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Minorities and the Construction of a Nation in Post-Socialist Laos

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by

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Contents

Acknowledgements	i
Abbreviations	v
A Note on Transcription, Spelling and Translation	vi
1. Introduction	1
1.1. What is a 'nation'?	4
1.2. Terminology	13
1.3. Methodology	17
1.4. Chapter scheme	37
2. Theoretical Framework: Presentation and Discussion	40
2.1. Gellner, Anderson and Smith	40
2.2. Nationalism and ethnicity: beyond the domination/resistance dichotomy	54
2.3. Forging nationhood in Laos	72
3. The Awakening of Ethnic and National Identity in Modern Laos	79
3.1. The divinities, the ethnic Lao and the indigenous peoples	80
3.2. Inclusion of the highland peoples in the modern world: the French period	89
3.3. National identity awakening in Laos	106
4. Ethnic Classification and Mapping Nationhood	126
4.1. Description and interpretation of the early censuses	127
4.2. Socialist regime: Break-up with the past	132

4.2. Socialist regime: Break-up with the past	132
4.3. Case study of the 2000 population census	140
4.4. Kaysone Phomvihane's theory of nationhood	146
5. Tensions within the Lao State's Representation of the National Culture	156
5.1. Remodelling Majority/Minority representations	157
5.2. "Culture in the New Era": a socialism with Lao characteristics	175
5.3. Construction of a national history	189
6. Narratives of the Nation	205
6.1. Narratives: product of power and consciousness	205
6.2. "Heroic village"	221
7. Ethnicity Reconsidered in Post-Socialist Laos	236
7.1. Duality of being	237
7.2. Post-socialist loss of a stable 'sense of self'	248
7.3. Outcasts of the nation?	262
Conclusion: Outcasts of the Nation? Minorities and the Construction of a Nation in Post-Socialist Laos	280
Appendices	287
References	297

Abbreviations

DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
ILO	International Labour Organisation
LFNC	Lao Front for National Construction
LPDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic
LPRP	Lao People's Revolutionary Party
LWU	Lao Women's Union
RLA	Royal Lao Army
RLG	Royal Lao Government

A Note on Transcription, Spelling and Translation

Transcription and spelling

Since no official system of transcription of Lao script into English exists, I have used one that tries to reproduce as closely as possible the Lao pronunciation with sounds that exist in English. For example, the 'or' in *kan tor su* (ການຕໍ່ສູ້ ("struggle")) is pronounced approximately as the 'or' in corn, while the 'o' in *vilàsòn* (ວິລະສິນ ("hero")) is the short 'o' as in bone.

Simple vowels in Lao are either short or long. I have differentiated these two types of vowel by marking the short ones with an acute accent over the letter, thus: 'ò'.

The consonants are generally pronounced as in English. An 'h' following any consonant indicates that it is aspirated. Even though the 'r' may be more appropriate for some words because of their Sanskrit or Pali roots, I have nevertheless preferred 'l' so as to be faithful to my informants' pronunciation.

I have generally kept familiar spellings, such as Vientiane (that strictly-speaking should be transcribed as *Viengchan*), for the sake of clarity. For the names of Lao authors of published works, I have retained the spelling used in the publication.

Finally, I have made no effort to represent the tonal elements of the Lao language.

However, by writing key terms and phrases in Lao script as well as in English, I hope

I have provided sufficient information for those who wish to draw on my work.

Translation

All the translations from Lao into English or from French into English are mine unless otherwise stated.

1. Introduction

My initial broad research aims were twofold: firstly, how might sentiments of national consciousness be created in a complex society (such as Laos)? And, secondly, which form of 'nation' would develop in a non-western, post-colonial and multi-ethnic country (such as Laos)? My interest was heightened by the turbulent history of Laos, especially from the late nineteenth century onwards. Laos, like Vietnam and Cambodia, is a former French colony. The country was entangled in the turmoil of the Second World War and the Japanese occupation of the region that irremediably damaged the 'prestige' of the French colonial power. Laos was first declared independent in September 1945 (after the surrender of the Japanese and before the return of the French), as an arrangement to be replaced less than a year later, in April 1946, with the status of a unified constitutional monarchy within the French Union. The newly built 'Lao polity' was destroyed, however, in subsequent years by the impact of the Cold War and the First and Second Indochinese Wars. From 1954 to 1974, a civil war tore the country apart along political, ideological and geographical lines. The conflict opposed the Royal Lao Government (RLG) to the Pathet Lao, i.e. the Lao communists. Both sides were heavily dependent on foreign powers: the United States and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (and, to a lesser extent, the People's Republic of China), respectively. Geographically, the country was also split into two zones. It was as if an imaginary (and fluctuating) line drawn from the North to the South, divided the country between the West and the East. Broadly speaking, the government-controlled areas embraced the plains, mostly inhabited by ethnic Lao populations, while the communists dominated the eastern and mountainous territories where non-ethnic Lao peoples were predominant.

The civil war has left enduring scars within the Lao collective memory. As a result, the present regime still struggles with the process of constituting a nation as it finds it difficult to come to terms with the country's past. My intention is to focus on the State's politics of producing 'a people': that is, a population encompassed by a sense of belonging to a community, i.e. a nation. However, I not only analyse the politics of national culture and identity but I also aim to study individuals' perceptions of these discourses. More precisely, I aim at capturing - through the study of certain members of ethnic minorities educated under the socialist regime - the feelings and expectations of the non-ethnic Lao peoples towards the State's politics of representation of a nation in post-socialist Laos¹.

In this Introduction I first introduce the concept of 'nation' by stressing its 'fuzziness', and by reviewing Western and non-western interpretations of its definition. I then briefly review some pertinent events in Laos' recent history. I next explain the reasons for my choice of a certain terminology. In a third section, I introduce and justify my methodology. Finally, I briefly outline the content of my thesis by presenting a Chapter Scheme.

¹ By 1995, Evans was concluding that "Socialism has come and gone in Laos" (Evans 1995, p. xi), with the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) maintaining a monopoly on political power whilst presiding over a fully-fledged transition to capitalism.

Map 1: Lao PDR



Map No. 3959 UNITED NATIONS
December 1996

Department of Public Information
Cartographic Section

Source: <http://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/english/htmain.htm> (site visited 12 October 2001)

1.1. What is a 'nation'? : A point of departure for reflection

The concept of 'nation' has been the subject of intense scholarly debate; indeed, no consensus exists on an academic definition of the term 'nation'. Gil Delannoi sums up the paradox: "nations exist, yet it is impossible to define them" (Delannoi 1999: 9). The most common dividing line amongst writers on this topic traditionally opposes the 'objectivists' to the 'subjectivists'. Back in the eighteenth century, the German philosopher Johann Herder (1744-1803) was a fervent supporter of the 'objectivist', or culturalist, perspective. For him, a person was necessarily German if she or he could speak German, since possessing a common language meant sharing a consciousness. More precisely, he stressed the importance of the *Volkgeist*, the essential spirit of a particular people. Conversely, the French doctrine of nationalism, influenced by the French Enlightenment and produced by the French Revolution, claims to be universalist, i.e. civic, egalitarian and rational, encompassing 'the people' inside the boundaries of a sovereign territory.

Relating as it does to the latter of these conceptions, Ernest Renan's short and compelling lecture, "What is a nation?" (1997 [1882])², is arguably one of the most influential essays in the debate over the definition of a nation. Renan reviewed and refuted each criterion that announced itself as the 'objective' and universal factor of national identification. The French philosopher subsequently argued that no criteria, whether they be of "dynastic principle", language, ethnicity, religion, or geography, are either sufficient or necessary to define a national identity. In brief, nations have *variable* 'objective' differences that distinguish them from one another. Renan thus proposed another, quasi-transcendental definition of the nation: a concept - "a spiritual principle"

² Ernest Renan gave this lecture at the Sorbonne on 11 March 1882.

- the strength of which lies, in his words, in "the desire to live together" (Renan 1997 [1882]: 31). He famously claimed: "[t]he existence of a nation is (if you will forgive me the metaphor) a daily plebiscite, just as that of the individual is a perpetual affirmation of life" (Renan 1997 [1882]: 32)³.

Taking the 'subjective' principle to its extremes, Walker Connor has described the nation as a "self-defined rather than an other-defined grouping, [and] the broadly held conviction concerning the group's singular origin need not and seldom will accord with factual data" (Connor 1978: 380). In other words, what determines the existence of a nation is the self-awareness of the whole population, not only of one ethnic group; thus is formed a unique group, of a self-perceived homogeneity (Connor 1972: 337). For Connor, therefore, in the absence of such self-consciousness, a nation simply does not exist.

Placing an equal stress on the people's will as the ultimate criterion (though in milder terms⁴), Clive Christie, making a further step towards the concept of self-determination, emphasises the relationship between national identity and democracy. He explains, thus:

A nation and a national identity cannot be said to exist unless a substantial section of the people so identified support this claim to nationality. In the end, the existence of a nation is not determined by objective criteria; it is self-determined by a particular people. The process of discovering a national identity, defining national goals and achieving them is therefore described as self-determination. (Christie 1998: 57)

³ My translation has been much inspired by the consultation of the two English translations of Renan's text, which may be found in Alfred Zimmern (ed.) (1939) *Modern Political Doctrines*, pp. 186-205; and in Homi K. Bhabha (ed.) (1995) *Nation and Narration*, pp. 8-22.

1.1.1. Forms of 'nation'

It is commonly agreed among historians that the concept of 'nation' first emerged and developed in Europe between the late eighteenth century and the twentieth century.

Moreover, some scholars have distinguished two types of nationalism by opposing the 'Western world' to the 'Eastern world'⁵ The underlying idea, based on the diffusionist theory, was that the concepts of 'nation' and 'nationalism', as political ideologies, flourished in Europe before spreading over the rest of the world, which, in turn, adopted the Western model (Plamenatz 1976, Seton-Watson 1977, Kohn 1945).

It is also assumed that nations came before nationalism in 'the Western world', whereas nationalist movements were developing in parallel with the sentiments of national consciousness in the 'Eastern world' (Seton-Watson 1977: 6-7). National characters grew steadily and unconsciously in the "old nations" in the 'Western world'. The process was "slow and obscure" (Seton-Watson 1977: 8), going on through the centuries until it reached the stage of crystallisation with the eruption of nationalism. Thus, Western nationalism was more political than cultural. Since the nations were already formed, nationalist movements solely expressed the strong desire to have their own state

⁴ It is difficult to think of one state in today's world that could fit Connor's definition.

⁵ These terms remain rather loosely delimited. It is interesting to note that the 'Eastern world' is generally defined in terms of broad geographical regions while the 'Western world' includes the names of states, thus:

	Hans Kohn.- <i>The Idea of Nationalism</i>	Hugh Seton-Watson. <i>Nations and States</i>	John Plamenatz;- <i>Two types of nationalism</i>
Western world	In the eighteenth century: France, England, Netherlands, Switzerland, the United States, the British Dominions	"Old nations" in 1789: France, England, Scotland, Netherlands, Castilian, Portugal, Denmark, Sweden, Hungary, Poland, Russia	In the eighteenth and nineteenth century: France, England, Germany, Italy
Eastern world	Central (including Germany) and Eastern Europe and Asia	The rest of Europe, Muslim lands, southern and eastern Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, America, South Africa and Australia.	Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America

(Plamenatz 1976: 29-30). As Plamenatz argued, "Eastern nationalism" was "imitative" because the nationalists had no choice but to adopt the only model available if they aspired to the level of the 'intruders' (from whom they could not escape, in any case). But this nationalism was also "hostile" because the nationalists asked for independence, as well as expressing their will to overcome their dependence on foreign influences (Plamenatz 1976:34). In time, they developed their own nationalism as opposed to the 'alien' model. As a result, 'Western nationalism' and 'Eastern nationalism' not only had different origins and causes, they also were ultimately oppositional in character.

This dichotomy between 'tradition' (Eastern nationalism) and 'modernity' (Western nationalism) was arguably best exemplified by Geertz. In his essay (1963), "The integration revolution. Primordial sentiments and civil politics in the new states", he pointed out the fundamental contradiction that challenged the newly independent countries in their process of nation-building. In brief, such countries were torn by two opposing forces, i.e. the "search for an identity" and the "demand for progress" (Geertz 1963: 108). As a result, these two aims were bound to create tensions within the ethnic identities – in Geertz's definition, "the people's sense of self bound up in the gross actualities of blood, race, language, locality, religion or tradition" - which were most likely anyway to be overwhelmed by the superior nature of the state. The danger was indeed that the conflict "between primordial and civic sentiments [would lead to] a loss of definition [...] either through absorption into a culturally undifferentiated mass or [...] through domination by some other rival ethnic, racial or linguistic community" (Geertz 1963: 109).

Since Geertz wrote his article, modernist theories have argued against the falsity of primordial national identities, be they located in Europe or elsewhere (I will come back to such theories in the next chapter). In addition, criticisms of eurocentricism have also contributed to the undermining of these arguments. Bhikhu Parekh, for instance, qualifies them as "half-truth" and refutes the idea that non-western leaders, hopelessly lacking in autonomy, simply copied the European nationalist discourse. In reality, "[m]any non-western societies had their own traditions of political thought, some of them fairly rich and well developed" and, though non-western countries used the language of nationalism, their nationalist discourse "borrowed some European ideas, but both indigenised and combined them with those derived from their own traditions." (Parekh 1995: 47). In short, "[t]he colonial nationalist discourse [...] was necessarily multistranded, multilingual [Parekh deals particularly with the example of colonial India], partly autonomous and partly heteronomous, eclectic and provisional, and the post-independence nationalist discourse could hardly be otherwise" (Parekh 1995: 48)⁶. Following this brief introduction to the concept of 'nation', I turn to Laos in the attempt to contextualize my initial theoretical outline.

1.1.2. "Moment of arrival"

The proclamation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) on December 2nd, 1975 ended a six-century old monarchy. The power of most influential ethnic Lao right-wing families had been broken, the Royal Lao Army (RLA) neutralised, and no more assistance could be expected from the United States. Consequently, the final seizure of power was a mere formality. Though politically and militarily victorious, the new leadership had to face the immense task of reconstructing a country wracked by

⁶ These arguments have also been thoroughly developed by Partha Chatterjee, to whom I shall return later.

bombing⁷ and artificially sustained by the millions of US dollars of economic assistance that were poured in during the war⁸.

But the challenges were not only socio-economic. The leaders of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) were in effect unknown figures to most Lao people when they came to power⁹. The Party's seizure of power had not been preceded by a popular uprising in either the urban areas or in the countryside. The Pathet Lao, the Lao communists, had not mobilised an exploited peasantry with promises of land reform. The civil war had left a disorientated population for whom communism was little more than a name. In effect, the political revolution took place in a quasi-vacuum.

What is more, after the failure of the Lao nationalist movements that emerged after the Second World War (which only promoted ethnic Lao culture and therefore excluded the ethnic minorities from the construction of a Lao national identity), the communists faced the enormous challenge of building another form of nation. The success of the "National Democratic Revolution" in 1975 was greatly indebted to the participation of some highland ethnic groups allied with the Pathet Lao and the Viet Minh troops during the French and American Wars; accordingly, the new leadership could hardly afford to ignore them in its nationalist project. Furthermore, as a socialist movement following the ideological line of Vietnamese communism (that is, of Marxist-Leninist persuasion), the new government had a completely different ideological framework that could be seen as constituting an advantage over the traditionalist and conservative Lao

7 Laos holds the unfortunate distinction of being the most heavily bombed country on a per capita basis in history.- Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and Mines Advisory Group (MAG) (1994) *Summary Description: Unexploded Ordnance Project, Xieng Khuang, Lao PDR*, MCC and MAG: Vientiane, Lao PDR.

8 More than US\$ 500 million flowed into the country between 1964-1975 (Stuart-Fox 1997: 153).

9 The famous exception was Prince Souphanouvong, member of the Lao royal family and because of that a much-respected figure in the eyes of the ethnic Lao people. His role was to represent officially the clandestine communist party in the wartime negotiation rounds.

governments that had preceded it. Indeed, the communists saw their ultimate objective, namely the creation of "socialist man" in a new society, as entailing the conquest of all the difficulties related to the issue of ethnicity that permeated Laos. Their nationalism, by emphasising the necessity to include all the ethnic groups in Lao society with equal rights and opportunities, may therefore be defined as a polyethnic or supra-ethnic ideology "which stresses civil rights rather than shared cultural roots, [...] where no ethnic group openly tries to turn nation-building into an ethnic project on its own behalf" (Eriksen 1993: 118).

However, the objective of creating a "socialist man" has waned over the years as the Lao Communist Party's ideology has changed. In the 1991 Constitution (the first one promulgated since 1975), the adjective 'socialist' is no longer applied to 'man'; instead, the only educational goal specified is to produce "good citizens" (Article 19), and a Lao citizen is someone with Lao nationality (as stated in Chapter Three of the Constitution, which defines the rights and obligations of citizens). Similarly, there is no mention of socialism in the preamble, even as a distant goal; Laos is referred to only as a country of "peace, independence, democracy, unity and prosperity". None the less, some socialist principles are still present in the formulation of the Constitution, "though they have been tempered by liberal notions to reflect contemporary realities and demands" (Stuart-Fox 1996: 216). Thus, the Lao PDR is still defined as a "People's Democratic State" (Article 2), and its organisations "function in accordance with the principle of democratic centralism" (Article 5).

Chatterjee has divided the emergence and development of non-western nationalist thought into three phases or "moments", namely, "the moments of departure, manoeuvre and arrival". The first stage defines the encounter between Eastern and Western culture,

and the discovery of their intrinsic differences. These dramatic events lead to the formation of nationalist thought based on the combination of the "superior material qualities of Western cultures with the spiritual greatness of the East" (Chatterjee 1993: 51). The second "moment" involves the mobilisation of the popular elements in what has so far been the project of an elite. The final phase (which is my main focus) is "when nationalist thought attains its fullest development", i.e. once statehood is achieved. The nationalist discourse is now a discourse of legitimation (Chatterjee 1993: 51).

My intention is to analyse this very "moment of arrival" in modern Laos, following the failure of the socialist project. In other words, I propose to study the nationalist discourse of the post-socialist Lao state. More precisely, I will be looking at the ways the state is uttering its discourse of legitimation within a context of multi-ethnicity.

Accordingly, it should be clear that my objective is not to discuss the reality of a 'nation' in modern Laos; rather, my focus is 'nationalism' as a process. I shall leave to others the task of discussing the result. Indeed, the fluidity of the definition of the 'nation' should warn us against any kind of simplification. While the people's adhesion to the nation is a necessary factor, it is also essential to bear in mind the fact that a 'nation' may be shaped in different forms. The examination of the Lao terms for 'nation' is a good method of encouraging a more subtle analysis.

The most commonly used Lao words for 'nation' are *pàthet sat* (ປາຍເທວຊາດ)¹⁰ or *sat* (ຊາດ); *pàthet* means "country" and *sat* can mean both "nation" and "race", depending on the context. Thus, the conception of 'nation' in the Lao language is closely linked to the

¹⁰ The use of a Lao font slightly alters the spacing between lines in the text.

metaphors of family, blood, lineage. The formal vocabulary likewise stresses the metaphoric relationship: *pithùphum* (ປີຕຸພູມ) and *matùphum* (ມາຕຸພູມ) may respectively be translated as "fatherland" (*pithù* = father) and "motherland" (*matù* = mother). There are also popular idioms that project the image of a localised identity. *Pathet sat ban meuang* (ປະເທດຊາດບ້ານເມືອງ) is one of them. *Ban meuang* can be translated as "town" or "country" in the vernacular. Similarly, the popular expression, *ban kert meuang norn* (ບ້ານເກີດເມືອງນອນ) ("the village where one was born, the town where one sleeps") emphasises the metaphor of a territorialised identity, the image of 'home', the idea of a place to which one belongs.

The examination of the nationalist discourse is only half the picture, though; the exploration of the feelings of the men and women who belong to an ethnic minority group and who have been involved in the communist war and then the socialist project will constitute the second part of my study. The French and American Wars abruptly changed their historical position: from the periphery to the centre, from being 'the savage' to being 'the patriot'. As far as I am aware, no study has ever been conducted on their views on the national(ist) project of the post-socialist era. I believe that this research will provide some insights into their interpretations of the idea of 'nation' in present-day Laos. I, of course, went to the field with some intentions, paired with a few concepts, in my own head; but my starting point was the individuals' very own perceptions. In brief, my analysis will be structured around two poles: the state and the individuals, i.e. educated members of ethnic minorities; between structure and agency, at the interface of nationalism and ethnicity (the links between which will be scrutinised in the theoretical chapter).

Before I present my methodology, it is necessary first to clarify some terms that I have decided to use, or not to use, in this study.

1.2. Terminology

1.2.1. Ethnic (group or people)

The term 'ethnic group' was first used in anthropology to refer to socio-cultural collectivities with 'given' characteristics, i.e. culture and language, which had, moreover, been transmitted unchanged from generation to generation (*The Dictionary of Anthropology* 1997: 152). After the Second World War, the word began to be used as a substitute for the term 'tribe', with its colonial links. But the flaws of the latter notion remained and the conception of groups of people as being clear-cut, isolated and enclosed was increasingly challenged on the grounds of being purely an intellectual view.

In one of the most influential essays on the study of ethnic relations, Frederic Barth formulated a theoretical model that argues that the focus of research ought to be the *boundaries* which delimit the group and not the "cultural stuff" it encloses (Barth 1969). This approach to ethnicity advocates a focus in terms of social organisation. It follows that ethnic groups must be defined from within, i.e. from the perspective of their members. Thus, instead of listing traits of 'objective' culture (which members often share with non-members anyway), Barth introduced the fundamental view of ethnicity as a subjective process of group identification in which people use cultural traits to position themselves in their social interactions with others.

Since then, despite the variable definitions of the concept, there have emerged a few points on which the theorists, at least, agree: the relational and dynamic characters of

ethnic groups (Poutignat and Streiff-Fenart 1995: 134). On that basis, Eriksen has proposed the following definition:

For ethnicity to come about, the groups must have a minimum of contact with each other, and they must entertain ideas of each other as being culturally different from themselves. [...] Ethnicity is an aspect of the social relationship between agents who consider themselves as culturally distinctive from members of other groups with whom they have a minimum of regular interaction.

(Eriksen 1993: 11-12)

His definition points out the two fundamental aspects of ethnicity. First, there must be an interaction; ethnicity does not occur when a population lives on its own. Secondly, this interaction leads to the awakening of self-consciousness, i.e. the awareness of being distinctive from the other ethnic groups on the basis of certain cultural traits, which can, again, vary. Thus, ethnicity cannot manifest itself among two groups, even though they have different cultural features (language and religion, for example), if these groups do not consider themselves to be different from one another. From the time of Barth's essay onwards, the questions to be asked have been either 'how?' or 'why?' rather than 'what?' How do the ethnic groups delineate, maintain and transform their boundaries? Why do the people studied adopt this specific ethnicity?

Following this brief introduction to the term 'ethnic', one can understand Banks' uneasiness to use the term 'ethnic' as an adjective. He thus prefers talking about the "quality of being ethnic" as a reference to the concept of ethnicity, which he tends to treat as "an analytical tool" rather than "simply a quality of a group" (Banks 1997: 6). But a few pages later, he concedes a partial definition, not of 'ethnic group' or 'ethnic

people', but of 'ethnic identity', which he uses to express a "sense of feeling of belonging to some ethnically defined group (a feeling which may be subjective on the part of a particular individual, or my own shorthand way of referring to a position that a writer attributes to an individual)" (Banks 1997: 9-10). It seems that the handling of the word 'ethnic' as an adjective still remains problematic for Banks, who uses it very cautiously. As a matter of fact, he questions whether the concept is always useful to explain a specific situation involving self-consciously distinctive groups of people. In his own words, the term is of "increasingly limited utility" (Banks 1997: 10).

It is not my intention to enter this debate, but the fact is that the term "ethnic people", *sòn phaw* (ຊົນເຜົ່າ), is used on an official basis in Laos today. Most analysts would agree that its definition is not academically based. *Sòn* generally means "man", "people", "subject" (for example, *pàsason* (ປະຊາຊົນ) means "citizen", "people"), and *phaw* sometimes is translated as "tribe" (the word, however, is no longer applied on its own in official parlance). The term "ethnic minorities" is also no longer officially applied; rather, the term "ethnic group" or "ethnic people" is being used in official documents. In reality, the Lao term "ethnic people" implicitly refers to those who are non-ethnic Lao (*bor pen khòn sòn phaw lao* (ບໍ່ເປັນຄົນຊົນເຜົ່າ)), although the ethnic Lao are also officially listed as an 'ethnic group' in the census¹¹. It should therefore be stressed that when the term 'ethnic' alone is applied by an ethnic Lao individual as an adjective to a person, it usually has a derogatory connotation: "she/he is an ethnic person (*pen khòn sòn phaw* (ເປັນຄົນຊົນເຜົ່າ)), i.e. she/he belongs to the (ethnic) Minority. The person

¹¹ A classification recently approved by the government, holds that the population of Laos is composed of 49 ethnic groups, with the ethnic Lao at the top of the table. The accuracy of the statistics obviously is not the issue; rather, it is the effect of the census' terminology on people's self-definition that matters. I will come back to this issue later on.

himself/herself would generally use the outsider's or insider's name after (in the English translation, before) the adjective 'ethnic', e.g., "I belong to the Lue ethnic group" (*pen khòn sòn phaw Lue* (ເປັນຄົນຊົນເຜົ່າລື້)). I suggest that the Lao term, *sòn phaw*, may be considered as a euphemism for "tribe" (*phaw*), though Lao officials may well disagree with this suggestion.

In this study, I will use the terms, 'ethnic minorities', 'minorities' or 'non-ethnic Lao'. The reason why I use the term 'ethnic minorities' or 'minorities' is that it is a common term in official documents and academic studies used to refer what, in the case of my study, I prefer to call non-ethnic Lao individuals for I will show that the concept 'Majority/Minority' can be misleading. During my fieldwork, I considered a person as non-ethnic Lao when he/she referred to himself/herself as a member of an 'ethnic group' (*sòn phaw*) by using the official label or a name other than 'Lao'. Finally, I will use the word 'Lao' to refer to a citizen of Laos, and 'ethnic Lao' to refer to the ethnicity.

1.2.2. Majorities/Minorities

I will adopt Eriksen's definition, which, in my view, wonderfully reflects the fluidity of the notions. He writes thus: "An ethnic minority can be defined as a group which is numerically inferior to the rest of the population in a society, which is politically non-dominant and which is being reproduced as an ethnic category [...] the twin concepts in minority and majority are *relative* and *relational*. A minority exists only in relation to a majority and vice versa, and their relationship is contingent on the relevant system boundaries [in my study, the state boundaries]" (Eriksen 1993: 121-122, original).

1.2.3. Indigenous people

I have decided not to use the term 'indigenous' because of its political connotation. Indigenous people are primarily defined as non-state people who seek recognition of their cultural and territorial rights, though they rarely or never envision separatism (Eriksen 1993: 125). I do not think that this is the case with ethnic minority populations in modern Laos. The term has been opposed by the Lao government, which apparently feels it is too broad in its implications and could just as well be applied to ethnic Lao people. These objections have not been officially promulgated, however, and donor agencies such as the World Bank or the Asian Development Bank continue to use the term in their own documentation with respect to Laos. More explicitly, I suspect that the refusal of the Lao government to use the term 'indigenous' is motivated by two reasons: first, because of its potential (and, indeed, explosive) political consequences, as mentioned above; and secondly, due to the on-going historical debate surrounding the identity of the original inhabitants of the country. I will return to the latter issue in Chapter Five.

1.3. Methodology

1.3.1. Anthropology of experience

I should first make it clear that my research does not have the objective of providing an exhaustive picture of individuals' thoughts, opinions or expectations. I did not use any quantitative methodological tools, such as questionnaires, surveys or samples. It was a deliberate choice. Although my study is not situated within the discipline of anthropology, I had little hesitation in choosing ethnography as my method of research as it is based upon a daily and close - or, as close as possible - interaction with people. Though I would not pretend to define myself as an ethnographer, deep in my mind - almost instinctively - I felt that in order to acquire an intimate knowledge of the people,

I needed to share their daily lives. I began my fieldwork acutely aware, however, of the difficulty that inherently defines the search for meaning in 'other' human social life. In other words: how would I get information, I asked myself, which did not consist of quantifiable figures and hard facts, but, conversely, was related to feelings, perceptions and opinions - some of them, moreover, politically highly sensitive? Or, as Clifford Geertz famously expressed it, "how is anthropological knowledge of the way natives think, feel and perceive, possible?" (Geertz 1993: 56). In brief, my intention was to see things "from the native's point of view"; to interpret his/her actions and feelings. In short, my approach may be crudely defined as 'emic' (though see the discussion below).

Geertz suggested that instead of trying to discover laws, patterns and norms, anthropologists should aim at the interpretation of the natives' perception of the world through the 'reading' of its medium, that is, its symbolic expression. He explained his approach as follows:

The ethnographer does not, and, in my opinion, largely cannot, perceive what his informants perceive. What he perceives, and that uncertainly enough, is what they perceive "with" - or "by means of", or "through" or whatever the world should be. [To illustrate his theory, Geertz took as an example his study of the conceptions of the person in Javanese, Balinese and Moroccan societies]. And in each case, I have tried to get at this most intimate of notions not by imagining myself someone else, a rice peasant or a tribal sheikh, and then seeing what I thought, but by searching out and analysing the symbolic forms –words, images, institutions, behaviours- in terms of which, in each place, people actually represented themselves to themselves and to one another.

(Geertz 1993: 58).

The interpretive, or hermeneutic, anthropology, popularised by Geertz, was greatly innovative in that representations of 'other' cultures could no longer possibly be seen as utterly neutral and objective. The oppositions, such as 'inside' versus 'outside', 'first person' versus 'third person', 'phenomenological' versus 'objectivist', 'emic' versus 'etic' analyses, became blurred, and, as a matter of fact, no longer relevant in Geertz's theory. In his words, he juxtaposed "experience-near" and "experience-distant" concepts. The notion of "experience-near" may be roughly equivalent to that of 'emic'; thus, the concept is "one that someone - a patient, a subject, in our case an informant - might himself naturally and effortlessly use to define what he or his fellow see, feel, think, imagine, and so on, and which he would readily understand when similarly applied by others." In contrast, the "experience-distant concept is one that specialists of one sort or another - an analyst, an experimenter, an ethnographer, even a priest or an ideologist - employ to forward their scientific, philosophical, or practical aims" (Geertz 1993: 57).

Geertz's methodology consequently was based upon communication, exchange, dialogue between the observer's "experience-distant" and the observed's "experience-near". As Marcus and Fischer comment and criticise:

... cross cultural understanding, like any social understanding, is but an approximation, variably achieved through dialogue, that is, a mutual correction of understanding by each party in conversation to a level of agreement adequate for any particular interaction. The anthropologist, as Clifford Geertz was eventually to conclude, chooses anything in a culture that strikes his attention and then fills in details and descriptive elaboration so as to inform readers in his own culture about meanings in the culture being described. In this eminently pragmatic

solution, ethnography is at best conversation across cultural codes, at minimum a written form of the public lecturer adjusting style and content to the intelligence of the audience.

(Marcus and Fischer 1986: 29)

The anthropologist himself/herself was now a factor that influenced the construction of the interpretations of 'other' cultures (Marcus and Fischer: 26). However, while Geertz's perspective greatly helped analysts to reflect on the practice of ethnography, paradoxically the object of study under his scrutiny had never been so static and exoticised. Watson thus observes, "Geertz [...] excludes the subjects of the essay, who remain almost as objectified (and as disempowered) in his account as they might have been in a conventional analysis" (Watson 1992: 138).

Pursuing a similar focus on the insider's views, Edward Bruner and Victor Turner, however, preferred to term their perspective "anthropology of experience" rather than "interpretive anthropology", for, as they explained, their focus is "more on experience, pragmatics, practice, and performance" and not only on the "analysis of symbols as such" (Bruner 1986: 4). By anthropology of experience, the authors meant the analysis of reality as perceived by one's consciousness. Bruner made it clear that the difference between experience and behaviour is that the former is fundamentally self-referential, that is, not only does it include actions and feelings but also "reflections of those actions and feelings", whereas behaviour is an outsider's description of someone else's actions (Bruner 1986: 5).

Yet, how might one expect to analyse another's experience that is inherently self? Here, the author clearly acknowledged his conceptual debt to Wilhem Dilthey (1833-1911)

and his hermeneutical perspective. The German philosopher, in response to the irreducible degree of opacity of another's experience, thus proposed that one "transcend[s] the narrow sphere of experience by interpreting expressions" (Dilthey 1976: 230)¹². Bruner, Turner and the other contributors to the volume (Turner and Bruner 1986) held a very broad conception of what "expressions" encompass, seeing this term as including "theater, narratives, hunting stories, revitalization movements, curing rites, murals, parades, carnival, [etc.]"; in brief, all cultural practices and performances that are "given in social life" (Bruner 1986: 5). Thus, to sum up, the distinction is between "reality (what is really out there, whatever that may be), experience (how that reality presents itself to consciousness), and expressions (how individual experience is framed and articulated)." (Bruner 1986: 6).

In some ways, the anthropology of experience (drawing on its predecessor, interpretive anthropology) is appealing for the purposes of my study. Firstly, it privileges the inner experience- the informant's interpretations - which constitutes the multiple starting points of my analysis. Thus, as Bruner wrote, "[b]y focusing on narratives or dramas or carnival or any other expressions, we leave the definition of the unit of investigation up to the people, rather than imposing categories derived from our own ever-shifting theoretical frames" (Bruner 1986: 9). My focus on narratives in this study will indeed show the rhetorical power of narrative performance to render plausible a narrator's particular version of an event or situation in his/her own eyes and those of the audience. It is not about the truth, but interpretations, feelings and expectations. Secondly, it asserts the autonomy of the individual within the system, in that "the anthropology of experience sees people as active agents in the historical process who construct their own world" (Bruner 1986: 12). The life of an ordinary individual is not condemned to

¹² Quoted, in turn, from Bruner (1986: 5).

subjection to the world-political economic system. Creation is also within the capacity of an individual. More precisely, individuals' experiences, their expressions, their enactments are enmeshed in an interdependent system: the world structures individuals' experience as much as the individuals interpret the world.

On that basis, Bruner and Turner's anthropology of experience may be viewed as midway between Geertz's symbolic, or interpretive, anthropology and the re-thinking of the practice of ethnography induced by a crisis of representation in the human sciences, best highlighted by two volumes published in the same year (1986): James Clifford and George E. Marcus, *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*; and George E. Marcus and Michael M.J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique. An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Geertz's metaphor of cultures as texts was in effect increasingly criticized for its relativism - each culture is unique - and localism - the separation between system and ordinary life. In their co-written book, Marcus and Fischer thus sum up ethnographers' new challenges, as follows:

Ethnography thus must be able to capture more accurately the historic context of its subjects, and to register the constitutive workings of impersonal international political and economic systems on the local level where fieldwork usually takes place. These workings can no longer be accounted for as merely external impacts upon local, self-contained cultures. Rather, external systems have their thoroughly local definition and penetration, and are formative of the symbols and shared meanings within the most intimate life-world of ethnographic subjects. Except in the most general overview, the distinction between the traditional and the modern can have little salience in contemporary ethnographic analysis.

(Marcus and Fischer 1986: 39)

One step further, James Clifford, in his seminal essay, "Introduction: Partial Truths", announced the end of holistic and objectivist theories in anthropology, and famously claimed that "ethnographic truths are [...] inherently *partial* - committed and incomplete" for "[p]ower and history work through [even the best ethnographic texts], in ways their authors cannot fully control" (Clifford 1986: 7). After the initial shock of the death of 'truth', Clifford exhorted us not to despair, and on the contrary, to embark on this new way forward: "But is there not a liberation, too, in recognising that no one can write about others any longer as if they were discrete objects or texts? And may not the vision of a complex, problematic, partial ethnography lead, not to its abandonment, but to more subtle, concrete ways of writing and reading, to new conceptions of culture as interactive and historical?" (Clifford 1986: 25).

On the modest scale that is mine, I have attempted in this study to present a discussion that includes the "multiple voices of those being represented" (James, Hockey and Dawson 1997: 1). My fieldwork has therefore been guided by three criteria: the interpenetration between the structure - in my case, the nationalist discourse of the state - the 'local', the considerations of 'others' (my informants), and my presence in the field as a 'positioned subject'. More fundamentally, this claim of partiality does not mean that the incomplete picture is untrue. I therefore also insist on the authenticity of the study in that, as Dilthey wrote, "reality only exists for us in the facts of consciousness given by inner experience" (Dilthey 1976: 161)¹³, which are necessarily biased and imperfect, yet still trustworthy.

¹³ Quoted, in turn, from Bruner (1986: 5).

1.3.2. Multi-sited ethnography

When I told a scholar -a long-term specialist on Laos - of my wish to study the issue of nationalism in Laos, he advised me to contact the Director of the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC) Research Department on Ethnic Groups. He, in fact, suggested that I should study this mass-organisation, i.e. its history, members, organisation, ideology, mission and influence down to the village level. I, however, held another view of my research objectives. I knew - roughly - the profile of the kind of key informant with whom I wished to work, i.e. a member of an ethnic minority, male or female, who holds or has held a position of authority within the State. The Director of the LFNC Research Department on Ethnic Groups, a member of an ethnic minority himself, consequently constituted the ideal point of departure for my research. My fieldwork was not based on a single location; in fact, I would define my methodology as a "multi-sited ethnography" (Marcus 1995). Three reasons led me to follow a discontinuous spatial pattern.

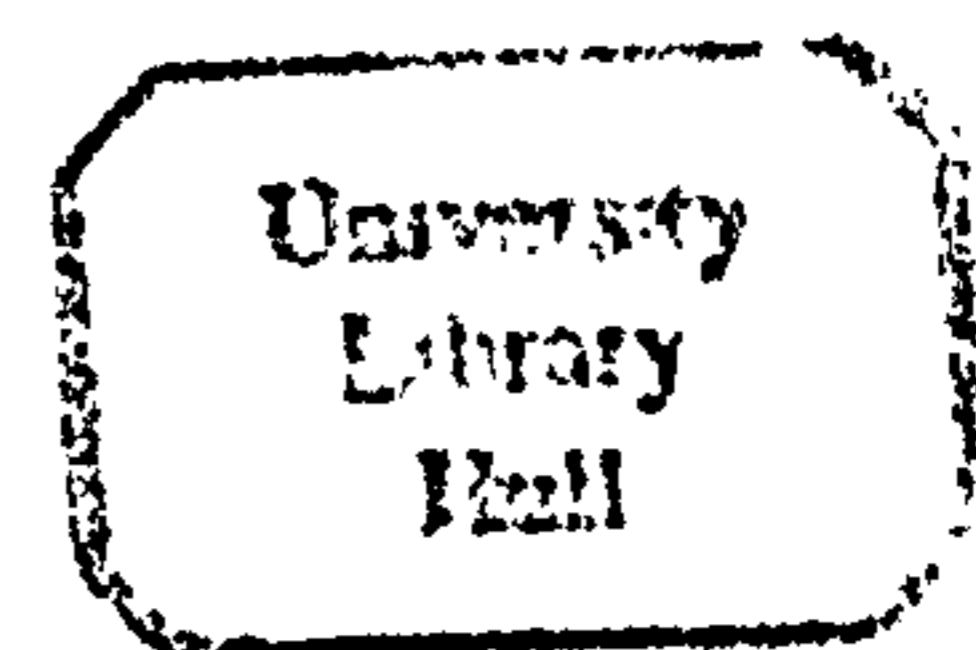
Firstly, anyone who wishes to do research in Laos at the present time must be flexible in her/his plans as well as patient and determined. The Lao authorities regard national security and territorial integrity, including the control of politically suspect minority groups in some rural areas, as two of their highest priorities. As a consequence, the process of obtaining a permit for long-term fieldwork in one or several villages, especially those that are predominantly non-ethnic Lao, is a long struggle, requiring patience and financial resources. For instance, a British doctoral student thought he had received permission for village fieldwork in Sainyabuli province, prior to his departure from the United Kingdom. Upon his arrival in Laos, he discovered the permission had been withdrawn, and after several months fruitlessly waiting, he was forced to change the topic of his dissertation. Another case is that of a French researcher's assistant, a

Lao, who was told to leave an ethnic minority village in south-eastern Laos (in the province of Sekong) after staying for only three days. He did not carry any permit with him. Yet, he knew well the relatives of the chief of the village and had no intention of conducting research but merely wanted to ask for additional information on the villagers' native language¹⁴. I am not saying that it is impossible to conduct long-term research fieldwork in rural areas in Laos. However, some provinces are more politically sensitive than others, and access for Western researchers depends on several factors, both individual (official contacts, finances, research topic and location, and luck!) and external (political climate and the government's variable mood with regard to foreign researchers).

My second reason for choosing a multi-sited ethnography is because the state and its nationalist discourse are not 'things' that are suspended above the society, but instead play a crucial role in the formation of 'the people'. The state's power and actions are dispersed throughout the society. Thirdly, my informants did not exist in the same socio-cultural context. As George E. Marcus has observed: "For ethnographers interested in contemporary local changes in culture and society, single-sited research can no longer be easily located in a world system perspective. This perspective has become fragmented, indeed, 'local' at its very core" (Marcus 1995: 98).

I therefore had different sites of investigation. The first one was the headquarters of the LFNC in Vientiane. As I befriended the Director of the Research Department on Ethnic Groups, people in the adjacent offices became used to seeing me wandering in the corridors and I no longer ran the risk of being questioned as to the reasons for my presence within the mass-organisation's building. My other sites of research emerged by

¹⁴ Which was apparently enough to raise the villagers' suspicions.



chance and by choice. The first one was located in the capital of Champassak Province, Pakse, where I stayed with a family in which the mother and the father were non-ethnic Lao and prominent members of the two main national mass-organisations, the LFNC and the Lao Women's Union (LWU). I met them during my preliminary fieldwork in Laos in late 1998 and noted at the time their particular status and the husband's willingness to work with me. I came back to see him a year later with a permit for a research project. In reality, my intention was to share his family, professional and social life.

My third site of investigation was situated in a village in the province of Sekong. I first visited the place with the Director of the LFNC Research Department on Ethnic Groups, who had offered me the opportunity to study the rebellions of ethnic minority groups in Southern Laos in the early twentieth century. I could not say, of course, that these rebellions were not my object of study, but I thought that by accompanying this prominent official, I would encounter other potential locations. The village of Ban Paktai was one of them. It had received the title of 'Heroic Village' for its participation in the revolutionary struggle. I came back one month after my initial visit to meet the chief of the village on a false pretext, and stayed on.

In addition, my trip with the LFNC official allowed me to observe him in a different social, political and cultural context; in essence, outside Vientiane. I met his colleagues, friends and relatives in the provinces, whom I went back to see when I repeated the trip on my own a few weeks later. They were all non-ethnic Lao, and some of them held positions within the various provincial administrations. These various sites of investigation emerged as I progressed in my research. I had a gut feeling that they were somehow connected; yet, it was not until I had completed my fieldwork and put some

distance between them and me that I was able to fully elucidate the logic of their relationships. I should stress that this is not a comparative study, as such, between homogenous units of study, though my research has comparative elements. My intention was not to compare the lives of these people located in various environments. I went 'down' from the capital to attain the village. It was not merely a geographical displacement - I went through the hierarchy of power, from the centre to the periphery. More precisely, I followed these people's journeys in space and time. These educated members of ethnic minorities were led to live in the capital, province, district or village for different reasons, yet all related to their trajectories within the state's apparatuses. I would say that, in a way, I followed the metaphoric stretching of power. Marcus acutely comments that

In projects of multi-sited ethnographic research, de facto comparative dimensions develop instead as a function of the fractured, discontinuous plane of movement and discovery among sites as one maps an object of study and needs to posit logics of relationship, translation, and association among these sites. Thus, in multi-sited ethnography, comparison emerges from putting questions to an emergent object of study whose contours, sites, and relationships are not known beforehand, but are themselves a contribution of making an account that has different, complexly connected real-world sites of investigation.

(Marcus 1995: 102)

Without a doubt, my collaboration with the Director of the Research Department on Ethnic Groups opened some valuable doors for me. On the other hand, my pairing with a high-ranking official also undoubtedly had its disadvantages: I was put in a dominant position almost involuntarily, a situation that certainly affected my fieldwork. It is an

unavoidable fact that the researcher is always 'a positioned subject' in the field. In the next section, I explain how I tried to weaken this dominant position.

1.3.3. The researcher as a positioned subject

I remember myself lying on the bed in a hotel room in Sekong town reading for the third, or maybe fourth, time Favret-Saada's book, *Les mots, la mort, les sorts*¹⁵. It was my only book and a great source of inspiration. Like many other readers before me, I presume, I have been deeply impressed by the author's extraordinary personal involvement in her fieldwork. She could not have done otherwise, though: her study on witchcraft phenomena in the West of France, *le Bocage de l'Ouest*, between the late 1960s and the early 1970s would not let her maintain a so-called neutral position as 'the' researcher, there only to observe, ask questions and/or write down field-notes. She realised that such a position was unsustainable, since words were anything but meaningless in a context of sorcery. Uttering words inevitably meant placing oneself within a power struggle. If she wanted to understand its mechanisms, she had to get totally involved:

Better to say that there is no neutral position in speaking: in witchcraft, words mean war. Anyone who mentions it is a belligerent, and the ethnographer like anyone else. There is no room for a non-committed observer.

