will get his inheritance; the bride can also receive something from her parents. Only when they live in their own home and have a child does the couple enter fully into the community.

Divorce

In the case of disagreement, the two families attempt to solve the problem, often with the help of mediators. A small amount of money given to one's spouse is sometimes enough to right certain wrongs. Divorce means reimbursing all or a part of the cost of the wedding which can be an obstacle for women wishing to leave the marriage. Divorce is relatively frequent amongst the Akha as long as the couple has no children, notably since the bride price is small. It is, on the other hand, forbidden amongst the Muchi and some Seng groups. Breaking this law will deprive their descendants of any possibility of their getting married together.

Baci *for the reconciliation of a couple*

Calling of souls

The baci *or* su kwan *is primarily a "calling of souls" ("souls" being here conceived as a sort of vital force that can make people weak if it leaves the body too long). In fact this ceremony is performed for any special event, such as a marriage, the welcoming of guests, a birth or a cure. It takes place on a table with beautifully arranged offerings to please the souls, often with a chicken (the head and feet will be used for divination). People sit around and touch the table as the performer chants blessing to call the souls back. Then the assembly uses cotton thread and wraps it around the host's wrist to fix the souls. This is followed by a festive meal. The* baci *threads should be worn until they fall off by themselves. All ethnic groups perform it, but with such minor variations as the color of the cotton thread.*

Funeral

A funeral is an important and costly event in the life of a family. Rituals differ from group to group: burial or cremation, the abandonment or the visiting of a tomb. For every group, however, a funeral is an occasion for the entire community to gather and carry out rituals to transform the deceased into ancestors who will watch over their descendants.

Funerals

After their death, the deceased are dressed in their finest clothing and kept in their house for awhile, then put into a coffin or wrapped in a simple mat, with a few objects and some money for their life in the Beyond. The size and length of the funeral depends on the deceased: modest for the young and more elaborate for older people who have many descendants. For the latter, the body is kept in the house for several days while the ceremony is being prepared and distant relatives given time to arrive.

The rites are performed by a relative assisted by an elder, monks (for Buddhists), or a funeral specialist, as is the case with the Akha. Non-Buddhists may also perform animal sacrifices since all offerings must take place during the funeral, whereas Buddhists can give offerings in the temple several years after the death.

In all ethnic groups, violent deaths are considered abnormal and dangerous. These deceased do not receive a funeral ceremony. They are buried where they fall and become wandering spirits.

Offering to the dead man on his coffin, Akha Oma

Buddhist procession to the cemetery

The Beyond

The function of the funeral ritual is to send the deceased's spirit to the 'land of the dead', often perceived to be a mirror image of their own village, although representations of the Beyond are blurred. The ritual then takes the form of a 'voyage', and all the places the deceased lived in during their life time are listed (Hmong), or all the places the group stopped in during their migration from Vietnam are named (Tai Yang), or their genealogy since the very first human is recited (Akha).

Since humans possess several souls, those of an individual can inhabit several places, be it the cemetery, the family altar, or in the land of the dead.

From top to bottom:
Tai Lue monk praying inside a phasat
Ho graveside ceremony for the deceased
Akha Nuheu altar for the deceased








17.03.2005

Tombs and cemeteries

The dead are most often buried in cemeteries. Only Buddhists and Mun (Yao Lanten) practice cremation. Nowadays, some Buddhists will place the ashes in a small stupa along the inside walls of the temple. Previously, cremation was a privilege reserved for the wealthy.

Cemeteries are forest plots beyond the village. Children and adult people are separated, and sometimes adult graves are grouped by clan. The exact place of the tomb is decided by the deceased: an egg thrown in the air will only break if the deceased wills it. Sometimes a small house is built in which food and objects will be placed for the deceased to use in the Beyond.