(Favret-Saada 1996: 27)¹⁶

My fieldwork was nowhere near as 'deadly' significant; but the reading of this powerful piece of work combining both autobiographical account and monograph made me

¹⁵ Translated into English by Catherine Cullen (1980) *Deadly Words*.

¹⁶ "Autant dire qu'il n'y a pas de position neutre de la parole: en sorcellerie, la parole, c'est la guerre. Quiconque en parle est un belligérant et l'ethnologue comme tout le monde. Il n'y a pas de place pour un observateur non engagé". (Favret-Saada 1996: 27)

realise the importance of self-consciousness in the field. My own subjectivity was relevant not only to the production of my academic work, but also to my experience of fieldwork. As Judith Okely asserts, "[t]here is a need for more explicit recognition of fieldwork as a personal experience instead of sacrificing it to a false notion of scientific objectivity" (Okely 1996: 27). Indeed, the ethnographer is himself/herself a "positioned subject" by his/her "age, gender and outsider's status, but also the ethnographer's lived experience which enables or inhibits particular kinds of insights" (Hastrup 1996: 119). As an inevitable consequence, "all statements about others are paired with the observer's experience" (Fabian 1983: 91).

Like thousands of Lao people, my parents left the country in the late 1970s and settled in France. I was then two years old. I therefore had no direct memories of Laos. Laos remained a distant country for me; or to be exact, my father's country, but not mine. I did not think I belonged to it. I was, of course, conscious that I was somehow different from my French friends because of 'that' South-East Asian background. But, then again, I used to compare my holidays in Thailand - my mother is Thai with Chinese origins - to my friends' summers in the countryside or on the beach somewhere in France. Just a matter of geographical, not cultural, distance. My origins, therefore, were never an issue in my daily interaction with people. In fact, I sometimes forgot that I had a 'Chinese' face. I did not feel distinctive culturally and the others never made me feel different - or if they occasionally stressed my South-East Asian origins, they did not do so systematically or strongly enough so as to make me feel ethnically different. I believe there are three other factors that may explain the absence of ethnicity in defining my identity. The first reason is personal. My father has never expressed nostalgic feelings. He has never painted a romanticised image of Laos, nor has he forced his children to respect and follow Lao traditions. He is not resentful either: he simply thinks that there

is no point in looking back on something that cannot be repaired. Secondly, the French ideology of integration, reinforced by the education system and the school's curriculum, does not encourage institutionally the expression of multi-culturalism (unlike in the United Kingdom). Thirdly, from a scholarly perspective, the concept of ethnicity is nowhere near as popular in French academia as it is in the United Kingdom or in the United States.

Yet, after the completion of my MA degree, I felt the desire to know more about the South-East Asian region. Upon my lecturer's suggestion, I decided to spend one year as an exchange student at the Centre for South-East Asian Studies at the University of Hull. I still remember my joy and surprise when I started to learn to read Thai and was able to recognise a few very simple words. I felt as though I had taken a giant step towards a new culture that might be mine, yet still seemed so unfamiliar to me. Then I met the lecturer who would become my supervisor, who suggested that I should conduct Ph.D. research on Laos. In his mind, my background would endow me with particular insights into a country that had been the focus of relatively little academic research. I was indecisive. Then, I realised that it was too late for me to go back to France and simply ignore my 'other' origins. It is perhaps at that time when my ethnic consciousness started to emerge. After a while, I decided to accept my supervisor's proposition.

I would therefore describe myself as a young unmarried woman, French-educated to a high level (holding a Masters degree in Political Science), with Lao and Thai origins, and a 'name'. That is the most neutral description I could possibly give of myself, and naively I thought that people in Laos would see me in these relatively straightforward terms. But the fact was that I already bore a 'non-neutral' name - I never fully realised

how significant it was until I arrived in Laos. I knew, of course, that one of my uncles (my father's cousin), Kinim Pholsena, had been assassinated in 1963¹⁷ whilst serving as the Foreign Minister under the Second Coalition government. As such, my family name, 'Pholsena', was already politicised even before I started my fieldwork. Fortunately, he was not known as a right-wing politician; if that had been the case, I do not think that I would have been able to conduct any sort of work in the country. Even so, his reputation as a Neutralist was none the less a double-edged factor for me. It all depended on the type of person I was dealing with, and their degree of political radicalism. Overall, however, the reactions were neutral, if not positive, though I encountered at times attitudes of suspicion.

I had initially thought that I would be considered as a fellow countrywoman, since my deceased uncle has been retained in the collective memory in a fairly favourable light. However, I rapidly realised that this advantageous and comfortable (albeit involuntary) position was not strong enough to overcome another aspect of my person: I had to accept that I appeared first and foremost as a *farang* ("foreigner"), a member of the dominant 'alien' world, a 'white Lao'. I remember how annoyed I felt when members of a French NGO paid me a visit in the ethnic minority village where I stayed for my fieldwork. I was forced to greet them and to speak in French. Suddenly, all the villagers could *see* that I was 'one of them', a *farang*.

Besides my Lao not being as fluent as a native-speaker's, my body language was also very revealing. For example, I walked and cycled (though not always consciously) faster than the average Lao woman. I was also rather clumsy as regards all the codes of behaviour, such as the prescribed ways of sitting, standing or talking to people. I learned

¹⁷ The Lao communists accused the CIA of plotting his murder, but at the present time the circumstances

quite quickly the most important micro-body disciplinary rules, some of which I had been taught back in France, e.g., never crossing one's legs while seated on a chair, or always bending one's head and one's back while passing in front of an older person. I could afford to be more relaxed, however, outside ethnic Lao society, in the non-ethnic Lao villages. I did not have to remain cautious and permanently alert with regard to my body and my behaviour in order to comply with my stereotypical conception of the ethnic Lao woman, for, in these villages, I was anyway irrevocably perceived as a member of an alien 'race'. The performance of my ethnic Lao origin was thus irrelevant and would not have helped to diminish the strangeness of my person. As a matter of fact, I did not want to be identified with ethnic Lao people either, as they were also perceived by the villagers as being 'alien' (albeit to a lesser degree).

Furthermore, I was a woman who mostly dealt with men due to the topic of my research. In a way, I was enclosed in a situation of reverse segregation. I spent a lot of my time with educated middle-aged men, who usually held a political position. The common assumption, as Okely notes, is that the female researcher is not "hampered" by her sex because she is treated as an "honorary male" (Okely 1996: 32). However, Okely found this status to be an inappropriate description of her position vis-à-vis Gypsy men. In fact, as she writes, she increasingly suspected that "women anthropologists [were] given ambiguous status in the field, not as 'honorary males', but as members of an alien 'race'" (Okely 1996: 32). I would agree with her. I surely was not considered as a 'male'; otherwise, I would have spent most of my fieldwork trying to recover from successive hangovers. Neither was I regarded as a local 'female' as I was allowed to interact directly with men without any witness around.

of his death still remain unclear.

To start with, I enjoyed my position amidst male social life. I was picking up information. I therefore simply performed the role assigned to me, i.e. a young female member of an alien 'race'. In other words, I complied with their perception of me and used their markers to my own end. But I increasingly came to feel that I needed to break this reverse segregation and to broaden my area of investigation. In short, I wanted to get other categories of people, especially women, to speak, so I could listen to their 'voice'. On a practical basis, diversifying my range of informants allowed me to double-check my data. A less academic motive, however, also persuaded me to ally myself with women, especially at the village level. The atmosphere among the men was at times tense and even oppressive. I came to the village with a short-term permit and utilised various pretexts to come back afterwards. The first few weeks were therefore psychologically and physically demanding. I could perceive that some men did not appreciate my prolonged presence. I was even once shouted at to "return to Vientiane" since my research-pretext had obviously expired. I reacted as if I did not understand; fortunately, the Party's village representative defended my case. I felt, however, that my position would become less and less tenable unless I could de-politicise myself; hence, my alliance with the women. To put it another way, my intention was to endorse a de-politicised and de-racialised identity. I wanted to appear as a 'harmless young woman'.

1.3.4. Interaction between the self and the other

Ethnographic fieldwork implies not only the ethnographer observing the people, as an unidirectional process, but two (or more) persons involved in the process of producing data: it is an interaction between self and the other(s) (Okely 1992: 3). Furthermore, Hastrup has pointed out that the relationship between the others and the researcher is not a peaceful dialogue; rather, "the condition of fieldwork is fundamentally confrontational and only superficially observational; self and other are inextricably

involved in a dialectical process. [...] Self and other, subject and object are categories of thought, not discrete entities." (Hastrup 1992: 117). Accordingly, it may be better to reformulate the practice of fieldwork as an interactive situation between *subject* and *subject*: "[i]t is a social drama confronting the performers with their unbounded selves" (Hastrup 1992: 118). My relationship with the Party's village representative illustrates this mutual influence on each other's behaviours. At the beginning of my fieldwork, the man imposed himself as my main informant, arguing that his political position and his duty to protect the 'guest' justified this. I, however, became progressively more annoyed by his constant attention. Indeed, I felt that his presence by my side implicitly excluded the possibility of my acquainting myself with some other villagers, men and women who, for whatever reason - that I would find out later on - did not hold the Party's representative in high esteem. (He was, in effect, often drunk, and after a while I feared that his reputation would somehow tarnish mine). I subsequently decided to put some distance between him and me. My move was facilitated by the fact that the LFNC representative did not appreciate the Party representative's behaviour either, and kept me away from him whenever he could. From then on, the Party's representative visited me less often in the house where I stayed, and he also tried to be sober in our meetings. His attitude also changed: from being the proud Party representative, he became a less authoritative man. He even appeared frail at times. He realised that I had found out that the image of authority he had tried to project was not confirmed by the villagers' opinions of him. He also knew that I no longer needed 'protection'; rather, it was my turn to show my sympathy before his physical (he was wounded during the American War) and psychological pains.

Watson has proposed a slightly different model to Hastrup, which would allow the desire to share experience to materialise, and the others to speak without us trying,

involuntarily, to control their words. Thus, "[a] model for another kind of knowing which is not premised on a desire for totalization is clearly friendship.... that first privileged experience of friendship which in retrospect seems to represent exactly that fusion of self and other which should be the end of interpretation" (Watson 1992: 142-145). As I am now culturally, temporally and geographically distanced from my fieldwork, I may now be able to describe myself in the field as an 'friendly alien'. Admittedly, it was as far as I could get into the 'fusion' because however I tried to 'soften' my presence, I clearly remained an intruder. I was acting in the field, not with the intention of deceiving, but because I could literally see on people's faces, in their body language, in the (rare) meeting of our gazes, that I needed to transform myself in order to undermine the violence of our interactions and to allow them to speak without me appearing as if I was aiming to control their words. Hastrup reminds us that "[w]hile perhaps enshrined in mutual friendship and even affection, the ethnographic dialogue is twisted by the fact that the ethnographer's questions are unsolicited, and that they will of necessity shape the answers. The ethnographic material is doubly mediated by our own presence and the informant's response to that" (Hastrup 1992: 122-123).

Firstly, I needed to weaken that logic of unequal relationships and to re-position myself within the local social hierarchy. I began by participating in daily tasks, such as carrying the babies on my hip around the village while their parents were in the field, or fetching water from the nearby pump with plastic buckets. In a rudimentary way, I wanted to show that I could also use my arms and my legs, that I could endure physical labour to a certain extent. I was not, however, allowed to go and help in the rice-field or to accompany the villagers in the forest: I was told I was not physically strong enough - I remained to a great extent a 'delicate' race, too. I also forced myself to get up at dawn, even if it meant sitting down outside the house quietly dozing. I started smoking, even

though I am not a smoker. In the village, everyone, except the babies, smoked homemade cigarettes. They grew their own tobacco: the commercial type was a luxury, so whenever I went to town I always made sure to bring back a few packs with me. I found that offering cigarettes during an interview or in the middle of a conversation was still the best way to make people feel more relaxed. One of my best memories is of the daily visits I paid to an old woman who stayed at home all day to look after her granddaughter. She would roll a cigarette for me and for her - she did not like the taste of the manufactured ones - and we would sit on the balcony of her house and chat. I should note here that, overall, I got along better with the old and/or married women than the younger unmarried ones. The latter - or, at least, some of them - saw me as a potential rival and therefore would keep their distance.

Secondly, I tried in parallel to conceal, or at least to neutralise, my politicised identity. In other words, I decided to change my 'professional' status. I started as 'the researcher', then became 'the photographer'. Whenever I took out my camera, excitement spread throughout the village, especially among the children and young women. Still, my most successful performance remained that of the 'nurse'. Of course, having no medical skills whatsoever I could not pretend to practise surgery. Nevertheless, the village was poor and such common medicines as 'Oralite' (an oral re-hydration formula) and 'Betadine' (a topical antiseptic), as well as vitamins, were greatly appreciated. Besides, the French NGO, *Médecins Sans Frontières* ("Doctors without Borders") was operating in the nearby town of Sekong; consequently, I used to go and ask them for advice about the few cases I could handle myself, such as that of the little girl who fell on a kitchen fire and burnt her arm, or that of the man who cut himself.

1.4. Chapter Scheme

In Chapter Two, I introduce and discuss the theoretical framework and studies on Lao nationalism. I first look at the theories of nationalism put forward by Gellner, Anderson and Smith, three of the most influential thinkers on the subject, and note the limits of their theories with respect to my study. I then extend my discussion to theories of nationalism *and* ethnicity, and I argue that these propose a framework that is too constrained to explain the complexity of my research. I therefore suggest some other conceptual notions that may encompass the multiple outcomes of my study. Finally, I discuss studies that have dealt with the concepts of nation, nationalism and ethnicity in modern Laos, and show how my work may contribute to the fostering of research in this field.

In Chapter Three, I review the historical relationships between the non-ethnic Lao people and the political authorities from the pre-modern period up to the proclamation of the Lao PDR in 1975. I focus in particular on three historical periods: pre-modern Laos (until the French colonisation), French rule (1893-1954) and the French and American Wars (1945-1974). Each period corresponds with a specific pattern of relationships between the non-ethnic Lao people and the political authority. Above all, I insist that the French and American Wars changed the role of the non-ethnic Lao populations socially, politically and historically. From the periphery where they were symbolically and administratively confined, the participation of some of their members in the wars exposed these individuals to socialisation and politicisation processes. From that point onwards, the nationalist discourse would have to include multi-ethnicity in its rhetoric.

In Chapter Four, I analyse ethnic classifications in contemporary Laos, with a brief review of previous policies. I first look at the ideologies that have influenced the Lao ethnic classification, namely, those of the former Soviet Union, China and Vietnam. Through an analysis of the construction of the latest official census (August 2000), I suggest a close relationship between ethnic categorisation and the nationalist discourse. I conclude with a study of Kaysone Phomvihane's - President of the Lao PDR (until his death in 1992) and celebrated at present in Laos as the inspirational figure of the regime - guidelines on the concept of the nation in Laos.

In Chapter Five, I question the Majority's ethnicity. I first argue that the constitution of a national identity in post-socialist Laos is being conducted through a dual process of exclusion and inclusion, involving a politics of Minority/Majority representation and a dichotomy between Tradition and Modernity. I extend my discussion to the nationalist discourse's search for particularism, through a politics of cultural discipline and a new approach to the narrative of the national history. At the same time, I suggest that the new form of nation, more centred on a spiritual principle, i.e. Buddhism, also originates in popular will, namely, the ethnic Lao population's.

In Chapter Six, I reverse the perspective and disclose the voices of those being represented. I focus my analysis on a few members of ethnic minorities who hold, or have held, a position of authority. More precisely, I analyse their interpretations of the past through their narratives. I point out their pattern, logic and coherence, but also their discontinuities, omissions and exaggerations. All these characteristics are constitutive of these individuals' identity. Experience, however, is never monolithic. Experience structures narratives, which, in turn, structure experience, while all interpretations and

expressions are historically, politically and institutionally situated. I therefore show that narratives also can change under new historical and political conditions.

In Chapter Seven, I reflect on the issues of ethnicity and identity. I first study the ambiguities of the ethnicities of the individuals discussed in Chapter Six, caught in-between the official categorisation, the Majority's ethnicity and their own perception of their ethnic identity. I then analyse what I call the crisis of identity induced by social, economic, political and institutional changes during the post-socialist era. The social and political identity of these educated members of ethnic minority groups is being challenged. Finally, I conclude with a specific case of instrumentalist ethnicity, which might prefigure the awakening of new identities in post-socialist Laos.

2. Theoretical Framework: Presentation and Discussion

In this chapter, I position my study both theoretically and in relation to works on Lao nationalism. Among the most influential theories of nationalism are those by Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson and Anthony D. Smith. I will first examine these and highlight their weaknesses regarding my study. I will then extend my discussion to theories of ethnicity *and* nationalism and point out their limits, while suggesting some other possible conceptual directions. Finally, I will review some studies on Lao nationalism in the post-socialist era and position my work accordingly.

2.1. Gellner, Anderson and Smith

Gellner, Anderson and Smith propose general theories that attempt to explain the development, spread and appeal of nationalism. All (to a lesser degree in the case of Smith, though) postulate that this political ideology is the consequence of the modernisation process, ushered in by the Enlightenment movement in eighteenth-century Europe. More precisely, factors such as industrialisation, the spread of literacy and secularisation led to the emergence of the nationalist phenomenon. These specific conditions, however, impede the generalisation of their models of nation-states to regions outside Europe. In addition, all three theories share some limits that make their application problematic for the study of nationalism in post-socialist Laos. First, all assume *a priori* historical and cultural homogeneity, and hence fail to explain the construction of a nation in multi-ethnic countries; secondly, they overlook the micro-effects of state power; finally, they neglect to take into account the individual perspective.

2.1.1. Ernest Gellner's model: industrial society and "high culture"

The assumption that nations possess a continuous and unchanged basis rooted in an ancestral past has indeed been seriously challenged by the modernists, who have been expressing the very opposite view, that is, nations are constructed and are a product of the modern era. For them, nations can be invented where they do not exist because nations are constructions: they are not 'natural'. Ernest Gellner is arguably the leading representative of the modernist perspective.

Gellner's position as to which came first - nation or nationalism - was radical. He wrote: "Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist" (Gellner 1964: 168). Again, "Nations as a natural, God-given way of classifying men, as an inherent though long-delayed political destiny, are a myth [...]" (Gellner 1983: 48). In brief, for Gellner, nationalism was a contingent phenomenon, "not [...] a doctrine presented by nationalists"; it is "inherent in a certain sets of social conditions" (Gellner 1964: 125), which emerged from the uneven diffusion of industrialisation.

For Gellner, the fundamental factor that impeded the formation of a nation in agrarian societies was the rigid social structure. There were two separate societies, or two spheres of culture, which featured a shared language and cultural characteristics: the "high culture", a privilege retained by a literate elite; and the "low culture", possessed by the rest - or the majority - of the population. They did not need to interact: each individual occupied one position within the society and within the division of labour until they died. That vertical and horizontal stratification was wiped out, however, when the agrarian polity turned into an industrial society. The development of the economy and the growth of productivity occurred in parallel with an increase in demand for a

literate, skilled and inter-changeable labour force on the territory. These educated and substitutable citizens were brought up by means of a modern mass-education system that also taught them a common language and standardised idioms that enabled them to communicate in the same cultural sphere. The "high culture" was now shared by all, and cultural homogeneity engendered national consciousness:

The conditions in which nationalism becomes the natural form of political loyalty can be summed up in two propositions: (1) Every man a clerk. (Universal literacy recognised as a valid norm.) (2) Clerks are not horizontally mobile, they cannot normally move from one language-area to another [...] Men do not in general become nationalists from sentiments or sentimentality, atavistic or not, well-based or myth-founded: they become nationalists through genuine, objective, practical necessity, however obscurely recognised.

(Gellner 1964: 160)

Nationalists will always be deceived or self-deceived in that they are unaware that 'national' local customs and cultures emerged *after* the imposition of the high culture upon the whole society: "[nationalism] revives, or invents, a local high (literate, specialist-transmitted) culture of its own, though admittedly one which will have some links with the earlier local folk styles and dialects" (Gellner 1983: 49). In *Nations and Nationalism* (1983), he then defined nationalism as:

[T]he general imposition of a high culture on society, where previously low cultures had taken up the lives of the majority, and in some cases the totality, of the population. It means the general diffusion of a school-mediated, academy-supervised idiom, codified for the requirements of a reasonably precise

bureaucratic and technological society, with mutually substitutable atomised individuals, held together above all by a shared culture of this kind, in place of the previous complex structure of local groups, sustained by folk cultures reproduced locally and idiosyncratically by the micro-groups themselves.

(Gellner 1983: 57)

Gellner attributed a crucial importance to industrialisation in the emergence of nationalism. Yet, the case of Laos is enough to contradict his argument by showing that nationalism can develop prior to, and outside of, industrialisation. Secondly, focusing on the material bases, Gellner never accounted for how individuals, both the elite and the 'masses', used and made sense of nationalism. Waldron notes that he never asked how nationalism "affected the masses and was felt by them" (Waldron 1985: 422). Moreover, "Gellner notes how 'ardently' national identification may be felt, but he really gives no account of how functional imperatives such as the one he invokes can lead to such powerful feelings." (Waldron 1985: 422). Thirdly, Gellner's concept of nation was inherently mono-cultural. His slogan may have well been, 'One Language, One Culture, One Nation', as he wrote:

... culture becomes of utmost importance - culture being, essentially, the manner in which one communicates, in the broadest sense. In simple societies culture is important, but its importance resides in the fact that it reinforces structure [...] In modern societies, culture does not so much underline structure: rather, it replaces it.

(Gellner 1964: 155)

I shall develop this third point further as Anderson's reflections on nationalism also share similar limitations with Gellner's theory.

2.1.2. Benedict Anderson: "Imagined communities"

In the early eighties, Benedict Anderson introduced the concept of 'imagining' the nation, which has had a long-lasting impact on the study of nations and nationalism. He sees the nation as being a "political imagined community". In his view, nations must be, can only be, imagined because "members of even the smallest nations will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion"(Anderson 1983: 19). The idea of simultaneity is crucial in Anderson's conception of the nation, that is, a horizontal society in time and finite sociological community in space. The novel is a key genre for the presentation of this notion of time as it has conventionally been structured upon a linear conception of time. The example of newspapers that imaginatively link thousands and millions of individuals, the vast majority unknown to each other, is also often quoted. Rather than stressing the exclusive concept of self-differentiation, Anderson prefers to emphasise the inclusive notion of belonging: "the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 1983: 16).

He develops his argumentation through the historical periods that have become landmarks in the history of nationalist movements. For each case, he shows how national consciousness was aroused under circumstances that were particular to those times and those places. But for him, despite the specificity of each situation, imagined communities, whether they were created in the seventeenth or twentieth century, in European or non-Europeans societies, were born out of three invariable conditions: a

bounded territory, a language - more precisely, a printed vernacular - which people living on the territory shared, and a favourable environment (trade, unified administration, 'national' transport network, expansion of printing, i.e. 'national' newspapers/books, etc.) enabling exchange and communication between the people within the territory's boundaries. As both an illustration of his argument and an element of my study, I will focus here on his analysis of the creation of national consciousness that nurtured the struggles for independence in South-East Asian colonies after the Second World War.

Anderson proposes three internal factors that fostered the awakening of national sentiments in the colonies. First, the Colonial State set up a modern education system, from which an indigenous privileged minority benefited. The principal reason for this policy was to supply the colonial administration and foreign private companies with competent personnel who could work as intermediaries between the Metropolitan power and the local population. The second factor was the inferior condition in which this indigenous class of civil servants was confined. Though bilingual and, in some cases, having even been educated in the Metropolitan State, they could not expect to work anywhere else than in their colonial administrative territory. As a consequence, these people would inevitably meet one another again and again during their journeys within these artificial boundaries, which would nevertheless become 'national' as a result of these same exchanges between members of the same social class sharing the same academic background and heading for the same fate. Anderson writes, thus:

From then on, the apex of his looping flight was the highest administration to which he could be assigned: Rangoon, Accra, Georgetown or Colombo. Yet in each constricted journey he found bilingual travelling companions with whom he

came to feel a growing communality. [...] Out of this pattern came that subtle, half-concealed transformation, step by step, of the colonial-state into the national state, a transformation made possible not only by a solid continuity of personnel, but by the established skein of journeys through which each state was experienced by its functionaries.

(Anderson 1983: 105)

As an illustration, Anderson attempts to compare the cases of 'Indonesia' and 'Indochina' by asking the initial question: why could the former become a nation while the latter merely remained a concept reminiscent of the French period? The key to the answer is to be found in "the isomorphism between each nationalism's territorial stretch and that of the previous imperial administrative unit" (Anderson 1983: 105). In Indochina, most of the indigenous positions in the French colonial administration were occupied by Vietnamese civil servants. The individuals would travel to what are today Laos or Cambodia to perform their duties, while rare were the Lao or Cambodian functionaries who would make journeys to Hanoi or Saigon. By contrast, in 'Indonesia' the Dutch colonial policy did not favour any ethnic groups in particular. As a consequence, they were able to imagine a common space through encounter and exchange of similar experiences. Anderson notes:

colonial administrative policy did not rusticate educated Sundanese to the 'Sundalands', or Batak to their place of origin in the highlands of North Sumatra. Virtually all the major ethnolinguistic groups were, by the end of the colonial period, accustomed to the idea that there was an archipelagic stage on which they had parts to play.

(Anderson 1983: 120)

The third factor was that the colonial education system, as is well known, led to the creation of a highly educated bilingual intelligentsia who would become the spearhead of the nationalist movements. "Colonial nationalism" was therefore shaped by the legacy of past nationalist movements in the 'Western world', which was inherited by the native élite and formed the basis of their claims to political sovereignty.

Yet, Anderson admits that the social change and modern innovations - capitalism (trade), an administrative network (state apparatus), mass-printing and a mass-education system - that brought culture to the fore as a basis for polity formation cannot by themselves contribute to the emergence of powerful sentiments (Anderson 1983: 129). For him, if people are willing to sacrifice their lives for their country, it is because they conceive of their act as being pure and natural. Thus, Anderson, rather than stressing the 'evil' character of nationalism, prefers to emphasise its power for engendering "disinterested" love, i.e. "patriotism":

Something of the nature of this political love [patriotism] can be deciphered from the ways in which languages describe its object: either in the vocabulary of kinship (motherland, Vaterland, patria) or that of home (*heimat* or *tanah air* [earth and water, the phrase of the Indonesians' native archipelago]). Both idioms denote something to which one is naturally tied. [...] In this way, nation-ness is assimilated to skin-colour, gender, parentage, and birth-era – all those things one can not help. And in these 'natural ties' one senses what one might call 'the beauty of *gemeinschaft*'.

(Anderson 1983: 131)

Anderson in effect argues that love for one's country proceeds from the sharing of the same language, which is an immanent - "primordial" in Anderson's words - trait shared by every member of the "imagined community", be it in the past, present or future. He poetically concludes:

What the eye is to the lover - that particular, ordinary eye he or she is born with - language - whatever language history has made his or her mother tongue - is to the patriot. Through that language, encountered at mother's knee and parted with only at the grave, pasts are restored, fellowships are imagined, and futures dreamed.

(Anderson 1983: 140)

Perhaps that is the reason why his chapter on "Patriotism and racism" is not entirely convincing, for he fails to provide compelling evidence to support his primordialist argument, and instead relies on the forces of imagination, which is rather less conclusive. Some critics have indeed pointed out the weakness of this argument. Alonso observes, for example, that although Anderson has done much to demystify the role of the state as purely institutional by defining the concept of 'imagining community', he "does not go far enough in identifying the strategies through which the imagined becomes second nature, a structure of feeling" (Alonso 1994: 382). Both Anderson and Gellner have stressed the role of an indigenous elite and of the state (the colonial state for Anderson and the industrial state for Gellner) in producing a national consciousness within a limited territory. But they still overlook the state and its multiple apparatuses of power and knowledge as a crucial actor in the naturalisation of national sentiments.

Gellner and Anderson's theories contain some similar weaknesses. The second target for criticism relates to the assumption of *a priori* cultural homogeneity. As Eriksen points out, "[b]oth stress that nations are ideological constructions seeking to forge a link between (self-defined) cultural group and state" (Eriksen 1993: 100). Likewise, Chatterjee has criticised their "sociological determinism", which assumes that a homogenous national culture necessarily precedes and engenders national sentiments:

Both point out a fundamental change in ways of perceiving the social world which occurs before nationalism can emerge: Gellner relates this change to the requirements of 'industrial society', Anderson more ingeniously to the dynamics of 'print-capitalism'. Both describe the characteristics of the new cultural homogeneity which is sought to be imposed on the emerging nation: for Gellner this is the imposition of a common high culture on the variegated complex of local folk cultures, for Anderson the process involves the formation of a 'print-language' and the shared experience of the 'journeys' undertaken by the colonized intelligentsia.

(Chatterjee 1993: 21)

For both Gellner and Anderson, nations are products of modernity. Gellner, as a modernist, argues that nationalism is determined by social and economic development; it is the inevitable result of industrial and capitalist growth, while the nation represents the only viable political framework able to sustain the newly homogenous population. Anderson also relies on modernity and its instruments, such as print-capitalism, while he adds the role of imagination in constructing the nation. In fact, nations, in the theories of Gellner and Anderson, seem to arise from a cultural and, in Gellner's theory, historical vacuum. Their arguments have therefore been criticised as inherently

functionalist in that "nationalism provided an ideological means, following the collapse of feudalism and absolutism, for the modern incorporation of élite and masses into the same political space, the nation-state. However much it may incorporate a sense of wholeness, nationalism for these authors [Gellner, Anderson, Hobsbawm] marks a distinctively modern break with a traditional past characterised by ethnic fragmentation and small-scale communalism" (Jenkins 1998: 144). Their models of nationalism are thus "a modern replacement for, or a supersession of, ethnicity, appropriate to the demands of the industrialized social world of nation-state" (Jenkins 1998: 144). Finally, Anderson, like Gellner, neglects to address individual interpretation. As Fox comments, "for Anderson, the imagined community of the nation is a mass fiction; it is never clear who, if anyone, imagines particular communities, or if there is any difference in the resulting fictional community depending on who imagines it and how they do so" (Fox 1990: 7).

The ethno-symbolic approach, however, with Anthony D. Smith as its best-known proponent, takes the opposite perspective by putting the "ethnic past" first.

2.1.3. Anthony Smith: Ethnic Past of a Nation

A.D. Smith admits that nations are modern phenomena. But, as he writes: "this is only half the story [...]: If nationalism is modern and shapes nations in the image of its *Weltanschauung* [world view], then nations too are the creations of modernity. [But] specific nations are also the product of older, often pre-modern ethnic ties and ethno-histories" (Smith 1998: 195). The conceptual key in Smith's theory is arguably the notion of "ethnic community" or *ethnie* (the French equivalent of the ancient Greek *ethnos*). In *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Smith defined *ethnies* as "named human populations with shared ancestry myths, histories and cultures, having an association

with a specific territory and a sense of solidarity" (Smith 1986: 32). These ethnic communities were flourishing in antiquity and medieval periods where, Smith argues, ethnicity also played an important role: "[these cultures] [he quotes as examples the ancient Greeks and Persians] remained recognizably distinct to their own populations and to outsiders; and cultural differentiation was as vital a factor in social life then as now" (Smith 1989: 344). The sense of commonness and uniqueness was also drawn from shared symbols – "emblems, hymns, festivals, habitats, customs, linguistic codes, sacred places and the like" - as they were "powerful differentiators and reminders of the unique culture and fate of the ethnic community" (Smith 1998: 191). Central, too, in that process of self-consciencisation were "shared memories of key events and epochs in the history of the community". These elements were indeed fundamental for the survival of certain *ethnies*, while many others were absorbed by more powerful ones or simply died by themselves as a result of lacking sufficient power and material to deploy symbols and memories. This supports the view that not all cultural attributes necessarily led to the formation of an ethnic community. In fact, many of *ethnies* remained merely "ethnic categories" since people were not conscious of belonging to any community.

This also marks the difference between Smith's historical ethno-symbolism and perennialism. Rather than descent or physical kinship ties, it is the *sense* of continuity that defines the structure of both ethnic communities and nations. However, it is equally crucial to distinguish *ethnies* from nations. If one adopts the subjectivist definition of nation, *ethnies* and nations are indeed alike. So, if *ethnies* are not nations, but modern nations are nevertheless closely related to *ethnies*, what then is the process that made possible the links between the two entities? This is where nationalism and nationalists intervene. Smith uses an analogy with the work of an archaeologist, as he defines nationalism as a "form of political archaeology" (Smith 1995: 15). In the same ways as

the archaeologist uncovers and reconstructs an ancient civilisation or era, and links it to later historical stages in the form of a chronology, the nationalist rediscovers and reinterprets the ethnic past so as to explain the present (unlike the modernist or the post-modernist for whom, conversely, the present re-invents the past) (Smith 1995: 15).

Accordingly, for Smith, the resources from an "ethnic past "and their perpetuation were to prove of seminal historical importance:

The problems of ethnic survival seemed particularly important for later nationalisms: the ability to call on a rich and well documented 'ethno-history' was to prove a major cultural resource for nationalists, and myths of ethnic origins, ethnic election and sacred territories, as well as memories of heroes and golden ages, were crucial to the formulation of a many-stranded ethno-history.

(Smith 1998: 192)

Smith subsequently defines an "ethnic past [as being] composed of a series of traditions and memories which are the subject of constant reinterpretation" (Smith 1995: 17).

Unlike Gellner and Anderson, his theory provides a better mechanism through which to understand the intensity of the emotions that underpin the "imagined communities".

Though Smith acknowledges the transformist aspect of the nationalist's work, the latter is still "more limited than that envisaged by both modernists and post-modernists"

(Smith 1995: 16). The fundamental difference between him and them lies in the interpretation of the past. For Smith, there are limits to the re-interpretation of the past (hence, in the re-construction of a nation), namely: the nationalist ideology's own agenda, scientific evidence (historical work) and popular resonance. The lattermost criterion, though being the least tangible, actually questions whether a past event would

appeal to people - whether it would fit with the "patterning of a particular ethno-history", by which Smith means the chain of key events that constitute the ethnic past of a nation. In other words, the nationalist intellectuals and professionals cannot just pick up any event or myth and systematically expect people to have feelings of commonness as a group as a result of their arbitrary selection of historical or cultural features.

However, in a later work Smith also recognises that the formation of nations from *ethnies* needed the intervention of factors partly independent of human and nationalist actions. He notes, thus: "It was the revolutionary nature of the economic, administrative and cultural transformations of seventeenth and eighteenth-century Europe that brought culture and ethnic identity to the fore as a basis for polity formation". Nevertheless, he immediately qualifies the argument by arguing that some of these "transformations" (such as the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg) occurred well before the modern epoch (Smith 1998: 192-193). As a result, and despite his refutations of being a primordialist or a perennialist, Smith does not entirely convince. Although he refutes the perennialist conception of nations in that it views the nation as some kind of extended family whose roots lie within time immemorial, he still admits the existence of "evidence of *some measure of national continuity*" (Smith 1998: 190, original stress).

Smith's theory also shares the same weaknesses as those of Gellner and Anderson: his theory is difficult to apply to multi-ethnic countries, such as Laos. If an *ethnie* is the core of a nation, what happens if there are several potential *ethnies* to dig into?

Secondly, Smith hardly takes into consideration the powerful influence of external classification; as Banks points out, "Smith's analysis tends either to ignore the distinction [between categorization by others and self-identification] or remain focused mostly on self-identification" (Banks 1996: 131). In other words, he merely considers

the state to be a neutral actor located above the society. In fact, as Tambini observes, "Smith treats ethnies as a collective actors, imputing them with self-consciousness and even rational intentions" (Tambini 1998: 144). As a result, Smith, like Gellner and Anderson, does not say much, if anything, about the individual perspective.

In the next section, I discuss theories of ethnicity and nationalism. I shall point out the strengths and the limitations of these theoretical frameworks in analysing the process of constructing a nation in Laos.

2.2. Nationalism and ethnicity: beyond the domination/resistance dichotomy

I should stress that this section is not solely about ethnicity. My theoretical reflection is not based on one key term, but actually on two, or to be exact, on a pair of key terms, 'nationalism' and 'ethnicity'. We have seen that theories of nationalism proposed by Gellner and Anderson have not paid much attention to the issue of ethnicity or ethnic identity, while Smith eludes the question of power by assuming a historical continuity in self-identification between the *ethnie* and the nation-state. But, without a doubt, theories of ethnicity have not shown much interest in nationalism, either. The creation of ethnic identities is usually argued to be a process internal to the groups being studied. I have already briefly discussed the concept of ethnicity in the Introduction. The fundamental principle of ethnic consciousness is the idea of 'we' and 'they': it is a form of social organisation of cultural difference (Barth 1969). The concept refers to "aspects of relationships between groups which consider themselves, and are regarded by others, as being culturally distinctive" (Eriksen 1993: 4). None the less, we will see below that in a specific historical, political and socio-economic context, ethnicity and nationalism

are actually closely inter-connected with respect to the creation and maintenance of ethnic and national identities.

But I will begin with a few exceptions to the rule that theories of ethnicity show little interest in nationalism. The first of these is Eriksen's book (1993), which draws some conceptual parallels between ethnic and national identities. First, both of them are "cultural constructions [...] they are not 'natural' " (Eriksen 1993: 100). Members of an ethnic group select, or sometimes even invent, objective features to define their 'culture', so as to be distinct from the others; and so do the nationalists, who reify a 'culture' through the promotion of 'ethnic' artifacts. Secondly, both identities presuppose the idea of interactions that provoke reactions of exclusion (of the others) and inclusion (of the same members); "[l]ike other ethnic identities, national identities are constituted in relation to *others*" (Eriksen 1993: 111, original stress). In other words, the key to both ethnic and national identity is self-identification; but while the former refers to people's self-definition (*emic* category), the latter is drawn from the actions of the nation-state (*etic* category).

Almost all anthropologists and sociologists working on nationalism usually agree that nationalism is born out of ethnicity, or in Eriksen's words, is "a variant of ethnicity" (Eriksen 1993: 101). Nationalism without ethnicity, in effect, is perceived as a somewhat "insubstantial and transient phenomenon" (McCrone 1998: 23). For Jenkins, nationalism is quite simply an "ideology of ethnic identification" (Jenkins 1998: 146). As such, his theory is similar to Smith's argument of pre-modern nationalism, a form that precedes the development of the modern state, and/or is autonomous of it. Jenkins thus defines the conditions for and the components of nationalism as follows: "an ideology or ideologies of ethnic identification, [with] historical contingency and

variation, a state context, ethnic criteria of political membership and a claim to a collective historical destiny" (Jenkins 1998: 162). But, one can oppose to his definition criticisms similar to those applied to Smith's propositions: they both elude the question of power by assuming a historical continuity in self-identification between the *ethnie* and the nation-state/the ethnic group; hence, assuming an ethnic consciousness *a priori*. This, one may argue, leads to a theory that resembles the perennialist stance.

These authors (Eriksen, McCrone, Jenkins) point out conceptual similarities between ethnic and national identities but do not quite resolve the chicken-and-egg conundrum that leaves us with a puzzling tautology: that is, nationalism awakens ethnicity, which is what precedes nationalism. At this stage, it would be helpful to introduce the notion of 'ethnic labelling' before I go on to discuss the role of the state in the formation of national *and* ethnic identities. One of the most forceful statements on the construction of ethnic labels is arguably the often-quoted pioneering essay by Ardener, "Language, Ethnicity and Population" (1989 [1972]). In his short but dense discussion, he first questions the validity of the (usually unquestioned) unit, 'population', or more precisely, of the labelled category applied to a group of people. He does so by pointing out that the colonial and contemporary ethnic labels in Africa - which was his research location at that time - barely correspond at all to the pre-colonial identities. He then makes his major point: that is, the now-familiar dual process of external classification (conducted by colonial scholars and administrators) and self-identification (by the 'people' targeted by the latter). The argument leads him to conclude that demography has nothing to do with ethnicity since there is not necessarily any biological continuity among the peoples who are being subsumed within an ethnic labelled category. Ardener argues that the creation of an 'ethnic group' is not, therefore, the sole product of an internal process. His

five-point list on the issues that are relevant to the classification of such groups reflects a more elaborate position. The points are as follows:

1. The ethnic classification is a reflex of self-identification.
2. Onomastic (or naming) propensities are closely involved in this, and thus have more than a purely linguistic interest.
3. Identification by others is an important feature in the establishment of self-identification.
4. The taxonomic space in which self-identification occurs is of overriding importance.
5. The effect of foreign classification, 'scientific' and lay, is far from neutral in the establishment of a such a space.

(Ardener 1989 [1972]: 68)

The study of the semantics of ethnic labelling has produced a prolific literature that is concerned with the historical invention of 'peoples' through the interactive process between objective imposition and subjective appropriation. The example of colonial ethnic labelling is a common one. During the period of colonial expansion, many so-called tribes appeared under the colonial administration and artificial boundaries were traced between groups of people for administrative and political reasons (see, for example, works by Southall (1970) and Amselle and M'Bokolo (1999)).

But my concern here is the relations between ethnicity and nationalism, and as such, Ardener's notion of "taxonomic space" is particularly helpful. Indeed, as Banks emphasizes, "[i]t highlights the fact that classifications (by the self or the other) are linked to other classifications and that none of these takes place in a vacuum" (Banks

1997: 132). Some authors have, consequently, argued that the missing link between ethnicity and nationalism lies in the central role of the state as the two phenomena emerge and move within the modern political form of the nation-state. As Banks, again, emphasises:

By focusing on nationalist ideology employed by the state we can no longer consider the state to be an abstract and neutral force or nexus of interests. It becomes an *agent*, one which is conscious of the ethnicity of its constituent populations and which itself may be a locus of ethnic identity.

(Banks 1997: 122, my stress)

The definition of the state as a new form of spreading power (via micro-politics) inevitably brings to mind Foucault's theory on governmentality. I will briefly outline Foucault's ideas on the state and then relate them to theories of ethnicity and nationalism.

2.2.1. Foucault: power/knowledge/problem of governmentality: an introduction

Foucault's analysis is rooted within a historical framework. The chronology of his studies runs from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century and mostly takes place in France. The key concept of his methodology is arguably the notion of genealogy, which refutes traditional historical accounts. Genealogy opposes the seamless, evolutionary, totalising narration of history with its great figures; on the contrary, it "must record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality" (Foucault 1977: 76). The genealogist's work is to unravel the misleading interpretation of historians and to point out, instead, the details that have been ignored precisely because they were thought

insignificant. Yet, the latter are the very events that encapsulate the workings of power.

Dreyfus and Rabinow thus stress that

[a]ccording to Foucault, the task of the genealogist is to destroy the primacy of origins, of unchanging truth. He seeks to destroy the doctrines of development and progress. Having destroyed ideal significations and original truths, he looks to the plays of wills. Subjection, domination, and combat are found everywhere he looks. Whenever he hears talk of meaning and value, of virtue and goodness, he looks for strategies of domination.

(Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982: 108-9)

Through his studies of the appearance of segregationary institutions, i.e. asylums and prisons - those very details ignored by the 'history of battles and heroes' - in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in France, Foucault demonstrated that new fields of knowledge developed from and reinforced the strategies of power. The combination of power and knowledge led to the emergence of what he called "technologies of power": the infinite amount of subtle disciplinary micro-practices that were designed to act upon the individual, the prisoner or the mad man to create "docile bodies". But these bodies also had to be efficient and productive. Indeed, one needs to relate these social practices to a key historical and political change that occurred during the same period: the ascendancy of the State. The radical change in Western political philosophy - now the state, and no longer the pursuit of God, was an end in itself - meant that it became impossible to govern a state without knowing its population; this involved the "discovery of population as an object of scientific investigation" (Foucault 1980: 124)¹⁸.

As Foucault explained:

¹⁸ In fact, I quote here the words of the interviewers, Alessandro Fontana and Pasquale Paquino.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a form of power [the state] comes into being that begins to exercise itself through social production and social service. It becomes a matter of obtaining productive service from individuals in their concrete lives. And in consequence, a real and effective 'incorporation' of power was necessary, in the sense that power had to be able to gain access to the bodies of individuals, to their acts, attitudes and modes of everyday behaviour. [...] at the same time, these new techniques of power needed to grapple with the phenomena of population, in short to undertake the administration, control and direction of the accumulation of men (the economic system that promotes the accumulation of capital and the system of power that ordains the accumulation of men are, from the seventeenth century on, correlated and inseparable phenomena): hence there arise the problems of demography, public health, hygiene, housing conditions, longevity and fertility.

(Foucault 1980: 125)

The control of individuals was linked with the reproduction of the population as a whole in order to sustain the existence and to increase the wealth of the state. Politics thus became "bio-politics".