The cemetery is perceived as being a dangerous place and is only visited during funerals. Only some groups which came from China will venture into the cemetery to give offerings and food during a few days following a death. The Ho feed their dead at the graveside every year but, like the Yao, they do not have a real cemetery. They practice geomancy in order to determine where someone will be buried, thus the graves are often spread out over a wide area.

House spirits

After the funeral, the spirit of the deceased is invited to inhabit a small altar within the home. This is where ancestors live for three generations, protecting the house and bestowing favours, although they can also cause illness if a taboo is not respected or if they are hungry. They are regularly fed by their sons with offerings during different festivals. Buddhists have recently begun feeding their dead only at the temple.

Altar of the house spirits in a Seng house

Graves. From top left to bottom right:
Baza (Phusang), Tai Lue, Tai Dam
Baza (Phusang), Ho, Ho
Khmu, Loma, Lao, Tai Dam

Phasat

Phasat, a Pali term meaning "offering", designates the main gift to the deceased. It is a structure representing a home which is then filled with clothing, kitchenware, money and other necessities. Made at the home of the deceased's relatives, the *phasat* is brought to the temple in a procession. Once there, a monk sits inside it and transmits all the necessities it contains to the deceased through his incantations. Each deceased person should receive a *phasat*, although this can take place years after his death depending on family fortunes. One can also offer a *phasat* to oneself and be sure to find the enclosed necessities in the world to come.

Double* phasat *ready to be inaugurated

Banners

Banners are locally woven and decorated with beads and paper cuttings. Hung from a decorative structure topped by a Naga or bird sculpture, they are offered to the deceased and brought to the temple in a procession together with a *phasat*, and can later be hung in the temple as a decoration.

Banner in front of a temple

Buddhism

Buddhism originated in India 2,500 years ago and spread throughout Asia while splitting into different branches. Theravada Buddhism became the branch of Buddhism practiced in Laos after its introduction into the country from Cambodia and northern Thailand in the 14th Century. There are about 170 temples and 500 monks in Phongsaly Province, a region in which one third of the inhabitants are Buddhists.

History and spread

Phongsaly Province contains two distinct Buddhist traditions: Lao Buddhism, which is also followed by some Khmu and Pisu and is predominant along the Nam U River; and Tai Lue Buddhism, also followed by the Phunoy, predominant in the west of the province. The only differences between the two forms of Buddhism are the writing systems used (tham lao and tham lue), a few rules which apply to monks (Tai Lue monks can eat three meals a day) and some minor ritual differences.

These two forms of Buddhism have been in the region since the 14th Century. The Phunoy and Pisu only converted to Buddhism perhaps in the 18th Century, whereas the Khmu from Muang Khua adopted Buddhism at the beginning of the 20th Century (20% of the Khmu in Phongsaly are Buddhists).

Buddhist offering in front of a stupa

Comings and goings of the devotees in the temple

The Community and the Monks

Village life and Buddhism are closely linked with each other. For villagers Buddhism is less about renouncing the things of this world and meditation than it is about the well-being and cohesion of the village. Village prosperity, the health of its inhabitants, good harvests and honouring the dead at festival times are the most important issues.

Village Buddhism is centred more around the temple and its layman leadership — a former monk, than it is involved in a monastic community which is often tiny or even absent. Since mandatory education was introduced in the 1970's, temple-based education has had a serious rival and candidates for the priesthood have become rare. Most of those donning monks' robes do so after the death of a relative, to escape a difficult family situation or in the hopes of obtaining an inexpensive education. Other candidates are older men who no longer have family obligations.

The ordination ceremony differs according to degree, whether one is a 10 to 20 year-old novice or a fully-fledged monk. It is a relatively simple ceremony for novices, calling upon godfathers to sponsor them and thereby gain merit. For monks, a second and more complex ordination requires the presence of several confirmed monks.