To come back to the relations between power and knowledge, it is precisely their correlation that made the disciplinary technology in prisons and asylums - Foucault also mentions the examples of hospitals and schools, among others - acceptable, 'normal' in the society's eyes. The scientific knowledge that emerged from these institutions, in return, hid the disciplinary technology under the clothes of normalisation. As Dreyfus and Rabinow observe, "political technologies advance by taking what is essentially a

political problem, removing it from the realm of political discourse, and recasting it in the neutral language of science" (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982: 196). What is more, these technologies of normalisation now encompass all behaviours, normal and deviant, since they create and define them. The disciplinary technology thus becomes a paradigm, or what Foucault called an "order of truth".

2.2.2. The Race to Nation Across Ethnic Terrain¹⁹

Thus, Foucault's contribution, among his countless others, is to have thrown a new radical light on the nature of the power of the state. In his words:

[...] since the sixteenth century, a new political form of power has been continuously developing. This new political structure, as everybody knows, is the state. But most of the time, the state is envisioned as a kind of political power which ignores individuals, looking only at the interests of the totality, or I should say, of a class or a group among the citizens. That's quite true. But I'd like to underline the fact that the state's power (and that's one of the reasons for its strength) is both individualizing and a totalizing form of power. Never, I think, in the history of human societies - even in the old Chinese society - has there been such a tricky combination in the same political structures of individualization techniques, and of totalization procedures.

(Foucault 1982: 213)

To a great extent, theories of ethnicity and nationalism have drawn on Foucault's model of the state and its binary project of individualisation and totalisation. Banks thus has stressed the interdependent process of inclusion and exclusion in the constitution of nation-states, in which "all nationalisms, once state control is achieved, actively seek

both to enhance and reify the specifically ethnic identities of deviant others within the nation state, and at the same time to efface the idea of ethnic particularism within the national identity" (Banks 1997:158). Similarly, Litzinger has brilliantly summarised "this theoretical framework, [whereby]

ethnic and national identities (as with gender, race, and sexual identities) are viewed not only as products of history but also as effects of dominant systems of power and knowledge. These identities are no longer viewed as embodiments of local, pre-modern, or traditional social forms. Rather, they are intimately caught up in, if not reflective of, the ideologies, social practices, and developmental discourses of the modern era and of the modern nation-state, where history is seen as a process of increased rationalization, social ordering, and cultural homogenization.

(Litzinger 2000: 25)

The strategy of the state to control ethnicity has been best exemplified perhaps by Brackette Williams in her richly textured article (1989). She first argues that the ultimate goal of nationalism is to extract "purity out of impurity" through such mechanism as "myth-making". She writes, thus:

[...] the ideologies we call nationalism and the subordinated subnational identities we call ethnicity result from the various plans and programs for the construction of myths of homogeneity out of the realities of heterogeneity that characterise all nation building. The starting point for the definition of purity is not, therefore, some objective point at which "real" purity, or for that matter, authentic culture,

¹⁹ I borrow here a component of the title of Brackett Williams' article (1989).

existed, but rather the classificatory moment of purification and the range of issues that motivate its invention. The starting point for understanding the relations between ethnicity and nationalism, a useful prologue to the analysis of the inter-penetration of race, class, and culture in nation-states, must be this mythmaking and the material factors that motivate and rationalize its elements.
(Williams 1989: 429)

But what Banks coyly terms "ethnic effacement" (1997: 159) is defined by Williams as "race-making". The process of homogenisation becomes in fact one of "purification". For Williams, ethnicity is a mere euphemism to refer to the manipulation of racial boundaries by the state. Ethnicity is thus that process of human classification that characterises all putatively homogenous 'nation-states', for "purity of types must be classified into being and can only be defined out of existence". These processes of exclusion and inclusion eventually will lead to the formation of a cultural mainstream:

[...] the magic of forgetfulness and selectivity, both deliberate and inadvertent, allows the once recognizably arbitrary classifications of one generation to become the given inherent properties of reality several generations later. The more ambiguous the material transmitted and the more mundane the processes through which it is transmitted, the more tenacious the mythical constructions it permits.
(Williams 1989: 431)

The non-visible mechanism of power is, in fact, determined by a third crucial agent, i.e. class. Because "race purity is never maintained for the sake of variety alone" (Williams 1989: 434), the nationalist ideology primarily provides the pretext for the control of the state and its resources by one dominant group. The locus of state power therefore lies

within the pairing of class/race. The dominant class dictates the values and the symbols of the society, giving rise to what Williams (who borrows the expression from Gramsci) calls the "transformist hegemonies" that aim at homogenising heterogeneity. These are fashioned through the assimilation of elements of heterogeneity through appropriations that devalue and deny their link to marginalised others' contributions to the patrimony (Williams 1989: 435). As a consequence, those outside the mainstream are now defined as 'ethnic' or 'minorities', racially differentiated because culturally stigmatised, as opposed to the 'non-ethnic' members of the nation blended in the cultural purity. These deviant groups outside the mainstream will not become full members of the ideologically defined nation unless they stop claiming their rights for a self-defined cultural identity. Their sole authorised contribution to the nation's patrimony will then be de-politicised traditions turned into harmless and colourful folk elements. Designated ethnic celebrations provide forums for such groups to display colourful proof that they too have contributed to the construction of the nation. Within the transformist hegemonies that characterise nation-states, marginalised groups soon learn that such proofs are often considered by the "non-ethnics" as little more than feathers and flourishes (Williams 1989: 435).

In short, the formation of a nation within a complex society, once state control is achieved, always depends on two opposite, yet complementary, trends: homogenisation – the blending-in process where ethnicity both as a process and as a category is suppressed – and stigmatisation – through which ethnicity, by contrast, is enhanced and controlled *outside* the cultural mainstream but *within* the national paradigm. As Banks concludes, "the nation's defining group, the one that claims the national label as its own [...], is not then simply another 'ethnic group', it is very deliberately and self-

consciously everything and nothing" (Banks 1997: 160). The "transformist hegemony" creates and defines both the national (normal) and the ethnic (deviant) identities.

Without a doubt, a great deal of literature has dealt with the strategies of resistance against the political, material and symbolic domination of the nation-state and its elite. For example, in a recent book that discusses the relations between ethnicity and the state, Wilmsen tirelessly emphasises the nature of ethnic and national identities as products of unequal structures. He therefore calls for the unravelling of the historical structures of inequality hidden behind the mask of ethnicity: "an appreciation of the dynamic flux in identity construction is essential to a prescient understanding of relations of production in a nation-state as they have been historically formulated and are realised today" (Wilmsen 1996: 10). For him (and the book's other contributors), ethnicity is a phenomenon that proceeds from a context of domination over a segment of the population. As he asserts:

Thus, ethnic politics is the politics of marginality. Indeed, ethnicity appears to come into being most frequently in just such instances when individuals are persuaded of a need to confirm a collective sense of identity in the face of threatening economic, political, or other social forces [...] Ethnicity, then, is a relational concept, one in which the dominant are able to define the subordinate.

(Wilmsen 1996: 4-5)

Thus, what was initially a historical construction initiated by the dominant became the putative primordial identity of the dominated. This is again the interplay between self-identification and external classification. As a result, the strategies of homogenisation and ethnicisation will remain invisible and highly effective as long as the dominated

people continue identifying themselves with the differentiating cultural traits without being conscious of their imposed character. Ethnicity is inextricably linked with the premises of power; it is the salient feature of the dominated. Likewise, Comaroff asserts that ethnicity cannot be understood except within a wider context of power struggle. Ethnic identities are "always caught up in equations of power at once material, political, symbolic. They are seldom simply imposed or claimed; more often their construction involves struggle, contestation, and, sometimes, failure" (Comaroff 1996: 166).

But it is not sufficient to unravel the structures of domination and unequal power if one wishes to grasp the complexity of the nature of the Majority (national) and Minority (ethnic) identities. They do not constitute two oppositional entities immutably separated by the binary division of domination and resistance. As Eriksen rightly reminds us, "like other concepts used in the analysis of ethnicity, the twin concepts of minority and majority are *relative* and *relational*" (Eriksen 1993: 121, original stress). Similarly, Jenkins points out the cultural void of the modern nation-states induced by a simplistic conceptualisation of ethnicity: "Culturally, we are left with no authentic place within modern nation-states for ethnicity, other than as axiomatic homogeneity, on the one hand, or as an immigrant or peripheral presence, on the Other" (Jenkins 1998: 144).

Some studies, however, offer a more subtle and productive analysis of the relations between the Majority (national) identity and the Minority (ethnic) identities. Their argument is that these two spheres of identification emerge and maintain each other through a simultaneous process of exclusion and inclusion. For example, in her very stimulating book on the Miao and cultural politics in modern China (2000), Schein stresses both the oppositional and incorporative role of the non-Han people in the constitution of Chinese (national) identity. As she suggests:

First, in the case of internal orientalism, those othered in dominant representation may simultaneously be considered an integral part of their representers' people or nation. Second, as was the case of China over the twentieth century, in the consolidation of identity, rather than a single other appearing locked in dyadic opposition to the nation, multiple contrastive others may be significant in defining the self. For China, it was the external West and the internal non-Han peoples that played the biggest roles in demarcating China's identity.

(Schein 2000: 106)

In Chapter Five, I will similarly address the issue of national identity in Laos through the analysis of the politics of minority/majority representation. But my intention in Chapter Five is also to show that the nationalist discourse in post-socialist Laos is not only a discourse of order. In order to capture all the ambiguities and tensions of the process of nation-constructing in post-socialist Laos, it is necessary to widen the perspective and to look at the *form* of the nation. I will therefore extend my discussion to encompass the debate concerning 'particularism versus universalism'.

But, just as the dominant group is falsely homogenous and hegemonic, the dominated people are not always either, submitting or resisting. As a matter of fact, they may themselves belong to the (national) majority in specific socio-cultural contexts.

Litzinger succinctly formulates the dilemma in the introduction of his book on the Yao in modern China (2000). He asks thus: "What happens when minorities are no longer seen as simply reacting to or always already resisting the Chinese state, but rather as central agents in the cultural politics of the post-Mao nation? What might the anthropology of post-Mao nationalism look like if it refuses to find in the ethnic subject

the perfected example of authenticity or resistance?" (Litzinger 2000: 20). More generally, the dualistic simplification between hegemony and resistance is giving way to the multiple, politically complex positions of interpretations that contend within the same social spaces of heterogeneous societies. My final two chapters will therefore be focused on the multiple voices of those being represented as they reveal their interpretations of the nationalist discourse under different historical, social and political conditions. Narratives of the individual guide my analysis in Chapter Six, while a re-thinking of the concept of ethnicity will lead me to a new position on identities in the last chapter.

2.2.3. Memory, history and identity: narratives of the nation

Representations of the past are central to the symbolic constitution of national consciousness. Since Ernest Renan's essay (1997 [1882]), the nation has been considered by scholars to be constituted of two causal facets, one linked to the past, the other to the present and the future. Thus, in Renan's words, "a nation is a great solidarity, formed by the realisation of sacrifices one has made, as well as of those one is prepared to make again" (Renan 1997 [1882]: 32). Horizontal homogeneity is accomplished along an uninterrupted span of time: "we are what you were, we will be what you are" (Renan 1997 [1882]: 32). However, the national narration involves, in the famous formula, the dual selective process of remembering and forgetting. The past appears seamless because it is constructed as such. The representation of the nation, as is well known, loathes disruptions and discontinuities.

The argument of horizontal homogeneity is taken up by Anderson, for whom national time is to be defined as an " 'homogenous, empty time' in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfilment, but by temporal

coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar" (Anderson 1991: 24). The conception of transverse time is crucial in the creation of the nation since "the idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation which is also conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history" (Anderson 1991: 26).

In the now familiar phrase, Stuart Hall has pointed out the discursive character of the "narrative of the nation...

told and retold in national histories, literatures, the media and popular culture. These provide a set of stories, images, landscapes, scenarios, historical events, national symbols and rituals which stand for, or represent, the shared experiences, sorrows, and triumphs and disasters which give meaning to the nation. As members of such an 'imagined community', we see ourselves in our mind's eye sharing in this narrative. It lends significance and importance to our humdrum existence, connecting our everyday lives with a national destiny that pre-existed us and will outlive us.

(Hall 1994: 293).

The people are not mere passive receivers, though. Bhabha sees the relationships between individuals and the nation's narrative through a dual lens, or in his words, in a "double-time". The people are the "historical 'objects' of a nationalist pedagogy", but they are also "the 'subjects' of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principle of the people as that continual process by which the national life is redeemed and signified as a repeating and reproductive process" (Bhabha 1995: 297).

But it is precisely this duality that allows individuals a space for contesting the official representation of the past, which claims to configure the imagining of the national community. Alonso, in her dense article about the struggles between the official and popular historical discourses in Mexico, points out the effects of power on public memory whereby the state imposes its 'truth' of past events in order to establish its hegemony. However, as she stresses, the "past is neither transparent nor given; 'what really happened' is a focus of conflicting representation" (Alonso 1988: 50). She provides the example of the resistance of Mexican rural communities to the dominant representation of the past. They display a counter-history, which repudiates the role of 'The Revolution', as presented by the Mexican state.

On a more general scale, for Gillis this ongoing process of the state's "memory work" contesting with that of the people has become more democratised, to the level of a personal matter: "[t]oday everyone is her or his own historian... Most people have long since turned to more heterogeneous representations of the past.... the reality is that the nation is no longer the site or frame of memory for most people and therefore national history is no longer a proper measure of what people really know about their pasts" (Gillis 1994: 17).

While acknowledging the existence of space for dissent, we should also, on the other hand, listen to those voices that ask for membership of the national community. In the discussion in Chapter Six, I suggest that the national history is both reproduced and contested consistently by the narratives of individuals.

2.2.4. Position: rethinking ethnicity

The issue of 'identity' seems to be unavoidable. A discussion of ethnicity and nationalism cannot avoid discussing the process of identification. A focus on individuals means that it is necessary to re-think the ways they construct who they are and who they want to be. As Hall comments:

Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. This view problematises the very authority and authenticity to which the term, 'cultural identity', lays claim.

(Hall 1990: 222)

Likewise, Bhabha rejects the "sociological solidity" of the 'imagined' community. His argument is that national identities are composed of narratives of "the people" that develop through a "splitting" process between "pedagogical" and "performative" narratives. "The people" thus are both "pedagogical objects" that internalise the national narration and "performative subjects" that challenge the received versions of national identity. The tensions between the 'split' signifier subsequently generate a "liminal form of social representation, a space that is *internally* marked by cultural difference and the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense cultural locations" (Bhabha 1995: 299, original stress). The difference between 'us' and 'them', Self and the Other, is not externally-orientated but lies within the boundaries of the nation-space: "the threat of cultural difference is no longer a problem of 'other' people. It becomes a question of the otherness of the people-as-one" (Bhabha 1995:

301). Cultural difference is irreducible and it reveals the hybrid quality and ambivalence of national identity in every state. Consequently, in Chapter Seven, I extend my discussion of narratives to issues of ethnicity and identity(ies); more precisely, to issues related to the fragmentation of identities.

I now turn to the works on Lao nationalism and position my study accordingly.

2.3. Forging nationhood in Laos

The most comprehensive study²⁰ so far on nationalism in Laos in the post-socialist era is arguably the book written by Grant Evans, *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance. Laos since 1975*, published in 1998. From 1975 to the late 1980s, the communists instituted measures to demonstrate their will to break with the past and with the abhorred former regime and its most potent symbols, i.e. the monarchy and Buddhism. But, after the collapse of the communist ideological project, the Lao State was in need of new symbols of legitimation. The regime consequently has "embarked on modifying old rituals and symbols and creating new ones" (Evans 1998: 14). Evans, an anthropologist and a long-term specialist on Laos, thus explores the continuing process whereby the present regime is struggling to impose in Lao people's minds images of cultural homogeneity and historical continuity through politics of representation and reinterpretation of the past.

Evans' analysis encompasses several realms, such as: commemorative rituals (National Day, the That Luang festival, the New Year's festivities, the 'cult' of Kaysone Phomvihane); the remembrance of symbols of the old regime, i.e. the monarchy and Buddhism; the 'national' monuments, such as statues; the re-writing of history books

²⁰ In fact, very little literature at all deals with the topic.

with their rag-bag of remembered and forgotten events; and the ethnic minorities and their instrumental role. Evans shows that either the rituals of legitimation initiated after 1975 to mark the change from the old patterns abandoned their triumphalist style (as is the case for National Day celebrations) or merely failed to appeal to the population (like the 'cult' of Kaysone that never managed to attain the level of that of Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam).

Meanwhile, the regime has re-appropriated for itself symbols of the past. The That Luang is a good example of the ambiguity of the state rituals. In 1991, this stupa became the national symbol and replaced the hammer and sickle in the official iconography. Yet, the That Luang had been the symbol of the Lao nation for a long period before the socialist epoch began. Furthermore, the That Luang festival, which is held in November every year between the thirteenth and fifteenth day of the twelfth month in the Buddhist calendar, has become one of the most popular events in the Vientiane urban calendar, although it was the Royal Lao Government (RLG) that instituted the That Luang festival as a national festival. However, in the present version of the festival the king is absent²¹ and the meaning of the Buddhist rituals are (tentatively) neutralised.

The selective memory manifests itself as what Evans terms the "process of continuity and discontinuity" (1998: 134). Again, the re-writing of Lao history provides an extreme demonstration of the famous 'Renanian' formula. Evans concludes that there is still much amnesia in the making of the 'national' narrative in Laos. He writes, thus:

²¹ In December 1975, with the declaration of the LPRP, King Sisavang Vatthana was forced to abdicate. In March 1977, upon allegations of anti-governmental activities, the ex-king and his wife and his two

Laos today is still in search of a convincing national narrative, because 'fratricide' there was not only in the distant past but very recent - and it is still not 'reassuring'. The civil war lasting from the late 1950s until 1975 has to be remembered for it is the process by which the new regime came to power, but it also has to be forgotten as a period of disunity.

(Evans 1998: 188-9)

But the most obvious example of the Lao state's "serious existential crisis" (Evans 1998: 10) is arguably the revival of Buddhist practices at both state and popular levels. In post-socialist Laos, the context of economic and social liberalisation begun in the late 1980s certainly favoured an atmosphere of regulatory relaxation that led to the resurgence of Buddhist popular practices²². But Evans argues that it was primarily the collapse of communism that urged the regime to find a new formulation of Lao nationalism and a new ideology of legitimation, to such an extent that he describes the phenomenon as "a re-Buddhification of the Lao state" (1998: 67). His analysis of the relationship between Buddhism and the state is clearly political and instrumentalist; although he seems at times to adopt a somewhat perennialist perspective, as in his conclusion when he states that "with the collapse of socialist ideology an older Buddhist discourse on Lao history has re-emerged to fill its place - a discourse which is centred on righteous kings and was suddenly interrupted by the historical hiatus of 1975" (1998: 70). Evans appears to suggest that the 1975 revolution was only an 'accident' and that historical continuity has resumed with the return of Buddhism at the core of Lao nationalism.

sons were arrested and sent to Huaphan Province in north-eastern Laos where they officially died from illness (though mystery still surrounds their arrests and deaths).

²² The leadership indeed underestimated the structural role of Buddhism within Lao society, especially at the village level. The Lao authorities thought they could replace it by the ideology of "new socialist men"

In this, his view has something in common with Smith's ethno-symbolism and its sense of continuity. Evans' chapter on the monarchy, entitled "Recalling Royalty", is even more demonstrative of continuing linkages with the past. Despite the forceful suppression of all royal symbols after 1975, the regime still shows some kind of nostalgia for, or at least reminiscence of, an ostensibly distasteful past. As such, Evans' descriptions of the Lao officials' behaviour during the visit of the Thai king and queen and their daughter to Laos (the first for the Thai king) for the opening of the Friendship Bridge in 1994 are rather intriguing, even amusing. He wrote, for example: "What is striking about this occasion [a *baci*²³ sponsored by the president and the prime minister and their wives for the royal couple and the princess at the Presidential palace] is the ease with which the Lao officials and their wives conformed to royal protocol, and the obvious delight they took in moving within the charmed circle of the Thai king" (Evans 1998: 113)

Evans' long experience of the country allows him not only to comment on the recent evolution of the state's cultural politics but also to provide insightful views on the older patterns under the RLG or the French. But what constitutes the major theme of his book also constitutes the main weakness in his argument: although he never quite makes it explicit, his analysis is obviously centred on culture, history and society from the perspective of the ethnic Lao majority. Likewise, the geographical focus of his study is revealing: his case studies are drawn from urban or semi-urban areas; more precisely, from Vientiane and Luang Prabang, both towns ethnically dominated by ethnic Lao people. Only one chapter deals with the non-ethnic Lao population ("The minorities in

but this ideology largely failed to appeal to those villagers who practised Buddhist rituals (Evans 1993). Accordingly, the Lao authorities were unable to control, let alone suppress, religion in the countryside.

state rituals"), and it is not among his most original contributions. Following Archaimbault's seminal research on Lao religious structures (1973) and Göran Aijmer's subsequent paper (1979), Evans similarly emphasises the central role of the ethnic peoples, the "Kha", in the political and religious rituals, notably surrounding the monarchy, during the pre-1975 period (1998: 143-146). But, unsurprisingly, the meaning of these ceremonies was diluted in the period from 1975 to the 1980s by the themes of 'multi-ethnic solidarity and unity', in which the previously symbolic kinship relationships between the ethnic and non-ethnic Lao were lost. However, under the present-day Lao State, the ethnic minorities have been turned into neutral items whose main use is to instil ethnic flavour into the 'national' culture.

Yet, Laos is a complex, multi-ethnic country. Nobody denies this fact. As a result, studies of Lao nationalism should more fully incorporate the 'ethnic' factor. The following chapters will be concerned with Laos' minority component as much as with Laos itself, in an attempt to redress this imbalance.

Above all, there is a striking lack of ethnographies of nationalism in Laos. Evans' book is original; yet, he only gives hints of the reactions of the urban-based ethnic Lao population to the state's cultural politics. As a result, his conclusion is short and unsatisfying. Besides, there is no mention at all of the minorities' feelings regarding the actions of the state: on how they make sense of their worlds and how they interpret the nationalist discourse. They are marginalised both from outside and from within. In other words, studies of Lao nationalism depict the "cultural mainstream", the ethnic Lao (national/normal) identity, and as an afterthought, the minority (ethnic/deviant) element.

²³ A popular ceremony in Laos that is organised to celebrate such events as a marriage, a birth, or more simply, the arrival of a guest.

Another example is Mayoury Ngaosyvathn's essay (1990) on the *baci sukuan*²⁴, which contains a strong perennialist argument and conflates ethnic and national identities.

Thus, Ananda Rajah, in his comments on the article, observes the "romantic idealization [of the nature of the "Lao" people]" (Rajah 1990: 313). In any case, Mayoury's conclusion leaves little doubt as to her approach:

The Baci or Sou Khouan has for centuries been an enduring and a central part of Lao culture. It contains an amalgam of the many religious and cultural traditions that have influenced Lao culture and it continues to adapt itself to changing political and cultural values. [...] As a key element of Lao culture, the ritual is a microcosm of Lao values serving to integrate the individual both spiritually and socially. In these terms, the ritual may be seen as the quintessential expression of conceptualizations of Lao identity.

(Mayoury 1990: 299-300)

To be sure, recent ethnographic studies of the politics of ethnicity and ethnic populations in Laos have been written (Evans 1993, Proschan 1997, Trankell 1998). For instance, in his study on the Kmhmu²⁵, Frank Proschan offers a brilliant example of the extraordinary fluidity and variability of ethnic identities (1997). In a sense, he renews the concept of boundaries by demonstrating that it is possible to have (within the same ethnic group) two competing models of ethnicity and identity coexisting: a primordialist one based on descent and a constructionist one based on behaviour. However, his theory is indifferent to the state. On the other hand, Trankell argues that external classification, the "official discourse of ethnicity", has led to the process of "laoization" by incorporating some populations within the "Lao Lum" category, despite their self-

²⁴ A fuller name for the *baci* ceremony mentioned above.

identifying as not being "Lao". The reason for this arbitrary classification is because they fit even less well into the other two categories, i.e. "Lao Theung" and "Lao Sung" (Trankell 1998: 51-52). But, both essays do not say much about nationalism. They mainly deal with theories of ethnicity without much analysis of the national(ist) structure.

My study of Lao nationalism in the post-socialist era differs from these works in two ways: first, my intention is to analyse the ideology of nationalism as a discourse of power by focusing on the relationships between the One/Majority and the Other/Minority. Secondly, however, I argue that the construction of this cultural, historical and political representation of a nation fails to encompass a section of the Lao population, i.e. educated members of ethnic minorities. My ethnography of a number of individuals' lives reveals a very different representation of the nation, reflected in their narratives and sentiments of uncertainty about their ethnic and national identities.

²⁵ I have followed Proshan's spelling.

3. The Awakening of Ethnic and National Identity in Modern Laos

In this Chapter, I focus on three historical periods: pre-modern Laos (until the arrival of the French), French rule (1893-1954) and the French and American Wars (1945-1974). Each period corresponds with a specific pattern of relationships between the non-ethnic Lao people and the political authority. Within the polity of the Lao kingdom (between the fourteenth century and the arrival of the French), there were few interactions between the ethnic Lao lowlanders and the highland peoples of various ethnic origins. The latter were the 'others', geographically, culturally, politically and symbolically located at the edge of the kingdom. The French colonisation, however, upset this dichotomy. Their ruthless policy, especially towards the upland peoples, was a major factor in the upheaval of ethnic rebellions that occurred from the late nineteenth century. These revolts highlighted these peoples' fierce sense of independence. However, I also argue that French policy, albeit indirectly and involuntarily, led to the transformation of some of these struggles into political claims. In particular, I will focus on Kommandam's armed resistance in Southern Laos as a remarkable example of the awakening of ethnic consciousness in colonial Laos. In the second part of the Chapter, I introduce the origins of Lao nationalism based upon ethnic Lao culture and identity. I then show that the participation of some ethnic highlander groups in the French and American Wars, some of them on the communist side, dramatically changed the nationalist discourse, which from then on would have to include multi-ethnicity in its rhetoric.

3.1. The divinities, the ethnic Lao and the indigenous peoples²⁶

3.1.1. Geographical and ecological frontiers

The polity of the traditional Lao kingdom, like other pre-modern South-East Asian states, was based on an ecological and geographical structure which was unchangeable, constituting as it did the "heartland of irrigated rice cultivation" (Leach 1960-61: 56). Beyond this heartland, the state could expand or retract since it had no irrevocably fixed boundaries, nor a permanent administrative apparatus. But the core of the kingdom, the rice-land, would remain despite the unstable mode of governance. Consequently, there was a real distinction between the peoples who lived on the plain and the populations who inhabited the mountains. Thus, Leach contrasted the "Hill peoples" to the "Valley peoples", while Condominas used variations on the term "civilisation" to differentiate between the "civilisation of mountains and the civilisation of the plains" (Condominas 1980: 185). The most salient features that distinguished these two groups of peoples from each other were their modes of subsistence (the highland peoples used the method of shifting cultivation to grow dry rice, whereas the lowland peoples were wet rice cultivators) and their religion (Buddhism for the latter and animism for the former). By the 1970s, this distinction was becoming a cliché, and was then abandoned in favour of the modern concepts of ethnicity, cultural politics or politics of identity which overlook the historical character of inter-ethnic relationships. It is not my purpose in this chapter to debate these issues. These lowland and highland cultural systems are certainly ideal types; nevertheless, there existed a cultural, ecological, political and geographical distance between the ethnic Lao and the indigenous peoples.

²⁶ I use the term 'indigenous' here in its restricted meaning; that is, in reference to the people regarded as the original inhabitants of one territory.

In addition, Savèng Phinit interestingly remarks that these mountainous and forested regions were perceived by the ethnic Lao as a sacred and magic place haunted by prominent spirits whose task was to protect the (fuzzy) frontiers of the kingdom (Savèng 1989: 194). This would reinforce the hypothesis that, among the ethnic Lao, there existed the perception of an incommensurable gap between those living at or around the centre and the others settled at the periphery, far away in a sort of mysterious, wild and feared land. This gap was more likely to exist in the case of those indigenous peoples who lived in remote areas, since assimilation could occur when the indigenous people lived among or near their "masters", as Leach showed in the case of ancient Burma (Leach 1960-61: 61-62). However, the ethnic Lao, although they controlled the government, had little interest in assimilating the non-ethnic Lao population during the pre-colonial period. Cases of assimilation that occurred amongst some indigenous peoples were not the result of a deliberate policy on the part of the lowlanders (Condominas 1980: 275); systematic and institutionalised policies were not enforced to draw the upland peoples into an unitary culture, which would have been that of the ethnic Lao.

Still, the indigenous groups did not live in strict autarky. Contacts between the ethnic Lao and indigenous groups were primarily economic, and historians have demonstrated that there has always been a tradition of interdependence between the various ethnic groups, mostly through trade (Gunn 1990: 72). Peaceful interactions were stimulated by a geographical setting that required the peoples interact occasionally in order to exchange certain necessities. However, these contacts were largely limited to the border areas of the populations' living environments. Much of the trade took place outside of individual communities, and was either mediated through an agent such as the *lam* (Halpern 1964: 94) or was carried out by Chinese traders who brought their goods to the

mountain villagers (Lebar, Hickey and Musgrave 1964: 215). The contacts between the peoples living at the periphery and the lowland peoples were also limited simply because of the extremely mountainous topography, aggravated by the poor means of communication. Under these loose political arrangements, the hill peoples were able to get by; hence, most of them maintained a real political autonomy.

3.1.2. The *mandala* politico-religious system

The political model of former South-East Asian states, including early Laos, was, as Stuart-Fox describes it, "loosely structured". He writes:

[...] Provided they paid a prescribed tribute and regularly presented themselves at court, and were prepared to contribute men and arms when called upon to do so, rulers or lords of constituent *meuang* (*chau meuang*) were virtually autonomous.

(Stuart-Fox 1997: 11)

Thus, as long as the chieftains of the *meuang*²⁷ complied with the king's requirements, they had a rather wide margin of freedom. In fact, the further the subject population were located from the centre, the lesser control the king could exercise over them. Christian Taillard described these spatial patterns as a "model of concentric halos with decreasing control" (Taillard 1989: 44). In fact, the smaller political entities even switched their allegiance completely as a result of wars and shifting power relationships, or avowed it to several different kings contemporaneously. Accordingly, the frontiers of the kingdom were relatively fluid, their definition and spatial extent depending upon the power of the monarch at the centre.

The Lan Xang kingdom (XIV-XVIII century), like the kingdoms of Lan Na or Ayutthaya, was influenced by the political and religious model of the Khmer empire of Angkor that existed between the ninth and the fifteenth century (Condominas 1980: 261). The latter, which had been itself influenced by Hindu magico-religious ideas, was based on the fundamental belief in "the parallelism between Macrocosmos and Microcosmos, between the universe and the world of men" (Heine Geldern 1942: 74). The Angkorean kings, claiming to be of divine essence, were the intermediary element that linked this cosmic order to the human world. Their task was to maintain harmony between the empire and the universe. To achieve this aim, they strove to replicate the former in the image of the latter. They were object of a cult, that of the *Devaraja* (the divine king), and placed at the centre of the world on earth (Keyes 1995: 73). Despite the decline of the Khmer empire of Angkor in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, there remained in the Theravada Buddhist polities of mainland South-East Asia, including the kingdom of Lan Xang, this conception of the world being centred on a point; hence, the often-quoted Hindu and Buddhist concept of *mandala*²⁸ to define the political system that governed the Southeast Asian pre-states. The Tai²⁹ leaders borrowed the concept and turned it into a political principle to organise and legitimate their rule. Thus, as a religious-cum-political image, the *mandala* was:

[...] a particular and often unstable political situation in a vaguely definable geographical area without fixed boundaries and where smaller centres tended to look in all directions for security. *Mandalas* would expand and contract in

²⁷ A *meuang* was the political unit above the village level comprising several villages, "usually connected by common descent and forming a defined geographical unity along the floor of an upland valley" (Stuart-Fox 1998: 28).

²⁸ The word means "circle" in Hindi and referred originally to a cosmological symbol. The *mandala* is thus a complex diagram in circular form that represents an image of the universe, a receptacle for gods. It is the place where the cosmic and psychic energies concentrate. As a sacred place, the *mandala* is a form of paradise (Rice 1980: 246).

concertina-like fashion. Each one contained several tributary rulers, some of whom would repudiate their vassal status when the opportunity arose and try to build up their own networks of vassals.

(Wolters 1999: 27-28)³⁰.

The *mandala* system was formed of several "circles of power", the centre of which was dominated by a Buddhist king who ruled by right of (divine) descent and right of merit. He had, it was believed, accumulated enough merit in his previous lives to have deserved to be born as a king. The expansion or contraction of the *mandala* would depend on his ability to gain the allegiance of smaller political structures and lesser rulers. His power was not in fact measured in terms of territorial gains but rather determined by the size of the ruled population. The power status of the centre was therefore highly variable in accordance with the resources available to the ruler from trade, tribute and manpower, the latter mobilised through military conscription or slavery (Wolters 1999: 114).

Condominas' study of Tai political systems (1980) described the historical process that led to the formation of the *mandalas* in South-East Asia. The Tai peoples, forced to leave Nan Chao (modern Yunnan) under the threat of the Mongol invasion in the thirteenth century, migrated to the north-western region of Mainland South-East Asia. The conquest of the land was conducted by warlords who rapidly formed small principalities or *meuangs*³¹, which in turned were linked within loose confederation structures, such as the "Twelve thousands rice-fields" (*Sip Song Pan Na*) or the "Twelve

²⁹ By the term 'Tai', I refer to the language family and their speakers. It therefore includes the contemporary Lao, Thai and Shan populations.

³⁰ Wolters, in fact, is said to have borrowed the term *mandala* from Charles Higham's book (1989), *The Archaeology of Mainland Southeast Asia* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

Tai Principalities" (*Sip Song Chau Tai*). But the most powerful war chiefs disrupted that balanced political model to subjugate weaker *meuang*s. This second stage of conquest led to further political centralisation and, eventually, to the formation of a state centred on a particular *meuang*: Chieng Mai for Lan Na; Luang Prabang (and later, Vientiane) for Lan Xang; and Ayutthaya for Siam (Condominas 1980: 270-271).

These conquerors were what Wolters dubbed the "men of prowess", endowed with "the spiritual and leadership resources [...] for mobilizing settlements and *mandalas* in pre- and protohistoric mainland South-East Asia" (Wolters 1999: 112). The "men of prowess" were also considered to be "Siva-like figures" for possessing such mighty qualities (Wolters 1999: 112)³². In effect, the likening to Siva played a crucial role in the development of South-East Asian conceptions of political authority. The South-East Asian élite adapted Hindu religious beliefs to develop a personal cult centred on the Siva-like man, through which they could legitimate their rule. This perception is fundamental as it implies that religious ideas legitimate political expansion and order. The earliest law code to have survived from the Lan Xang period, known as the *Law of Khun Bôrom* and written in Xieng Khuang in north-eastern 'Laos'³³ in 1422, refers in detail to the structure of early Lao society. The latter consisted of four categories: aristocracy, free peasants or commoners (*phai*), slaves (*kha*), and at the bottom, the non-ethnic Lao. As Stuart-Fox explains:

³¹ Condominas defines *meuang* as a generic term that refers to all types of Tai political and administrative organisations, whether be they a state or a town (Condominas 1980: 267).

³² This perception originated from the seminal teaching of the "devotional movement" known as *bhakti* by Indian religious teachers to the South-East Asian élite. Hindu devolutionism proclaimed that "supreme spiritual power" or "cosmic power (*sákti*)", that of the creator god Siva, could be attained by means of asceticism (Wolters 1999: 111).

³³ I use quotation marks here to emphasise the fact that I am referring to colonial Laos as opposed to the present-day Lao polity.

At the apex stood the king, surrounded by his powerful lords comprising the *Sena Amat* [Council of Nobles]. [...] Below the nobility came the free peasantry who were valued as productive farmers and soldiers, for every able-bodied free man was expected to fight. Other ethnic groups, the Lao Thoeng [sic], abided by their own laws and customs. They stood entirely outside the pale of Tai-Lao society, their status even lower than slaves (*kha*), let alone domestic servants (*khôy*).

(Stuart-Fox 1998: 47)

In the organisation of the Lao *mandala*, the religious-political order indeed served to legitimise the relations of inequality by providing for the subject population an explanation of their position in the merit-ranked social order. Each individual's position corresponded to a social and political status as well as to a specific position in the production system to which were attached privileges and duties. The hierarchy was also justified by religious principles. Accordingly, the non-Tai peoples (or non-ethnic Lao in the Lan Xang kingdom) were believed to be condemned to the most degrading tasks because of their original exclusion from the religious (Buddhist) mainstream as recounted in the ethnic Lao myth of the origin of mankind (see below).

3.1.3. Myth and cosmology

In his study of Lao religious structures, Charles Archaimbault showed that the unequal relationships between the ethnic Lao and the non-ethnic Lao peoples were inscribed in the ethnic Lao myth of the origin of mankind, known as the myth of *Khun Bôrom* (Archaimbault 1973). This cosmology divided the world between the descendants of the deities (*Khun Bôrom* was himself the son of the king of deities), called the *then*, and the human beings who were born to marrows that grew on earth. Originally, inside these vegetables, the ethnic Lao and non-ethnic Lao were similar, but as soon as they came

out, from two different holes, they became distinct from one another. From then on, there were the ethnic Lao on one side and the 'Kha', i.e. the non-ethnic Lao, on the other. Archaimbault wrote, thus:

Whereas within the marrows, social distinctions were non-existent, once out of the marrows, a discrimination was carefully established between the different clans and between the Lao and the aborigines. The Kha, who came out from a special hole made by a glowing hot drill, were settled in the mountains where they cultivated ray, while the Lao, settled in the plain, allocated to themselves the paddy fields.

(Archaimbault 1973: 77)³⁴

The role of the myth, among other functions, helped to give legitimacy to the existing social order by conflating the latter with a putative natural order. It asserted the right of the ethnic Lao to rule over the indigenous peoples. It also justified the politico-religious order by placing the Buddhist kings in the rank of deities, since they were the descendants of *Khun Bôrom* whose seven sons went to establish different kingdoms in the north-western region of Mainland South-East Asia³⁵. Thus, *Khun Lô*, the eldest son of *Khun Bôrom*, founded Meuang S'va, which would later become the kingdom of Luang Prabang (Archaimbault 1973: 105).

On the other hand, Archaimbault also revealed a more complex relationship than the traditional hierarchy placing the king above his rulers and his slaves. He noted that the

³⁴ "Or, si au sein des courges régnait l'indistinction, dès la sortie des courges, une discrimination fut soigneusement établie entre les différents clans et entre les Lao et les aborigènes. Les Khà sortis par un trou spécial foré au fer rouge furent installés sur les montagnes où ils cultivèrent des ray, tandis que les Lao établis dans la plaine s'adjugèrent les rizières (...)" (Archaimbault 1973: 77).

rites of Luang Prabang were also charged with the right of the aborigines to the soil, as they were its first occupants. He wrote:

The fight that opposed the conquering Lao to the indigenous peoples, which fight remained outside cultural boundaries, was replaced – at least, according to the texts – by an *agonal*³⁶ game, the function of which was to re-introduce temporarily the barbarians into the community, and to trace back the evolution of an exclusive right on land.

(Archaimbault 1973: 79, original stress)³⁷

Similarly, Aijmer challenged the common perception of a natural and simplistic politico-religious hierarchy (Aijmer 1979). In so doing, he referred mainly to Archaimbault's works on ethnic Lao culture and religion. His purpose is not to deny the ethnic Lao domination; rather, by highlighting certain features of ethnic Lao traditional rituals, he provides a basis for a more subtle understanding of the ethnic Lao-'Kha' relations. Aijmer develops his thesis through the analysis of the ritual that was performed at the New Year festival in Luang Prabang. During this ceremony, the aborigines had to offer to the king of Laos cucurbitaceans called "fruits of strength, fruits of longevity". According to Aijmer, this ritual reveals the ethnic Lao recognition of the 'Kha' rights to land. He writes, thus:

³⁵ The kingdoms of Annam, Nyuen, Siam and P'uon, the lattermost corresponding to the present-day province of Xieng Khuang.

³⁶ For the meaning of the game played in Luang Prabang, Archaimbault refers the reader to another of his writings, "Une cérémonie en l'honneur des génies de la mine de sel de Ban Bô" in *La Fête du T'at* (1970) (Archaimbault 1970: 87).

³⁷ "Au combat qui opposa les conquérants lao et les aborigènes, combat qui demeura en dehors des bornes de la culture, fut substitué – du moins selon les textes – un jeu agonal chargé de réintroduire momentanément les barbares au sein de la communauté, et de retracer l'évolution d'un droit exclusivement foncier" (Archaimbault 1973: 79).

The king being a descendant of divine beings, has affiliation with heavens, and, by virtue of his divine celestial nature, he is naturally excluded from rights to land. Thus the pumpkins ritual expresses the transfer of these rights to land to the king, with an emphasis on the control of produce and production. In this ritual situation the Kha seem to operate not as subordinated representatives of a conquered minority group stripped of their rights by an intruding and mighty for usurping political control; rather they act as masters of the land and representatives of the locality –the pumpkins people as it were- in dealing with divine forces; in doing so they express their ultimate and exclusive rights to land as well as their continuing rights to allocate these terrestrial rights to the Luang Prabang king.

(Aijmer 1979: 740-41)³⁸

3.2. Inclusion of the highland peoples in the modern world : the French period

In a very stimulating and well-documented article, Oscar Salemink argued that the montagnard³⁹ identity in the Central Highlands of Vietnam under French colonial rule was a construction on the part of the French, who "through a deliberate and carefully planned ethnic policy, supported, protected and exploited this distinct identity for their own purposes" (Salemink 1995: 265). Salemink obviously challenged the assumption that there existed a primordial montagnard-Vietnamese animosity. Furthermore, he

³⁸ Aijmer goes even further by claiming that the Kha and the king shared "blood brotherhood" since in the foundation myth of Luang Prabang, the eldest son of the founding king, *Khun Lô*, was given the name of the dispossessed indigenous chief, in recognition of his former rights to land. For Aijmer, that act established a relation of kinship between the two royal lines, for this transfer of name implies "the sharing of their respective protective spirits and symbols of ancestry" (Aijmer 1979: 745). But the existence of this relation of kinship is exclusive to the Luang Prabang cosmology that, as Archaimbault demonstrated, is a product of the Kingdom's particular history. Aijmer admits, therefore, "[the] contract [blood brotherhood] which has united the two ethnic groups is a particular solution which has emerged out of a particular historical situation. Outside the domain, the ideology of inequality applies" (Aijmer 1979: 745). Nevertheless, these elements of the myth are still revealing of the ambiguities that surrounded the relationships between the conquerors and their subject population.

showed that this montagnard identity was built up around an opposition to the Vietnamese identity in "a process of *ethnicization*", which he defined as the relation of a population to a *nation-state*. He then contrasted the process of ethnicization to the process of "tribalization"⁴⁰, "which essentially defines indigenous peoples in relation to *territories*" (Salemink 1995: 263, original stress). In other words, the ethnic group is self-perceived and subject whereas the tribe is object and conceived by others. The former is mobile and has awakened to an ethnic political consciousness while the latter is ascribed to a place, with no clear sense of identification with a political unit any broader than the local level. My intention here is to test Salemink's thesis in the case of colonial Laos by asking whether the French were involved in the awakening of ethnic consciousness amongst highland populations in 'Laos'.

3.2.1. Colonial writings

The objectification of the 'Kha'

The writings of Reinach (1911) and Le Boulanger (1931) on the peoples of 'Laos' were fairly typical of their time. According to these French authors, there were two major racial categories: the Tai and the 'Kha'. But, if the Tai category was justified to a certain extent by linguistic criteria, the 'Kha' grouping appears to be much more dubious. The 'Kha' were first assigned specific morphological features. Le Boulanger, who based his book on earlier French ethnographic data, described the 'Kha' as the "traditional type of savage with their dark skin, straight nose, non-slanting eyes" (Le Boulanger 1931: 15).

In fact, the French re-appropriated the Lao word *kha* to construct a pseudo-scientific category, whereas the Lao term originally referred to a class and social representation.

³⁹ French word that has become a common term synonymous with 'highlanders' or 'highland population'.

In other words, the 'Kha' were turned into an *objective* ethnic category, in spite of the fact that, among themselves, there were differences - in languages, customs and clothing - which made Reinach note, in contradiction to his own argument:

Scattered, with no links between them, spread out so that they would offer less resistance, speaking different dialects, deprived of common interests, the various Kha tribes appeared before us under a degenerated aspect.

(Reinach 1911: 126)⁴¹

In effect, the 'Kha' were singled out for their indigenous origins, as well as identified irremediably as 'primitive' compared to the more 'civilised' Tai peoples, on the basis of 'scientific' works. Their status as the most ancient inhabitants of Laos, as the two authors argued, had been demonstrated by the excavations carried out by the Pavie⁴² Mission. Some pre-historical discoveries, such as basic tools and weapons, served also to prove their low level of development as well as to provide an explanation for their rapid subjection by more 'evolved' conquerors (Reinach 1911: 125-26). Similarly, it is interesting to note that the adoption of Buddhist religion by some 'Kha' groups was considered as a sign of evolution; for instance, Reinach observed that the "moral recovery [of the Kha Khouènes, Khmous and Lemets [sic]] had already begun with the practice of Buddhism" (Reinach 1911: 128). There were, therefore, some hopes that they would emancipate themselves and eventually dissolve their intrinsic 'inferiority' by

⁴⁰ A term that he borrowed from Georges Condominas (1966) "Classes sociales et groupes tribaux au Sud-Vietnam" in *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie*, Vol. XL, p. 168.

⁴¹ "Disséminées, sans lien entre elles, dispersées pour qu'elles offrissent moins de résistance, parlant des dialectes différents, privées d'intérêts communs, les divers tribus et peuplades khas se présentent à nous sous un aspect dégénéré" (Reinach 1911: 126).

⁴² Auguste Pavie, the first French vice-consul, arrived in Luang Prabang in 1887.

mixing with 'superior' races, such as the Lue, Lao or Thai populations (Reinach 1911: 128)⁴³.

Naming tribes

The demand for the identification and classification of the colonised peoples under the French administration was driven by various purposes, some of them interrelated: scientific enquiry on the part of ethnographers, proselytism in the case of missionaries, administrative requirements for colonial rulers and genuine fascination for the rest. Ethnographers and colonial rulers were looking for homogeneous units to be used as analytical tools; hence, the common use of 'tribe' or 'tribal society' to classify people. For Salemink, this process of "tribalisation" progressively corresponded with a "political reality" through the arbitrary linking of the 'tribes' to 'territories' (Salemink 1995: 263). Similarly, in his short essay, Edwin Ardener puts into perspective the significance of contemporary and colonial ethnic labels by showing that they rarely correspond with pre-colonial identities. He also argues that they function in a recursive way: the labels used by colonisers, missionaries and foreign scholars were returned to and appropriated by the people in question (Ardener 1989). In fact, as Salemink observed, the "convergence of ethnography and administration, most notably of linguistics and education and of customary law and policing, resulted in a practical reduction of the number of tribes for administrative purposes" (Salemink 1995: 270). In

⁴³ Yet the French sinologist, Henri Maspéro, denied the assumption that grouped the 'Kha' as an ethnic category of its own. Compared to the works of Le Boulanger and Reinach, his contribution to the study of the peoples of French Indochina was undeniably pioneering. His legacy includes his famous distinction between "hierarchical" and "anarchic" political organisations (Maspéro 1929). This opposition included other variables, such as religion (collectively practised for the former, but an individual or family matter for the latter), family structure (patriarchal for the former; patriarchal or matriarchal for the latter), and language (tonal for the former, mono-tonal for the latter). Different combinations of these criteria formed different cultural types. For Maspéro, the "tribes" that he classified as anarchic political organisations were lumped together by the "civilised neighbouring" populations (the "Annamites", the "Cambodians", the "Laotians") under the general terms of "Moi", "Pnon", "Kha", respectively. He asserted that "these names have no ethnic value and label without distinction all those peoples that are considered as savages" (Maspéro 1929: 233).

colonial Laos, the 'Kha' category became an objective representation, not only through fallacious scientific arguments but also to serve administrative and political purposes. The 'Kha' were identified as a category in their own right in the colonial taxation system and were therefore subjected to special requirements, which, in turn, reinforced the process of objectification.

3.2.2. French administration

The policy of mise en valeur

When the French annexed the Lao territories east of the Mekong river at the expense of Siam in 1893, they still held high expectations as to the profit they would be able to make from the exploitation of the country's natural resources and from the trade between 'Laos' and the other components of French Indochina. However, commercial opportunities and fruitful investments in the country were to remain part of the "myth of the fabulous wealth of Laos" (Stuart-Fox 1995: 118): the country neither met its own administration's expenses nor benefited France. Commercial hopes were exaggerated and the country's budget always showed a deficit (Stuart-Fox 1995: 122).

Two contradictory principles underpinned the French administration of Indochina: on the one hand, colonisation had to be 'cheap'; on the other, reaping profits from colonies was an equally strong imperative, a strategy known in French as the *mise en valeur* (Brocheux and Hémery 1994: 74). These objectives reflected, in effect, two radically different perspectives in terms of political rule. The 'cheap domination' perspective would merely require a type of indirect rule, following the British model in India. Conversely, the *mise en valeur* postulated a strongly interventionist administration (Brocheux and Hémery 1994: 75). The latter view eventually triumphed when Paul

Doumer took up his position as General Governor of Indochina in 1897. His arrival resulted in the organisation of a systematic and bureaucratic centralised administration.

Colonial system of taxation

Under Doumer, a more sophisticated taxation system was one of the first reforms to be implemented. Indochina had to become a self-supporting colony, and tax collection represented the fundamental financial lever to facilitate the transformation of the colonies into profitable markets and producers. One of the impacts of the new system of taxation was to force the transformation of a predominantly subsistence economy into a monetary one, as money progressively replaced barter as a means of exchange. Personal annual tax – to be paid in cash, not kind -was required from every male between the ages of 18 and 60. In addition, every male between the ages 18 and 45 was obliged to serve *corvée* labour annually; the work generally involved the construction of colonial infrastructure, stimulated by the *mise en valeur* policy (Stuart-Fox 1997: 32).

In effect, as early as 1896 a distinction was drawn within the taxation system between the ethnic Lao and the non-ethnic Lao. For instance, in southern 'Laos', a tax differential was established between the ethnic Lao and the population of the Bolovens Plateau, on the basis that the latter were considered "more primitive and poorer". Consequently, the ethnic Lao paid 2 piasters a year personal tax against 1.5 piasters for the people living on the Plateau, namely the non-ethnic Lao. Conversely, the number of days of *corvée* was higher for the latter (15 days a year) than for the ethnic Lao (10 days a year). By 1914, the number of days had increased to 20 and 16 days a year, respectively (Moppert 1978: 98). However, *corvée* labour could be avoided by an additional cash payment. As a matter of fact, the ethnic differentiation would widen through the years, with the

ethnic Lao serving fewer days of *corvée* by redeeming them, while the non-ethnic Lao would be expected to perform more *prestations* (service) as a compensation for a reduced tax rate, or for their incapacity to meet tax demands (Gunn 1990: 55).

By 1940, a complex system was applied with five different categories differentiated along class, land ownership, professional and ethnic lines. The last two categories set apart, on the one hand, the "Lao, Vietnamese and 'evolved' montagnards such as the Hmong, Man, Lu [sic], Yao and Kha Loven [sic], who paid 2.5 piasters a year personal tax"; and, on the other hand, "those montagnards such as Kha [sic] and Phoutheng [sic] who paid 1.5 piasters per annum personal tax" (Gunn 1990: 52)⁴⁴. Similarly, the annual *corvée* labour was fixed by following the reverse order with the 'Kha' serving more days than the rest of the population who, furthermore, could afford to take advantage of the redemption mechanism. This practice indeed appeared to be common, with Gunn noting that "[i]n the period from 1909 to 1912, the number of *prestation* days redeemed was increased to a rate almost equal to one half of the total contribution of resources to the budget" (Gunn 1990: 50).

The French made heavy demands on the upland peoples and generally had little respect for their customs and traditions. For instance, they ignored their agricultural calendar and required days of *corvée* even during crucial seasons such as the sowing period, whereas in pre-colonial times, the manual labour was required only after the harvest season (Moppert 1981: 49). It was not uncommon as well for the villagers to spend several days, which were not included in the days of *corvée*, reaching their work site on foot. Besides, apart from the roadwork *corvée*, the French demanded portage and mail

⁴⁴ Quoted, in turn, from the colonial document dated 1940 and entitled, "Devoirs en matière fiscale des autorités provinciales françaises et laotiennes et des autorités cantonales et communales laotiennes", Résidence Supérieure au Laos, Vientiane, p. 19.

delivery services, and also made requisitions for clearing rocks from the Mekong or for repair works (Gunn 1990: 50). Therefore, it was this compulsory labour, rather than the tax charges, that provoked great resentment and discontent among the mountain peoples, who bore the harshest demands of the French authorities.

A cross-racial and centralised administration

The French, however, hardly disrupted the pre-modern Lao political organisation. The colonial system entailed the integration and subordination of the whole Lao structure within the colonial state system. The French authorities simply appointed French officials to the highest positions in the provinces, which had been specifically created to encompass the traditional districts (*tasseng*), grouped into cantons (*meuang*). The French, meanwhile, assumed the right to approve all appointments. The main reason the French maintained the pre-modern Lao system in this form was the financial constraints they faced: the administration of Laos, if not profitable, had to be as inexpensive as possible, hence the extremely small number of colonial staff in 'Laos' and the reliance on Lao political structures (McCoy 1970: 78)⁴⁵.

The French instituted, moreover, a cross-racial administration among the mountain peoples. In doing so, they manipulated ethnic relationships so as to ensure a system of indirect rule in areas where direct control would have cost too much in men and matériel. In McCoy's words, "[t]he French used traditional racial hierarchies where they were strong, reinforced them where they were weak, and created them where they did not exist" (McCoy 1970: 80). This system, combined with the bureaucratic taxation

⁴⁵ In 1914, there were 24 French officials in the whole of upper Laos (Brocheux and Hémery 1994: 89). McCoy quotes the case of Saravane Province, which in 1938 had only three French officials to administer 6 cantons, 36 districts and 596 villages (McCoy 1970: 78).

system, ineluctably engendered or exacerbated ethnic conflicts. As an often-quoted example, Izikowitz, in his landmark work on the Lamet of northern Laos, mentioned (albeit briefly) the tensions created by the cross-racial administration between the Lamet and their neighbours, the Lue (Izikowitz 1951: 346).

However, the most unpopular elements of the colonial system were, according to many sources (for example, Moppert (1978)) the *lam kha* and the *tasseng*. The former was an individual, usually of ethnic Lao origins, who used to play the traditional role of intermediary (especially for trading) between the mountain peoples and the ethnic Lao. Such individuals were later employed by the French as interpreters and messengers to pass on to the highland villagers the French orders. They therefore were an essential link in the administration of the 'Kha' regions, and most of them abused their position, creating great resentment amongst the population (Moppert 1981: 50)⁴⁶. The *tasseng* were even more despised due to their role in the collection of taxes. They also had the right to ask for corvée and numerous other services from the villages that came within their remit. These 'civil servants' serving the French administration, invested with authority by a great power, often behaved as despots in their small 'kingdoms'. Not surprisingly, they were usually the first victims of the insurrections.

The combination of these two factors - ruthless administration and the colonial system of taxation - greatly contributed to the creation and/or exacerbation of inter-ethnic tensions, and thus to the uprisings in colonial Laos.

⁴⁶ The *kouang*, *lam haou* or *van* has been characterised by the Lao communist leader, Phoumi Vongvichit, as "a ferocious regime of exploitation" (Gunn 1990: 49, quoted from Phoumi Vongvichit 1968: 36).

3.2.3. A process of ethnicisation in colonial Laos?

In addition to being portrayed as 'primitive', the 'Kha' were also represented as rebels (*peuple insoumis*), in contrast to the ethnic Lao, who complied more readily with the French administration's wishes (partly because they were better treated, in relative terms). Moppert ironically described the myth of the "dangerous land", inhabited by no less dangerous 'savages', as the "zone of barbarity [between] the two zones of civilisation (Lao and Vietnamese). [...] The barbarian is the one who is not like the others. The proof is that he does not want to understand that his interest is to submit" (Moppert 1978: 35)⁴⁷. For the French authorities, there were only two possible responses (both radical) that could resolve the 'problem', i.e. the resistance of some groups of highland peoples: extermination or domestication (*apprivoisement*). Thus transpired the infamous policy of 'pacification'.

There was a series of highland peoples' rebellions, beginning in 1895⁴⁸, reaching a peak between 1910 and 1916, and finally dying out in the 1930s, all of which expressed resistance to almost every aspect of the French administration. As early as 1901, some Mon-Khmer highland groups led by their chief, Ong Keo, embarked upon armed resistance to the French, on the Bolovens Plateau in southern Laos⁴⁹. Ong Keo was eventually killed in 1910 but the struggle was carried on by Kommandam, who had been one of his right hand men. Kommandam managed to resist the French for almost thirty years (he was eventually killed in 1936) by conducting a guerrilla campaign throughout the highlands. He was not alone in his struggle, though, and through the

⁴⁷ "Le barbare, c'est celui qui n'est pas comme les autres. La preuve, c'est qu'il ne veut pas comprendre que son intérêt est de se soumettre" (Moppert 1978: 35).

⁴⁸ The first serious violent uprising irrupted that year in southern Laos.

⁴⁹ I shall return to this revolt later.

years he rallied to his cause partisans among the highland populations⁵⁰ (Moppert 1981: 53).

For Gunn, the "shared montagnard ethnic identity or sense of separateness from outsiders" could explain the insurrections, although he obviously prefers to stress the material causes, such as colonial tax, corvée requirements and the abuses of the *lam kha* (Gunn 1985: 59). According to Moppert, the main factor behind the revolts is to be found in the form of the traditional dichotomy between 'valley peoples' and 'hill peoples'. As mentioned above, the hill peoples managed to preserve their political autonomy to a certain extent, due to the topography of the region; hence, there remained amongst them a strong sentiment of independence, which was ferociously defended on the ground, through armed resistance if necessary. The French administration neglected this fundamental attribute of the highland peoples, and consequently had to face the consequences of their ruthless policy (Moppert 1978: 227).

One may argue that there existed a 'sense of separateness from outsiders' among the highland peoples even before the arrival of the French. Contacts with the Lao population (albeit limited) in the form of trade and tribute to the lowland rulers (as outlined in Section 3.1) made possible the fundamental distinction between 'we' and 'them'. A shared montagnard (or whatever label is applied) ethnic identity, as opposed to a Lao identity, did not exist, though. The idea of an ethnic identity that would have gone beyond the level of the village or a cluster of villages appears rather unlikely. The sense of self (as opposed to the 'others') was not attached to a political entity any broader than one's immediate environment. Rather, I suggest that the French policy of pacification heightened the highlanders' fierce sense of independence, and *indirectly* fostered

⁵⁰ Moppert refers to him as a Nha Heun. However, according to my field notes, he was a Laven. In both

political ethnic consciousness among some members of the highland population in south-eastern 'Laos'.

Kommandam: the first 'Kha' political leader

Kommandam's political programme went further than that of any other rebel ethnic leader. He was not only fighting against the French administration's abuses but also endorsed his claims with a sense of common identity, embodied in the *Khom* race. Kommandam's strategy to identify his partisans as the *Khom* was nothing less than remarkable. He appointed himself as *Chao Phraya Khom* (Great Chief of the *Khom*) and would refer to his movement as "We, the *Khom*". He also invented a *Khom* writing system as a medium for propaganda and for the co-ordination of activities between very remote ethnic groups⁵¹, stirring up resistance among the hill population so that they would not comply with the French authorities' requirements (Moppert 1981: 53). By the late 1920s, Kommandam was explicitly claiming a special political status that reflected a clear ethnic consciousness. Moppert wrote:

In one of his last known letters (22 February 1927), Kommandam, while not challenging the French administration over Laos, makes a condition [for its continued existence]: that is, every member of the *Khom* race would be considered as belonging to a distinct race, that would be allowed to live in its own region and, above all, would be cognisance of the regime under which it would be placed, and for how long.

(Moppert 1981: 54)⁵²

cases, he belonged to the Mon-Khmer ethno-linguistic category.

⁵¹ There are, in fact, very few sources regarding the extent of Kommandam's support amongst the highland population.

⁵² "Et dans une de ses dernières lettres connues (22 Février 1927), Kommandam, tout en ne remettant pas en cause l'administration française sur le Laos, y met cependant une condition, à savoir que tous les

The origins of the term are not clear but it seems that *Khom* was an old word used by the Tai peoples in ancient times – perhaps before the foundation of the Lan Xang kingdom - to designate the Mon-Khmer-speaking population of Laos (Stuart-Fox 1998: 17)⁵³. Later on, the ethnic Lao texts, such as the *Nithan Khun Bôrom* ("the Legend of Khun Bôrom"), would refer to them as *Kha kau* ("old slaves") (Stuart-Fox 1998: 164).

Kommandam was perfectly aware of the name's historical meaning when he used it in his political propaganda. Moppert reveals that, in 1927, he refused to pay taxes to the French authorities, and instead stated that he would remit them to the Prince of Bassac⁵⁴, in accordance with the ancient political model that supposedly established Bassac authorities as the "rulers of the *Khom* race" (Moppert 1981: 54). Given the fact that the Kingdom of Champassak was not formally founded until the early eighteenth century, Kommandam was probably referring to the *meuang* which, having been under Khmer rule, was then loosely incorporated within the *mandala* of Lan Xang around the fourteenth century. By proclaiming his disciples and himself as *Khom* people, Kommandam in fact re-appropriated the status of original inhabitants of 'Laos'. His partisans were no longer the French 'Kha', confined in an outside naming. Instead, they became the *Khom* or ancient 'Kha', to whom was, to a certain extent, attached a glorious past, embodied in the Khmer empire and the Lan Xang kingdom. In brief, Kommandam tried to create a primordial identity rooted in a mythical past and bound together with blood ties through common descent.

khoms soient considérés comme une race à part, qu'on les laisse vivre dans leur région et surtout, qu'on leur fasse connaître le régime sous lequel ils seront placés, et pour combien de temps" (Moppert 1981: 54).

⁵³ Stuart-Fox originally quoted the information from Charles F. Keyes (1974) "A Note on the Ancient Towns and Cities of Northeastern Thailand" in *Southeast Asian Studies*, 11, p. 503.

A shared montagnard ethnic identity in the Bolovens?

In order to present a complete picture, it is also necessary to question the notion of the Bolovens Plateau as a *geographical* entity in order to demonstrate that Kommandam's appeal for the *Khom* race was the result of a complex combination of factors, rather than merely an isolated phenomenon. The Bolovens Plateau is only a portion of an area known as the High Plateaux which, from the North-West to the South-East and across the Lao-Vietnamese border, comprises the Bolovens Plateau and the Central Highlands of Vietnam (namely, the regions of Kontum, Pleiku and the Da Lac Plateau). The Central Highlands, originally included in French Laos as early as 1893, were later transferred to the region of Annam in 1904 and 1905. The detachment of Stung Treng from 'Laos' to 'Cambodia' in 1904 also reduced the administrative territory of southern Laos (Stuart-Fox 1997: 27). These changes were usually for reasons of administrative convenience, and therefore contributed to the creation of arbitrary *geographical* entities. The Bolovens Plateau was just such an entity: its boundaries remained fuzzy, vaguely delimited in the North by the Sedone valley and in the South by the Attapeu-Champassak provincial border.

Crucially, the Plateau is composed of two terraces, of which the highest (1200 m), known as the "Royal Plain", had been seen by the French authorities and entrepreneurs as a new Far-East *Eldorado* (Moppert 1978: 17). The authorities and the entrepreneurs had been entertaining the fantasy that the Plateau would be a highly profitable area for growing products such as cardamom, coffee or tobacco. The dreams were still alive under the Protectorate. But by the time the French left in 1954, however, none of these great plans had been achieved. In their attempt to 'unblock' and to integrate the country

⁵⁴ Bassac is the other name for Champassak.

into the Indochinese economy – and consequently to weaken the trade between Laos and Thailand - the French had in mind the idea of an all-weather road (and later on, a railway) through the Annamite mountain chain dividing Laos from Vietnam. But the local labour force, i.e. the male population living in these remote areas, was generally insufficient to make possible the French authorities' overreaching ambitions. As a consequence, these construction projects, although only partially completed, incurred great costs in time and labour, especially upon those forced to work on the projects in order to fulfil their *corvée* obligations.

Under the French, the people inhabiting the plateau were dubbed the *Bolovens*. The category was obviously an outsider naming since the people were calling themselves *Djerou*⁵⁵. Dauplay listed other "races" living on the "edge and the slopes" of the plateau: there were the "*Souei*, the *Phou Thay*, the *Alak* and the *Nha-Heun* [sic]" But he made no mention of other ethnic peoples, such as the *Ngae*, whom yet were living in that area (Dauplay 1929: 7). As a matter of fact, the population arbitrarily called the *Bolovens* may well have consisted of more than one ethnic group, but the reification of this invented outside naming was reinforced by an administrative reality. In May 1907, under the threat of further resistance and insurrections, a distinct administrative territory was created with the delineation of a *Boloven* Province, the centre of which was sited on the Plateau. The objective, essentially, was to gather together all the so-called *Boloven* households under a unique authority. Indeed, it was believed that the cause of their anger and frustration lay within the exploitative system of cross-racial administration. Dauplay wrote, thus:

⁵⁵ Who are also known as the *Laven* (or *Loven*) at the present time (Chamberlain 1995, Chazée 2000).

The then Superior Resident (Mr. G. Mahé) attributed, and his opinion was shared by the majority of the Europeans aware of the current affairs in Lower Laos, the long-lived rebellion to the absence of leadership unity and to discontent, as a result of the division of the Boloven into six distinct groups under leaders who are Laotian and, consequently, alien to their race.

(Dauplay 1929: 42)⁵⁶

Later on, the politics of creating the 'Moi' in the Central Highlands of Vietnam would also affect –to a lesser extent, though – the South of Laos. In 1935, a *Commissariat des Confins Moi* ("Authority of the Moi Border Regions") was set up, with the establishment of offices in 1936, in Ban Me Thuot in the Central Highlands and on the Lao side of the border in Ban Tampril (where it was called "the Delegation of the Sekong [river]" (Moppert 1978: 43). The *Commissariat* was then replaced in October 1939 by the *Inspection Générale des Pays Moïs* ("General Inspectorate of the Moi Regions"). As soon as the following year, the newly appointed *Haut-Commissaire des pays moïs* ("High Commissioner of the Moi Regions"), Lieutenant Omer Sarrault, claimed confidently that "the ethnic and geographical unity of the 'Pays Moïs' should include 'the totality of autochthonous populations' both in upland Annam and Cochinchina and in Eastern Cambodia and Southern Laos" (Salemink 1995: 273).

Still, there is no evidence that the French deliberately concocted a plan to create an "essential unity of the Montagnards" opposed to the ethnic Lao identity, as they did in 'Vietnam'. The 'Moi' policy was very much focused on the Central Highlands, and was very limited elsewhere in Indochina. The most notable example of this policy was the

⁵⁶ "Le Résident Supérieur d'alors, (M.G. Mahé) attribuait, et son opinion était partagée par la majorité des Européens au courant des affaires du Bas Laos, la longue durée de la rébellion à l'absence d'unité de

detachment of a montagnard territory (under French rule), the *Pays Montagnard du Sud-Indochinois* (PMSI) or the Special Administrative Area, in the Central Highlands in 1946. As a matter of fact, the creation of an autonomous montagnard zone was an element of a much broader strategy: the containment of the Viet Minh, the northern Vietnamese Communists. The First Indochina War effectively began in December 1946. Less than two years later, in March 1948, the French announced the formation of a Tai Federation to include all the Tai-speaking ethnic groups of the northern Vietnamese highlands living on the western bank of the Red River. The montagnards of the PMSI and the highlanders of the Tai Federation were thus expected by the French to oppose, and subsequently to weaken, the Vietnamese state by claiming rights for cultural and political autonomy (Hickey 1982: 401)⁵⁷.

In 'Laos', such federalist move did not occur. Kommandam's political claims were not a direct consequence of deliberate manoeuvres on the part of the French administration. His demand for an exclusive *Khom* political status may, however, have been influenced by the French ethnic policy, and especially by the creation of a distinct administrative unit on the Bolovens Plateau in 1907. Kommandam demanded, as early as 1910, that the "other races inhabiting the plateau [of the Bolovens] such as the Nha Eun [sic], Souei and Phou Thay were to be driven off" (Gunn 1985: 52). Kommandam was the first leader to unify scattered highland peoples on such a scale and to give, or try to give, them a sense of common ethnic identity. His request for a separate status for the *Khom* should be interpreted, however, as a claim for political autonomy under a superior authority (be it ethnic Lao or French) rather than as a demand for self-

direction et au mécontentement, résultant de la division des Boloven en six groupes séparés, relevant de chefs laotiens et, par conséquent, étrangers à leur race" (Dauplay 1929: 42).

⁵⁷ The situation in the North was even more explosive since the Chinese Communists came to power in January 1949, thereby providing the Viet Minh with a powerful ally controlling the northern border.

determination. His struggle never endorsed a national dimension, nor did Kommandam ask for self-determination: the rebellion he led was not a national liberation war.

I have shown in this section that the French, for their own interests, contributed to the reification of the highland peoples by imposing a name and a territory on them. Yet, the case of Kommandam shows that these peoples were not ineluctably petrified by the process of tribalisation. On the other hand, the process of ethnicisation, following Salemink's definition, was not fully achieved, though it did begin. Kommandam's insurrection was simply suppressed too early: upon his death in 1936, Laos was still a Protectorate. Nevertheless, his struggle, as well as that of other highland leaders, heralded what was to occur in the French and American Wars, when highland peoples would again be pulled into the mainstream. Though all the minority revolts under French rule failed, they show the fiercely independent character of these people, their self-distinction from the lowland population and the beginning of their awakening to political consciousness. Finally, these rebellions very much reveal the influence of external factors, which would continue to play a determinant role after the departure of the French.

3.3. National identity awakening in Laos

3.3.1. The formation of early Lao nationalism

The impacts of colonial rule on indigenous societies were many and various. One of them was the imposition, and the adoption by the indigenous nationalists and future rulers of the country, of the notion of fixed frontiers. As is well known, the geographical boundaries created by European colonialists were new in the sense that they did not correspond to the political entities that had existed previously in the region. Stuart-Fox wrote, "the European concept of a centrally administered territorial state, with clearly

marked, agreed-upon boundaries, came into conflict with the Southeast Asian *mandala* model based on tributary relations with subsidiary centres" (Stuart-Fox 1997: 21). By the mid-nineteenth century the kingdom of Lan Xang was in disarray. It had been divided since the seventeenth century into three principalities, Vientiane, Luang Prabang and Champassak, each claiming its heritage and the status of kingdom. Two centuries later, the kingdom of Lan Xang fell under the sway of the newly ascendant Siamese power. In 1827, Vientiane was destroyed by Siamese forces and the kingdom of Lan Xang disappeared from the map. Champassak and the Khorat Plateau (in what is now North-East Thailand), as well as Lao *meuang*s throughout the middle Mekong region, all became tributaries of Bangkok. Only Luang Prabang maintained a semblance of independence by paying tribute not only to Bangkok and Hué but also to Beijing. The arrival of the French, however, gave 'Laos' a new territorial entity. On 3 October 1893, a treaty was signed between the Siamese and the French, under which the former ceded the East bank of the Mekong to the latter. This act was supposed to be only the first stage in the expansion of French Indochina. However, the French did not reconstitute the former kingdom of Lan Xang; instead they reshaped its territorial boundaries by playing a geopolitical game and by following their vision of Indochina, a vision which entailed a narrow conception of 'Laos' as a mere extension of 'Vietnam'.

The boundaries of modern Laos were formed through bargaining, pressure and negotiation involving the British and the French, each trying to obstruct the other's expansion whilst maintaining their colonial possessions in mainland South-East Asia. Thus, in the decade after the treaty of 1893, France had the opportunity to extend its Lao territories to include the whole of the Khorat Plateau. British opposition prevented her from doing so, however. Essentially, Britain wanted to retain Siam as a viable independent buffer state between British India and French Indochina. However, the

French failure to press for further territorial gains was also due to France's own attitude: by the beginning of the twentieth century, France was already exhibiting a declining interest in these matters, and as a consequence, opportunities to extend Lao territories were not fully exploited. The last major boundary change for the Lao state involved two extensions of territory West of the Mekong (Sainyabuli and part of Champassak) in February 1904. Two months later, Britain and France signed the Entente Cordiale in which they recognised their respective zones of influence. The policy of expansion was over. In the treaties of 1893, 1904 and 1907 with Siam and Britain, the French gained what they desired: "reconstitution of Cambodia, a strategic hinterland in Laos 'rounding out' their Indochinese empire, control of the Mekong river and relatively well-defined frontiers" (Stuart-Fox 1995: 121).

In reality, economically as well as strategically, French authorities saw 'Laos' as a mere extension of Vietnam, the latter being the centrepiece of their Indochinese strategy of imperialism. In a recent study, Christopher Goscha has shown how the French colonial project in Indochina was guided by a desire to make this wider political space a reality (Goscha 1995). The Vietnamese were regarded as the indigenous backbone of this project. The French thus encouraged a westward Vietnamese immigration into 'Laos' (as well as into 'Cambodia') in order to staff the administrative apparatus and to supply labour for the plantations and mines. This pro-Vietnamese policy resulted in a demographic imbalance, especially in urban areas of 'Laos'; in fact, the infrastructure of the modern economy in Laos was almost entirely non-Lao (Christie 2001: 116). 'Laos' was not seen by the French as an historic political entity in its own right. The Lao territories gained by the early twentieth century were not administrated as a single unit. The French made no attempt to unify the different regions. Instead, they adopted a dual structure: while the kingdom of Luang Prabang was maintained as a protectorate, the

rest of 'Laos' was directly administered as a colony. In his study of the political status of 'Laos', written in 1938, Katay Don Sasorith (1904-1954) criticised these different politico-administrative treatments on the grounds that they encouraged national disunity and the fragmentation of Lao historical identity. This prominent Lao politician thus argued for the project of a single political regime that would encompass the whole of France's Lao territory and unify the regionally based Lao principalities (Katay 1953: 150). As Clive Christie comments with regard to Katay's reflections:

Katay argued that, although the French had justified their take-over of Lao territory as a means of protecting the Lao people from the threat of complete absorption by Siam, their own policy of maintaining different administrations in different parts of Laos had, if anything, deepened the crisis of Lao identity. By basing their policy towards the Lao on regional dynastic identities, moreover, the French were undermining the deep-rooted sense of unity among the Lao, symbolized by their collective historical memory of the kingdom of Lan Xang. (Christie 2001: 113)

As a result of geopolitical machinations and the relatively low position assigned to Laos by France, the new political entity of 'Laos' was a truncate one; without the Khorat Plateau, France held only an under-populated fragment of the former Lao kingdom of Lan Xang. The Lao nationalist movements, including the communists, adopted these new boundaries, and *not* those of the ancient kingdom of Lan Xang, as a national spatial framework for their struggle for the independence of Laos. France did not only draw the borders of modern Laos; she also participated, albeit involuntarily, in the shaping of Lao

nationalist ideology by providing it with a 'potential, imaginable' national territory⁵⁸.

However, the French dual administration over Lao territories impeded the creation of a unified political entity, which clearly refutes the argument that the modern State of Laos was purely a French creation⁵⁹. Rather, it was the Lao declaration of independence and unity in 1945 which suddenly made the world conceive of Laos as a political entity distinct from other parts of Indochina. The political and cultural claims of the tiny Lao elite, to which Katay belonged, took on a new dimension with the events of the Second World War.

The politique indigène and the development of Lao national identity

After the fall of France in 1940 and the establishment of the French Vichy government by the German Nazi regime, Indochina came under the control of Decoux's Vichy administration. With the rise of Thailand's pan-Thai movement and the apparent willingness of the Japanese to sacrifice French Laos to the expansionist aims of its Bangkok ally, the Vichy French government realised that they needed to counter-attack if they wanted to prevent the loss of 'Laos' from French Indochina. The urgency of the situation consequently led to the development of a *politique indigène* ("indigenous policy") in Laos (Christie 2001: 114). This change in French policies was, in fact, guided by an overall strategy, the objective of which was to reinforce the loyalty of the constituent parts of Indochina to the Metropolitan power (and, hence, to diminish the risk of implosion in the course of the Second World War) by enhancing their place

⁵⁸ My argument here is clearly influenced by Thongchai Winichakul's concept of the geo-body of the nation. In a brilliant study, the Thai academic shows how Thai nationhood was created through technologies of territoriality; as he writes: "The geo-body of a nation is merely an effect of modern geographical discourse whose prime technology is a map. To a considerable extent, the knowledge about the Siamese nationhood has been created by our conception of the Siam-on-the-map, emerging from maps and existing nowhere apart from the map" (Winichakul 1994: 17).

⁵⁹ Charles F. Keyes, for instance, writes that Laos "was, in a very real sense, entirely a creation of the French" (1995: 95).

within the framework of French Indochina. Thus, under the leadership of Admiral Decoux, Governor General of Indochina from 1940 to 1945, a campaign for national renovation was launched within each separate domain of French Indochina.

In 'Laos', a series of social, economic, administrative and political reforms were initiated, in tandem with the building of transport infrastructure, in order to make the Lao elite feel that they had a future in French-Lao co-operation, and at the same time to counter the pan-Thai appeal of Bangkok. Greater financial resources from the general Indochinese budget were thus allocated to various spheres of Lao society. As Ivarsson notes, "for Decoux and the French authorities to build up this specific Lao identity was not viewed as a goal in itself but as a means to integrate Laos further into the Indochinese Federation and make it a more viable member of this entity" (Ivarsson 1999: 64). The reorganised *École d'Administration* in Vientiane now privileged the education of a Lao elite, at the expense of the Vietnamese students, so as to allow the newly trained Lao civil servants to play a greater role in the administration of their country. Meanwhile, new schools and health clinics were constructed, many in rural areas, and social and agricultural services improved. More significant for the constitution of a distinct Lao identity was the creation of a Lao movement - the "Lao Renovation Movement" - in 1941 under Decoux's auspices, the "first genuinely nationalist organization in Laos" (Christie 2001: 114).

Charles Rochet, the Director of Public Education, played a key role in this reform movement, along with a small group of young, educated Lao led by Nhouy Abhay (1909-1963) and Katay Don Sasorith. As Christie asserts, "[t]hat Rochet had a profound influence on the first generation of Lao nationalists was affirmed subsequently by members of that generation" (Christie 2001: 115). The Lao Renovation Movement was

primarily cultural, focusing on the re-discovery and promotion of Lao literature, theatre, music, dance and history as a means of stimulating a sense of Lao identity. Rochet sincerely believed, moreover, that Lao culture and identity had to be restored and preserved by the Lao people themselves. He thus supported the creation of a young Lao elite who would lead the cultural renovation and national awakening. The Lao Renovation Movement's journal, *Lao Nhay* ("Great Laos") was first published in January 1941⁶⁰, and regular meetings were organised. In fact, Rochet's initiatives were based on a conviction that the main threat to Lao identity came, not from Thailand, but from the very Indochinese entity envisioned by the French. Rochet believed that "[t]he Lao people ... were being steadily turned into aborigines in their own land, and he foresaw a real danger that a coherent Lao identity would eventually disappear altogether (Christie 2001: 116).

In brief, this project to restore Lao culture and identity sent a clear message of unity and homogeneity to the population of 'Laos'. In other words, it held that the Lao people were encompassed by a common identity, defined along ethnic Lao cultural traits; that is, an "identity defined in pure ethnic-Lao terms to which the other ethnic groups were to be assimilated" (Ivarsson 1999: 65)⁶¹. Both Rochet and Nhouy Abbay's emphasis on the fundamental role of Buddhist religion in the restoration of Lao identity well illustrates this perspective (Christie 2001: 115). Undoubtedly, a national consciousness had awakened in 'Laos'. It was not long before the Lao elite sought to claim the political framework required to encompass and legitimate their sense of nationhood on the international scene – that is, a sovereign and unified state.

⁶⁰ See the recent and very informative essay by Søren Ivarsson (1999) on the newspaper's role in the awakening of a national 'imagining' among the young Lao elite.

⁶¹ Quoted, in turn, from Pietrantoni (1943: 22).

3.3.2. The highlanders of Laos in the French and American wars: pawns or patriots?

The split in the Lao independence movement: Lao Issara versus Pathet Lao⁶²

On March 9, 1945, the Japanese interned what remained of the French colonial administration in Indochina and incited the rulers of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam to proclaim their countries' independence under Japanese patronage. Laos, thus, was finally proclaimed to be independent on April 8, 1945, in spite of the objections of King Sisavang of Laos. Prince Phetsarath, who as viceroy had assumed the function of Prime Minister, set up a provisional Lao government in Vientiane and created, on August 18, 1945, a Lao Issara ("Free Laos") committee which became the nucleus of a Lao political party. Both of his brothers, Prince Souvanna Phouma and Prince Souphanouvong, and other members of the Vientiane upper class joined the new group. The first Lao nationalist movement, the Lao Issara, emerged thus during the Second World War and was led exclusively by the ethnic Lao elite. However, the arrival of French troops, dropped into Laos along with British troops, caused a clash between the King and Prince Phetsarath. The latter was dismissed from his post on October 10, 1945. On March 21, 1946, at Thakhek, in Central Laos, the Lao Issara forces were decisively defeated by the French. The Vientiane regime, with its leaders, fled to Thailand and on April 23, 1946, King Sisavang was crowned King of Laos once more. On the 24th, French forces entered Vientiane. A constitution was promulgated on May 11, and Laos became a constitutional monarchy within the French Union.

⁶² The term Pathet Lao gained international currency when it was used at the Geneva Conference of 1954, although representatives of the Pathet Lao forces were not seated at the conference and it was a Viet Minh general who signed the cease-fire with the French on their behalf. The name remained in common use as a generic term for the Lao Communists despite the fact that a "legal" political party, the Neo Lao Hak Sak (NLHS), the Lao Patriotic Front, was formed in early 1956. Therefore, although Pathet Lao is properly the name only of the armed forces of the Lao Communists, it is colloquially used to include all non-Vietnamese components of the Lao Communist movement (Langer and Zasloff 1973: 2).

The Lao Issara refugees in Bangkok carried on their activities as the Lao government-in-exile, but some Lao Issara members began to support a compromise solution. Fundamentally conservative and anti-revolutionary, they regarded the French as their best option for safeguarding the stability and the independence of Laos against the communist threat (Christie 2001: 117). In consequence, a division of opinion gradually appeared within the Lao Issara ranks over the issue of whether to cooperate with the French. Phetsarat and his brothers began to drift apart. The former adopted a wait-and-see policy that condemned him to a ten-year exile⁶³. Souvanna Phouma returned to Vientiane when the Lao Issara government-in-exile officially declared itself dissolved on October 25, 1949. But Souphanouvong had already chosen his own path. He had made clear his refusal to accept the new political direction in Vientiane, and as early as February 1949 he had established a separate political front for the guerrilla army he commanded, the Progressive People's Organisation, which later led to the creation of the Pathet Lao.

The growth of the Pathet Lao and the Viet Minh role

The historical and colonial relationship between Vietnam and Laos had developed into a complex and divided one by the end of the Second World War. When the Vietnamese communist organisation, the Viet Minh, founded by Ho Chi Minh, learned of Lao aspirations to independence it sought to play an important role in guiding and supporting early Lao nationalists (such as Kaysone Phomvihane, Nuhak Phumsavan and Faydang Lobliayao, a Hmong leader), in order to prevent the French from regaining Indochina (Brown and Zasloff 1986: 39). Following the dissolution of the Lao Issara in

October 1949, Souphanouvong journeyed to meet Ho Chi Minh at the Viet Minh headquarters at Tuyen Quang in North Vietnam and negotiate for Vietnamese support. A First Resistance Congress of Lao communist leaders was thus convened on August 13, 1950, at Tuyen Quang. Among those present were Souphanouvong, Kaysone, Sithon Kommandam (the son of Ong Kommandam, who represented the southern ethnic peoples), Faydang, Nuhak and Phumi Vongvichit (Langer and Zasloff 1970: 49). The Congress, with the encouragement of the Vietnamese, proceeded to elect a new resistance government of Laos, with Souphanouvong as the Prime Minister of the new regime. A later meeting held in North Vietnam in November, 1950, provided the Pathet Lao with a new political movement, the Neo Lao Issara ("Free Lao Front"), and with a brief political program that aimed to appeal to every Lao, calling as it did for equality of all races in Laos, a unified struggle against the French and the abolition of inequitable taxes (Fall 1965: 178). The implementation of this policy gave the non-ethnic Lao peoples for the first time a place within a political movement where their interests were considered and promoted.

The Viet Minh and Pathet Lao's strategy in Laos' highland areas

Since 1945 the Viet Minh had been actively recruiting in Laos along the western border of Vietnam, particularly with the aim of forming anti-French resistance groups. In the sparsely populated border regions of Laos and Vietnam, the political situation was indeed extremely confused. Between the start of World War II and the break-up of the Lao Issara movement in 1949, numerous small anti-French groups operated in this area. What they all had in common was their dependence on Viet Minh support (Langer and Zasloff 1970: 38). The Lao "liberation forces", thus, had since late 1947 been shifting

⁶³ He returned home in 1957 to become Viceroy again, only to die a few months later.

gradually from western to eastern Laos, that is to say, away from Thailand and closer to Vietnam. Between the end of 1948 and early 1949, they had set up regional branch committees in North-East Laos (in the provinces of Sam Neua (now Huaphan) and Xieng Khuang) and central Laos (in the Eastern areas of the provinces of Khammuan and Savannakhet) (Brown and Zasloff 1986: 40). Here they began to launch, following the model of the Chinese communists under Mao's leadership, armed propaganda activities with the aim of establishing strategic base areas. This strategy sought to secure a rear-base area located outside the geographical zones controlled by the enemy, which could be used as an area for military and logistical operations (Gunn 1988: 216).

As the Viet Minh did, the Pathet Lao also obtained safe territorial bases and logistical corridors (through which external assistance could flow) by gaining the support of the ethnic populations in the mountains of north-eastern Laos. The north-eastern border provinces of Sam Neua and Phong Saly provided the Pathet Lao with access to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and a base area isolated from the rest of Laos by rugged mountain terrain. The Bolovens Plateau area of south-eastern Laos provided yet another logistical corridor, namely the Ho Chi Minh trails. The provinces of Sam Neua and Phong Saly were as important to the success of Pathet Lao as the trails were to Hanoi in its support for the conflict in South Vietnam. These provinces had been under Pathet Lao control since 1953, when an invasion by four Viet Minh divisions captured them and turned them over to Pathet Lao forces⁶⁴. The Pathet Lao could not have

⁶⁴ By the beginning of Geneva Conference in 1954, therefore, there were two Lao governments claiming national legitimacy: the Royal Lao Government (RLG) set up through negotiations with the French, and the Pathet Lao "resistance" government created under Vietnamese patronage. In the course of the Geneva Conference, however, the status of the Royal Lao Government as the internationally recognised Lao political entity was confirmed, as was its territorial integrity. Nevertheless, the powers at the conference stated that the Pathet Lao should continue to administer the two provinces of Phong Saly and Huaphan, until a negotiated settlement could be reached between the RLG and the Pathet Lao, and arranged the political, administrative and military integration of these two provinces in the Royal Lao Government system. In consequence, the first Geneva Conference confirmed the administration of these two north-eastern provinces by the Pathet Lao, which was already a reality on the ground.

controlled these two mountainous provinces, however, without significant help from the highland peoples.

When the Lao Issara leaders returned from Thailand to Vientiane in 1949, Souphanouvong's dissident faction was clearly a minority within the Lao nationalist movements; the allegiance of the disparate but important ethnic groups was therefore crucial in mobilising mass support for the survival of the Lao communist movement. As Bernard Fall noted, "[l]ike almost all communists in underdeveloped countries, the Pathet Lao consists of an extremely small communist hard-core group and a vast united front movement covering all strata and all age groups of population" (Fall 1965: 180). Moreover, Fall observed in the 1960s that "[i]n large measure, the Laotian communist movement appears to be based not on the Laotian lowlanders but on many of the minorities of Laos - Thai, Meo [sic], and Malayo-Indonesian (i.e. *Kha*, Lao or slave [sic]) peoples" (Fall 1965: 173). There are as yet very few statistics on the extent of highland peoples' allegiance to the communists⁶⁵.

The alliance of some highland ethnic groups with the Viet Minh and Pathet Lao forces had different and complex causes. It is not my purpose here to review them all; none the less, it is commonly accepted that the highland populations in Laos were caught between the propaganda of the French, on one hand, and that of the Viet Minh and Pathet Lao, on the other, both sides being eager to obtain their loyalty in the aftermath of the Second World War. The 'choice' between the two sides was contingent and,

⁶⁵ A North Vietnamese cadre's note book indicated in late 1967 the following ethnic composition for members of the People's Party of Laos (PPL), the Lao Communist Party: Lao Theung, 60.02 %; Lao Lum, 36.7 % and Lao Sung, 3.08 %. The American political scientist Joseph Zasloff subsequently asserted that "these figures, if accurate [as a matter of fact, they amount to 100.07%!], would demonstrate that the Lao communist movement leaders assign importance to building their party among the ethnic minorities. Since the Pathet Lao is populated only by 20 percent lowland Lao, these statistics are credible." (Zasloff 1973: 28).

above all, guided by survival imperatives⁶⁶. For instance, in his brief account of the French 'pacification' campaign in south-eastern Laos (1946-1949), which involved a fierce competition between the French and the Viet Minh to win the support of the population (1988), Gunn noted that "the communist ability to meet traditional minority grievances with relevant promises [e.g. abolition of taxes], appeals and opportunities was undoubtedly a major factor contributing to overall success in the highlands of Indochina" (Gunn 1988: 240). In that region, the Viet Minh were indeed able to capitalise on the population's resentment at the exploitation they had endured under French rule (see Section 3.2. of this Chapter) (Gunn 1988: 242)⁶⁷.