From top to bottom:
Learning to write in the temple
Blessing for an inauguration
Novice enthronement ritual

Theravada Buddhism

Meaning, "Doctrine of the Ancient Ones", this branch of Buddhism which is present in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, is based upon the Tipitaka, or the "three baskets" where the manuscripts were kept. They were written in Sri Lanka in the Pali language, which originated in Northern India. They record the words of Buddha (Sutta Pitaka), monastic discipline (Vinaya Pitaka) and "commentaries" (Abhidhamma Pitaka).

The section on monastic discipline contains the rules of Buddhist behaviour: 5 for the layman, 10 for novices and 227 for monks.

manuscript in palm leaves

Almsgiving ceremony to the monks

Buddhist festival

Village Buddhism comes into its own mainly during annual ceremonies when the villagers gather in the temple to give offerings to the Buddha in order to earn merit for the living and the dead. Dressed in their finest clothes, worshippers come to the temple early in the morning carrying offerings while monks recite the sacred texts. Each festival is different and is a day off work.

Lao New Year

Lao New Year is celebrated in April, at the end of the dry season. The New Year celebrations are meant to announce the much needed coming rains. The festivities last three days: the last day of the year, an intermediate day and the first day of the New Year. On the first day Buddha statues in the temple are taken down from the altar and splashed with water. Neighbours and friends then sprinkle each other, as well as houses, vehicles, etc. On the second day each household gives offerings for the dead. New household protective talismans replace the old ones. On the third and final day, the Buddha statues are repainted, dressed in new finery and brought back to the altar. The accumulated bad luck of the past year is ritually thrown out of the village and the Buddha is requested to admire the renewal efforts made for the upcoming year.

Rocket Festival

Although this festival takes place in May or June in the rest of the country, in Phongsaly it is celebrated on the second day of the New Year. Rockets are fired by some families to honour their dead. The height and the distance travelled by a rocket allows the family members to estimate if their deceased member reached the paradise.

The New Year Buddha Washing Ceremony in a Phunoy Village

Rockets launched towards the sky

Enterring the Lent

Buddhist Lent begins at the full moon of the eighth month and lasts for three months. Offerings are given to monks and ordination ceremonies become more frequent. Lent restricts the movements of monks who must sleep in their temple and be even more vigilant as to their religious precepts. Lent also influences the life of the layman who is discouraged from marrying, building or travelling. It is also a dangerous period when the rice harvest is in peril: evil spirits must be kept at bay and prayers are more regularly recited in the pagoda on every holiday during the lent.

Rice Growing Festival

This festival takes place during the new moon of the ninth month and is the same as the New Rice Festival. Villagers bring the first fruits of their harvest —especially new rice— to the pagoda as an offering to the deceased.

From top to bottom:
Offerings in the temple on the day of entering Lent
Novices enthronement ritual in the Lent period
Offerings of new rice to the temple

Kinaly mask

The Kinaly are celestial feminine beings, half-bird and half-woman angels evocativing beauty and grace. It is said that they like bathing in a lake near Phongsaly until the menfolk frighten them off. About once every ten years, at the occasion of the Buddha's birthday, the Phunoy perform dances wearing masks. It is also said these dances help ensure rain. Two men are chosen to wear Kinaly masks, a long rock and coloured paper wings attached to a bamboo structure and dance through the village square. This performance has now almost disappeared. The last such celebration took place in 1995.

Kinaly dance of the Phunoy during the 1950s and 1980s

Ancestor Festival

This pagoda celebration of the dead used to be one of the biggest festivals in the province. It was mostly observed by the Tai Lue and the Phunoy, with offerings of not only small paper houses but of paper buffaloes and elephants as well. These offerings, along with paper rice granaries, were meant for the use of the deceased in the afterlife. Families today bring offerings of platters composed of rice, vegetables and fruits from their harvest.

End of the Lent

This festival is celebrated at the time of the full moon of the eleventh month. The end of the Buddhist Lent is marked by confessions by monks and the floating of rafts as an offering to the Naga to keep bad fortune at bay. For the layman previously forbidden activities can start up again and final offerings are made to the dead until next year's New Year celebrations.