In some cases, the political orientation of some ethnic groups was also determined by their leaders. Once their support had been won, their groups would ordinarily follow their leaders. Sithon Kommandan was one such leader, as well as Faydang Lobliayao⁶⁸.

⁶⁶ For example, in their joint article on Hmong migrations and history (1997), Culas and Michaud describe the dramatic situation of the Hmong in Laos during the American War. According to their estimation, several thousand Hmong participated in the fighting against the Pathet Lao and the Viet Minh Communists, while perhaps as many other Hmong were enrolled in the People's Liberation Army, the Communist armed forces (Culas and Michaud 1997: 232). Different causes – briefly explained in the notes below – led to this partisanship. But even for those who did not want to get involved in the conflict, in order to survive under extreme difficult material conditions they had to seek help from one side or the other, i.e. the Royal Lao Government/Americans or the Pathet Lao/Viet Minh. And, in case they did not, they would be suspected of sympathising with the enemy (Culas and Michaud 1997: 232).

⁶⁷ The situation in north-eastern Laos was, however, different. The reasons are numerous, but centred mostly around one key factor: opium. About 50 to 100 tonnes of opium were produced per annum in Laos until the war disrupted things during the mid-1960s, and the Hmong grew over 90 % of that total. Both the Viet Minh and the Pathet Lao tried to seize the Hmong opium crops in order to finance their activities. Without opium to trade, the Viet Minh and Pathet Lao could not have obtained arms. It is thought that one of the principal objectives of the 1953 Viet Minh invasion into the two north-eastern provinces of Sam Neua and Phongsaly was the Hmong opium crop. Also pertinent is the traditional pattern of Hmong external relations with other ethnic groups, which is in large part structured by the opium trade. The Hmong occupy many scattered mountains' tops, where the poppy grows best, surrounded by lower elevations where the much larger Tai and Kmmu peoples live. The tension produced by this settlement pattern stems from the fact that the Hmong must come down from the mountains to market their opium, and those who dwell on the mountainsides traditionally have forced their way in as middlemen in the profitable trade between the Hmong and the lowland merchants. As a consequence, the Hmong have always fought with whomever occupied the elevations immediately below them, and picked their loyalties during the French and American wars in opposition to whomever commanded the loyalty of their neighbours. By recruiting support among the Tai and the Kmmu, the Pathet Lao and the Viet Minh therefore automatically alienated most of the Hmong, who chose to ally themselves instead with the French, and later with the Americans (Wekkin 1982: 186-187).

⁶⁸ Faydang's alliance with the Communists was also probably caused by internal feuds between the Hmong clans. In 1935, Faydang became the leader of the Lo clan, which was opposed to another clan, the

The son of Ong Kommandam (see Section 3.2.3. above), Sithon enjoyed considerable prestige among the ethnic peoples of south-eastern Laos (Gunn 1988: 241). Sentenced to life imprisonment by the French for his participation in his father's rebellion against the colonial authorities, he and his brother, Kamphanh, were released from jail in Phong Saly province in 1945. Sithon then began establishing resistance bases in Phong Saly and in Xieng Khuang in 1947 (Burchett 1957: 247). He soon made contact with the Viet Minh leadership in northern Vietnam and the Lao Issara government in Vientiane. In 1948, he led raids on the Bolovens Plateau and, in 1950, he regrouped communist partisans with his son Sang Kham in their home province of Saravane (Gunn 1988: 241). Sithon's fight against the French and the Americans may be regarded as the continuation of his father's struggle. The major difference between the two revolts, however, was the new concept of 'struggle for national independence'. The ethnic fighters were enrolled in a larger type of war, in which the ideology and objectives were now nationalist in content.

Before I develop further the Pathet Lao's ethnic policy after 1954, it will be helpful to briefly review some historical background concerning the American involvement in Indochina following the departure of the French after their defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

Ly, which was led by Touby Ly Fong. Touby's father took the position of *kiatong*, or clan leader, in the region of Nong Het in 1938. The station of *kiatong* had previously been held by Faydang's father, Lo Bliayao, and then by Song Tou Lobliayao, Faydang's eldest brother. In 1939 Touby Ly Fong was selected as the new *kiatong* or what was equivalent to a *Chao Tasseng* in the ethnic Lao administrative system. As a result of these events, Faydang, whose clan's honour had now been disgraced, rebelled against the French and began a bitter feud with the Ly clan. Touby's influence in the Royal Lao Government increased rapidly as he was promoted to the position of *Chao Meuang*, or district governor, of Xieng Khuang Province as well as being appointed to the central government (Stuart-Fox 1997: 39-40).

The American War (1954-1975)

After the signing of the Geneva Agreements in July 1954 (following the surrender of the French at Dien Bien Phu on May 7th), Laos, as a buffer-state in the Cold War, almost immediately became a battleground between North Vietnam and the United States. Laos has frontiers with Thailand, Burma, China, Cambodia and Vietnam; once the latter had been divided at the 17th parallel by the 1954 Geneva Agreements, Laos had frontiers with both North and South Vietnam. Furthermore, this meant that Laos shared common boundaries with two socialist states, the People's Republic of China and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and with the neutral states of Cambodia and Burma. The country also possessed the strategic Plain of Jars, where enough air power could be based to dominate the whole of South China and Mainland South-East Asia.

From 1954, the key American goal in Laos was to retain as much Lao territory as possible within the American sphere of influence. Laos was at that time regarded as the key to the security of Thailand and, by extension, to that of the entire South-East Asian peninsula. The breakdown in 1963 of the second Geneva Agreement (which had attempted to reconcile the contending parties in Laos) came more rapidly and violently than the breakdown of the first Conference in 1959. The military involvement grew larger, the Pathet Lao was more highly mobilised, the Great Powers were deeply involved, and the stakes for the North Vietnamese were more significant. Laos bordered 700 miles of highly vulnerable North Vietnamese frontier and provided the best route of approach to South Vietnam. Therefore, by supporting the Pathet Lao by means of weapons supplies and ideological advice, the Viet Minh aimed to pursue their own vital interests also⁶⁹.

⁶⁹ Communist forces were in control of most of the mountainous regions in Laos. Their basic aims included, according to Branfman, "(1) driving RLG forces out of northern Laos and in particular asserting

Consequently, from 1964 the other primary aim of the United States was to assist the military effort in the Republic of Vietnam. To this end, they used bases in northern Laos to bomb North Vietnam. The United States also carried out extensive bombing in southeastern Laos in an attempt to stop supplies flowing into South Vietnam from the North. Bombing the Ho Chi Minh Trail- the access routes running from North to South Vietnam via southern Laos - also weakened the Lao communists' position. As the U.S bombing of the Trail grew in intensity, it led inevitably to a widening of the war into southern Laos. The aim of these attacks was to deny the Pathet Lao forces access to rural populations, who might have provided them with support and cover, and to disrupt the social system created by the Pathet Lao in eastern Laos.

The Pathet Lao's ethnic policy: recruitment and ideology

After the 1954 Geneva Conference, Pathet Lao recruits were raised primarily from the provinces of Phong Saly, Sam Neua and Luang Prabang. These recruits, gathered to be trained as soldiers and cadres within the Communist movement, were selected from humble origins, a fact that branded them as a new generation that would be fully dedicated to the revolutionary struggle (Langer and Zasloff 1970: 117-8). More precisely, in tandem with the negative appeal to fight against the "colonialists" and "imperialists", the Pathet Lao employed the positive appeals of the struggle for independence⁷⁰ and the promise of education for the young recruits (the lattermost was,

control over the area down to the Plain of Jars; (2) keeping the Ho Chi Minh Trail open; and (3) working for a Vientiane government in which the Pathet Lao would have a real and, ultimately, a controlling voice (Branfman 1970: 221).

⁷⁰ Without providing any details of the coercive methods he mentions, Zasloff wrote: "Over the past twenty years [the author carried out his research from 1967 to 1972], Pathet Lao cadres have used a blend of persuasion and coercion to recruit men to their forces. In the earlier years, they relied more heavily on persuasion, especially in the areas that they did not dominate. As the cadres established control, they could simply draft men into military service. However, even when they applied pressure, their doctrine

perhaps, the most attractive of all to parents and children alike) (Zasloff 1973: 78). The North Vietnamese contribution to the military training and ideological education of the Lao recruits was also important. From the early 1960s, Lao candidates, especially young officers, were sent to North Vietnam for political and technical training. Langer and Zasloff thus observed that "[s]ince a large percentage of the Lao who attend schools in North Vietnam are or will become officers in the LPLA, the Vietnamese mark on their thinking is all the more significant" (Langer and Zasloff 1970: 119). However, the authors remained cautious in their assessment of the long-term impact of the North Vietnamese education on the Lao communist elite. In addition, they wrote: "As for who will be chosen, we have not thus far learned much about the role of the North Vietnamese in selecting Lao youths for education. Nor do we know the ethnic distribution of those selected, an important question for the future leadership of Laos." (Langer and Zasloff 1970: 120). None the less, the communist leadership was careful to widen its ethnic basis so as to avoid being accused of ethnic chauvinism. To this end, the PPL organised three separate sections within its membership staff: one for Lao Sung affairs, another for Lao Theung affairs and a third one for Lao Lum affairs. Moreover, according to Zasloff's study, in response to complaints by ethnic leaders about discrimination against their children who wanted to study abroad, children of minority candidates were given priority to study in the former Soviet Union, China and other communist countries (Zasloff 1973: 27-8). Yet, the American political scientist admitted that overall it was difficult to estimate the level of ethnic recruitment in the Lao People's Liberation Army (LPLA) and that only assumptions could be formulated on the basis of scattered pieces of information. For instance, one of Zasloff's interviewees, on the basis of his experience in Luang Namtha Province (northern Laos) and his discussions with North Vietnamese Army advisers, estimated that "60 to 70

required them to propagate the notion that their recruits had joined the revolutionary struggle of their own

percent of the LPLA were Lao Theung and the rest were Lao Lum and other groups" (Zasloff 1973: 1981).

By 1972, the "Liberated Zones" covered four-fifths of the entire territory of Laos and embraced more than half the population. Propaganda activities and social development were taking place in these areas. In Sam Neua Province, there operated a conservatory, two radio stations, a news agency, several daily print bulletins, periodicals and publishing houses. The Pathet Lao also announced that it had built 196 schools in the "Liberated" zones by 1972 (Rathie 1996: 68). The propaganda effort was, of course, directed at specific groups of peoples. For example, radio broadcasts were made in some of the ethnic group languages (Zasloff 1973: 61). The Pathet Lao understood, as had the Viet Minh before them, that in order to carry through a war of national liberation, it was necessary to mobilise the peasantry by instituting immediate reforms at the local level and making it clear through political education that the national revolution was the prelude to a wider social revolution of which the proletariat and the poorer sections of the peasantry would be the main beneficiaries.

As a matter of fact, the Lao communists attempted to re-define the very basis of national identity in Laos. Unlike the conservative nationalists in Vientiane who identified Lao nationalism with the lowland Lao, the Pathet Lao depended on the mobilisation and support of ethnic populations. It was therefore necessary for the Pathet Lao to emphasise the minorities' integration within the nation. Clive Christie explains, thus:

free will." (Zasloff 1973: 78).

In their conception of a *Laotian*, as apart from purely *Lao*⁷¹, nationalism, the Pathet Lao acknowledged the difficulties of creating one national entity from the separate "nationalities" of Laos; particularly since the civil war period had exacerbated schisms between the nationalities and within them. But the Pathet Lao envisaged the gradual ending of "contradictions" between the Lao and the minorities and the development of unified national consciousness; while at the same time they emphasised that the separate cultural identities of the minorities should be preserved. Of course, the dominance of the lowland Lao, both in terms of language and over the political structure, remains inevitable. But the privileged educational opportunities, often abroad, offered by the Pathet Lao to minority cadres, showed their determination not only to bring about political change in minority areas "from above" but also to allow minorities to play an active and central role in the political future of Laos.

(Christie 1979: 156, original stress)

By deliberately underplaying the class issue, by studiously emphasising their adherence to the main symbols of Lao national identity -the Buddhist Sangha and the monarchy- and by making it clear in their programmes that the national liberation struggle against the United States was the first task of the revolutionary movement in Laos, the Pathet Lao were able to establish their nationalist credentials in the 1960s. However, it is essential to point out the fact that the Pathet Lao ideology always depended on foreign patronage and protection. Although the details of the origin of the Pathet Lao movement are still cloudy, the close relationship with the revolutionary movement in Vietnam cannot be questioned. In fact, the institutions of the Pathet Lao have been closely modelled on those created by the Vietnamese Communists. Likewise, the ideology and

⁷¹ i.e. ethnic Lao.

the strategies of the Pathet Lao have reflected the ideology and the strategies of the Vietnamese communists.

Conclusion

The major victims of the war in Laos were the highland populations who lived in the most fiercely contested regions and who were mobilised by both sides. Allies of the Americans were often evacuated from militarily threatened areas and placed in secure camps. The major towns and cities of Laos along the Mekong River, however, were basically immune from serious fighting. The tragedy of the highland peoples was simply to be living in the wrong place at the wrong time. They were forced to choose one side or the other, their choice being based on their perception of where their best interests lay and rarely on ideological factors connected with a conflict 'above their heads'. The preliminary efforts of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) to develop a polyethnic version of socialism during the Indochinese wars provided a foundation for further efforts after 1975. The contemporary consequences of these policies, as the LPRP continues to attempt to deal with the contradiction between national unity and the cultural diversity of the pluri-ethnic people of Laos, will be addressed below.

4. Ethnic Classification and Mapping Nationhood

The modern State, in the Foucauldian sense, is that hegemonic apparatus whose *raison d'être* is to control and to administer the body of the population through a series of discourses that together form the "regime of truth", which Foucault defined as follows:

Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.

(Foucault 1977: 131)

Truth is not transcendental, "out there": it is produced here and now. Indeed, modern states, among other agents, participate in a continuous and uninterrupted process of generating "truth" through the use of "technologies of power" in order to legitimate and naturalise their authority. They transform innovations into everyday practice "by constant reiteration of [their] power through what have become accepted as natural (rational and normal) state functions, of certifying, counting, reporting, registering, classifying, and identifying" (Cohn and Dirks 1988: 225).

My intention in this chapter is thus to show the determinant role that administration in general, and population censuses in particular, play in the modelling of Lao society in the image of a national community. In other words, the State in modern Laos has

operated the census as a vector of ethnicity (through the manipulation of ethnic boundaries) in order to fashion an imaginary nationhood out of real heterogeneity.

4.1. Description and interpretation of the early censuses

Insightful works have shown the long lasting impact of the knowledge produced by colonial administrations on the independent states they once governed⁷². For instance, Cohn, in an article that analyses the conduct of the censuses in India under British rule, argues that the censuses that classified the Indian population into castes significantly influenced "scholars' and scientists' views on the nature, structure and functioning of the Indian caste system" (Cohn 1987: 242). Indeed, the colonial State contributed to shaping the ruled population according to a new conceptual framework by operating instruments of domination, or technologies of power, which included the census, the map and the museum (Anderson 1991: 167).

4.1.1. The French administration

The French censuses of the population of colonial Laos were basic. The data reported in the 1911, 1921, 1931, 1936 and 1942 censuses (see Appendix 1: *Ethnic composition of the population of Laos, 1911-1955*) were mainly based on general administrative reports, such as the *Annuaire Statistique du Laos* and the *Annuaire Statistique de l'Indochine*⁷³. Only major groups were listed. There were nine of them, namely, the "Lao", "Tai", "Kha", "Meo-Yao", "Vietnamese", "Chinese", "European", "Cambodian", "Indian and Pakistani" (though, for the two last groups, the data is patchy and is completely missing from the 1942 survey). The table gives the "Ethnic Composition of the Population of Laos" as a general title, and the very neutral term of "group" is used to head the column of ethnic classifications. As a consequence, presumably, the nine

⁷² See, for instance, Charles Hirschman (1986 and 1987).

statistical categories were considered as "ethnic groups"⁷⁴. Yet, more detailed statistics were available from other sources, such as military reports, ethnographic studies (conducted by both French and foreign researchers), and provincial statistical records. But the subcategories were simply not listed in the ethnic composition of the population related to the whole territory. There seem to be several related reasons for the basic classification, as follows.

The French administration classified the population into categories that followed racial lines; hence, inevitably, the use of rough methods of categorisation. That could also explain why the "Lao" and "Tai" groups were invariably placed at the top of the list, despite the fact that the "Kha" outnumbered the "Tai" population in general (see Appendix 1). The classification was indeed based on the assumption that the "Kha" were not situated at the same level of civilisation as the "Lao" and "Tai" (Hirschman 1987: 568). But then, one could equally well ask why the "Europeans" were usually put at the bottom of the list. Economically as well as strategically, French authorities saw Laos as an mere extension of Vietnam - especially after the failure of the *mise en valeur* policy (see Chapter Three). Consequently, marking the domination of the ruling Whites over the subordinated Asians was probably not such an issue, in a possession that has been called a "colonial backwater" (Gunn 1990). The poor system of data collection, aggravated by poor communications, especially in the upland areas, were certainly other factors that contributed to the dearth and inaccuracy of the statistics (Pietrantoni 1953).

⁷³ For the 1911 census figures, the data came from the *Bulletin de l'Office colonial* (No.62, February 1913).

⁷⁴ However, in 1953 the term "nationalities" was used for the heading of a census referring to "European, Vietnamese, Chinese and Cambodian" populations. These appeared to be Lao citizens, since there is another table referring to the same populations based on the same source but which gives the list of the "proportion of each nationality in the foreign populations" (Halpern 1961: 45.- quoted, in turn, from *Annuaire des Etats Associes*, 1953). But, the distinction between "ethnic groups" and "nationalities" appeared rather fuzzy and did not seem to follow a coherent pattern (for example, in the 1955 census, the Vietnamese, Chinese and European populations were still included in the ethnic composition of the

However, the non-utility of a detailed ethnic classification was probably the primary reason for keeping the census at such a basic standard. The taxation administration needed only simple distinctions to administer the population: the Lao and the non-Lao (the Europeans - French and others - and the Asian foreigners - including Chinese - were subject to a different tax system (Pietrantoni 1953: 28)). Later on, the system became slightly more complex but the classification still followed the same pattern as that of the census⁷⁵ -or, on the contrary, was the latter following the administration's interests? In any case, rough, i.e. racial, categories were apparently sufficient for the functioning of the colonial tax system which was emphatically the backbone of French Laos.

4.1.2. The Royal Lao Government's administration

The first post-colonial census under the RLG appears to have been conducted in 1955, while the last colonial countrywide census seems to be dated as far back as 1943 (Pietrantoni 1953, 1957). But the official departure of the French from Indochina in 1954 did not remove the colonial imprint. Their classification inscribed their image of the Lao population on the post-colonial censuses. Indeed, the latter kept the same pattern, i.e. the naming and the categories (see Appendix 1, the year 1955), which meant that the racial lines were insidiously perpetuated among the natives. However, the Lao authorities brought about one significant change that reflected the imperative of forming a self-conscious Lao national community. They gathered the "Lao" and "Tai" groups together under a single category (see Appendix 2: *Ethnic Composition of Laos, 1954-1955, by percentage of ethnic groups in each province*), resulting in an increase in the figures in favour of the ethnic Lao, at the expense of the "Kha" population. In addition, there were suspicions on the part of some individuals involved in the census that the

population as "group") (Halpern 1961: 19.- quoted, in turn, from *Annuaire Statistique du Laos*, Lao Ministry of Interior).

"Kha" figures were underestimated in the censuses (See Appendix 1)⁷⁶. But, on the other hand, there is no evidence that the underestimation was systematic and politically orientated, and it could simply have been due to the difficulty of listing populations living in remote areas.

In the 1950s, the use of the seminal terms "Lao Lum" or valley Lao, "Lao Theung" or Lao of the mountain slopes and "Lao Sung" or Lao of the mountaintops, was initiated under the RLG. It was a stroke of genius. That classification is still being used in present-day Laos and is widely applied, even among academic works. And yet from the beginning it was clearly a political attempt to emphasise the unity of the country by suppressing the pejorative nature and the racial connotations attached to the previous naming system, and by denying the reality of the cultural differences among the peoples (Halpern 1964: 5). The mapping of Lao society was first shaped by a racial theory in the form of scientific discourse engendered and developed by the colonial authorities, with the support of a certain type of ethnographic studies and in response to a demand from the administration. The racial discourse was then naturalised through a "repertoire of rituals and routines of rule" (Cohn and Dirks 1988: 225). In the aftermath of colonial rule, the discourse was perpetuated and reproduced under a new terminology by the newly independent state. The "Lao Lum", "Lao Theung" and "Lao Sung" categories referred exactly to the same major ethnic groups ("Lao and Tai", "Kha" and "Meo-Yao", respectively) as defined by the colonial administration. The categorisation was as arbitrary as the previous one, but it endured because it coincided with the "truth" that had been produced and already legitimised during the French period.

⁷⁵ See the 1940 system of taxation in "The colonial system of taxation", Section 3.2.2., Chapter Three.

⁷⁶ Curiously enough, a hand-written note was added below the original table of the Appendix 2 suggesting that the non-Lao groups were indeed underestimated.

That classification was furthermore encouraged by the RLG because it served its project of building Laos as a nation, and, as such, was widely used. As a matter of fact, some of the RLG members saw the use of these gross ethnic categories as an indicator of the integration of the non-ethnic Lao peoples into the ethnic Lao cultural mainstream. Katay Don Sasorith thus wrote in 1953:

Indeed, the ethnic issue in Laos won't be as complex as it is in Siam, because in Laos, the Lao element clearly and undeniably predominates, in terms of numerical importance as well as by its degree of social and cultural development. [...] Some educated and developed Boloven or Mèò [sic] tend to get closer to us, as much in their way of dressing and their lifestyle as in their patriotic ideal, to such an extent that they now want to be called under the name "Lao Theung" [...]

(Katay 1953: 21)⁷⁷

That "truth" was also legitimised by other agents, such as foreign scholars. Indeed, those who criticised the Lao Lum, Lao Theung, and Lao Sung stratification also recognised the logic of it. For example, the American anthropologist, Joel Halpern, wrote in the 1960s:

Leaving the Mekong plain the land abruptly changes to rugged mountains cut by narrow valleys. The observer looking closely at the settlement pattern below can discern almost a textbook illustration of ethnic stratification and economic-geographic adaptation to the land based on varying degrees of altitude.

⁷⁷ Certes, le problème ethnique au Laos ne sera pas aussi complexe qu'au Siam, car au Laos, l'élément lao prédomine nettement et indiscutablement, tant par son importance numérique que par son degré de développement social et culturel. [...] des Bolovens ou des Mèos [sic] instruits et évolués tendent à se rapprocher de plus en plus de nous, tant dans leur façon de s'habiller et dans leur manière de vivre que

(Halpern 1964: 5)

A "truth" had been produced and legitimised, naturalised through a series of discourses, which were operated, integrated and transmitted by diverse and multiple agents, i.e. the colonial administration, the post-colonial state, scholars and the population. They all underlie a fundamental action: a "truth" had been produced and developed, maintained and naturalised through a political economy (Foucault 1977: 131). The "truth" was sometimes criticised and even denied, but it was the starting point from which the debates over ethnic classification were departing. It was this "regime of truth" that the Pathet Lao, and later on the socialist regime, attempted to break and to replace by their own discourse of the nation.

4.2. Socialist regime: Break-up with the past

4.2.1. The "Policy of National Equality" and the Civilising Project

On 2 December 1975, the monarchy was abolished and replaced by the Lao PDR. The propaganda for socialist construction became an appeal for an united patriotic front. The ethnic minority members were called upon to join the struggle for the triumph of socialism against the "imperialists and the reactionaries". Indeed, as Martin Stuart-Fox rightly observed, "[n]ational solidarity and defence had to proceed hand in hand. So long as ethnic and social divisions remained, these could be exploited by the 'enemies' of the new regime" (Stuart-Fox 1981: 63). The new regime explicitly recognised the "Hill-Tribe Question". Kaysone Phomvihane, the then leader of the Party, thus declared in a 1982 speech:

dans leur idéal patriotique, au point de vouloir se faire appeler maintenant sous le nom de "Lao Theung" (Katay 1953: 21).

No tribe can be regarded as the majority as nearly 70 tribes [sic] with different levels of economic, cultural and social development live in Laos. The tribal question is one of the major problems of the Lao revolution and socialist construction in Laos. Our Party is trying to resolve this issue while carrying out its overall cause of socialist transformation. The Party is striving to tighten unity among the nationalities and tribes, taking into consideration the special aspects of each tribe and our harmonious interests in the struggle for a bright future.

(Kaysone 1982)⁷⁸

He called therefore for greater attention to be paid to promoting education among ethnic groups, improving their living conditions and increasing production in remote minority areas. Furthermore, he insisted on respect being paid to the "psychology, aspirations, customs, beliefs of each ethnic group" (Kaysone 1980: 233). On the tenth anniversary of the Lao PDR in December 1985, Kaysone announced that minority traditional culture had been preserved through schools of dancing, music and handicrafts. Lenin's apprehension about the risk of ethnic awareness in the Soviet Union led him to initially promote the policy of "national equality"; so too did the Lao PDR, as had previously the People's Republic of China and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

Brief account of Chinese and Vietnamese Communists' experiences

Although for Lenin nationalism was a secondary problem, it was essential to keep it under control. His strategy for neutralising the national question was guided by his perception of nationalism as the result of past discrimination and oppression.

Consequently, national antagonisms and mistrust were to be dissipated by a period of

⁷⁸ Quoted, in turn, from Luther (1983: 44).

national equality; this policy came to be known as "the flourishing of the nations". It was predicated upon the belief that nations would naturally move close together, a process described in the official Marxist vocabulary as the "rapprochement" or "coming together" of nations (Connor 1984: 202)⁷⁹.

This vision of the achievement of historical progress became the landmark of any communist project. While the work of Marx and Engels centres on a critique of capitalism and includes analyses of societies characterised by slavery and feudalism (the stages thought to be the immediate predecessors of capitalism on the evolutionary scale), they drew heavily on the work of Lewis Henry Morgan when they turned to analyse "primitive" societies. Morgan's theory of social evolution outlined three main stages: savagery, barbarism and civilisation (1877). The programme of promoting "national equality", although formulated differently, followed the same historicist and universalist vision; it was only a prerequisite for a higher stage in the movement towards assimilation⁸⁰ that Lenin perceived as progressive and inevitable. Later on, the Marxist-Leninist regimes' attitudes in China, Vietnam and Laos vis-à-vis their minority populations were driven by that policy of "national equality". Subsequently, they all sent their cadres to the highland areas to enumerate the populations and to collect data dealing with the material aspects of their lifestyle in order to promote the ethnic group under a so-called supra-national culture. Ethnographic studies and censuses, indeed, reflected the belief that cultural recognition would narrow the gap between peoples.

⁷⁹ This policy of "national equality" was therefore not merely a political device to preserve the unity of the Soviet state; it also reflected the ideology of egalitarianism. It was based on the idea that human nature would change radically in the homeland where revolution occurred and that a new man, stripped of all the prejudices of the former world, would emerge from the revolutionary process (Carrère d'Encausse 1978: 47).

⁸⁰ But the Soviet authorities were careful to avoid using the term 'assimilation', for they argued it conveyed a negative meaning, as it was connected with capitalist societies and their coercive process of acculturation conducted by the state's dominant group towards the minorities. On the contrary, the Marxist-Leninist approach was claimed to be different: the process of merging together was doctrinally based upon absolute national equality and on the basis of voluntary co-operation.

When the PRC was proclaimed in 1949, the traditional Han goal of forced assimilation was rejected. The objective of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was to end the inequality between the ethnic groups through a programme of gradual cultural, economic and political equality. Stevan Harrell offers a concise definition of the work as "creating autonomous regions, implementing educational and developmental plans, bringing leaders of the peripheral peoples into the fulfilling of the promise that all *minzu*⁸¹ equal legally and morally, would march together on the road to historical progress, that is, to socialism" (1995: 24).

The slogan was then "Unity in Diversity" or "Unity and Equality". All the minorities were allowed to keep their cultural distinctiveness. For the Chinese Communists, the two great evils that had to be overcome now were the attitude of Han cultural superiority ("Han Chauvinism") and the fear the minority groups had of Han domination ("local nationalism"). In the 1950s, party cadres were sent to the minorities' areas to collect data on their customs and lifestyle, the objective also being to make their minority propaganda and the training of a socialist proletariat among the minorities more effective (Dreyer 1975: 52).

The Vietminh's policy towards the minorities was very similar to the Chinese model. Article 3 of the amended 1960 Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam reiterated the policy of autonomous zones⁸² while asserting that such autonomy was to

⁸¹ Chinese term, of Japanese origin, that can be translated as "nation", "people", "nationality" or "ethnic group" (Gladney 1998: 117)

⁸² After their victory over the French, the Vietminh rewarded its minority supporters by creating in 1955 and 1956 two Autonomous Regions - respectively, the Tai-Meo zone in the North-West and the Viet Bac zone in the North-East. However, the reunification of the country in 1975 heralded a return to the minority policy of the 1946 Constitution that had made no mention of self-determination. Thus, ignoring the provisions of the 1960 Constitution, the government announced on December 29, 1975, its decision to dissolve the Autonomous Regions.

be within "the territory of Vietnam [which] is a single, indivisible whole from North to the South" (article 1) (*The Constitution of Vietnam*: 42-23). In reality, the right of self-determination was subordinated to socialist ideals. As within China's autonomous zones, the minorities were expected to follow the path to 'progress' by going through all the evolutionist stages - from primitive communism to feudalism, then to capitalism and finally to socialism. As Jean Michaud observes:

In a new country where the collective project has to be popular, national and scientific, there was little room left for the ways of the past. Following this frame of mind, and despite an openly egalitarian state rhetoric, montagnards were considered culturally and economically backward unless they accepted the cultural supremacy of the lowland majority.

(Michaud 2000: 357).

4.2.2. Lao ethnography

Following the Chinese and Vietnamese communists, the Lao authorities have launched data campaigns in areas inhabited by minority populations, first in the "Liberated Zones" during the war, and then, after their victory, throughout the country from the late 1970s. As mentioned above, the ethnographic works were guided by similar Marxist-Leninist theories, i.e. "policy of national equality" and "evolutionist theory". In 1981, Kaysone made clear that the incumbent terminology, i.e. the three large "national categories", "Lao Lum", "Lao Theung" and "Lao Sung", was to be replaced by a new ethnic classification. He wrote thus:

[Each ethnic group] has [...] its own characteristics. As the revolution developed, the various ethnic groups became integral parts of the nation of their own free

will, under the *then* political denominations: Lao Lum (of the plains), Lao Theung (of the slopes) and Lao Sung (of high altitudes). The Central Committee of Ethnic Groups must co-operate with the various branches and with our brothers, the workers from the various ethnic groups, to conduct together research and discussions with regard to the names and the lists of ethnic groups, *in order to establish official rules*.

(Kaysone 1981: 47, my stress)

As a consequence, the new regime started using a new classification for the population census. The three-fold categorisation with the "Lao" prefix was deemed to be anti-revolutionary and its use was abandoned in political documents, although this terminology is still widely used in present-day Laos.

The ethnographic research methodology in the Lao PDR is probably best exposed in a working manual, entitled "References and criteria for conducting research on ethnic groups across the country for statistic purposes", and written by Sisouk Chonmaly⁸³, the Director of the LFNC Research Department on Ethnic Groups⁸⁴. The document is also worth mentioning as it was used as the official guide during the data collection campaign for the 2000 census.

The applied methodology is directly based on Kaysone's definition of the nation that he gave during a "Conference on Ethnicity" in 1981, in which he declared: "The national question has four criteria or characteristics, which are: common language, common territory, common socio-economic organisation, and common psychology" (Sisouk

⁸³I use here a pseudonym

⁸⁴I have the 1999-updated version, but apparently Sisouk has been using these guidelines since the late 1970s when he started his ethnographic research in the Lao PDR, personal communication.

1999: 1). This definition is itself clearly inspired by Stalin, who defined a "nationality" by five similar criteria: a stable community of people, a language, a territory, an economic life and a psychological make-up or 'national character' (Stalin 1913)⁸⁵. But only two of the four criteria are to be applied for ethnographic research in the Lao PDR, i.e. language and "material and spiritual ways of life" (ຂີວິດດ້ານວັດຖຸ ແລະ ຈິດໃຈ (*sivìt dan vattù làe chitchai*)); a third criterion is also added, namely, the origins and migrations of the group. Laos being a predominantly rural country, Sisouk argues that there is not enough variation in socio-economic organisation for this to be a factor of differentiation. As for the territory, there is simply no autonomy granted to ethnic groups in Laos.

It rapidly appears, however, upon closer scrutiny of the document, that the ethnographic element is accompanied, if not dominated, by the objective of controlling ethnicity and producing fixed and "correct" identities. Sisouk even admits that "spiritual" as well as "material ways of life" are not such reliable criteria, especially the former because "some ethnic groups mingle with others' culture. Sometimes, some ethnic groups adopt others' culture as theirs. As a consequence, we must be careful to collect an adequate amount of clear data for comparison" (Sisouk 1999: 8). The data collection seems in effect to be guided by two political aims: (1) to contribute to the national culture and (2) to censor 'bad' while promoting 'good' culture. Indeed, as Sisouk bluntly explains:

[...] in general, all the ethnic groups' psychological and cultural features mentioned above do not conflict with the overall psychology, with the national community's culture. On the contrary, they enhance the psychology and the culture of our Lao nation. They also provide us with information to conduct

⁸⁵ Quoted in turn from John Fineberg (ed.) (1936) *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question*. 138

research for clarification as well as for supporting the Party-Government in its policies and socio-economic development plans that lead all the ethnic groups into the path of development and prosperity. [A few pages below, he specifies the aim:] Once the data is collected, we will write an assessment report and submit it to the appropriate organisation in order to set up short and long-term plans to view the backward practices and to promote the correct ones.

(Sisouk 1999: 3 and 18)

Ethnographic works produced by Marxist-Leninist regimes have always been strongly identified with a civilising project vis-à-vis ethnic minorities⁸⁶. So-called scientific study thrives on an ideology strongly influenced by evolutionist theories, the objective of which would be to "classify the ethnic groups according to their degree of cultural development"; in effect, criteria for distinction or grouping are thought of as "criteria of backwardness" (Goudineau 2000: 23). An "ethnic group" in this sense is probably better defined as a 'tribe', i.e. a group of individuals, seen as being clear-cut and isolated, around which are traced artificial boundaries for administrative and political reasons. To be exact, the idea of 'tribe' came from an illusion. At the ideological level, 'tribes' are a colonial concept that reflected the conception held by Western culture of the rest of the world at that time, key themes of which were imperialist expansionism and the dichotomization of humankind into the "civilised" and the "uncivilised" (Cohen 1978: 384). There is clearly a double agenda attached to ethnographic studies in the Lao PDR (on the one hand, promotion of cultural diversity and on the other, political control of ethnicity) and the emphasis is most likely to be on the political aspect. As such, an "ethnic group" appears as a fixed entity on which is imposed a set of characteristics that have been accepted as "correct" and distinctive enough. That seems to be in effect the

basis for an "ethnic group" to appear on the census list. I suggest that the pattern of the Lao PDR population census not only reflects Marxist-Leninist ideology, but also parallels the shaping of the nation. As such, an analysis of the construction process and the structure of the latest population census is most helpful.

4.3. Case study of the 2000 population census

Data collection for the 2000 census was once more driven by the constant imperative to list and to identify the exact number of ethnic groups, an obsession that Lao officials commonly share with their Chinese and Vietnamese counterparts. But in Laos the issue is particularly acute, as in contrast to China and Vietnam the figure has been subjected to several revisions. An official document mentions the successive figures of 200, 177, 150, 131, and even up to 820 and 850 ethnic groups (Sisouk 2000: 1)! Unfortunately, it does not specify any dates, but according to Grant Evans, the number of 820 self-named ethnic groups was the result of the 1983-1985 census (1999: 178). It was not until 1985 that the Party approved an official estimate of 47 ethnic groups; and yet, even after the publication of the 1985 population census, the deliberations continued (Goudineau 2000: 22).

The 1999 data collection campaign, once again, aimed at clarifying this forest of anarchy, uncertainties and confusion. And, after five years of apparent stability, new figures emerged: 49, instead of 47, ethnic groups, which were distributed between four, instead of the previous six, ethno-linguistic categories (see Appendix 3: "Assessment of the ethnic groups' names in the Lao PDR accepted during the LFNC meeting on 13-14th August 2000"). The issue is not, of course, to debate the figures' accuracy, since the census is anyhow arbitrarily constructed. Rather, I attempt here to analyse how and why

⁸⁶ I use here the term 'minorities' instead of 'groups' for it is evident that the civilising project was not

the changes occurred or did *not* occur. By addressing these questions, the answers may, in turn, help to interpret the broader picture, i.e. the nationalist discourse.

Teams, composed of officials from the LFNC Research Department on Ethnic Groups, were sent across the country in groups in Spring 1999 to collect data on the ethnic populations. The campaign lasted nearly four months until September of that year. Each team stayed for about one month in the provinces, which had been divided into five major geographical areas⁸⁷. Except for two members, the teams had little, if any, knowledge or academic background relating to ethnographic methodology. Before they left for the field, they received only a few days' training at a seminar taught by Sisouk, who supervised the census. To be fair, their task was not to conduct an exhaustive investigation as had been done in the past; in fact, it merely consisted of collecting the population censuses from the provincial LFNC organisations. Some ethnographic studies were nevertheless carried out to fulfil the imperative of clarification, but these works were performed by an exclusive few, including Sisouk himself.

In reality, the changes in the census went far beyond the addition of two new ethnic groups. In fact, the first assessment of the provincial censuses gave a list of 55 ethnic groups (see Appendix 4: "Assessment of the provincial LFNC censuses 1999-2000: list of 55 ethnic groups"), which was whittled down to 49. Ironically, the main objective of the census co-ordinators was not to check information in the field but rather the data provided by the provincial LFNC organisations. Indeed, the authorities, alarmed by the confusion that was reigning throughout the country and among the officials themselves,

applied to the political majority that is also an 'ethnic group' according to the Stalinist definition.

⁸⁷ The five areas were the South (Champassak, Saravane, Sekong and Attapeu); the Centre (Savannakhet, Khammuan and Bolikhamsai); the North-West (Udomxay, Phongsaly, Luang Namtha and Bokeo); the North-East (Luang Prabang, Huaphan, Xieng Khuang and Saysombun); and an area including Vientiane, its prefecture and the adjacent province of Saignabouli.

placed a high priority on keeping the proliferation under control. Sisouk, thus, recounted in his report:

According to the data of the Committee on Population Census, the population amounts to 4,574,848 inhabitants, among whom 24,084 have not specified their ethnic affiliation and 10,201 do not appear on the list of 47 ethnic groups. Many problems, however, occurred after the population census' [of 1995] documents were sent to the Party-State's provincial organisations. The Statistical Department has received letters and phone calls from the Central Committee's offices and ethnic groups' representatives in the provinces, pointing out the absence of ethnic groups' names as well as names that did not satisfy ethnic groups.

(Sisouk 2000: 4 and 5)

Finally, thirteen new ethnic groups, which were not listed on the national census, appeared in the provincial data⁸⁸. In total, five new ethnic groups were officially recognised for inclusion in the national census at the LFNC meeting held on 13-14th August 2000, though only two of these had been listed in the provincial data (these were the ກຳມຸ "Thaen" (out of the ກຳມຸ "Kmmu" group) and the ໄທເໜືອ "Thai Neua" (out of the ຜູ້ໄທ "Phuthai" group), the latter being listed in no less than three provinces⁸⁹) (see Appendix 3). Two of the other groups recognised for inclusion, the ໄຕ "Tai" and the ອີດູ "Idu", seem to have been proposed at the central level, as neither of them appeared on the provincial data at all. The fifth ethnic group, the ລາຮູ "Lahu", was a new name in the

⁸⁸ Kado, Kanai, Tong, In, Yàng, Meuang, Kàyong, Thai Rat/Lat, Summa, Bri/Labri, King, Thai Neua, Thaen.

official list⁹⁰. It encompassed the ກຸຍ "Kuy" and ມູເຊີ "Musser" peoples, which disappeared from the census by becoming sub-categories⁹¹. The construction of the 2000 census was also probably inspired in some ways by the Vietnamese census' names. Indeed, in total eleven names (some of them attributed (supposedly) to the French colonisers and/or being perceived as derogatory in the authorities' eyes) were replaced by 'correct' ones, among which four were already listed in the Vietnamese census⁹². That similarity could also possibly explain the apparition of a "Tai" group (extracted from the "Phuthai"), which is found among the 54 Vietnamese official ethnic groups.

This cultural objectification is most unlikely, however, to have any short-term impact on the population, all the more so as the names still remain subject to possible revisions, depending on whether they will fit the evolving standard of "correctness" (Sisouk 2000: 8). During a trip to a village in 1999 in the province of Sekong, I was intrigued when an official kept repeating to the villagers that they should no longer call themselves "Lao Theung" or ຕາຍ "Ngae", but ກຽງ "Krieng". However, a month later, when I came back to the village, the answers were still 'politically incorrect'. I then asked the village's Party Representative the ways in which he usually described himself:

- What is your national group (ສົມຊາດ (*sònsat*))?
- Lao Theung! [the man replied at once. He then started enumerating the different national groups:] There are the Lao Theung, the Lao Lum, the Lao Khong,...

⁸⁹ Phongsaly, Luang Namtha and Bokeo. As for the Thaen (separated from the Kmmu), I can only make suppositions. As Sisouk disagrees with the idea of granting them the status of "ethnic group", the other reason could be that they are influential enough to have gained themselves their visibility.

⁹⁰ The Lahu ethnic group is also listed in the Thai and Vietnamese population censuses.

⁹¹ A third group, the Khir, was simply suppressed for an unknown reason.

He stopped, looking hesitant, and then mumbled a few more words I was unable to understand. I asked his nationality (ສັນຊາດ (*sànsat*)). He replied without hesitation:

- Lao.
- Your ethnic group (ສົມເຜົ່າ (*sònp̄haw*))?
- Ngae. [He then specified:] We belong to the 68 ethnic groups like the Lao Sung, the Mèo,... [He stopped and inaudibly mumbled again.]

During our whole stay in the village, I never heard someone spontaneously introducing himself or herself as "Krieng".

Accompanying the Director of the LFNC Research Department on Ethnic Groups on another short trip to a Ngae village in Sekong Province the same year, I witnessed an intriguing scene involving the LFNC official and the villagers. Sisouk, the Director, declared that their ethnic group actually belonged to a larger category, the ບຸຮຸ "Bru". He argued that both ethnic groups indeed shared some traditions, such as offering to special guests the boiled feet, head and giblets of a chicken. The villagers looked puzzled, but silently submitted before the central authority.

Sisouk is often depicted as a pro-Màkong (the official ethnic group to which he belongs, and which is referred to as the "Bru Makong" in the census' sub-categories) chauvinist. I would suggest, rather, that this high-ranking official is lobbying for the cause of the "Bru" as an official category. In effect, as Cohn similarly observed in India:

⁹² The 'correct' ethnic groups are as follows, with their former names in parentheses: Kmmu (Khammu), Y'ru (Lavaen), Tlieng/Trieng (Talieng), Blao/Brao (Lavè), Krieng (Ngae), Rarak/Lalak (Alak), Iumien (Yao), Akha (Kor), Singgili (Phounoy), Lahu (Kui and Mousseu), Sila (Sida).
The four Vietnamese ethnic groups are: Kho-mu (Khammu), Brâu (Brao), La Hu (Lahu), Si Là (Sila).

The implied argument is that the census was one of the situations in which Indians were confronted with the questions of who they were and what their social and cultural systems were. I don't think that the act of a census enumerator asking a question of a peasant contributed too much to the process. [...] If there was a direct effect of the census [on the mass of the Indian population], it was on the enumerators.

(Cohn 1987: 248)

In addition to the list of 55 ethnic groups resulting from the Lao Front provincial censuses, Sisouk proposed a much-condensed list of only 34 groups (see Appendix 5: "Assessment of the names of 34 ethnic groups"). Among the causes of that dramatic reduction was the grouping of eight ethnic groups listed separately in the 1995 census within a single one, the "Bru"⁹³. I will return to Sisouk's motives in Chapter Seven, but I would predict that statistical stability will remain the authorities' imperative. In Richard Handler's acute observation, nationalist discourses are "attempts to construct bounded cultural objects" (Handler 1988: 27). Consequently, too dramatic a change (in one way or another) of the census would indubitably disrupt the whole picture of the nation. As Eriksen notes: "[N]ationalism reifies culture in the sense that it enables people to talk about their culture as though it were constant" (Eriksen 1993: 103). The Lao PDR's authorities are still in search of the symbol of national identity in the form of an almost sacred number, i.e. that of the total of ethnic groups. In order to keep the number of 47 ethnic groups they could have turned their back on the claims discussed above. I suspect, however, that pressures for clarity and order were too strong to be ignored. In the final section below, I furthermore argue that the census' pattern has been influenced by Kaysone Phomvihane's 1981 guidelines on ethnicity and nationalism in Laos.