From top to bottom:
Offerings deposited in and around the temple for all the dead
Pirogue race during the boat festival

Other Festivals

Some festivals, such as Phavet Festival in which monks recite stories of the different lives of the Buddha, are only celebrated occasionnally. Others are only celebrated by the Lao, such as the "rice cake offering" of newly harvested rice in February or the boat festival which only takes place in Muang Khua where river conditions are optimal. Full moons, new moons and half-moons are days off and considered propitious for prayers and other temple activities.

Monks and the life cycle

In addition to the annual festivals, monks can perform certain rituals for laymen. Although they do not take part in births or weddings, they can choose a baby's name with the help of astrological books and determine propitious dates to perform these events. Their presence is indispensable at funerals, both at the deceased's home and at the temple. They can also perform certain healing rites to assure a long life or keep misfortune at bay as well as blessing a new house, a vehicle…

Monks performing healing rituals in the temple

Temple

The temple is the centre of Buddhist life, as it is not only a place of prayer and celebration but also a place for study and artistic expression. Built high above the village it dominates social life. Along with the school, it is often the only communal structure in the community. It is also an emblem and its beauty is the pride of the village.

The Temple exterior

Building varies according to the wealth of the village as well as that of region and the time of its construction. Since the temple is a living space, which requires continual embellishment or even reconstruction, it is never very old. Amongst the Lao, village temples are built out of wood on stilts. Only the largest are of masonry and built on the ground. Tai Lue style temples often have a large roof on pillars linked by a small wall. A corridor housing the drum leads from the main building to the monks' dwelling.

Altar of the Divinities of the Temple

This altar is the place where land spirits and temple protectors are fed. Three small altars can be added to the main one, thus forming the divinities of the four direction of the compass.

Temple of U Tai

From top to bottom:
Lao Style temple of Senlat
Feeding place for divinitites of the temple

Stupa

The stupa was originally a monument to hold the relics of the Buddha or important monks and was only found in main temples. Recently, many temples have built replicas of That Luang in Vientiane which is a symbol of the Lao nation. Sometimes small stupa are used as funeral urns of villagers.

Banyan tree

The Banyan tree, under which the Buddha received the enlightenment, is present in every temple. It receives offerings during festivals.

From top to bottom:
Village copy of Vientiane's golden stupa
Banyan tree in the courtyard of a temple

Monk house

This house that looks just like any other village house is the place where monks eat and rest.

The Place of Ordination

Orination takes place in a separate building containing Buddha statues. Only important temples have such a place which is reserved for ordination ceremonies.

Drum

The drum is beaten on full, dark and half moon days and also at festivals to inform the villagers of the times of prayers. During festivals, skilled villagers perform a dance while beating the dream while dancing.

From top to bottom:
Monk's dresses drying in front of their house
Place of ordination of the temple of U Tay
Drum and gong of the of the U Tay temple

The Temple interior

The central structure of a temple is called a vihan, or meeting hall. Set off and sacralised by boundary stones, or sima, which are buried in front of the four temple walls, the vihan opens to the east. It is above all a barely furnished assembly hall built around a central Buddha altar.

From top to bottom:
temple altars from the villages of:
Navai
Muang Khua
Muang Va
Bomai (next page)

Paintings

Paintings, either painted directly on the walls or hung in frames, illustrate the Buddha, his life or representation of heaven and hell. The latters are becoming increasingly common.

Gutter

Every temple has a gutter, sculpted in the shape of a naga, and which is used to wash statues of Buddha during the Lao New Year Festival.

Temple guardians

The entrance doors are often guarded by animal shaped statues. Unlike in the rest of Laos, lions are often used as in Mahayana Buddhism, rather than ophidian naga.

Display Stand

Some temples have a stand to display manuscripts (*bailan*) during the Pravet festival.