4.4. Kaysone Phomvihane's theory of nationhood

4.4.1. Kaysone's guidelines on nation and ethnicity

Kaysone Phomvihane's guidelines still strongly influence the actual nationalist discourse. In particular, his booklet entitled, "Expanding roots of solidarity between various ethnic groups within the Lao national community", written in 1981, is still referred to as the ideological bedrock for works on ethnic groups, including the censuses and the ethnographic studies. In one section, Kaysone explained the different processes that led to the emergence of nations in the world. He developed his views in a lengthy argument, of which large extracts are well worth citing in order to understand the idea of nationhood that still permeates the nationalist ideology in the Lao PDR:

Clans: [...] [ກົກ (*kòk*)] and *tribes* [ເຫລົ່າ (*law*)] [...] are communities of individuals living only in a primitive subsistence society that lacks stability and relational consistency. In the present day, in some underdeveloped countries, there are still remains of this type of society of clans and tribes: based on kinship, ancient stratification, psychology, lineage, animist practices and wedding rituals, etc.

Then, along with the development of production, the society divides into classes (ຊົນຊັບ (*sònsàn*)). The clans and tribes, in general, disintegrate due to the broadening of relationships between peoples from different clans and tribes, and to the apparition of new economic bases. A new human community has been created. That is the ethnic group [ເຜົ່າ (*phaw*)] (*peuplade*)⁹⁴.

⁹³ These 8 ethnic groups are: Kàtang, Mákong, Tri/T'li, Tà-Oy, Pàkò, Suay, Kàtu, Tlieng/Trieng. Sisouk also includes the sub-categories Kanay, In, Tong, Kàdu.

⁹⁴ Ethnic group in French.

Ethnic group: Each ethnic group has its own language. But there is as yet no language unity in each area. There are even real differences, due to the fact that individuals from the same ethnic group went to seek refuge and mixed with those from another ethnic group. The ethnic groups' economy is based on self-sufficiency, which does not promote the development of economic and cultural exchanges, and which also explains the non-homogenous character of ethnic groups' languages.

The ethnic group formed with the slavery system and subsisted until the feudal period in the history of human society. It can be the basis for the formation of a nation, as in the case of Austria, Hungary, Russia, Georgia, etc.

An ethnic group can be the constituent basis for a certain number of nations, as is the case of the Russian ethnic group, which is the common origin for Russian, Ukrainian, Byelorussian ethnic groups, which later on became Russia, Ukraine and Byelorussia.

A certain number of ethnic groups in a country can blend into a nation, as is the case with France, Germany, Italy, England, etc.

Some ethnic groups in certain countries can progressively get along with one another in the fields of language, psychology, as well in economic and territorial areas so as to become nations. This is the case with ethnic groups that united throughout historical periods to struggle against external aggression and to protect the nation subjected to the feudal system, such as Vietnam, for example.

As a matter of fact, this is the case with the ethnic groups of all colonies, which unite to resist imperialism, to achieve independence, freedom and to become a nation [...] as well as an united country [...], such as some Asian and African countries in the history of the contemporary world.

Thus, the word "nationality"[ឧទាត (*sat*)] (*nation*)⁹⁵ [...] is not the outcome of man's will, neither of the administrative power's imaginative efforts. It is the consequence of the impact of economic and social laws. Consequently, a nationality is a community of individuals that normally emerges in history, on the basis of common language, territory, economic lifestyle and psychology that reflects a cultural community. This is what appears in Western European countries, such as England, France, Italy, while feudalism collapses and capitalism develops. As far as eastern countries are concerned, such as Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia, etc., they emerged during different historical periods. Despite their different ways of forming, the national communities, once created, are characterised internally by four characteristics, i.e. language, territory, economy and culture. An ethnic group also possesses these four features, but they are not consistent. Dealing with the improvement of national unity simply means dealing with the improvement of these four features. [...]

A nation (ປະເທດឧទាត (*pàthet sat*)[...]): is clearly distinguished from "race" (ເຊື້ອឧទາត (*seuasat*)) [...] and "nationality" (*sat*)[...]. A nation is the whole community or a group of several communities, each of them having different features, but united within the same historical destiny, with the will of living on the same territory, under the same administration, constitution and laws. A nation can consist of only one nationality (*sat*) [...] (for example, Korea, Eastern

⁹⁵ Kaysoné translated the word *sat* as "nation". However, the term "nationality", in its cultural sense, seems to be a more appropriate translation in the light of his definition that follows; all the more so as, in the next paragraph, he refers again to the concept of nation, but this time using the term *pàthet sat*, *pàthet* meaning "country".

Germany, Japan, etc.), or of several nationalities (*sat*) or several ethnic groups (*phaw*) (for example, several Asian and African countries).

(Kaysone 1981: 19-25)

In their book on *Asian Forms of the Nation*, Tønnesson and Antlöv classified the nationalist "route" that the Lao PDR, like China, Vietnam, and to a lesser extent, Cambodia, followed, as *class struggle* or *social revolution*, during which the population seized power from the colonial state to form a "state based on an ideology of class struggle" (Tønnesson and Antlöv 1998: 22, original stress). During the first years of communist rule, the Socialist Revolution indeed planned to create a loyalty to the new state greater than the loyalties to particular ethnic identities. In other words, the priority was to overwhelm the ethnic identities with "the principle of the primacy of politics" (Gunn 1991: 530), which claimed to be able to outline an ideal social and political order on the basis of universal ideas and then to act politically to realise it. The regime's real objective was not to build a society based on national consciousness; rather, the concept of class was thought to be the new society's main axis of identification. The ultimate goal for the Lao communists, as it had been for their Soviet, Chinese and Vietnamese counterparts, was to eradicate the "old" identities and replace them by a "socialist" one. Kaysone asserted in 1976:

The building of socialism does not only consist of creating new relations of production and new productive forces, but also in contributing a new superstructure. If one wants to create new relations of production and new productive forces, there must be new, socialist men.

(Kaysone 1977: 78)⁹⁶

But, by the time Kaysone wrote his booklet, the second phase of the regime had been under way for two years. The Seventh Resolution of the Supreme People's Assembly was endorsed in December 1979. This document proposed a number of important changes in economic policy in order to improve the disastrous economic performance that characterised the first four years of the new administration. It admitted that, while Laos might be in the process of "by-passing capitalism", it was going to take time to construct a socialist economy. Restrictions on private production and internal trade were liberalised; price controls were abolished for goods sold on the free market. Economic management of state enterprises was reformed by adopting profit as the criterion of efficiency (Stuart-Fox 1986: 61).

In 1981, Kaysone certainly believed in the construction of a socialist society, but ethnicity persisted as a vertical phenomenon that cut across class and socio-economic strata, despite the land reform and collectivisation campaigns. Ethnicity did not fade away as expected. Kaysone's classification of social entities suggests an ethnic character to his theory of nationhood: "one ethnic group can form the basis of a nation". However, he clearly rejected that "route" in explaining the creation of Laos as a nation.

Meanwhile, Kaysone cleverly proposed the idea of nationhood based on sentiments. Ethnic groups, thus, may share nothing but the will to pursue a life in common and thereby form a nation. They are joined together, in Kaysone's terms, "within the same historical destiny, with the will of living on the same territory, under the same administration, constitution and laws". They united to fight and defeat the "imperialists"

⁹⁶ Kaysone Phomvihane *Rapport sur la situation de l'an dernier, les orientations et les tâches révolutionnaires dans la nouvelle étape et les orientations pour 1977*, quoted from Amphay Doré (1982: 106).

together. The sense of solidarity that allowed them to gain victory has endured since then. The emotional feelings that emerged under hardship have become the cement of the new nation. Kaysone's theory of the creation of the Lao nation is arguably subjectivist, civic-orientated and modernist. Paraphrasing Gellner's famous words (1964), the drive for "independence and freedom" led to the emergence of the Lao nation where it did not exist before. It also transcends linguistic and cultural differences, as the constitution of a nation is defined by the concomitance of territory, national community and the Modern State. In other words, in Kaysone's theory, the peoples who live within the national boundaries belong to the Lao nation-state. But this population needs controlling and subordinating under the State's project of constructing a nation.

4.4.2. Control of ethnicity

In his glossary of human organisations (1999), directly inspired by Kaysone's 1981 writing, Noychansamon Denchaleunsouk (pen name of a LFNC member) highlights the distinction between "ethnic group", "nationality" and "nation". He points out the fundamental distinction between the juridical/political and ethno-cultural concept of nationality. Likewise, he re-applies Kaysone's subjectivist and civic definition of "nation". His definitions are as follows:

Ethnic group [*sòn phaw*]: [...] community of individuals forged by history, on the basis of common language, roots and naming, sharing thoughts and psyche that reflect a cultural community. [...]

Nationality [*sànsat*]: community of individuals that belong to the same country, on a legal basis, no matter what their physical and cultural differences;

Nation [pàthet sat]: all the communities having different characteristics which join in the same historical destiny, and which are willing to live on the same territory, under the same administration, constitution and laws.

Nationality [sat] (National category or large ethnic group) [sònsat or sòn phaw nyai]: it is not formed by human aspirations, or by the will of the executive authority. It is the result of the impacts of the whole socio-economic system. Therefore, a nationality truly means all the human communities that emerged in history, on the basis of common language, territory, livelihood, thoughts and diverse cultural features.

(Noychansamon 1999: 1 and 2).

According to the above definition, a "nationality" (in the ethno-cultural sense) - or "national category" or "large ethnic group" - has similar characteristics to those of an "ethnic group", but the difference is that a "nationality" would arise from socio-economic inequalities: some "ethnic groups" would dominate, and eventually absorb the others. On the contrary, in Laos, the "ethnic groups" have not reached the stage of "national category" or "large ethnic group", and probably never will under the present ideology. The Lao State, applying the Stalinist-cultural definition of ethnicity, defines an ethnic group as a cultural totality. An ethnic group is identified by a set of taxonomic features, and according to the evolutionist theory used by Kaysone, it succeeds the "clan" and the "tribe" but is the predecessor of the "national community" or "nationality". But Kaysone's distinction between "nationality" and "ethnic group" is not always clear. The terms sometimes appear to be interchangeable in the text.

Nonetheless, "nationality", in the sense of cultural community, seems to suggest a more advanced stage, whereas "ethnic groups" are still described as "inconsistent" and "non-homogenous" entities.

In effect, slogans such as "equality in diversity" or "one people, many ethnic groups" are synonymous with the principle of levelling down; this is the reason why claims such as Sisouk's (for the admission of the "Bru" as an ethnic category) have little chance of success. Anyhow, this LFNC official and member of the Communist Party is certainly conscious of the risk of politicising his ethnicity, for which he would likely be accused of threatening the equilibrium of the nation⁹⁷. For the purpose of controlling ethnicity, the state in Laos defines what is 'correct' in terms of language, locality, and culture - regardless of a group's subjective belief in its existence as a people or in the legitimacy of these state-defined cultural traditions. The deviant peoples will not become full members of the ideologically defined nation unless they stop claiming their right to a self-defined identity.

This rule, however, does not seem to apply to the ethnic Lao group. In the Lao language, there is only one term ("Lao") to designate both the ideas of ethnicity and nationality. The ambiguity is therefore as much linguistic as conceptual. Used in the legalistic sense, the term "Lao" should be viewed as an a-ethnic and a-racial status, attributed to members of all ethnic groups. The term "Lao", in other words, is used as a synecdoche for the whole population. Thus, ambiguity thrives on the equivocal use of the term. Yet, textually, "Lao" refers to an ethnic group since it derives from a group to whom are attached specific characteristics. But this rule never strictly applies to the ethnic Lao, because the "Lao culture is shared by all the ethnic groups. It is composed of the best of each ethnic group's culture. The ethnic Lao language is the vernacular

⁹⁷ Sisouk told me about an intriguing conversation he had with his friend, who is himself (in Sisouk's words) a high-ranking "Bru" official. His friend apparently told him that there was a "Bru" association in France. Sisouk, then, asked him jokingly if he wanted to set up a similar association in Laos as well, which prompted his friend to retort: "Are you mad? Do you want us to get arrested?"

language, and the script is the national script for all the ethnic groups" (Kaysone 1981:

49). Again, Kaysone wrote:

Our country is among those that have several ethnic groups, of which the ethnic Lao group has a greater population than the others, located in almost all the provinces and holding a superior degree of economic and cultural development.

Each ethnic group shares common characteristics with the Lao national community.

(Kaysone 1981: 47)

The census, accordingly, perfectly depicts this form of the nation. Indeed, the ethnic Lao are always put at the top of the list followed by the small, scattered "ethnic groups". Obviously, the principle of levelling down does not apply to the ethnic Lao.

Conclusion

The egalitarian policy that held all ethnic groups to be equal (economically, socially and politically) was initiated under wartime conditions as part of the Communists' survival strategy. The goal was to gain highlanders' loyalty and their support for the Pathet Lao troops. After 1975, the strategic plan was turned into an ideological programme of preservation and promotion of every ethnic group's "culture". The principle, copied from the Stalinist model, was to give every member of the "multi-ethnic" state official recognition on an equal footing. In consequence, the new regime created "ethnic groups" as equals in their membership of the nation. In reality, the egalitarian ideology serves another purpose: the State, as a vector of ethnicity, actively manipulates, creates, suppresses (or maintains) ethnic boundaries, the ultimate objective being the formation of a homogenous national culture out of real heterogeneity.

Meanwhile, the concepts of ethnicity and nationality seem to be conflated with regard to the ethnic Lao ethnicity. As Banks comments, "the nation's defining group, the one that claims the national label as its own [...], is not then simply another 'ethnic group', it is very deliberately and self-consciously everything and nothing" (Banks 1997: 160). Two interdependent processes are involved in the construction of a nation, once state control is achieved: on the one hand *reifying diversity*- through which ethnicity is enhanced and controlled *outside* the cultural mainstream but *within* the national paradigm - and on the other hand, *homogenising* - the blending-in process where ethnicity both as a process and as a category is suppressed.

But, in the case of Laos, these two processes of mapping nationhood are hampered by inconsistency, which reduces their effectiveness. As has been discussed, the 2000 population census, behind its ordered facade, is in reality the product of multiple negotiations and arbitrary decisions that leave members of some ethnic groups confused and sometimes resentful. It is the lack of consistency that prevents this technology of power from becoming 'natural' and from becoming integrated in individuals' minds. The continued popular and official use of the three-fold category, Lao Lum, Lao Theung and Lao Sung, in contemporary Laos, despite Kaysone's 1981 call for its replacement, thus epitomises the Lao state's deficit of power. Sisouk's lobbying for the visibility of the "Bru" in the census may be another example of the regime's deficiencies in controlling ethnicity. At the same time (and this will be the focus of my next chapter) the (ethnic Lao) Majority's ethnicity is still a long way from establishing hegemony.

5. Tensions within the Lao State's Representation of the National Culture

In this Chapter, I will be looking at the Lao State's representation of the national culture. More precisely, I will address the issue of national identity in post-socialist Laos through an analysis of the politics of Majority/Minority representation. In particular, I illustrate this opposition between the One and the Other by focusing on the re-writing of the national history. My argument is that the narration of an inclusive history necessarily reflects this ambivalence of identity, "this necessity of the Other to the self, this inscription of identity in the look of the other" (Hall 1991: 48), both internally and externally. I argue, in effect, that a double process is shaping Lao national identity. Ethnic minorities' objectification strengthens the cultural Majority, which in turn is reinforced as a whole (including the Minority) by a discourse of 'national(ist) genealogy' and the politics of conflation between blood and territory.

From a broader perspective, the nationalist discourse is in search of "a *difference* with the 'modular' forms of the national society propagated by the modern West" (Chatterjee 1993b: 5, original stress). In the case of Laos, this desire to construct a distinctive model must be analysed (at least as far as culture and history are concerned) by investigating Laos' relationship with its neighbouring 'brother', Thailand. This chapter therefore will try to show that the processes of inclusion and exclusion are not only induced by the necessity of constructing an encompassing and homogenised national culture, but are also subsumed within this search for cultural particularity. These tensions are exacerbated by the fact that the discourse has its roots in Marxist-Leninist principles. In 1975, the present regime proclaimed a break with a distasteful past and instead

promised the beginning of a new socialist era. But anti-colonialist rhetoric no longer seems appropriate to rally the population, and symbols of the past are being recalled in a distorted representation that also fails to appeal to the population. The newly reformulated national culture in post-socialist Laos is still very much under construction.

5.1. Remodelling Majority/Minority representations

5.1.1. Blended into the 'cultural purity': the assimilation policy

Since 1975, the non ethnic-Lao peoples have been drawn into the homogenisation process, mainly through relocation and sedentarisation programmes. I do not intend here to elucidate in detail the origins and the consequences of these programmes. Indeed, a remarkable pioneering study on the impacts of the government's resettlement policy on the relocated villages was conducted in 1996 by a team of five researchers under the supervision of Yves Goudineau, a French anthropologist, in collaboration with the Department of Non-Formal Education of the Ministry of Education⁹⁸. The study covered six provinces (Luang Namtha, Udomsai and Xieng Khuang in the North; Attapeu, Saravane and Sekong in the South) and included twenty-two districts and sixty-seven displaced villages, with around a thousand families being interviewed.

As Goudineau points out in the main report, population shifts are not a new phenomenon. They occurred in the past in conjunction with semi-nomadic or nomadic agricultural practices, or due to seasonal migrations in the search for work. The situation changed with the arrival of the French in the nineteenth century, who were the first to attempt to control the population by 'fixing' them. But the successive wars in the twentieth century - the French War and, especially, the American War - brought about

considerable migrations of thousands of families entrapped between the two zones of influence. After 1975, however, the population relocations were no longer caused by circumstantial events, but were an integral component of the government's national planning for rural development. At present, the fundamental difference between past movements and the current resettlements is the government's desire to definitively sedentarise the highland villagers in specifically targeted lowland areas. Goudineau, thus, writes:

The principal characteristics of resettlements linked to the current rural development policy is not so much that the population shifts, or that this is designed to be permanent settlement; these are recurrent themes in recent Lao history. It is rather that these villagers have been made to leave their original territory, thereby making their sedentarisation irreversible as part of an increasingly rigorous deterritorialisation process.

(Goudineau 1997: 17)

Since the Fourth Party Congress in 1986, the reduction of shifting cultivation has been one of the Lao government's top priority programs. In popular mind, all ethnic minorities in Laos are swidden rice farmers and all ethnic Lao are paddy farmers. But the reality of swidden farming is complex. The decline of forest cover is due partly to the activities of traditional swiddeners who are forced by declining yields and increasing needs to shorten their fallow periods. Yet, there are different techniques of 'slash-and-burn' in the system of fallow cycles and in itinerant shifting systems, as well as in several crop production systems. The dwindling forest cover is nevertheless commonly

⁹⁸ Goudineau, Y. (ed.) (1997)

blamed on the ethnic minorities⁹⁹. They are viewed by the government as being responsible for forest destruction and other ecological damage. Consequently, after the Fourth Party Congress, the government promulgated regulations forbidding the clearing of mature forest for swiddens and restricting farmers to clearing secondary growth areas. By reiterating this emphasis in the Resolution of Rural Development (RD) in 1994, the reduction of shifting cultivation has again been brought to the fore in rural development strategy¹⁰⁰.

In order to improve the overall performance of rural development, and under increasing foreign criticism, the government adopted a new policy in 1994, the central feature of which is the strategy of establishing "focal sites" (FS), i.e. clearly defined geographical areas integrating several development projects. The RD programme based on the FS approach was launched by the government and the Party without any assistance from the donor community. Since February 1995, following the first national conference on "Sustainable Rural Development", donors have been requested to provide financial support to the FS policy; thus, 80% of the funding is expected to come from international organisations (interview with a foreign agronomist)¹⁰¹. However, the latter have been adopting a very cautious attitude towards the FS strategy and especially its

⁹⁹ A number of studies have been conducted in order to assess the rate of deforestation in the Lao PDR. Nonetheless, the variation in methodology makes comparisons rather unreliable. The most recent estimates on the present forest cover range from 53% (Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), 1995) to 40 % (Forest Cover Monitoring Project (FCMP, 1997) (FCMP/GTZ, 1999). Detailed studies on the causes of deforestation are lacking, but FCMP data shows that during the 1993-1997 period, areas covered by forest were converted to the following land uses: wood and shrubland (25%), shifting cultivation (63%) and permanent agriculture (12%) (FCMP/GTZ, 1999). In the Lao PDR, conversion of forest to wood and shrubland is usually caused either by forest fire or clear-cutting of sites for (possible) future hydropower reservoirs.

¹⁰⁰ In addition, increased pressure on potential swidden land also derives from a demand for exportable timber. Indeed, the export of timber and timber products is a major source of income. Laos has increased exports of timber to the point where it is one of the primary sources of foreign exchange, accounting for \$89,7 million in 1997 (only exceeded by garment exports (\$90,5 millions) *The Economist Intelligence Unit Country Report : Cambodia; Laos.*- August 2000: 24). The restrictions on swidden agriculture have not been imposed purely in response to ecological concerns but also because of the government's immediate need to export timber products and to preserve existing forest for eventual exploitation.

'resettlement' component. Indeed, they and foreign analysts seem to perceive the strategy as being merely a newly reformulated policy to resettle people from the mountains into these focal sites as well as to gain better control over them (interview with a foreign technical adviser¹⁰²). The slogan for the FS policy is indeed *chatsan asib khongti*. *Chatsan* means "management", *asib* means "profession", and *khongti* means "of (one particular) place" (Ovesen 2001: 15). In other words, the objective appears to be to promote sedentary and permanent farming settlements. The method was examined during the Sixth Round Table Follow-up Meeting organised by the government in Vientiane in May 1998. The report that followed tried to convince the donors that the FS strategy was not a catchword for resettlement. It, thus, argues:

In its report to the donor community at the Geneva Roundtable in 1997, the government has already mentioned that the term 'resettlement', used up to now *for want of a better term*, does not convey the exact meaning of the Lao expression *chatsan asib khongti*. In the Lao language, this means stabilisation of production, or establishment of permanent farming conditions. Our intention is not to move populations per se [...] Our intention is to create permanent conditions for livelihood to attract moving populations whose traditional methods of slash-and-burn cultivation are no longer sustainable, and who hardly survive at the subsistence level. *Chatsan asib khongti* is thus a priori a rational way to integrate these 'unsettled families' as full participants in the construction of our country, and to give them improved access to development services.

(State Planning Committee 1998: 21)¹⁰³

Indeed, the forest land use issue is one that illustrates the conflict between the government's priorities and ethnic minorities' rights which generates discrimination and domination.

¹⁰¹ 18 June 1999.

¹⁰² 18 June 1999.

¹⁰³ *The Rural Development Programme 1998-2002, The 'Focal Site' Strategy.* - May 1998.

Every year, the provincial authorities decide on the number and the location of focal sites to be set up and delegate their implementation to the district level. But given the lack of financial support and the weakness of the institutional framework, the policy of FS may be overrated. Apparently, some zones were designated as "focal" without establishing the conditions to implement effective development patterns (interview with a foreign chief technical adviser¹⁰⁴). Furthermore, in recent years the authorities have realised that the objective of eradicating shifting cultivation is unlikely to be achieved. Accordingly, the term "stabilisation" has replaced "eradication". However, this agricultural practice, though tolerated, has to evolve towards a better diversified and commercially orientated cropping. The cultivation will only then receive official recognition and be termed "permanent production", rather than "shifting cultivation". Indeed, some shifting fields are now euphemistically reported as being *suan* ("gardens") rather than *hai* for non-rice crops (Interview with a Lao official from the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry)¹⁰⁵.

However, it is essential to bear in mind that resettlement situations are diverse. "There is no one pattern which can account for all contemporary resettlements", Goudineau stresses in his report (Goudineau 1997: 18). For example, it is very difficult to assert whether a relocation has been voluntary or not since within the same village, divisions and disagreements are frequent. But a resettlement to the plains undeniably leads the upland families to break with their natural environment and cultural habits (Goudineau 1997: 21). Resettlement is the government response to the conflict between swidden farming and state interest in forest resources. It is thus promoted as a means for general economic development and is used (though not acknowledged) as a mechanism for

¹⁰⁴ 14 June 1999.

control or surveillance of politically suspect minority groups. Moreover, the policy clearly also has an ideological purpose, that is, to integrate the ethnic minorities into the national culture. The Iresons, thus, bitterly concluded as early as 1991 that "the resettlement becomes another means by which ethnic minorities are Laoized as they are 'developed' " (Ireson 1991: 935-936).

But the homogeneity of the cultural mainstream is itself a construction. As Hall puts it, there is no such "sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity - an 'identity' in its traditional meaning (that is, an all-inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation)". Quite the opposite, he continues: "it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its *constitutive outside* that the 'positive' meaning of any term - and thus its 'identity' - can be constructed" (Hall 1996: 4, original stress). Consequently, I show below how One and the Other are inextricably linked in the construction of a national culture in post-socialist Laos.

5.1.2. Internal orientalism

The year 1999 was marked by the promotion of Visit Laos Year 1999-2000. To celebrate the event, a long parade was organised on the opening day of the That Luang festival in November in Vientiane. The procession was led by a group composed of young female and male students wearing their school uniform and waving national flags. This first group was called "Lao Modern Time and Great Victory to the Century" [sic] (Brochure of the Lao National Tourist Authority, *Opening Ceremony Visit Laos Year 1999-2000*, 18 November 1999 [in English]). Strangely enough, at the tail end of the procession, the closing group, referred to by the nostalgic title, "Long Distance Friendship and the True Dream", represented the past, embodied in men wearing red

and green feudal soldiers' clothing. Some of them were perched on the no-less traditional elephants, symbol of the former regime. The animals were also carrying three young and attractive women dressed up in the so-called "Lao Lum ", "Lao Theung" and "Lao Sung" traditional costumes. Although this terminology is now forbidden in the official texts, it is nevertheless still widely used, even by state newspapers.

The second group, "Sieng Khene Dene Champa: Welcome to Lao PDR", was a digest of the multi-ethnic national culture, in which the 'typical' Lao musical instrument, the *Khene*, was paired with dances performed by students from the School of Arts of Vientiane and the School of Highland Ethnic groups; they were joined by Army troops and members of the National Sport Committee. This is a common pattern (of which modern China has been a long-term producer) whereby minority peoples, as Gladney ironically depicts, are shown as "good dancers, singers, and sportsmen, [which] is a feature of this [objectivised] process well known to travellers in China and of the Chinese state's representation of itself as 'multinational'" (Gladney 1994: 264). The commercial floats, referred to as "Honesty and Friendship", constituted the next group in which hotels, restaurants and handicraft shops were represented by lavishly decorated floats and carefully integrated into the larger picture. The companies had indeed skilfully crafted their own brands to include a symbol of the national culture. For example, Beer Lao, the successful national beer brand, displayed a model of a racing boat, used in the very popular racing boat competition that takes place during the celebration of the end of the Buddhist Lent in October.

The fourth group in the parade was by far the largest in size and variety, the better to represent "Lao Heritage and Culture". Indeed, all the provinces were represented in an orderly pattern. Three sub-groups were arrayed along geographical lines: the "Northern

Zone" (including the province of Vientiane - though it is not situated in the North, being the capital it probably had to come first); the "Central Zone" and the "Southern Zone". The parade offered, thus, a panoramic view of countrywide cultural productions, exhibited in a succession of visual displays. Each province was led by a young woman, holding a sign indicating the name of the province and dressed up in the traditional clothes of the province's largest ethnic group. The provincial displays, which reflected some of the provinces' most salient features, had been fabricated by the provinces themselves, in collaboration with the Department of Culture and Information and the Department of Trade and Commerce. Some provinces, such as Xieng Khuang, Huaphan, Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Savannakhet and Champassak, obviously had more attributes to attract tourists. These provinces are not only the largest in terms of population and area; during the parade, they were also all particularly keen in displaying their specific historical and cultural legacies. This self-stereotyping process provided a series of snapshots for tourist brochures: Xieng Kuang and the Plain of Jars ("Thong Hai Hin"); Huaphan and the Viengxai caves; Luang Prabang and the Lao New Year; Vientiane and the Rocket festival, Savannakhet and the dinosaur fossils; Champassak and Vat Phu. As a consequence, one could almost observe a dramatic division of the national space between the historical and 'culturally loaded' provinces and the 'culturally poor' provinces, such as Bokeo, Sekong or Attapeu. The latter, unsurprisingly, were represented by 'their' 'colourful' ethnic groups, dancing, singing or simply marching, as if they were their sole cultural items. For instance, the provinces of Saravane, Sekong and Attapeu were remarkable for their lack of cultural material. Their dancers in 'traditional costumes' were trailing on foot behind the province of Champassak and its impressive float carrying a model of the Vat Phu temple. As a result, the cultural demarcation between the Southernmost 'small' provinces and their prestigious and imposing neighbour (candidate for World Heritage status) was striking.

This balancing act between past and present is not performed by chance. It is part of the on-going process of crafting a national culture. The appearance of this parade was also very instructive because it epitomises the government's struggles between socialist principles and the country's integration into the capitalist economy. This display of cultural productions for the local population and for the tourists reflects what Trankell calls the "marketing of 'culture' ". She remarks, thus: "while preserving the cultural heritage, the Lao national identity is at the same time being negotiated and put on stage for commercial purposes" (Trankell 1999: 199). What is more, the parade embodies a paradox in that it promotes an ideology of the multi-ethnic culture, yet through a cultural hierarchy. Some authors have in effect argued that the representation of ethnic minorities has in fact more to do with the construction of the majority identity than it does with the minorities themselves. As Dru Gladney puts it, the objectification of the minority "as exotic, colourful and 'primitive' homogenizes the undefined majority as united, monoethnic, and modern" (Gladney 1994: 93). Explicitly using Edward Said's famous theoretical framework that places the relationship between power and representation in the context of colonial relations of domination, he calls such a process "oriental orientalism". According to Said, as a style of thought Orientalism is based upon an "ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident' ". On this basis, an "enormously systematic discipline" was created "by which European culture was able to manage - and even produce - the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period". Thus, Orientalism was a "Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient": Orientalism created the Oriental. What is more, however, "European culture gained in strength and

identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (Said 1995: 2-3).

The example of an ethnographic study recently published in Laos shows how ethnic minorities are being depicted, to use Schein's expression, as a "reservoir of still-extant authenticity", imbued with flavours of romanticism and desire for wildness (Schein 1997: 70). In his booklet (1997) that recounts his ethnographic trip to encounter the Lolo people in Phongsaly, the northernmost province of Laos, Houmphanh Rattanavong, the director of the Institute of Cultural Research in Vientiane, adopts a tone that often resembles genuine enthusiasm, if not lyrical élan. The parallel between nature, landscape and highlanders is recurrent in his narration. He praises the people and imbues them with nostalgic qualities, such as remoteness and authenticity, by using bucolic images:

Many people may wonder why inhabitants of the mountains like wearing bright and shiny clothes. Perhaps one answer may have to do with the bountiful beauty that nature at these high altitude places offers them. As man opens his eyes, the first thing he sees is the beauty of nature that surrounds him. He may instinctively like to make himself as Mother Nature. [...] Human society in the mountains has its foundation on nature. The mode of production as well as the rest of the way of life depends on nature, which is in its pristine form, adorned with high ranges of mountains covered with all kinds of beautiful vegetation.

(Houmphanh 1997: 67-68, original translation)

For Houmphanh, the research trip appears to be a quest for the 'essence' of these people as much as a personal achievement. It is a space-time journey, to reach an a-temporal territory, a 'lost world'. His foreword is worth quoting, not least for its style:

It was pointed out to me: "if you don't trek ravines, climb mountains, how could you know for sure how pristine and how magnificent are some remote territories of our country; how magnificent are some remote territories of our country; how could you claim to have fathomed the hardship or the joy that our people experience in their daily life; how could you really know their hearts' desire". [...]

This is true! I feel that each journey which I have made has given me an added sense of worth as a "human being". [...] Once I finally arrived at Oupao village or any other communities, I felt dazed as if I was in a state of dream. It was hard to believe that I physically was among them.

(Houmphanh 1997: Foreword (no page quoted), original translation)

As elsewhere in the world, ethnic groups in Laos are being subsumed into the national patrimony. They are given the discrete, bounded, objective forms of items; in brief, they become commodified (Foster 1991: 240). A seminar on the conservation and promotion of the "intangible cultural patrimony" of the minority groups in the Lao PDR was held in Vientiane in October 1996, organised by UNESCO in collaboration with the Lao National Commission for UNESCO and the Ministry of Information and Culture. The concept of "intangible cultural patrimony" is the definition of "culture" used by UNESCO, and applied as the bedrock of the politics of preservation of the country's multi-ethnic patrimony. According to the final report (1996), though it does not clearly define it, the notion of "intangible culture" seems to refer to the reservoir of knowledge, such as languages, tales, myths and rituals, that cannot be measured. There appear,

however, to be two levels in the discourse of preservation. Firstly, the "things" that bound the minority groups' cultures, such as languages, crafts, music, oral tales or habitat, must be inventoried and enhanced. Secondly, these particular cultures are, in turn, inventoried into a generic national culture. As a matter of fact, "tangible" and "intangible" are similarly defined as "things" to collect and to preserve. None the less, the report warns against the dangers of fixing traditions, and carrying cultural stereotypes (1996: 13). It also recommends that members of ethnic groups, especially the youth, should have the choice between one or several "cultures" and decide themselves on the future of their traditions (1996: 16).

The so-called international community, through representative organisations, certainly plays a significant role in legitimising the framework that defines what, or rather, *where* a culture should be with respect to minority peoples. As a matter of fact, both states and foreign experts tend to view the world as made of 'peoples' with distinctive and discrete cultures. This is what Susan Wright calls the "old definition of culture", i.e. fixed, small and a-historical entities defined by distinctive characteristics and composed of identical individuals, as opposed to the "new idea of culture", the meaning of which is, on the contrary, continually contested by multiple agents at different places and times. Unlike the "old idea of culture", there is no top-down definition by the "undefined voice" which Wright sharply criticises (Wright 1998: 8-9). She takes as an example the 1995 report *Our creative diversity* of the international organisation UNESCO, which for decades has been involved in the mission of preserving and promoting the world's cultural patrimony, yet without engaging with the issue of the political dimension of defining 'culture'. She argues, thus, that the UNESCO report "deploy[s] a disembodied voice, 'we', to authorize a top down definition of 'culture' as if it were common sense or

'natural'. This strategy, like the old anthropological strategy of objectification, tries to mask or erase the politicization of culture" (Wright 1998:12).

5.1.3. External orientalism

Yet Lao nationalism in post-socialist Laos can not be fully understood as a process internal to national borders; in other words, it is not pertinent to define the consolidation of the national culture only through the Majority/Minority internal dichotomy. As Schein has demonstrated the demarcation of Chinese national identity through "multiple contrastive others", i.e. the external West and the internal non-Han peoples, I likewise argue that the politics of culture in the Lao PDR are being shaped both internally and externally (Schein 2000: 106). Laos is becoming increasingly integrated into the capitalist world market. To be sure, the openness of its economy is not at all comparable to other states in South-East Asia that have inscribed the culture of capitalism in their society. Nevertheless, the country still has to confront the effects of its (slow) economic integration into the world market. It is also important to bear in mind that Laos is very dependent on foreign aid. For example, in 1996/1997, nearly half of total capital expenditure was financed by foreign sources¹⁰⁶. Its geographical position puts the country in a very fragile and vulnerable position and forces the authorities to adopt what has been called the "politics of landlockedness" or "managing dependency" (Rigg 1995).

It is worth analysing the first ever attempt to conduct a sociological survey in post-war Laos, which was carried out by Grant Evans in collaboration with the Institute of Cultural Research in 1997 (2003 households were surveyed in 6 districts of Vientiane

¹⁰⁶ IMF figures quoted from Economist Intelligence Unit Country Report: Cambodia, Laos.- 4th quarter 1998.

Municipality)¹⁰⁷. Despite its limitations, the report gives precious information for a better understanding of people's perceptions of some of the issues which have been the focus of the government's concern lately. Especially instructive for us are two questions concerning the respondents' views of the world. First, they were asked to name the country they would most like to visit, given the opportunity. The most popular choice was clearly the United States (32%), followed by Japan (14.4%). Thailand came in third place (10%). It preceded the socialist regimes of China (7.1%) and Vietnam (5.9%). The former Soviet Union was not even mentioned, and neither was France, the former colonial power.

If you were able to choose a country to go and visit, which one would you like to visit the most?

	Frequency	Percent
Not go anywhere	176	9.2
Anywhere	218	11.4
America	612	32.0
Japan	275	14.4
Thailand	191	10.0
China	136	7.1
Vietnam	113	1.5
Australia	64	3.4
Canada	27	1.4
England	25	1.3
Switzerland	24	1.3

¹⁰⁷ 1997-1998 Vientiane Social Survey Project.- Institute for Cultural Research, Ministry of Information and Culture, Vientiane.

Singapore	23	1.2
Germany	18	0.9
India	7	0.4
Hungary	1	0.1

Source: 1997-1998 Vientiane Social Survey Project (question 42)

But the following question, complementary to the previous one, saw a dramatic change, not only in the order of the list but also in its content. People were asked which modern societies they would most like to be a model for Laos. More than a third (37.2%) answered their own country, Laos. Japan came second (26.3%), followed by Singapore (19.9%). The rest of the countries (including the United States and the "developed modern countries") accounted for less than 5% of the answers; these included Thailand and Vietnam, both of them being barely mentioned (0.1%). As for China, it disappeared from the list, while France appeared in it.

Which modern society would you like the most to be a model for Laos?

	Frequency	Percent
Lao	695	37.2
Japan	491	26.3
Singapore	372	19.9
Developed modern countries	107	5.7
America	67	3.6
France	64	3.4
Russia	52	2.8
Hungary	13	0.7

Thailand	2	0.1
Cambodia	2	0.1
Vietnam	2	0.1

Source: 1997-1998 Vientiane Social Survey Project (question 43)

As regards these results overall, Lao people seem to hold a relatively positive image of their society, since a third of the respondents list their own country as the model to follow, despite its very weak socio-economic indicators¹⁰⁸. Japan and Singapore's presence as second and third choices, respectively, can be explained by their positive representation abroad, through the fact that they are perceived to have successfully managed to combine images of efficient capitalist economy and respect for traditional values. Accordingly, there is no rejection of the capitalist system as such; rather, it is the socialist model which has long since lost its appeal (Vietnam is hardly listed, and China not all). On the other hand, the respondents' choices also show the limited influence of Western countries, confirmed by the low scores attained by the United States and France. The lack of enthusiasm manifested vis-à-vis Thailand is especially interesting, and yet not surprising. Being the closest country to Laos culturally and historically, one might have expected a higher score. The relationship between the two countries is traditionally described as being like that between older and younger brothers - the age hierarchy oscillating between the two depending on the interlocutor¹⁰⁹. As a matter of

¹⁰⁸ Grant Evans, however, holds the opposite view; he writes, "Perhaps the dominant consciousness among ordinary Lao about their society today is its 'backwardness', a consciousness which has sprung from the LPDR's endless promotion of the importance of 'development', and in more recent times through the growing exposure of Lao to the outside world which draws attention to how 'backward' Laos is" (Evans 1998: 190-191). I would suggest that while the Lao people are well aware of their poverty and the country's slow economic development, they remain none the less proud of what they perceive to be their own culture.

¹⁰⁹ See, for a Lao perspective, the study of Lao-Thai relations by Mayoury and Pheuiphanh Ngaosyvathn (1994) *Kith and Kin Politics. The Relationship between Laos and Thailand*. Their intention, expressed in the introductory chapter, says it all: "this book is aimed at exploring the intricacies of the Lao-Thai saga of love and loathing. It is a story both tragic and comic, with abrasive sentimentality and explosive emotion sometimes substituting for the facts facing the two countries".

fact, their shared Buddhist cultural values have been overlooked and their differences heightened as the result of their leaderships' opposing ideologies over the past 25 years.

The influence of the Thai media, for example, has become a matter of growing concern for the Lao authorities. The Lao Women's Union (LWU) has criticised Thai TV programmes for encouraging incorrect dress and manners, at the expense of traditional clothing such as the *pha sin* (the Lao sarong). Similarly, some have accused the media of playing a significant role in the rise of consumerism or, worse, of crime in Laos (*The Nation* (Bangkok), January 28 2001)¹¹⁰. However, official statements lack proof to substantiate these claims. Nevertheless, concerns over the country's exposure to ill-perceived influences from 'the outside' have been clearly expressed by the government¹¹¹. The Party's directive entitled *Concerning Cultural Activities in the New Era*, issued in October 1994 following the Fifth Party Congress, details at length the external dangers that could threaten the integrity of the 'multi-ethnic national culture'. It warns that...

[...] along with the success [of building up and enhancing a national culture], many undesirable phenomena have appeared, such as: livelihoods based on chasing after money, repulsive fads and fashions, false beliefs which are

¹¹⁰ Worth noting, since it is rare enough, is research published in 2000 by a Thai academic, Vipa Uttamachant, on the impact of Thai media on Lao society. These are some of her conclusions reported in the English-language Thai newspaper, *The Nation* (January 28, 2001); see also Martin Clutterbuck's short article, "Official enemy: Thai culture" in *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 11 February 1993, p. 33.

¹¹¹ Interesting, thus, were the fierce reactions in the Lao state media when a Thai pop singer was accused of having made derogatory remarks about Lao people during a TV show. Below is an excerpt of an article in the Lao-language newspaper, *Vientiane Mai*, written by a Lao female (possibly a member of the Lao Women's Union), which illustrates the sense of insult to national pride:

If Nicole [the Thai singer] lacked the education to be able to make a distinction between what is right or wrong, the Lao people would not bear a grudge for her naivety. But, on the contrary, she has received a good education, has a rather high living standard, as well as a certain degree of fame. So, how could one forgive her for what she said? The only explanation left is that she intentionally meant to harm Laos' dignity and reputation, which is unacceptable. If Laos is a small under-developed country, the Lao people, on the contrary, morally and intellectually are not inferior to any other people.

spreading rapidly, especially among our youth who do not know the traditions and customs, nor the elegant national culture; behaviour and practices which are contrary to the national culture; viewing of traditions only as a means of making profits; activities of a business culture that knows only commerce and trade without appreciating the values of culture, which grates on society, and which the national legal system has not been able to limit and to resolve. In addition, antique cultural artefacts are being smuggled out of the country; foreign cultural influences are entering into the country which have bad effects on the national cultural legacy; which have led national identity and culture to become unclear, or even worse, to fade away altogether.

(1994: 2, original translation)¹¹²

I argue that two dyadic relations shape national identity in post-socialist Laos. The first relation uses the representation of ethnic minorities to strengthen the national culture. The ethnic minorities serve as an oppositional figure to stress the homogeneity of the Majority. The second relation - between Thailand/the West and Laos - is based on an ideological dichotomy: Thailand appears as an anti-model, the core of which is viewed as being contaminated by the ill effects of capitalism. Laos, by contrast, tries to define itself as a virtuous nation by applying a moral discourse; in other words, by claiming an 'authenticity' lost by Thailand.

In the next section, I specifically will discuss the nationalist discourse and its search for "a *difference* with the 'modular' forms of the national society propagated by the modern West" (Chatterjee 1993b: 5, original stress). This search for 'authenticity', however, retains a dual agenda, between falsity and genuine feelings, rhetoric and people's

autonomy; more precisely put, between, on the one hand, the state's politics of cultural discipline, and on the other the revival of popular Buddhism.

5.2. "Culture in the New Era": a socialism with Lao characteristics

5.2.1. "A new socialist man"

After 1975, the new regime believed that transforming the masses was the first and foremost step in the construction of a newly socialist state. Short of capital and of qualified people but with a plentiful supply of physical labour, the government logically emphasised the crucial importance of the human factor amongst the solutions to economic and social problems. The goal was to achieve a social homogeneity which would transcend ethnic identity. In a country where more than 80 % of the population live in rural areas and in the absence of a working class, the peasants were bound to be drawn into the socialist revolution. The state was eager to find, or to create, a new social class on which to base the transition period to a socialist economy. In 1978, an accelerated programme was launched to collectivise agriculture. However, conceived as well as executed badly, it proved to be a disaster both from the point of view of production and because it stimulated opposition among the Lao peasantry who had previously been sympathetic towards the new regime. The government condemned the refusal of the peasants to co-operate as a threat to national security and therefore attributed to the peasants a political dimension that they had never had before (Taillard 1983: 131).

The government assumed that socialisation of the countryside would bring about what every socialist regime hoped for, i.e. objective independence or self-sufficiency and self-reliance, which would prove the superiority of socialist over capitalist modes of

¹¹² The translation is not mine, though I have made a few corrections.

production and thus strengthen commitment to the regime. Grant Evans gives two other main reasons for collectivisation, one of which was the distrust of the peasantry by the communists who assumed that the peasants did not form a genuine class of revolutionary elements and would veer towards capitalism if they were allowed to keep and use the means of production for their private activity. The second reason is induced by this suspicion of the peasantry: independent peasants, designated as "rich peasants", would disrupt the planned economy through resistance, opposition and rebellion; in contrast, "[a] collectivised peasantry [...] would be integrated into central planning and be unable to resist surplus transfers from agriculture to wherever the state planners saw fit to invest it" (Evans 1995: 18).