Architectural elements

Some elements, such as pillars, plinths or right angles can be beautified by decorations.

Platform

It's the place where monks sit during ceremonies.

Art in the temple

In Buddhist communities, the temple is an emblem of the village and its beauty is the pride of all. It is decorated with care according to the means available. The statutes of the Buddha and its altar form the central element, while the statutes of the devotees are the sign of the villagers' devotion.

Statues of Buddha

Statues of Buddha are the most important part of the temple. There may be many of them, although only one stands out thanks to either its size or a particular characteristic. They are most often made locally out of wood according to precise rules and proportions which have been handed down in books through the centuries. Statue styles may vary according to localities; the large ears on the Tai Lue statues are an example of this. There are also statues made out of precious metals or, increasingly, out of cement. They must all receive a golden heart during an important ceremony destined to give them life and activate their powers. These statues may, however, lose their powers: if they are damaged they can become dangerous and were at one time buried in a cemetery reserved for Buddhas.









6.5.2006

Altar pedestal

Built of masonry, the function of the pedestal is to receive and display Buddha statues. This is why it must be elaborated and is often decorated with colours, stencil motifs or bas relief.

The pedestal is often topped with two Naga sculptures: standing behind the Buddha statues, they act as protectors of the Buddha and of Buddhism.

Other elements

The altar can contain different kinds of offerings which were given to the deceased or to the Buddha during ceremonies. These may be flag holders or banana tree trunks spiked with decorations made of wax, which have been given to mark prayers or on other occasions.

Every temple has to contain candle holders. These are necessary since villagers attach cotton threads to them or place lit candles in them during ceremonies.

The altar may also contain fans, which are offered by laymen to the monks. The monks hold them in front of their faces during prayers. The fans are meant prevent the devotions.

Tai Lue altar in the temple of Yo

Decorated candelabra from the phounoy temple of Komen

Stencil patterns

Stencil patterns are often geometrical motif based on floral inspiration, used to decorate columns, walls and sometimes ceilings. Some stencil work can represent the Buddha or other characters, such as angels-like kinaly girls. These paintings are made with stencils made by monks or laymen out of thick paper, then applied on wall with gold paint. The motifs represented here are reproductions of paintings found in the ordination building of the Tai Lue temple at U Tai.

Armes of the buddha from the Yo temple

Stencil patterns from U Tay temple

Arms of the Buddha

Tai Lue and Phunoy temples often contain objects, which are attached to rods representing different weapons, such as axes, lances, etc. arrayed on either side of the altar. They are called Buddha's arms or Buddha's tools. Also found in temples of northern Thailand, they suggest a Chinese Daoist influence.

Devotees

Temples may contain statues with human or animal shapes placed close to the altar. Human statues are devotees (male and female) representations, often in a position of prayer, offered to the temple by real worshippers. Animals are mainly elephants and horses which are prestigious mounts dedicated to Buddha. The tortoise represents the woman.

Examples of sculptures of temple devotees


HAVE A GOOD TRIP

A closing word on an open world

This book describes the life of the people of a given region, at a given time: the province of Phongsaly during the first years of this millennium. During the 21st Century, like the rest of the country and the world, this province has undergone major changes: opium and dry rice are converted to cash crops like rubber trees and sugar cane; walking is replaced by cars on the newly opened roads; fire is superseded by electricity, which has brought, in its wake, television and mobile phones. Villages move to the roadside; inter-ethnic marriages develop, as does migration to urban centres. Many of the objects or practices described here may soon be nothing more than a memory.

There have always been changes. Because these groups are not well known to outsiders, and also because not all of them have considered it necessary to preserve the narrative of their history, too often made up of wars and migrations, one might have thought that these populations lived outside of change, following a timeless, "traditional" way of life. But not knowing history is not the same as not having it. Two hundred years ago, few of the groups we speak of were present in the region. Some of them did not even exist as a group. Like everywhere, life is movement. Let's just hope it changes for the better for these people.