Collectivisation therefore was not only seen as a means to achieve economic security but also as an instrument for political consolidation. This was particularly true of Laos, the goal of which was to become self-sufficient in food over a period of three years. It was hoped in effect that the three-year plan, with its emphasis upon collectivisation, would strengthen security by implanting new popular administrative structures through which to promote party control, and by raising living standards, thus generating commitment to the new regime. Collectivisation would thus encourage agricultural production and contribute to the internal security of the state by preventing counterrevolution. Finally, it was expected that collectivisation would transform the people into new socialist men. The collectivisation planning was, thus, a part of the logic of trying to change society from above, in the name of building socialism in a peasant country.

5.2.2. Politics of cultural discipline

Although the project of building up "new socialist men" has faded away, the state has not abandoned the idea of 'renewing' the people, as expressed in the reformulated concept of "culture in the new era". The examination of a colour leaflet produced by the Ministry of Information and Culture (MIC) in 1998 throws interesting light on the type of society that the state is attempting to mould. The document was distributed to the Ministry's provincial offices and was unambiguously entitled "Criteria/Guidelines for constructing life in the new cultural era". These guidelines target three social levels, i.e. the village, the family and the individual; and attribute duties to each of them in order to develop a way of life that corresponds to the prescribed 'culture'. The pictures that illustrate the leaflet leave little doubt about the 'good' culture. For example, on the balcony of a wooden house on stilts, a 'traditional' family - the elderly, the children and the parents - is eating sticky rice from a basket, with ethnic Lao-like dishes placed on a low bamboo table. They are using spoons for the soup and fingers for the rice. Each of the two women (looking like the mother and the grand-mother) is wearing a *pha sin*, and the grand-father (or the husband) has cotton threads around his wrist (thereby indicating that it is a Buddhist family). However, it is significant that Buddhism is never mentioned as such in the text, an indication of the fact that it is not constitutionally recognised as the privileged state religion (see below for fuller discussion). The 'multi-ethnic family' is not forgotten either with another picture of four women dressed in 'traditional' ethnic clothes, yet lined up in front of an ethnic Lao-style wooden house on stilts, divided into three distinctive habitats - presumably, the balcony, the central house and the kitchen - with square roofs, proper fences and surrounded by a green and tidy environment. Finally, the That Luang is on the cover of the leaflet, and a picture of a waterfall (implying a wealth of natural resources) closes the text.

The (explicit as well as implicit) objectives exposed in this leaflet interestingly echo cultural changes noticed in the relocated villages, and mentioned in the 1997 Goudineau report. Indeed, one reads that:

The most obvious signs of cultural rupture caused by relocation are given by the development of houses and the evolution of dress. The adoption of Lao Lum style dwellings (houses on stilts designed to accommodate, on average, one family) is strongly encouraged in the new villages by the local authorities, who provide advisors to explain how to build houses or construct an example house for the village chief. The new habitat, while having some advantages (in terms of hygiene and light) is often at odds with the architectural and social traditions of the hilltribes who are used, for example, to long houses (able to house up to a hundred people) as some southern Austro-Asiatic groups are (in Sekong, Saravane), or built on the ground houses as are the Miao-Yao of the North. The difference is not merely technical but signifies the loss of an ancient architectural skill or art [...].

(Goudineau 1997: 35)

In fact, as early as 1976, a campaign of cultural and ideological renewal was launched with the objective of the transformation of the moral, spiritual, cultural and social life of the people and the formation of the "new individual" possessing a high level of revolutionary morality and culture (Kaysone 1980: 208-210). The new culture had to be founded on love of socialism and patriotism, but also guided by a "moral life". The new socialist man was to be animated by "a spirit of solidarity, be a good father to his family and respect the laws of the state" (Doré 1982: 109). As Evans acutely observed, the ideals of the "new socialist man" of the 1970s and early 1980s actually contained conservative values, specifically influenced by ethnic Lao cultural standards:

Arguably the interpretation given to the morality of the new socialist man by the LPRP was strongly conditioned by the [ethnic] Lao social environment. That influence explains the highly traditional and conservative as well as nationalistic cast of ideology. Reactions against Western fashion, music and decadent morality, exemplified by prostitution or simply the holding of hands in the street, largely reflected the values of elderly people (whose number included the party leadership), who are traditionally guides in such matters, and the sexual conservatism of village culture.

(Evans 1995: 4)

The language of authenticity, or cultural uniqueness, used in the government's ideological campaign conveys the false assumption that each 'culture' has an unique and immutable essence. A quarter of a century after the campaign started, the conservative rhetoric that aims to discipline behaviours is still present and as strong as ever¹¹³. The school curriculum, for instance, shows how the discourse of cultural and moral rectitude is promoted as a daily practice from a young age. One school text, in particular, entitled "Lao Culture and Society", caught my attention. Written in 1998 and printed by the Ministry of Education, the manual is in fact directed at trainee teachers and is part of their final year curriculum's reading material. Every aspect of social and cultural manners is reviewed, whether they take place in private, public or professional spaces, in a mundane or official context. The body is strictly constrained through exhaustive

¹¹³ Another example is a notice issued by the Ministry of Information and Culture (Notice No. 848, 14 October 1999), which attempts to regulate activities in entertainment places. In that notice, it is, for instance, stipulated that it is forbidden to play and to sing foreign songs. They are, however, allowed if foreigners participate in the event; in that case, foreign songs must be limited to 20% of the total music played. The way of dressing is similarly subject to rules. Thus, it is strictly forbidden for men to wear "eccentric" clothes, to have long hair and ear-rings; as for women, they are not allowed to wear trousers and skirts, or any kind of clothing that is contrary to the Lao traditions. Sexual conservatism also is

codification. These micro-politics of the body serve to constitute a 'natural' way of behaving and, subsequently, a marker of primordial identity, bluntly expressed by a (Lao) proverb, quoted in the book: "Manners indicate the race, behaviour the lineage" (ກິລິຍາບອກຊາດ, ມາລະຍາດບອກຕະກຸນ (*kiliyaborksat malàyatborktākūn*)) (Ministry of Education 1998: 12). Moreover, there is little doubt that these codes of 'savoir-vivre' - or 'savoir-être' - depict the stereotypical representation of a 'good' ethnic Lao person, as the manual defines 'Lao-ness' in the following terms:

The Lao have a firm attachment to the sensible practice of traditions. They are gentle, modest and relaxed people, and are not so very backward [sic]. Moreover, the Lao know how to offer respect, dignity and help to the weakest, they know how to respect the elderly and the senior people to whom the nation and the Lao are grateful; these are the ways of showing mutual respect that are expressed during the important days of the nation and in life, such as during the *baci sukhuān*, the exchange of wishes.

(*Lao Culture in Society* 1998: 37)

Hand-in-hand with its politics of authenticity, the Party's injunctions mix patriotic élan, a socialist tinge and economic comfort: "work for the wealth of your family, for the nation, for civilisation and for social justice" (Ministry of Information and Culture 1998). The consolidation of the national culture is accompanied by exhortations to attain economic competitiveness: "Culture is the force that allows society to expand [so] it will not be embarrassing to stand next to other nations. The development of a nation goes hand-in-hand with cultural development as well as development in all the domains.

reflected in instructions which stipulate that entertainment places must be well lighted so that people can be clearly visible, for, as it is explained, dark lighting can lead to indecent behaviour.

The raising of people's level of culture is [therefore] an important factor for the country's socio-economic development", emphasised the Party at its Fifth Congress in 1994¹¹⁴. Cultural politics in post-socialist Laos thus appear to be ambivalent, caught between the rhetoric of preservation and the desire for modernity, tensions expressed by Houmphanh Rattनावong in his article on "Culture and Lao Culture":

For our new culture, if we only preserve the old culture by improving what is inadequate, it cannot be a new culture. We must therefore create a more civilised culture that corresponds to the current situation and realities. Meanwhile, we must accept the best in the world to always enhance our culture.

(Houmphanh 1996: 163)

Ann Anagnost shows that the tensions in contemporary China between the construction of a national culture embodied in primordial traits and the necessity of moving towards modernity (symbolised by economic reforms so as to meet the international standards of the capitalist economy) have led the Chinese Communist Party to construct the complex discourse of "civilisation" (Anagnost 1997: 75). As she explains, that discourse is, above all, a "discourse of lack"; that is, the official recognition of the failure of the Chinese people to match Western criteria of quality, productivity, discipline and civility - in essence, the standards of the modern labour force (Anagnost 1997: 76). Concretely, these tensions have given shape to "disciplinary practices", based on a complex combination of conservatism and evolutionism, in an effort to reconcile the essence of the national character and the urge to reach the advanced stage of world-historical development. Accordingly, Anagnost argues, the authoritarian post-Tiananmen state has endorsed a "pedagogical role of raising the quality of people, but [...] acts as

¹¹⁴ *Concerning Cultural Activities in the New Era.*- Directive of the ninth meeting of the Party Central

capitalism's "despotic double", a socialism with "Chinese characteristics" that invites the imposition of capital logic while suppressing any expression of a popular sovereignty" (Anagnost 1997: 79).

The "new culture" discussed above thus attempts to squeeze egalitarian ideals, evolutionist ambitions and essentialist desires all together in a so-called reformulated concept. However, to a certain extent the revival of Buddhism, both at popular and institutional levels, reflects a remarkable evolution in the government's promotion of national identity in post-socialist Laos. Yet, the phenomenon can be interpreted in several ways: as a step backward in the process of building a modern state or, on the contrary, as the regime's attempt to legitimate its rule, or again as a sign of autonomy from the Western model of the nation-state. Reflections on all these three possibilities will constitute my next section.

5.2.3. The search for legitimacy: Buddhism and politics

The Department of Religion of the LFNC published an intriguing article on Buddhism in the *Lao Sang Sat*, the LFNC official magazine, in 1998. The text differed from the official rhetoric for the authors did not try to demonstrate a common ground between the religion and socialist ideals; rather, they stressed the spiritual force of religion, in general, and of Buddhism, in particular. The article went on to emphasise the role of Buddhism in various areas, such as education and the arts. More surprisingly, it also pointed out the political role of Buddhist monks in the form of kings' advisers, whose kingdoms furthermore were to be ruled by Buddhist principles and commandments. The conclusion is most innovative as it recognises that progress in science and technology will never undermine religion. On the contrary, society will always need spiritual support and moral values, no matter how developed it is:

Nowadays, some people believe that religion will disappear when men attain a sufficiently high degree of knowledge in science and technology. However, what happens is the opposite. The more science and technology develop, the more men need to achieve spiritual and moral happiness, i.e. the greater their need of higher moral values, of justice, humankind, civilisation and peace. In brief, as long as religion keeps its role of moral shelter for humankind, we can argue that religious principles and virtues will always stay in men's hearts.

(The Department of Religion 1998: 43)¹¹⁵

Thus, the concurrence of the parade marking Visit Laos Year with the That Luang festival was not coincidental. The religious monument, which was formerly the centrepiece of a tribute ceremony to royalty under the former regime, has replaced the hammer and sickle as national symbol¹¹⁶. Consequently, the That Luang festival has become the locus of the State's representational project of the nation, a crossroads between socialist ideals, Buddhist rituals, exhibition of the multi-ethnic national culture and the politics of opening to the world. The conflation of Buddhism and Socialism is openly celebrated and benefits from extensive media coverage¹¹⁷. As Trankell observes, "symbolic production of identity is being staged in the state rituals, now managed not by the king, but by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party" (Trankell 1999: 199).

¹¹⁵ These claims certainly do not really fit the socialist ideals of "industrial men". The Lao communist leaders emphasised training of cadres, and more generally the necessity to educate peoples. Following the Vietnamese political ideology, the government adopted the program of "the Three Revolutions" and like his Vietnamese comrades, in 1982, Kaysone stressed the key role of technology in rapidly developing the economy : "[i]n Laos, the urgent problem of the bypassing to socialism is how to develop the new production forces and how to increase the efficiency of work. An answer to these questions rests in scientific and technical progress. This is why our Party, in the three revolutions, considers the scientific and technical revolution as the key point" (Kaysone Phomvihane (1982); quoted, in turn, from Luther (1982: 47)).

¹¹⁶ Grant Evans has already expertly analysed in his book (1998) the re-integration of Buddhist and former nationalist symbols by the regime into its propaganda in the hope of re-legitimising itself.

Functioning as collective representations, symbols and rituals aim at producing homogeneity from heterogeneity and integrating what is fragmented. Symbols of nationhood are required to engender social cohesion by arousing a deeply felt sense of shared community. They encompass the unique and distinctive values, or at least those that are officially claimed to be unique and distinctive, of the society. As Kertzer puts it, "the nation itself has no palpable existence outside the symbolism through which it is envisioned. [...] Far from being window dressing on the reality that is the nation, symbolism is the stuff of which nations are made" (Kertzer 1988: 6). One may therefore argue that the revival of Buddhism is the sign of, in Chatterjee's words, the "[spiritual] 'inner' domain of national culture [...] bearing the 'essential' marks of cultural identity" (Chatterjee 1993b: 6).

Transposing the argument to the post-independence era, Keyes, Hardacre and Kendall have termed the present declining influence of standard nationalism in some Asian states as a "crisis of authority" or "deficit of legitimacy". They define the phenomenon as follows:

It is the experience of having a problematic relationship with the past, of being alienated from traditional certainties in which cosmology reflects community and vice versa, of being offered and often pressured to accept an identity with one particular version of one's heritage rather than another that constitutes what we term the modern crisis of authority.

(Keyes, Hardacre and Kendall 1994: 4)

¹¹⁷ The example usually quoted is the picture taken of the Party's senior members making merit during major Buddhist festivals. Even the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC) has put one of these photos on the cover of its magazine (*Lao Sang Sat*, 1(2), 1998).

For them, the new states of Asia have been promoting too long and too uncritically the Western model of the nation-state. In pursuit of their modernising and nation-building projects, the governments expected thereby to create a secular identity within a rationalised society. However, the state's technologies of power (see Chapter Four (Cohn and Dirks 1988; Anderson 1991)) have failed to create feelings of belonging while creating new problems, such as social anomie (Keyes, Hardacre and Kendall 1994: 6-7). The authors thus assert that the "crisis of authority" has led to the resurgence of religion because it fills people's need for commitment and sharing. Indeed, they suggest that the nation as an imagined community is itself imbued with a 'primordial' identity that is, in their definition, the intrinsic feelings of belonging to the same community. That is the 'spiritual essence' of the nation, which the Western model of the nation-state cannot produce (Keyes, Hardacre and Kendall 1994: 5). Writing about Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, they argue that these states have, however, been forced to embrace Buddhism, and as such to attempt to control its public manifestations, in order to counteract a popular source of authority that transcends that of the state. Thus, though South-East Asian expressions of national sentiment may be *different* to those featured in the model propagated by Western historical thought, they have been partially appropriated by the state.

The Lao government, in effect, still keeps the *Sangha*, the Buddhist clergy, under its control and although the latter has regained its popularity, links with the Party remain close (Stuart-Fox 1998: 168). Buddhism may have been granted a new political role¹¹⁸,

¹¹⁸ Thus, according to the Party's resolution on religion, Buddhism not only "played an important role in the work of national unification in the past" and presently plays a role in "preserving and developing the national culture" as well as educating the people both literally and morally, but the "monks, the nuns and the believers [also] participated in the patriotic movements to fight against the colonialist imperialists and to liberate the country." (The Lao People Revolutionary Party's Central Committee 1992: 12).

but its newly reformulated function is nowhere near the type of strong alliance with the state that has never ceased to exist in neighbouring Thailand. In fact, while ostensibly displaying respect during Buddhist festivals, the Lao government has also been trying to present a secularised image of Buddhism in order to reconcile the official political ideology and the religion¹¹⁹.

Worth noting, thus, is a recent article published in the Vientiane French language newspaper, *Le Rénovateur* (18 May 2000), which discusses the relationships between Buddhism and Marxism in the Lao PDR. The author, Khamphao Phonekèò, argues that religion and ideology, far from opposing each other, are, on the contrary, complementary. To begin with, Khamphao criticises both the old Regime and the Pathet Lao, the former for corrupting Buddhism and the latter for misunderstanding it. He then suggests that religion has now been cleansed of its superstitious aspects while the Party has recognised its previous mistakes. Accordingly, in its newly purified form and fully rehabilitated, Buddhism now enjoys an even greater popularity than in the past.

Khamphao then explains that Buddhism, like Marxism, has no ambitions but to change society for the better. In effect, they have a similar perception of the world. But neither of them pretends to provide holistic doctrines, which are anyway "useless discourses". They are not "ideologies". Both of them simply intend to offer men and women a "recipe" for happiness. The only difference between Buddhism and Marxism is thus merely a question of scale: while the latter seeks to create conditions for an equal and happy society, the former focuses on the individual's happiness. As a matter of fact,

¹¹⁹ Trankell's account of the restoration of the former royal palace in Luang Prabang similarly illustrates the authorities' discomfort regarding symbols associated with the former regime. The palace was built by the French in 1914-1920 and was turned into a museum under the socialist regime. During the restoration (financed by a foreign development agency), the name of the palace changed twice. Known as "The Royal Museum" since the king's abdication in 1976, it was re-named the "Grand Palace Museum" in

Buddhism and Marxism are reduced to the most basic teleological explanation: their "primary and only possible" objective is to make people happy. "Both of them are extremely practical and put practice above everything", Khamphao asserts, "no matter what the pretty arguments, only the end matters; the Marxists prefer calling this result happiness and the Buddhists, end of suffering"¹²⁰. Moreover, Buddhist people, he says, are better able to live in a socialist society because a Buddhist person, some may argue, is not a selfish individual in quest of his/her own salvation, but, on the contrary, a person who is more able to feel compassion for others.

The author goes on to argue that Buddhism, like Marxism, promotes socio-economic development. In doing so, he refutes the commonly held view that the Buddhist concept of renunciation is contradictory to the idea of material well being. Poverty has been condemned by Buddha, he writes, as a cause of immorality and crimes; consequently, to eliminate these negative phenomena, the economic conditions of the population first must be improved. Of course, development must not follow market logic, as that will produce the reverse effect: creating a vicious cycle of needs and desires leading to endless suffering. Accordingly, both Buddhism and Marxism reject the capitalist system that enslaves men and women. Therefore, Khamphao happily concludes, "there is nothing surprising in the fact that Buddhism and Marxism get along with each other in Laos. It is not so much a political deal as a very natural alliance. Not only do they not oppose each other (for they belong to different parts of human life) but they are complementary, and in some ways they reinforce each other"¹²¹.

1993. By 1996, however, it was being referred to simply as the "Museum of Luang Prabang" (Trankell 1999: 199).

¹²⁰ "[...] tous deux sont extrêmement pratiques et mettent la pratique au-dessus de tout; peu important les beaux raisonnements, seul compte le résultat; ce résultat, les marxistes l'appellent plutôt bonheur et les bouddhistes, cessation de la souffrance" (Phonekèo 2000: 5).

¹²¹ "Il n'y a donc rien d'étonnant à ce que le bouddhisme et le marxisme fassent bon ménage au Laos. Ce n'est pas point là tellement un compromis politique qu'une alliance fort naturelle. Non seulement ils ne

Attempts in the Lao PDR to demonstrate that Buddhism and Marxism are compatible are not new; to be exact, they go back as far as 1975 when the Pathet Lao came to power. Soon after the communist victory, monks were already being taught in political seminars that the two belief systems held identical principles, i.e. "essential equality of all the people", and aimed at the same basic objective, i.e. "promotion of happiness through elimination of suffering" (Stuart-Fox 1998: 161). The government also wanted to turn the monks into educators for the socialist programme, notably in the countryside. But the accommodation between the two philosophies did not go so far as to create a doctrine of Buddhist socialism, as in Burma; nor did the Party intend to suppress Buddhism. Rather, in the mid-1970s and early 1980s, the government tried to limit and control the *Sangha*, through such means as censoring 'wasteful' practices (for instance, merit-making donations to the *vat*) or prescribing compulsory re-political education seminars for the monks. In short, the objective was to "bend [the *Sangha*] to the will of the state" (Evans 1993: 135).

What is more, the secular promotion of Buddhism by the government is rooted in a great dilemma: a third of the population is, according to the official data, non-Buddhist (*Population Census 1995*). Lao citizens have the freedom to choose their religion, as long their choice does not infringe the law. Buddhism is no longer the state religion. However, the Party unambiguously commands ethnic groups to abandon their "backward practices" (but not necessarily to adopt Buddhism instead), or to put it differently, their animist rituals, which "have bad impacts on solidarity, productivity and life of the diverse ethnic groups as well as of the nation" (Lao People Revolutionary Party's Central Committee 1992: 14). More generally, the construction of a nation on a

foundation of cultural particularity may help the Lao P.D.R. to gain a sense of 'uniqueness' in the world. The promotion of Buddhism at the state level in Laos may thus be viewed as one of the manifestations of the tensions between the principles of incorporation and exclusion in defining the national body and its culture. But in my view, the creation, or the revival, of the 'spiritual essence' of the national community is based on the wrong premises: it is concentrated on the ethnic Lao culture and thereby highlights those who are excluded. The government, too focused on the defence of the country's cultural integrity against the 'West', is forgetting that its national culture is defined through the opposition of Majority/Minority.

In the final section, I analyse the writing of the national history. I argue that the process of re-writing Lao history illustrates in a remarkable fashion how One/Majority and the Other/Minority are inextricably linked in the constitution of a national history in post-socialist Laos, which aims at a "single, consistent, unambiguous voice [...] glossing over all earlier contradictions, divergences, and differences" (Chatterjee 1993a: 51).

5.3. Construction of a national history

5.3.1. Tensions between multi-ethnic and mono-ethnic ('indigenous')¹²² perspectives

The desire to break with the past is commonly shared by political revolutions. The politics of *tabula rasa* aim at putting an insurmountable gap between the new age and the old one so as to allow the state to produce its own version of the national identity by sweeping out the conflicting representations of the past¹²³. The preamble of the

et, d'une certaine manière, se renforcent." (Phonekèo 2000: 5).

¹²² By 'indigenous', I refer to the non-academic definition of the term, i.e. of one relating to the native or original inhabitants of an area.

¹²³ Gillis interestingly notes that it was "the French Revolutionaries who invented the 'Old Regime', exaggerating its backwardness as well as its injustices in order to justify their claim that 1789 represented

Constitution of the Lao PDR offers an example of elliptical narrative style. It begins as follows: "more than six centuries ago, our ancestors founded, during the period of Tiao Fa Ngum, an united country, Lan Xang, and made it prosperous and glorious" (*Constitution of the Lao PDR* 1991: 1). The narration then re-starts in the 17th century! The then Revolutionary Museum - now re-named and reorganised as the Lao National Museum - in Vientiane offered an even more striking illustration of amnesia: one room was allocated to the pre-colonial period, which lasted approximately five centuries, as opposed to seven rooms for the modern era (including the French and American Wars), which merely amounts to two centuries.

However, the blanket theme of "the Struggle for Independence" that gives to the standard narration a thin thread of continuity can be challenged in terms of its ability to provide an adequate basis for a national history that can appeal to all the Lao people. As already stated in Chapter Two, Evans observes, "Laos today is still in search of a convincing national narrative, because 'fratricide' there was not only in the distant past but very recent - and it is still not 'reassuring'. The civil war, which lasted from the late 1950s until 1975, must be borne in mind because it is the process by which the new regime came to power, but it also has to be forgotten as a period of disunity" (Evans 1998: 188)¹²⁴. On the other hand, there are a number of publications and works

a remarkable leap forward" (Gillis 1994: 8). The Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) in Laos thus rapidly instituted a whole series of new national markers including a new flag, a new anthem and a new national day, which is now on 2 December. The Royal Lao Government had celebrated Independence Day on 19 July and Constitution Day on 11 May. It is interesting to note that no new constitution was adopted by the SPA, though. The former constitution of the Kingdom of Laos had been dissolved on 13 April 1975 and the LPDR remained without any constitutionally grounded system of laws for 15 years. It was not until 1991 that the SPA endorsed the first Constitution on 14 August. During the intervening period, the LPRP retained a monopoly on legislative and executive powers. The leaders of Laos apparently judged it unnecessary to institutionalise their rule by means of a written constitution.

¹²⁴ Grant Evans also notes that in the 1996 school text books the episode of the so-called "American War" has disappeared (when compared to the 1979 edition), and so has the stage of building "socialist men" (1998: 164); although the American War seems to remain one of few themes allowed by the government (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, 11 February 1993: 32-33).

available nowadays promoting a 'genuinely indigenous' history¹²⁵. For example, a mass circulation Lao history booklet, entitled "Lao History, Lao People, Lao Territory" (1998), by the prolific Lao writer, Duangsai Luangpasi, explains the origins of the Lao people as follows:

3000 years before the Buddhist era (before the birth of Buddhism), hence more than 5000 years ago, an ethnic group emerged, peacefully cohabiting and having a livelihood among themselves. The latter might [sic] have been the Lao ethnic group.

It is written in some documents that the Lao people are an ethnic group that emerged in the North of the Altai Mountains in Mongolia. Then, this people continued emigrating towards the South to settle down in a territory between the Huang-Ho and Zangzi or Yangzikiang rivers (in Southern China).

In some other documents, it is written that the Lao are a people that settled down in a territory between the Huang-Ho and Zangzi or Yangzikiang rivers.

Upon these two series of documents, it is possible to assert that this people are the "Lao people", even though one of the two does not specify the place of origin.

A point that is unanimously perceived is the very apparition and existence of the Lao people.

(Douangsai 1998: 5)

¹²⁵ During a trip to southern Laos in 1999, I witnessed an intriguing conversation between two senior officials of the LFNC, the country's principal mass-organisation. One was telling the other about a conversation he had with Nuhak Phumsavan, one of the most prominent Lao leaders and one of Kaysone's comrades from the early days of the Indochina War. Nuhak was questioning the senior LFNC official about the settlement period of the ethnic Lao on the present-day territory of Laos. He thus asked him several times whether the *Lao Derm* (ລາວເດີມ "the Original Lao") ever existed. The senior LFNC official replied that they did around 4000 or 5000 years ago. Nuhak's view appears to reflect a return to the constitution of a national history whereby the ethnic Lao people is assimilated to a biological descent group that constitutes the racial core of the present-day Lao people.

The author does not specify any of his sources of information; neither does he challenge their theories, while he jumps arbitrarily to a quick conclusion that assumes a seamless past for the 'Lao'. I will return later to the debates among scholars that surround the factual existence of original 'Lao' people. But it is most unlikely that the Tai were ever within a thousand miles of the Altai Mountains. However, the following analyses of the origins of present-day Laos' population by two other Lao history books, "History of Laos, volume 1" (1995) and "Lao History in Ancient and Middle Ages" (1998), throw an interesting light on the perpetual exercise of reconstructing history. They show how changeable is the official ideology at the present time. It is revealing to note that it was not until 1984 that a politically acceptable short history of Laos was available for teaching in schools. In 1989 a much fuller history appeared, "Lao History from 1893 to the Present", and this was used by teachers and for students at the post-secondary school level (Evans 1998: 160).

Each of the history books has a different agenda: one searches for an inclusive identity, while the other aims to revive a primordial ethnic Lao identity. Tensions between the two narratives seem, therefore, to be inevitable. The authors of the academic book, "Lao History from 1893 to the Present" (1989), also published "The History of Laos, Vol.1" (1995), which covers the preceding periods, i.e. from prehistory to 1893. Analysis of some passages suggests an inclusive, multi-ethnic approach. For example, diversity is expressed by encompassing botanical metaphors: they quote Kaysone Phomvihane poetically claiming that "[e]ach ethnic group has a nice and beautiful culture and belongs to the Lao national community, just as all kinds of flowers grow in a garden of various colours and scents " (*History of Laos, volume 1* 1995: 13).

Patricia Pelley, in her study of the construction of a national history in Vietnam, also notes that the presence of ethnic minorities posed a problem in the re-writing of national history in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam after 1945. The treatment of ethnic differences was also erratic, oscillating between two extremes: the concealment or the recognition of ethnic heterogeneity. When the latter option was adopted, Pelley argues, it was done so in a way that transformed the ethnic minorities. The metaphor 'flowers in the garden' introduced a "new sense of topography and borders" by "converting strange and hostile landscapes into familiar ones and [changing] barbarian others into brothers" (Pelley 1998: 379). She writes thus:

When they talked about ethnic differences in Việt-Nam, [Northern Vietnamese] postcolonial scholars often borrowed from the idioms of horticulture and consanguinity. The sixty-four different ethnic groups in Việt-Nam, for example, were reconfigured as flowers in a garden. The ideal garden is an exercise in order: everything is in its place.

(Pelley 1995: 242)

Also equally applied by both Lao and Vietnamese official historians is the over-used cliché depicting the "central thematic of resistance to foreign aggression" (Pelley 1995: 233), which helps to build up the common dichotomy, 'we' against 'them'. Consequently, the "essence of the Lao people of all ethnic groups" is defined by reactivity to the 'threats'; that is, the portrait is of a "peaceful, united, hard-working, genuine" people with an indomitable spirit (*History of Laos, volume 1* 1995: 13).

Yet, despite all the multi-ethnic claims, Lao historians cannot avoid an ambiguous essentialist tone centred on the ethnic Lao, as if an image of concentric circles were imprinted upon the Lao 'nation'. They write thus:

The specificity of the living conditions and the relations between various ethnic groups engender favourable conditions for national harmony, due to their [ancient] origins in Laos. Those large communities have unified and the population is united. It is the population of Laos, with the Lao-Thai speaking community as its core, in a multi-ethnic structure.

(History of Laos, volume 1 1995: 13)

The centrality of the Lao-Tai culture is also reflected in the historical account of population settlement on the Lao territory. The Lao history book for trainee teachers entitled, "History of Laos in Ancient and Middle Ages" (1998), for instance, follows a logic of continuity that stresses the cultural superiority of the ethnic Lao over the 'indigenous' people:

Historians' studies have confirmed that the human groups who first settled on Lao territory were the Lawa. They lived in a primitive way, mainly depending on nature. At 600 BC, the Khmer began immigrating into this territory in an increasing flow until 300 BC. The two ethnic groups interbred and engendered different primitive organisations in the territory.

At the beginning of the Christian era, the Lao ethnic group of Ai-Lao descent started emigrating towards this territory and cohabited peacefully with the indigenous ethnic groups. Around the middle of the 8th century, especially after

the take-over of Meuang Sua by Khun Lô¹²⁶, the Lao ethnic group immigrated into the territory on a very large scale, and after much interbreeding, the latter has become the present-day Lao people.

(History of Laos 1998: 6-7)

Likewise, the volume "History of Laos, Vol.1" (1995) describes the Mon-Khmer people, the first inhabitants, as being ineluctably assimilated by the "Lao-Thai" while the rest of the non-ethnic Lao peoples are transformed into the well-known 'national' ethnic groups:

Thus, during the first millennium, continuous movements, intermingling and interbreeding between tribes took place on the Lao territory. The process of evolution can be summed up as follows: from the beginning of the Christian Era in the 7th and 8th centuries, Laos' main area was constituted by the Mon-Khmer speaking ethnic population, of which the main group was the Lava. Some of the Thai [sic] people might also have lived with the Mon-Khmer population in some areas, notably in northern Laos. From the 7th century, the Lao-Thai grew with the addition of those originating from the North, progressively including all the Mon-Khmer tribes to become the main ethnic group in Laos. Afterwards, following historical evolution and development, the Tibeto-Burman, Hmong, Yao, Vietnamese and May (Meuang) [sic]- speaking communities who came to settle down on the territory formed a community of Lao ethnic groups that has existed to the present day.

(History of Laos, volume 1 1995: 11)

¹²⁶ According to the legend, *Khun Lô* was the eldest son of *Khun Bôrom*, himself the son of the king of

The process of homogenisation becomes in fact one of "purification". As discussed in Chapter Two, Williams thus argues that the ultimate goal of nationalism is to extract "purity out of impurity" (Williams 1989: 429). These processes of exclusion and inclusion eventually will lead to the naturalisation of a cultural mainstream. In consequence, those outside the mainstream are now defined as 'ethnic' or 'minorities', racially differentiated because culturally and historically stigmatised, as opposed to the de-ethnicised members of the nation blended in the cultural purity and racial continuity. My analysis below of the construction of a 'national(ist) genealogy' in Laos illustrates this process of 'race-making' through such mechanisms as 'myth-making'.

5.3.2. National(ist) genealogy

In some ways, the politics of race and culture in contemporary Laos may be analysed from the perspective of the relationship between Thailand and Laos, as the claim for the authenticity of a 'Lao' race is made to a certain extent at the expense of its neighbouring 'brother'. Houmpanh Rattanaovong, for instance, asserts that the term "Tai" or "Thai" did not exist (in reference to either the people or the ethnic group) before the 6th century. He writes, thus: "The so-called "Tai" populations did not yet exist in North Vietnam nor in Laos. They were all called Lao" (Houmpanh 1990: 165). In other words, only the name, 'Lao', is original and authentic, although there is no evidence that it actually referred to the present-day ethnic Lao in Laos. In fact, as Terwiel points out, research on the origins of the Tai in pre-historical times faces a major obstacle, which is that the Tai peoples are not mentioned in any text under that name (Terwiel 1978: 240). Consequently, it would appear to be highly speculative to attempt to identify a discrete and homogenous people called 'Lao' while different names were being used to refer to the population living in this area. Moreover, the link made between the 'Ai Lao' and the contemporary ethnic Lao is questionable. For instance, Terwiel again remarks: "There is one early

account regarding the Ai-Lao who are mentioned for the first time in Han times in the Hou-han-shu [...]. They were reported then to have lived in the Kwangsi-Yunnan area, the region of China bordering on Tongkin. At this stage we cannot be certain that these actually were T'ais¹²⁷" (Terwiel 1978: 249).

Likewise, in his analysis of the 'Tai' identity, Keyes argues that, in fact, the category 'Tai' is a product of modern nation-states that render what is constructed and re-constructed as self-evident through the constitution of a "nationalist genealogy" (Keyes 1995: 143); that is, the idea of cultural purity is reinforced by a logic of race by means of manipulating cultural and historical elements in order to produce 'blood' continuity between past and present. As Keyes puts it, "all communities have a 'genealogy', to use Foucault's term, and that genealogy is not determined by nature - by biological descent, for example - but is culturally constructed and historically contingent" (Keyes 1995: 137).

The Lao history book for trainee teachers, "History of Laos in Ancient and Middle Ages" (1998), mentioned above develops an even more explicit version of the origins of the Lao people. To the ethnic Lao is attributed a glorious civilisation, even greater than that of 'China', yet this is done by means of a very weak argument:

'Lao' is the same word as 'Dao', for the Lao lived in a high-level and civilised place. That was why they were named after Dao, Thien, Then, Thay [sic], ... which also mean 'sky'. When the Chinese realised that the Dao possessed a better culture (more civilised) and good traditions and customs, they admired and respected them, and called them 'Ai Dao'. However, the Chinese cannot

¹²⁷ The choice of this spelling, as Terwiel explains in a note, is to indicate the aspiration by means of the

pronounce very well the letter 'd' and pronounce it 'l'. The term 'Ai Dao' has therefore become 'Ai Lao'. [Later, the narration continues, transforming the 'Ai Lao' into the 'Lao' with no explanation] The Lao-Thai descent community settled first between the Huang-Ho and Yangzikiang rivers on contemporary Chinese territory around 4000-3000 BC. The Lao created their cities before the Chinese, who at that time were still nomads. Upon recognising that the Lao had a better civilisation than theirs, the Chinese thus considered the Lao as the eldest brothers and called them 'Ai Lao'.

(History of Laos 1998: 8)

As Connerton points out, the politics of *tabula rasa* paradoxically engender even greater reference to the past (Connerton 1995: 61). Nations need a foundation, a mythical past. The standard historiography of Laos therefore has constructed a mythical continuum between the kingdom of Lan Xang (which actually existed between the fourteenth and the eighteenth century, and is portrayed as the 'golden age' when 'Laos' was an unified, resplendent and independent nation) and the Lao PDR (represented as the first state ever to have succeeded in recovering parts of this glorious past by regaining independence and unity). This journey back to the 'roots', mythical or pre-historical, is quite deliberate. As Gillis rightly remarked, "if the conflicts of the present seemed intractable, the past offered a screen on which desires for unity and continuity, that is, identity, could be projected" (Gillis 1994: 9). The standard Lao historiography represents a configuration of the past-present that Alonso has termed "epic nationalist discourse" representing "idealized images of a harmonious, pre-colonial social order imbued of nostalgia" (Alonso 1994: 388).

What is more, by representing a racially based cultural mainstream, the Lao historiography mitigates the historical fact that the ethnic Lao were not the first inhabitants. The 'sin' of origin is washed out by the bounding of the 'nation' as a collective subject - a super-organism with an unique biological-cultural essence - in the ethnic Lao creation myth of *Khun Bôrom*. The conflation between blood and territory is indeed suggested by the blending of legend and history. In the article entitled "The importance of the Khun Bulom chronicle and Lao history" (1996)¹²⁸, Souneth Photisan rejects the commonly held view that sees the story as a legend. On the contrary, he argues that the chronicle is the bedrock of the Lao 'soul'. He writes thus:

Some people refute the value of the Khun Bulom chronicle, regarding it as a legend without any scientific grounding. We think that they have not really read it, only some rudiments. In-depth studies suggest that the Khun Bulom chronicle is indeed an integral and inseparable part of the history of Laos, of which it constitutes the fundamental element. The Khun Bulom chronicle represents the thought and the spirit of the Lao people since time immemorial.

(Souneth 1996: 48)

The myth of *Khun Bôrom* is thus turned into an historical fact, and serves to justify the idea of territorial aggrandisement combined with a view of racial destiny. In the history book for trainee teachers (1998), for example, one reads: "To unify and to unite the different ethnic groups, Khun Bulom established the law whereby the Lao were born in the same place: they were born from a gourd, which has become a legend that has been passed on up to present time" (*History of Laos* 1998: 10).

¹²⁸ The myth of *Khun Bôrom* is the ethnic Lao myth of the origin of mankind. The best study on the myth and its interpretations is to be found in the volume by the French anthropologist, Charles Archaimbault (1973).

For Balibar (1997), the construction of the nation-state is fundamentally linked with the State's manipulation and control of ethnicity. De facto, every nation-state has to produce, invent or create their own "fictive ethnicity", or imagined homogeneity, out of real heterogeneity; that is, each national must feel that he or she has one and only one ethnic identity formed through the mechanisms of common language and 'race', both of which form in people's minds the representation of a distinctive community. Thus:

No nation possesses an ethnic base naturally, but as social formations are nationalised, the populations included within them, divided up among them or dominated by them are ethnicised - that is, represented in the past or in the future *as if* they formed a natural community, possessing of itself an identity of origins, culture and interests which transcends individuals and social conditions.

(Balibar 1997: 130-1, original stress)¹²⁹

Another remarkable example of this politics of conflation between blood and territory in post-socialist Laos is the bureaucratic use of the racial category. For instance, amongst the data included on the state identification (ID) card are the holder's race (*seuasat*), nationality (*sànsat*) and ethnic group (*sònphaw*). Except for the citizens of Vietnamese or Chinese origin, the entire population, non-ethnic Lao as well as ethnic Lao, are classified as 'Lao' under both the race and nationality categories. The same nomenclature is also applied to the compulsory household booklet, and to the immigration card that both Lao nationals and foreigners fill in at the border posts. On all

¹²⁹ "Aucune nation ne possède naturellement une base ethnique, mais à mesure que les formations sociales se nationalisent, les populations qu'elles incluent, qu'elles se répartissent ou qu'elles dominent sont 'ethnicipées', c'est-à-dire représentées dans le passé ou dans l'avenir *comme si* elles formaient une communauté naturelle, possédant par elle-même une identité d'origine, de culture, d'intérêts, qui

these documents, 'nationality', 'race' and 'ethnic group' are required, with 'Lao' defining the first two qualities for Lao nationals, no matter what their 'ethnic group'. In contemporary Laos, the state perceives 'race' as a "biological extension of the lineage, encompassing all people dwelling on the territory" (Dikötter 1990: 426). The process of tribalisation (making of minorities) reinforces the core of a 'Lao race', which, in turn, is further homogenised against an external Other.

Conclusion

In an edited collection of papers on South-East Asian identities, Kahn suggests that the nationalist discourses of the political leaders in the region have moved to more particularistic, culturally orientated themes (Kahn 1998: 15). The case of Singapore, for example, is very revealing of the process. The Singaporean authorities realised the inadequacy of what Chua Beng-Huat calls, "the inscription of the culture of capitalism" in the society and of development rhetoric as a mode of legitimation (Chua 1998: 32). Consequently, they felt the need to change their nationalist discourse in order to fill the emptiness of the "Singaporean nation". They consequently have adopted, like many other South-East Asian states, an essentialist language whereby the 'unique' cultural characteristics of their population are being promoted. Kahn, instead of speaking of 'official nationalism', therefore prefers to use the terms "cultural politics" or "culturalization of the political landscape"; and, instead of 'national loyalties', he prefers the term "identity politics". But despite the use of a different vocabulary of nationalism - a hybrid of 'hard' facts of politics and 'softer' idea of culture (Trankell and Summers 1998) - the objective of political leaders has remained the same, that is, creating a sense of cultural homogeneity or "a cultural identification" among their people, which is actually the very core of the nation. However, Kahn refutes the "language of cultural

transcende les individus et les conditions sociales" (Balibar 1997: 130-131, original stress); the translation

uniqueness" as "somehow constructed, rather than pre-given". One must not be deceived, therefore, by the accents of authenticity and sincerity stemming from cultural essentialism for it is institutionally, politically and historically constituted. Obviously, Kahn is taking Anderson's stand, rather than Smith's, as he writes:

For Anderson (and for most contributors to this volume), but not for Smith, there is no objective sense in which we can speak of a 'true Germaness' or a 'true Chineseness' for that matter – both are imaginary, not because they are false, but because they are the product of discourse, that is, they are constructed or created out of concrete social and historical processes.

(Kahn 1998: 16)

Conversely, Partha Chatterjee refutes the idea of 'fabrication' and 'falsity'. He disputes the claim that the idea of the nation is a universal concept, and argues that postcolonial nations of Africa and Asia are constituted on a *principle of difference*, founded on a construction of their cultural particularity rather than as an adaptation of their form of nation to the universal form. Thought of in this way, the nation situates itself within universal history (as the history of the nation's coming to self-awareness) while preserving its 'spiritual essence' as an identification with a primordial (hence timeless) culture that becomes enframed as the national 'tradition'. Nevertheless, Chatterjee also points out the hegemonic character of the nationalist discourse once statehood is achieved (Chatterjee 1993a: 51).

Likewise, in their co-written volume, Charles Keyes, Helen Hardacre, and Laurel Kendall resolutely take the 'insider' perspective. According to them, if the Asian states –

is from Smith (1998: 204).

in which they include the South-East Asian region - are now facing a crisis of authority, it is due to the failure of modernisation and nation-building projects to provide a coherent social and moral order. Here, the authors clearly challenge the assumption that cultural identities are wholly created and recreated from virtually nothing. They fiercely criticise the modernist and post-modernist stands and their *tabula rasa* theory.

The construction of a national culture is definitely a delicate exercise, balancing ethnicity, history and tradition. In a very welcome attempt, Stein Tønnesson and Hans Antlöv have proposed an approach that encompasses these issues, "one that restores to the nation its history and future, while also taking full account of the shifts that national and other identities have gone through historically" (Tønnesson and Antlöv 1998: 17). To put it differently, the conceptualisation of national identities entails a constant movement, a balancing act between authenticity¹³⁰ and creation, sense and imagination; for the three concepts - ethnicity, history and tradition - can be extremely fluid and yet so *real* to the people when they narrate their own perception of the nation.

The revival of popular Buddhism in Laos may be perceived as the key indicator of an inner spirituality, reflecting an autonomy from the Western discourse of power by reflecting the 'soul' of a Lao nation. Yet, its instrumentalisation by the State exemplifies the dilemmas in the construction of a Lao national identity and culture. The regime uses Buddhism to legitimate its rule while it keeps the *Sangha*, the Buddhist institution, under its firm control. Unlike in Thailand, Buddhism - with its inherent risk of alienating the non-Buddhist citizens - is not at the core of Lao nationalism. In reality, the government's nationalist discourse is still deeply entrenched in an anti-colonial mode of thinking, as the government is as yet unable to utilise cultural resources that

might allow it to construct a different and compelling form of nation. The writing of a seamless nationalist discourse illustrates this dead-lock: the official historiography balances between a patchy revolutionary rhetoric, on the one hand, and a myth-making narration that excludes almost half of the Lao population, on the other.

In the next two chapters, the newly reformulated nationalist discourse in post-socialist Laos will be studied from the partial point of view of members of ethnic minorities who were educated under the socialist regime. I first will focus my analysis on their narratives - the expression of their consciousness, feelings and expectations.