Farewell board for Bun Tay district

Bibliography

There are few books on Phongsaly province, and most of them are in French. Among these few books, those of Lefèvre-Pontalis, and Guillemet and O'Kelly are vivid descriptions of the region around 1900. Although also dated, Aymé's work is the most complete presentation of the province to date, and the writings of Roux and Tran-Van Chu complement it with a wealth of ethnographic information. Finally, Bouté's book is a remarkable, unique ethnographic work on an emblematic population of this province.

The selection of general references on ethnic groups and Laos prioritizes more accessible books, in English; first on ethnic groups that are present in Phongsaly, and then on the culture and history of Laos.

*Phunoy, elder of the temple, (*ajan vat*) and his books*

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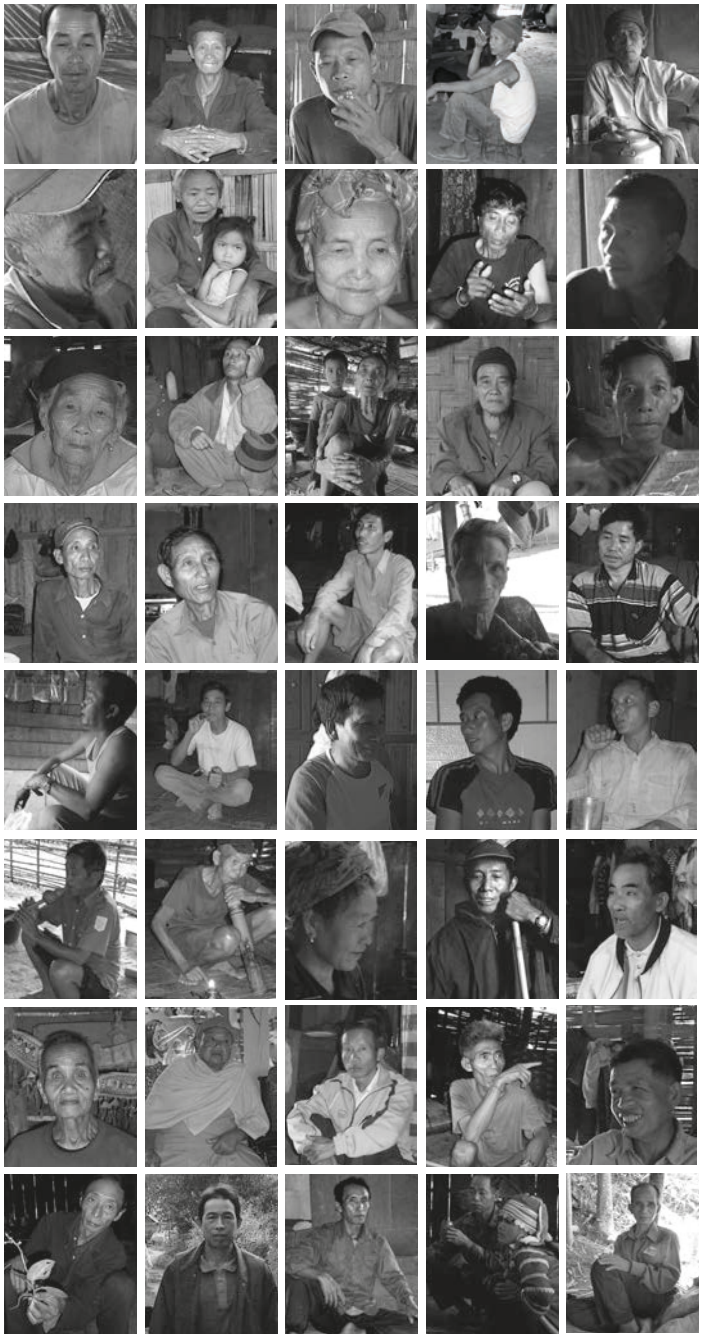


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