¹³⁰ But again, one can ask what is "authenticity": a self-generated feature of a community or an authentication of a tradition?

6. Narratives of the Nation

In this chapter, I will present the oral memory of some members of ethnic minorities through their narratives. I argue that these narratives are also the structuring expression of these individuals' consciousness, both reproducing and contesting the state's nationalist discourse (as there exist identifications as well as potential disjunctions between the narration told by the rulers and the stories embedded in the lived experience of the ruled). Thus, my intention will be to transcribe the memories of the ruled that have remained concealed in the 'national' history, and to show that, in the manner of Bhabha, "no political ideologies could claim transcendent or metaphysical authority for themselves" (Bhabha 1995: 299). I will first tell the narratives of these men who call themselves "revolutionaries" (ភ័ន្តប្រឹក្សា (*khòn pàtivàt*)). Then, I will point out the divergent interpretations performed by the state and the villagers of Ban Paktai concerning Ong Keo, the ethnic leader turned into a patriotic figure for the sake of the national history.

6.1. Narratives: product of power and consciousness

6.1.1. History, memory and narratives

Jacques Le Goff points out that "memory is a fundamental element of what one now calls individual or collective identity". But he also warns: "collective memory is not only a conquest, but also an instrument and an objective for power" (Le Goff 1988: 175). He denounces "collective memory" as "mythical, distorted and anachronistic" and opposes it to history, which "must enlighten memory and helps it to rectify its errors" (Le Goff 1988: 194). The latter proposition implies that history is scientifically superior

since it would construct a 'true' representation of the past. Le Goff notes, a few pages later: "historical objectivity progressively builds up, through unceasing successive revisions of the historical working, laborious successive rectifications, accumulation of partial truths" (Le Goff 1988: 199)¹³¹. But, surely, identity politics is also closely related to how history is appropriated, remembered, forgotten or created by the nation-state. As part of the process, the re-enactment of (selected) past events serves an important function for the nation-state, creating encompassing feelings of belonging to one history and one community (Gillis (1994), Connerton (1995), Kertzer (1988), Alonso (1988)).

Accordingly, several authors have stressed the narrative character of the nation, best expressed in Anderson's seminal formula "imagined community". Balibar writes: "All social communities, reproduced by the working of institutions, are imaginary, that is, they are based on the projection of the individual life into the fabric of a collective story, on the recognition of a common name and traditions lived as the reminiscence of a time immemorial" (Balibar 1997: 127)¹³².

However effective the symbolic power of the narrative of the nation is in mobilising a sense of identity and allegiance, Bhabha still rejects the totalising project of 'modern' nation-states in which people are turned into "one" and subsumed to an "holistic history" (Bhabha 1995: 292). In his words:

The nation is no longer the sign of modernity under which cultural differences are homogenized in the 'horizontal' view of society. The nation reveals, in its

¹³¹ "[...] L'objectivité historique se construit peu à peu, à travers les révisions incessantes du travail historique, les laborieuses rectifications successives, l'accumulation des vérités partielles" (Le Goff 1988: 199).

¹³² "Toute communauté sociale, reproduite par le fonctionnement d'institutions, est imaginaire, c'est-à-dire qu'elle repose sur la projection de l'existence individuelle dans la trame d'un récit collectif, sur la reconnaissance d'un nom commun, et sur les traditions vécues comme trace d'un passé immémorial..." (Balibar 1997: 127).

ambivalent and vacillating representation, the ethnography of its own historicity and opens up the possibility of other narratives of the people and their difference. (Bhabha 1995: 300)

Likewise, Tonkin argues that people are both subjects¹³³ and agents in the account of memory and the constitution of history. Social conditions and political rhetoric model people's identities; yet, their subjectivity is not entirely dominated by the social and by the action of the nation-state. Personal and social identities are clearly intertwined; however, people have a margin for criticism and self-reflection. She states: "[...] oral accounts no less than written ones can be means of comment and reflection, in which different pasts are conceptualised, and, often, contradiction and failure admitted" (Tonkin 1992: 130-131). In other words, totalising narrations of national history are not themselves homogenous. They serve as a framework, the content and bounds of which may be re-presented by people. The working of power is neither total nor unilateral.

Subsequently, she strongly rejects the dichotomy between history and memory whereby the latter would be defined as "pre-historical" while the former would be considered as "civilised" (Tonkin 1992: 119). For her, it is in fact reductionist to oppose memory as orality/incoherence to history as literacy/rationality while historical material also includes oral accounts and 'historical stories' can originate from memory. She thus asserts: "People use available representations for new ends and these may be effectively critical, even if they are not explicit, verbally rational disquisitions" (Tonkin 1992: 119). In effect, Le Goff's harsh criticism of "collective memory" as unreliable, subjective and ideological, obliterates the "inventive power of language" or how narration, the act of telling a story, can create meaning (Ricoeur 1986: 17). Ricoeur's argument is that "the

¹³³ 'Subject' is used here to refer to an individual who is subjected to the actions of an authority.

'language-game' of narration ultimately reveals that the meaning of human existence is itself narrative" (Ricoeur 1986: 17). The power of narrative subsequently opens up the multitudinous possibilities of re-telling history; in Ricoeur's words:

... the history of the vanquished dead crying out for justice demands to be told. As Hannah Arendt points out, the meaning of human existence is not just the power to change or to master the world, but also the ability to be remembered and recollected in narrative discourse, to be *memorable*. These existential and historical implications of narrativity are very far-reaching, for they determine what is to be 'preserved' and rendered 'permanent' in a culture's sense of its own past, of its own 'identity'.

(Ricoeur 1986: 17, original stress)

6.1.2. Memories of revolutionaries: narratives of a nation

I will develop my arguments with two narratives. The first story recounts the "revolutionary" life of a LFNC official. The second narration recounts a dramatic war experience in the life of a retired soldier. The two men told their stories spontaneously, as they were free to structure their 'plot' as they wished. In each case, I started my interview with an opening question and thereafter rarely intervened.

In Pakse, the capital city of Champassak Province in southern Laos, I stayed with a family whose parents were both permanent members of political mass-organisations. The father, Somchit, was in charge of Minority Affairs at the local LFNC office, and his wife, Manivong, worked in the Department of Propaganda at the Lao Women's Union (LWU). The couple had different ethnic origins: Somchit was Oy, a group that belongs to the Austro-Asiatic population, and Keo was Phu Thai, officially classified under the

Lao category according to the 1995 Lao census. The narrative that follows is constructed from Somchit's own oral accounts of his activities as a "revolutionary". The episodes of his life represent the introduction to my reflections. First, I will transcribe the original linear narration; then, I will point out the contradictions. However, I am aware that by translating and writing down his story I have already disturbed it, although I am using his own words whenever *I* (again) consider it relevant to do so.

Somchit left his native village, Ban Tok, in Meuang Sanamsay¹³⁴, Attapeu Province, at the age of 12, to "join the revolution" (ຮ່ວມການປະຕິວັດ (*huam kan pàtivàt*)). His mother was killed by the "enemy" (ສັດຕູ (*sàttu*)) because his father and his uncles and aunts, whom his father "recruited" (ລະດົມ (*làdòm*)), were "revolutionaries". She was shot in the evening, after having spent her day looking after the cattle in a rice-field hut. The "enemy" entrapped her on her way back home. In fact, they confused her with Somchit's uncle and killed her by mistake. This murder was the main cause of Somchit's involvement in the revolution.

Somchit also joined the revolution because his village was in the "middle of an intensely disputed zone (ເຂດຍາດແຍ່ງ (*khet nyadnyaeng*)) between the Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS) and the "troops from Meuang May, Attapeu (or from Vientiane in Meuang May, Attapeu)"¹³⁵. Somchit therefore decided to leave; as he said, "As I saw there was no peace, I escaped (ບໍ່ສະຫງົບຈຶ່ງຫນີ (*bor sàgnòp, cheung ni*))". Furthermore, the Army officials of the "enemy", "the colonels Khamkhong and Khoumki", were forcing people

¹³⁴ Sanamxay is located on the western side of Attapeu. It is bordered by Champassak Province to the West, and by Cambodia to the South.

to work as "coolies" to serve and to enhance the power of the authorities in Meuang May. These three causes led Somchit to "sacrifice" (ສະຫລະ (*sàlà*)) his birthplace to join the NLHX: "In brief, I left because of feelings of resentment and revenge (ຄວາມຄຽດແຄ້ນ (*khuam khietkhaen*)) against the "enemy", because I felt "injustice" (ບໍ່ຍຸຕິທຳ (*bor nyùtitham*))". His uncles and aunt, also involved in the revolution, then took him with them to join the resistance activities.

Somchit's recollection of the beginning of his "revolutionary activities" (ເລີ່ມໄກວປະຕິວັດ (*khieunvai pàtivàt*)) interweaves the personal story with the historical context, with the addition of ulterior ideological motivations. The way in which he presented the death of his mother showed that the loss clearly represented the turning point of his life. She was killed because of her relatives' involvement in the revolution when the "enemy" mistakenly retaliated against her. Consequently, by dying involuntarily and brutally as an innocent victim of the "enemy's" barbarism, but (indirectly) for a just cause, she has become, for Somchit, a symbol of both injustice and the Revolution. Furthermore, these fierce emotions are reinforced by such figures as the "colonels Khamkhong and Khoumki", the "enemy", presented in counterpoint as despotic rulers enslaving the population to be their "coolies". The vocabulary used clearly denotes the anti-colonial rhetoric he probably learnt during his political classes.

As a matter of fact, Somchit's initial participation in the revolution appears to have followed a less straightforward path. Upon being questioned in the aftermath of the interview, a process that disrupted his reconstruction of his life, some faults inevitably

¹³⁵ To put it differently, his village was controlled in turn by the communist Pathet Lao and the rightist Royal Lao Government (based in Vientiane), respectively.

appeared and disclosed a rather more complex picture. When I asked him to tell me more about his experience as a soldier, his narration suddenly lost its linearity. Below is an extract from the interview in which Somchit recounts an episode of his life that he had previously omitted:

- So, you said that you were a soldier for three months. Can you tell me more about it?
- At the age of 16, the young men were forced to become *commando* soldiers, *maquis* soldiers¹³⁶, or militiamen. I had been a soldier for three months. Then, I realised that it wasn't right, that we were badly treated, so I refused and escaped from the village, and joined the revolutionary action.
- So, it was the "enemy", who was forcing people [to become soldiers]?
- Yes, it was them who forced the men to become *maquis* soldiers. Then, those who were the most promising ones became *commando* soldiers. But, I didn't reach that level. I was just a *maquis* soldier. I didn't have the possibility (ບໍ່ມີເຈົ້າໂສມໄຂ (bor mi ngerñ khai)) of becoming a *commando*. I saw that there was no justice, so I left.

The "American War" started in Attapeu in 1964, and some battles occurred in the late 1960s in the district of Sanamxay. Like most of the districts in Attapeu, Sanamxay was first controlled by the Royal Lao Army (RLA), who progressively withdrew westwards as the Pathet Lao and the Vietnamese troops gained territory (Handicap International 1997: 40). As Somchit himself explained, the tactical situation around his village was confusing: there were no clear-cut zones of influence belonging to either the RLA or the Pathet Lao. It was not uncommon, in effect, for a village in Attapeu or elsewhere to

have been controlled alternately by the two sides; hence, the villagers were often caught between the RLA and the Pathet Lao troops. Somchit was recruited by the RLA because his village was temporarily under their control. The death of his mother may have well been the turning point of his life, but other circumstances also influenced his decision to "join the revolution". For instance, Somchit stressed the role of his uncle, Bounmy, in his involvement in the "struggle" (ການຕໍ່ສູ້ (*kan tor su*)); his repeated use of the verb "to escape" (ຫນີ (*ni*)) might also suggest that his choice of side was dictated mainly by random external factors, which forced him into making certain choices in order to survive. However, the constant theme was that his choice of allegiance was a result of deeply-held convictions and ideological beliefs. They reflected the re-presentation of *his* past. He embroiders his individual story with the patriotic discourse: they merge to form only one collective memory. To put it another way, his story was sensible and coherent in his mind - its composition drew heterogeneous events of his lived experience into "wholeness and shapeliness" (Miller 1987: 1104). More importantly, the structuring of action led to the "acquisition of an identity through inscribing oneself into a role in the world" (Clark 1990: 168). In other words, his re-appropriation of the events produced meaning in his existence.

The second story is a short but equally powerful narration of a *vilàson àvùso* (ວິລະສິນ ອະວຸໂສ), a "retired (or, old) hero". It has a similar plot, expressed in the same vocabulary of action and violence: sacrifice, involvement, struggle, revolution, enemy, loss and death. I first need to present and to explain the context. I will focus my analysis

¹³⁶ The French term, *maquis*, historically refers to the French Resistance that fought against the German forces during the Second World War. The term refers more generally to organised underground armed resistance.

on the case of Ban Paktai in Meuang Thateng¹³⁷, Sekong Province, also called *Ban Ong Keo* or *Ban Vilàson* ("heroic village") as this village was the birthplace of the minority leader, Ong Keo. As I have explained in my methodology, my request to do research on ethnic minorities' revolts with the support of the LFNC was a pretext to be introduced to villages that are perceived as having a significant revolutionary history. I was realistic enough to acknowledge the tremendous ideological burden behind the stories of these rebellions' ethnic leaders who were resistant to any kind of encroaching domination. Moreover, I had no choice but to begin my fieldwork with a LFNC official, Sisouk Chonmaly, by my side.

I was introduced to Ban Paktai for the first time during my research trip with Sisouk. The village is located on the main road that links Pakse to Sekong town, the municipality of Sekong Province. It is composed of three units, totalling 58 households with 271 people (Integrated Rural Accessibility Planning (IRAP) 1997). The numerically and politically dominant ethnic group is the Ngae, accounting for 90% of the villagers. Thirteen ethnic Lao families from Ban Maknao moved into the village in 1997 as part of the government's resettlement scheme to give people access to the road, and there were also a few Alak people. Ban Paktai is an old village: it moved closer to the road in 1973, but has always been located on the Sekong plateau. The main agricultural practice is that of shifting cultivation, mixed (for a very few families) with sedentary rice farming.

The village was without doubt an obligatory stop on our so-called historical investigation. As soon as we arrived in the municipality of Sekong Province, the local

¹³⁷ Meuang Thateng was created in 1993. It was previously under the administration of Meuang Lao Ngam, Saravane Province. Meuang Thateng is bordered by Meuang Saravane and Meuang Lao Ngam

LFNC recommended to Sisouk and myself a route to follow for our research. For the entire duration of our trip, I felt as though I was on a guided tour, organised by the LFNC officials. They told us that, among the few witnesses still living, there was an "old hero" called Uncle Tin (who lived in the town a few metres away from the administration building) and a number of people in Ban Paktai in Meuang Thateng, the district that is bordered by Champassak Province to the West. Obviously, these witnesses clearly were the officially approved informants, and the fact that they were located in places accessible by road was no coincidence. I certainly would not have been allowed to go to remote places in search of less well-known witnesses by myself - the oral memory of 'national' history is kept under firm control. I will first describe my first encounter with the village of Ban Paktai in late August 1999, so as to show the false assumptions, but also the accurate observations, that I then made; both the assumptions and the observations proved to be equally fruitful for the more rigorous analysis I developed when I had the opportunity to come back to the village and stay for longer periods.

We arrived in Ban Paktai in the afternoon. Sisouk and I were accompanied by a local LFNC member and the son of the head of the LFNC as driver. Our group certainly looked fairly official at first glance: Sisouk and Saveng - the local LFNC member - were both dressed in white shirts and grey trousers, and my physical presence, though mute most of the time, was sufficient to arouse curiosity among the women and children. We quickly realised that all the men in good physical shape had gone to cut some trees for the construction of a new school. Sisouk then asked to meet the head of the village LFNC branch while waiting for the return of the younger men, but it transpired that this individual had also gone into the forest. The village men, however,

(Saravane Province), Meuang Lamam (Sekong Province) and Meuang Paksong (Champassak Province),

soon returned from their labours - they had probably been told about our visit by a runner shortly after our arrival - and some of them joined us at the village head's house. The first surprise, ironically, was that nobody in the village was able to give us information on Ong Keo. In fact, the sole authoritative informant, Somseun, had moved to a neighbouring village, Ban Songkham, to marry. His father had been one of Ong Keo's fighting companions. Upon the villagers' insistence, it was decided to bring him to the village, instead of us going to meet him.

Somseun was a 75-year old man. He introduced himself as a member of the Ngae ethnic group. He looked fit at that time and the tone of his voice was still assertive; his face was heavily scarred, and he had lost an eye. Soon after Sisouk finished asking him questions about Ong Keo, he spontaneously started telling us about his own life as a war veteran and, especially, his experience of torture by the "enemy". I have reconstituted below the circumstances of his capture, drawing upon elements of the story I heard unexpectedly during that first visit and upon complementary information I recorded when I interviewed Somseun again during my second visit to the village.

He started his "revolutionary activities" in 1951 as the leader of a group of skirmishers. Three years later he "sacrificed" (ສະຫລະຂາດ (*sàlà* "to sacrifice", *khat* "to be torn"¹³⁸)) his family and joined the resistance. In 1957, the "enemy" captured him. Somseun gave two slightly different reasons for his arrest: he told Sisouk that the "enemy" had arrested several men distributing political pamphlets who then denounced him as their leader, whereas he told me that he was caught by the "enemy" while carrying secret documents. In any case, he was accused of plotting against the government, despite his

to the North, the West, the East and the South, respectively.

protestations: "All I said was that I wanted the two sides to stop fighting. I wanted an united government between Souphanouvong and Souvanna Phouma so that the Lao and the Vietnamese would stop killing each other!".

These claims did not prevent the "enemy" from beating him up so as to extract information from him. Here, I let Somseun recount the story in his own words (derived both from the account he gave in Sisouk's presence and his later interview with me):

"They arrested me and threatened to kill me. They took me to an isolated place by car, but I refused to get out. I told them that if they wanted to kill me, they might as well do it in the car! Instead, they took me back and locked me up in a small hut with just one hole for seven days and seven nights. They used electric shocks, they hanged me upside down. I was so badly beaten up that I fainted and lost one of my eyes." Somseun added in the interview: "But I was determined to keep the secret and to die for the country (ຕາຍເພື່ອຊາດ (*tay pheua sat*)). If I had given information, I would have lost the country (ເສີຍປະເທດຊາດບ້ານເມືອງ (*sia pàthetsat ban meuang*)). If I had to die, I would die alone and save the country (ປະເທດຊາດຍັງ (*pàthet sat nyàng*)). But, I was determined."

He was finally freed and carried on the "struggle". He would be arrested three times during the war but, he said, his first arrest was by far the worst.

Somseun's narration bears a remarkable similarity to the model stories of "revolutionary heroes" published in the communist propaganda documents. For example, Kaysone Phomvihane told the following "heroic" story of Sithong, a "revolutionary model", in his speech during the Youth Lao Hak Xat Congress in 1968:

¹³⁸ Although the expression *sàlākhat* does not exist in Lao, Somseun may have combined the words "to sacrifice" and "to be torn" in order to stress the magnitude of his sacrifice.

Comrade Sithong joined the revolutionary path at an early age. While he was doing his work, the enemy arrested him. At the beginning, the latter tried to corrupt him, to offer him money [...]. But Sithong rejected these offers. Having failed in using soft methods, the enemy employed violence. They tortured him with electricity, burnt him [...]. But Sithong remained calm and didn't lose his courage. During his transfer, with other comrades, he escaped, joined the Revolution and pursued his revolutionary struggle.

(Kaysone 1975)¹³⁹

These stories stressed equally such values as integrity, courage, sense of self-sacrifice and patriotism, but also invariably involved elements of physical and emotional violence. Here is another dramatic extract:

Comrade Chantha was caught by the enemy in the act of achieving his mission. The latter tortured him, beat him savagely, branded him, used electroshock, made him drink whitewash liquid, etc. But Comrade Chantha refused to reveal the secret. On the contrary, he insulted the man who carried out the torture with all his energy and resisted until the last minute. Before he died, he cried to his enemies: "Kill the imperialists and the henchmen! Glory to our victory! I keep the revolution in my heart, how can you possibly know?"

(Norindr 1980: 483)¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ "Le camarade Sithong s'était engagé dès son jeune âge dans la voie révolutionnaire. Pendant qu'il accomplissait son travail, il fut arrêté par l'ennemi. Au début, celui-ci essayait de le soudoyer, de lui promettre de l'argent et (?) [sic - original translation]. Mais Sithong rejeta ces offres. Ayant échoué avec la politique de la carotte, l'ennemi recourut à la violence. Il le tortura à l'électricité, le brûla avec le fer rouge. Mais Sithong garda son calme et son courage. Pendant son transfert, en compagnie d'autres camarades, il s'évada, rejoignit la Révolution, et poursuivit son combat révolutionnaire." Kaysone Phomvihane (1975), "Discours au Congrès de la jeunesse LHX", 25/08/1968, Editions du NLHX, (page non-specified); quoted from Norindr (1980: 484).

In his book (1998), Evans mentions that the third grade Lao primary school textbook (issued in 1996) has re-introduced the story of "The Hero Si Thong", his capture and torture by the "foreign imperialists" and his escape, for which he received a medal on Army Day in 1956 (Evans 1998: 164). As Benoît de Tréglodé acutely observes, revolutionary regimes that come to power, in the attempt to transform and to appropriate the people, systematically deploy the techniques of awards and celebrations of exemplary members (Tréglodé 1999: 23). He further argues that the production of "new heroes" in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in the 1950s and the 1960s contributed to the forging of a link between the centre and the periphery. In other words, the celebration of exemplary members of the nation played a role in the political unification of the 'national' territory by suffusing the figure of the local hero with a 'national' aura (Tréglodé 2001)¹⁴¹.

To some extent, Boulom and Somchit, to use Bhabha's words, are the "historical 'objects' of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin or event" (Bhabha 1995: 297). Like Somchit, Somseun certainly selected the most vivid recollections of his "revolutionary activities", relying on his memory of the narrative authority (i.e. the communist leadership's narrative). He thus may have exaggerated, or *a posteriori* omitted, some events - yet the scars I saw on his face were very real. But the issue, again, is not so much the facts as

¹⁴⁰ "Le camarade Chantha, dans l'accomplissement de sa mission fut arrêté par l'ennemi. Celui-ci le torturait, le battait sauvagement, le brûlait avec le fer rouge, le soumettait au magnéto, le faisait boire de l'eau de chaux, etc. Mais le camarade Chantha refusa de révéler le secret. Au contraire, il injuria son tortionnaire de toutes ses forces et résista jusqu'à la dernière minute. Avant de rendre le dernier soupir, il cria en face de ses ennemis: "A bas les impérialistes et les valets! Vive notre victoire! La révolution, je la porte dans mon cœur, comment peux-tu savoir?" *Les gars du 97*, Ed. Neo Lao Hak Xat, date and page non specified; quoted from Norindr (1980: 483).

¹⁴¹ Benoît de Tréglodé has estimated at 148 the number of "New Heroes" recognised between 1950 and 1964 by the DRV (Tréglodé 1999: 21). To my knowledge, there has been no such degree of production of

the meaning produced by the narrative. The memory is not modelled on an immutable essence; it evolves and it mutates. But the violence and the suffering of their past, which also define their glorious days, have remained entrenched in their memory and have contributed to the shaping of their identity. As Ricoeur poetically observes, identities are sustained through "a creative fidelity grounded in founding events which place them within timeness" (Ricoeur 1992)¹⁴². The composition of their stories configures and synthesises, moreover, a multiplicity of events into a meaningful whole, which can be understood from the end to the beginning and from the beginning to the end, allowing one to "read time backwards" repeatedly (Ricoeur 1980: 183). Thus narrative allows, in Ricoeur's words, through repetition and memory, "the retrieval of our most basic potentialities inherited from the past in the form of personal fate and collective destiny" (Ricoeur 1980: 183).

I therefore argue that the narratives of these two men embody "heroic revolutionary" narratives by delivering an interpretation of their experience, as reality perceived by their consciousness. It is not a "mere experience". For Victor Turner, a "mere experience" is "simply the passive endurance and acceptance of events" whereas "an experience" is "formative and transformative" because of its emotional power and (negative or positive) effects. Thus: "[w]hat happens next is an anxious need to find meaning in what has disconcerted us, whether by pain or pleasure, and converted mere experience into *an* experience. All this when we try to put past and present together." (Turner 1986: 36, original stress). By re-enacting their past, Somchit and Somseun attempt to maintain their present role within the world. To put it differently, their narratives are constitutive of their identities. As Bruner asserts, "[i]t is in the

heroic biographies, or "heroes", by the Pathet Lao or the communist regime after 1975. Nevertheless, patriotic emulation and revolutionary heroism were very much inscribed in the propagandist agenda.
¹⁴² Quoted, in turn, from Poutignat and Streiff-Fenart (1995: 180).

performance of an expression [in this case, a narrative] that we re-experience, re-live, re-create, re-tell, re-construct, and re-fashion our culture. The performance does not release a pre-existing meaning that lies dormant in the text. Rather, the performance itself is constitutive. Meaning is always in the present, in the here-and-now, not in such past manifestations as historical origins or the author's intentions." (Bruner 1986: 11).

Thus, the experience-cum-past is never monolithic. Experience structures narratives, which in turn structure experience, while all interpretations and expressions are historically, politically and institutionally situated. As Bruner comments:

There are no raw encounters or naive experiences since persons, including ethnographers, always enter society in the middle. At any given time there are prior texts and expressive conventions, and they are always in flux. We can only begin with the last picture show, the last performance. Once the performance is completed, however, the most recent expression sinks into the past and becomes prior to the performance that follows. [...] Life consists of retellings.

(Bruner 1986: 12)

In the next section, I will show that narratives also change under new historical and political conditions. I will focus on the divergent interpretations of the history of Ong Keo, the minority leader turned into a 'national hero' in Ban Paktai, and show how his 'legacy' is reflected in the present divergent interpretations of the past.

6.2. "Heroic village"

6.2.1. From a 'Kha' leader to a 'patriotic hero'

I have already mentioned in Chapter Three the name of Ong Keo, the leader of a minority revolt on the Bolovens Plateau¹⁴³ in Southern Laos in the early twentieth century under French colonial rule. I will first briefly present his actions from the perspectives of scholars and of Lao official historiography. Then, I will comment on the 'legacy' of Ong Keo's actions in Ban Paktai, based on the villagers' reactions. My brief account of Ong Keo's history is principally drawn from the works of Moppert (1978, 1981), Gunn (1985) and Murdoch (1974).

Ong Keo's real name was "My"; hence, he was condescendingly re-nicknamed by the French as "Bac My" (which may be roughly translated as "that bloke My"). He was an Alak¹⁴⁴, born in Ban Paktai from a relatively modest background - his father was the chief of the village. However, he rapidly distinguished himself by his charisma and intelligence: his command of Lao, and also of Pali¹⁴⁵, no doubt helped him to build up a certain prestige among his fellowmen. He began his actions around 1900 amidst the highland people's sentiments of resentment and anger, caused by the French authorities' harsh and insensitive rule (the different interpretations of the minority rebellions were reviewed in Chapter Three). He performed religious *Phi* ("spirit") ceremonies on Phu (Mount) Tayun, located a few kilometres East of his native village, during which he urged his followers to "throw out the invaders". The rituals attracted an increasing number of people. He was soon proclaimed Phou Mi Boun, "the Holy Man", by his followers, and rapidly became known as Pha Ong Keo or Ong Keo (*Pha* means "saint",

¹⁴³ See my description of the area in Chapter Three, Section 3.2.3.

¹⁴⁴ According to all three authors (Moppert (1978: 50), Gunn (1985: 43), Murdoch (1974: 55)).

¹⁴⁵ The sacred language of Theravada Buddhism

Ong "king, prince or a divine person of high rank" and *Keo* "diamond or precious stone"; Moppert suggested the following translation: "the Saint who possesses the miraculous stone" (Moppert 1978: 78)). In April 1901, Ong Keo launched his first spectacular attack on the French local authority in Thateng, in Eastern Province (now Sekong Province). It was clearly in retaliation for the French authorities' destruction of the temple of Ban Nong Mek, Ong Keo's stronghold, on the Bolovens Plateau a month earlier. The ambush opened a 6-year period of armed actions and repression between Ong Keo and his partisans and the French in the mountainous eastern region of the Bolovens Plateau.

Finally, in October 1907, the Phu Mi Boun surrendered, following the dispersal of his troops who had been seriously undermined by various factors, including military defeats, epidemics and famine. However, he never really submitted to the French conditions - for instance, he did not relinquish the title of *Chao Sadet* ("Great King") that he had bestowed upon himself, and he continued to perform very popular *Bouns*, religious ceremonies mixing both Buddhist and Alak rituals (Moppert 1978: 171). He even implicitly encouraged his disciples, notably Kommandam, to carry on the struggle. Eventually, incensed by his 'arrogant' attitude, the Commissaire of Saravane, Dauplay (who had played a crucial role in the rebellion's repression), decided to get rid of him. He set up a meeting in November 1910 with the clear intention of killing Ong Keo. Debates still surround the circumstances of his murder. Some sources claim that he was killed by Dauplay himself, who hid a gun under his hat (Moppert 1978; Murdoch

1974)¹⁴⁶; others argue that it was Dauplay's men who bayoneted Ong Keo to death (Gunn 1985: 51)¹⁴⁷.

It comes as little surprise that the rebellions of highland people against the French administration, including Ong Keo's, have been portrayed by the present regime's historiographers as the pioneering fighting movements for the independence of the country. It is therefore still common to read in the state-controlled newspapers rhetoric such as follows:

The armed struggles of the people of various ethnic groups [...] showed the spirit of steadfast and unyielding struggle of the valiant Laotian people who refused foreign domination. They ignited the revolutionary flames of patriotism of the multiethnic Lao people which have continued to burn inextinguishable.

(Vientiane Times, January 8-11, 1999)

These revolts serve the state's hegemonic discourse well as they fill in the historical blanks of the anti-colonialist struggle under French rule with factual heroic events. Their "patriotic" resistance against "foreign aggression" is stressed, while their true motivations are obliterated. In brief, local conflicts have been re-cast as proto-nationalist movements¹⁴⁸.

¹⁴⁶ Murdoch, in turn, quotes from Burchett's book (1957: 242). The latter interviewed the son of Ong Kommandam, Sithon, who gave him this version of Ong Keo's death. Moppert did not indicate his sources, although they are most likely to be the same as Murdoch's.

¹⁴⁷ Gunn, in turn, quotes this second version from a report by Dauplay: AOM Aix F6, "Mort de Bac My et capture de ses lieutenants" (Dauplay to the Resident Superior of Saravane, 19 December 1910). However, considering the fact that Dauplay was the main investigator into Ong Keo's death, one may wonder whether his testimony is entirely trustworthy.

¹⁴⁸ Another similar example is discussed in Hoskins' study of the headhunter, Kaha Katoda, of Balaghar on the Indonesian island of Sumba, who has been turned into a 'national hero' for the sake of the state's legitimation project (1987). But the post-colonial independent states are not alone in their search for national 'heroes', as the 'old' European states share a similar eagerness for such figures: Jeanne d'Arc (for France) is arguably one of the most famous examples.

6.2.2. Rhetoric of struggle and local traditions

However, the villagers of Ban Paktai showed a divergent interpretation of the 'hero' Ong Keo, which does not follow exactly the national narration. In fact, they interweave the thematic of struggle with local traditions. During his interview, Somseun thus portrayed Ong Keo as having supernatural powers, as a true "Holy Man"; below is his narration (my transcription follows his words as closely as possible):

One evening, Pha Ong heard the Phi Bang Bot¹⁴⁹, who came down on his horse. But he couldn't see him. He could only hear him. Ong Keo was in the spirit house. He learnt the chants and the prayers from the Phi Bang Bot during three days and three nights. After the third night, Ong Keo saw the candles in the spirit house. He still couldn't see the Phi Bang Bot but his horse only. From then on, Ong Keo had the power. If he ordered the buffaloes to crush, they would; if he told people to fight against each other, they would. So everybody, without exception, in Meuang Thateng believed that he was a *Pha Ong*, the most powerful; that he could defeat the French. And Ong Keo said that he wanted to defeat the French because they were oppressing the people.

The attribution of special powers to a charismatic leader is a common occurrence, especially in non-Buddhist traditions; as Murdoch explained in his essay on the "Holy Man's" revolt:

The panels found in the Saravane area portraying Ong Keo as a *Thevada* suggest the invocation of the proto-Bodhisattva Maitreya¹⁵⁰ tradition. In addition there

¹⁴⁹ A malevolent spirit

¹⁵⁰ In Buddhism, Maitreya (Sri Ariya Maitreya) is the future Buddha (who, it is believed by many of the faithful, will come 5000 years after the death of Gotama Buddha) (Keyes 1995: 90).

were repeated references to 'Phu Mi Bun' (he who has merit) and 'Thammikarat' (Ruler of Law or Ruler of Justice'). On the Lao side of the river [Mekong], and specifically among the non-Buddhist Kha, the more common reference was to invulnerability - as though invulnerability to bullets or personal harm was a kind of 'proof' of the 'legitimacy' of the Phu Mi Bun and his cause. The tradition of sorcery, spirit-mediums, and invulnerability is particularly strong in the Kha tradition, as has long been acknowledged by the Lao. [...] The background religious elements of the traditions of the Maitreya, the *Phu Mi Bun*, and the invulnerable sorcerer were to be incorporated by the leaders of the rebellion. By drawing on these elements, the rebellion's leaders became focal points for the dissatisfaction of the populace. Without this religiously sanctioned leadership, it would have been far more difficult to have organized the rebellion's followers. (Murdoch 1974: 64-5)

In effect, the tradition of sorcery and invulnerability has remained carved in oral memory, as demonstrated in Somseun's account of Ong Keo's execution. The *Phu Mi Bun* was summoned to a meeting by the Commissaire of Saravane, Dauplay¹⁵¹, in Vat Tai in Thateng. But as soon as he and his soldiers (there were six of them) entered the room, Dauplay locked the door. The French officer then issued Ong Keo with a deadly challenge to his special powers: if by dawn he were unable to escape, he would be killed. The next morning, Ong Keo was still entrapped and Dauplay therefore ordered his men to fire at him. But the bullets did not reach him. Dauplay then ordered his men to stab him to death, but their blades could not penetrate his flesh. Eventually, a *sin* (the Lao woman's sarong) was wrapped around a rifle's bayonet. The blade this time pierced his body and Ong Keo died - but there was no blood. Invulnerability was Ong Keo's

proof of his legitimacy (Murdoch 1974: 64). Only an 'impure' element, the *pha sin*, could disrupt his power. The official historiography has completely left out the religious aspects of Ong Keo's rebellion, but the villagers of Ban Paktai, on the contrary, incorporate them as the central element of their narration while also acknowledging Ong Keo's fight against the French colonialists. They are not challenging the national narration; rather, they are adding to it a mystical dimension, which belongs to the local traditions.

6.2.3. 'War genealogy'

Ban Paktai's reactions to the national narrative of Ong Keo, however, have been ambivalent. While they are grateful for the attention he is receiving, they express bitterness at what they feel to be a dispossession. During my first visit to Ban Paktai, the villagers sitting on the balcony of the village head's house listened silently to Somseun. They sometimes nodded, but never interfered in the conversation. Somseun seemed to be a well-respected figure in the village. After he finished his story, he soon left and went back to his village. The atmosphere between the villagers and we outsiders was now relaxed. There were six villagers: the head of the village, Pim; the Front man, Nieung; the secretary of the Party, Phumi; and three other men of indeterminate position, Khamsing, Bounmak and Sim. The expression of suspicion¹⁵² on their faces had disappeared. As the atmosphere became more and more relaxed, with the aid of rice alcohol and Sisouk's jokes, some dissonant voices began to emerge. I cannot recall who was the first to speak, but all the villagers who were present approved the criticism. They complained that we were the third group to come and ask them to tell the story of Ong Keo. Boulom had already told it to some Lao provincial officials and to some

¹⁵¹ In the interview, Somseun pronounced the name "Complay". I surmise that it is a deformation of Dauplay.

foreign scholars. Yet, they had never heard of these researchers again, nor had they been informed of the results of these investigations. The villagers then expressed the wish to have a museum of Ong Keo in the village, and insisted that it should be "nowhere else".

When night began to fall, I started to think that it would be nice to get some rest. But as soon as we finished eating we were led to another house at the edge of the village. By then, a few other men had joined us, and the bottles of rice alcohol were drained at an even faster pace than had hitherto been the case. As inhibitions weakened further, Phumi, clearly drunk, suddenly told Sisouk in a surprisingly distinctive and firm tone that Somseun deserved to be raised to the rank of "national hero" (ວິລະສົມແຫ່ງຊາດ (*vilàsòn heng sat*)), like Sithon Kommandam (the son of Ong Kommandam) and Ong Keo: "I agree with your research", he said to Sisouk, "but I think that other valorous soldiers, who are still alive, should also be decorated. Boulom should receive the first-class medal that he never got; all his medals are second-class ones¹⁵³. Boulom deserves it; he was tortured and he fought for the nation".

The other villagers at first remained quiet, then reproached Phumi for his tempestuous behaviour. They defended Sisouk who, after all, had come to study their ancestor.

Phumi, in turn, retorted that he had never criticised this research but that, to his mind, Boulom should be awarded the title; also, we were not the first people to show interest in Ong Keo. The villagers did not say anything but nodded. In his interview, a few weeks later, Phumi again stressed the leading role of Uncle Somseun in the shadow of Ong Keo:

¹⁵² One of the men even asked us if we had an official permit from Vientiane to come and do research in the village. Sisouk just laughed, and the man did not insist. I later asked Sisouk about that incident but he said that I must have misunderstood, for it never happened.

¹⁵³ A villager whom I could not identify at that time mentioned a badly conducted investigation into Somseun's deeds at the time the medals were awarded.

- Were there many revolutionaries in Ban Paktai? [I asked him.]
- Yes, there were. To tell you the truth, from the start, it was Uncle Somseun who formed [ສ້າງ (*sang*) literally, "built up"] two comrades. Then, it developed from 1954 to 1956. Then, from 1956 to 1960, there were 12 comrades. It was Uncle Somseun who made them up. He's a true hero. The enemy's barbarity, it's not nice. The tortures he suffered from, it wasn't nice. He didn't tell you the other day. He was modest. But, we, his children, know his actions. He's an authentic hero of the province of Sekong. He's the number 1. The number 2 is... [hesitation] Khamsong. The number 3 is... [hesitation] Khamdieum... [hesitation] Khamlieun. These three comrades were tortured, beaten up, until they bled and were wrecked.
- All these three comrades are from the same ethnic group?
- Yes, all three were Ngae, from Ong Keo's lineage. They are his children.
- They were from Ban Paktai?
- Yes, all of them.

Phumi had been back in the village for 14 years now. He was wounded during the war: he received a bullet in his leg (which has not yet been extracted), in addition to developing a cyst in his abdomen that he cut out himself. The messy scars were still visible. Phumi was thus convinced that he would die soon. He left the village in 1969 to "join the revolution" at the early age of 13. He was a soldier at the district level in Meuang Vienthong in the former Eastern Province until 1973, when he joined a battalion. Soon afterwards, he was sent to Vietnam for seven years to study and obtained a degree in "military studies". Then, back in Sam Neua, he carried on studying mechanics for one year and a half. He "started [his] service" in 1981. He went to

Udomsai, Phongsaly, Luang Namtha, Luang Prabang, Xieng Khuang, and then to Vientiane in 1982. Finally, he was sent to Sekong, then a newly created province, in 1984. He retired the following year.

His father also participated in the "revolutionary struggle" in the early 1950s. He was a "recruiting agent on the ground" (ພະນັກງານຂົນຂວາຍດຳລົງພື້ນຖານ (*phànàkngan khònkway damlòngpheunthan*)), involved in secret activities in the district of Lamam in the Eastern Province (now, Sekong Province). He supplied the Issala soldiers and recruited new fighters in collaboration with the northern Vietnamese troops. In 1954, following the fall of Dien Bien Phu, most of the "civil soldiers" (ທະຫານຝ່າຍພົນລະເຮືອນ (*thàhan fayphònlàheuan*)) of Ban Paktai rallied to the troops in the newly "united two provinces" of Sam Neua and Phongsaly to join the battles. His father came back to the village a few years later, in 1957, to carry on the struggle in their native area¹⁵⁴. The story of Phumi clearly recalls that of Somchit, whose father, uncles and aunt were all "revolutionaries" and cared for him after the murder of his mother by the "enemy". Phumi did not start his "revolutionary activities" when he left the village. He was still a child when he supplied the Issala soldiers who hid in the rice-fields and the forests. Phumi was 10 when he started some "minor activities" because his "parents and relatives were also involved in the revolution". The long journey to Sam Neua was thus the logical pursuit of a wartime education that had begun several years earlier.

¹⁵⁴ The territory of present-day Sekong was a strategic site during the American War as the "Ho Chi Minh trail" ran through the area. The trail was thus dubbed the "road of the three nations" as it was possible to join from 'Sekong' both northern and southern Vietnam (Handicap International/UXO Lao 1997: 4). But the battles differed greatly from one district to another due to the great topographical variations between them. As the road (National 16) in the plains going from Saravane to Attopeu and passing through the former Lamam District was under the route close control of the rightist Royal Lao Army posted on the Bolovens Plateau, the Viet Minh and the Pathet Lao used the trails located in the Eastern districts of

Ong Keo is being included by the villagers of Ban Paktai in what I term a 'war genealogy'. The figure of the ethnic leader is being reinterpreted to endorse a story that follows neither the 'national' history nor the story of ethnic rebellions. He is no longer the static and monolithic figure of the national past. Instead, Ong Keo appears to be being re-cast as the ancestral figure of the "revolutionary" struggle of Ban Paktai. His patriotic figure is re-appropriated to legitimate his putative descendants' claim for recognition of their role during the American War. His story is being re-told to support their claims. Indeed, Phumi's protest to Sisouk that night well expressed claims to the right for homology between the 'great' and the 'small' fates¹⁵⁵, i.e. Somseun, like Ong Keo and Sithon Kommandam, is a local hero as much as a national hero. In other words, Phumi disputed and claimed back the genealogy of the village by linking the 'great' history to the 'small' fates. Also, in a certain manner, Somseun's narration is also that of Phumi; that is, a story of suffering, deprivation and violence caused by the war, of wounds that are not yet healed. However, Phumi expressed a new narrative, which does not follow the "revolutionary" story exactly. His narrative asks for another ending: the recognition of he and his fellows within the 'national' history. It re-constructs a past that looks towards the future. As Bruner observes, "[s]tories give meaning to the present and enable us to see that present as part of a set of relationships involving a constituted past and a future. But narratives change, all stories are partial, all meanings incomplete." (Bruner 1986: 153).

The content of the official historical account tends to imply that the communist-led nationalist movement in Laos was based on a genuine popular awakening to anti-colonialist consciousness of the whole population, of which the ethnic minorities

Dakchung and Kalum, bordering southern Vietnam. In consequence, these two mountainous and remote areas were heavily bombed from as early as the 1950s.

¹⁵⁵ I have borrowed the expression from Tréglodé (1999).

formed only one component. This claim leads implicitly to the weakening of the non-ethnic Lao role in the revolution. An article published in the *Vientiane Times* on the 50th anniversary of the creation of the Lao People's Army (LPA) claimed that the Pathet Lao soldiers gained the ethnic minorities' confidence, as they did with other sections of the population: "we won the people's support after lengthily explaining them [sic] our goals and showing them the justness of our cause" (*Vientiane Times*, January 8-11, 1999)¹⁵⁶.

Ethnic Minorities were among 'the people' who happened to be 'there' to support the movement. Ethnic minorities, like the rest of the "patriotic people", gave their "sons and daughters" to the revolution. They are no longer presented as key actors in the "revolutionary struggle" as they once were in the early historical re-presentations. For example, thirty years ago, a Neo Lao Hak Sat publication stressed the active participation of ethnic peoples during the war. It was thus asserted: "The multinational character of Laos also reflects itself in the composition of the revolutionary army. In all units, from the biggest down to the smallest, there are men of various nationalities enjoying complete equality of political and other rights. Each nationality has one or several famous names in the army: Si Thoong is of the Lao Lum nationality, That Tou of the Lao Sung, and Thao Kong of the Lao Theung" (Neo Lao Hak Sat 1966: 25). As Grant Evans notes:

There is a tendency to de-emphasise the minority aspect of these revolts and to stress the idea that they were part of some more general "Lao resistance" to colonialism. Similarly, narratives about the "war against the Americans" (i.e. the civil war with the Royal Lao Government) stress the solidarity between the

¹⁵⁶ Another paper relating the "struggle for independence" from 1939 to 1946, published in the LFNC magazine, introduces the "Lao people" as "the *great popular mass* [who] understood that in order to regain independence and freedom, they had to rely on their own strength and joined the appeal made by the Indochinese Communist Party" (Sinsay 1998: 23, my stress).

different ethnic groups in the struggle, but no key minority figures stand out in the struggle.

(Evans 1998: 149)

This is the reason why the concept of narrative is liberating - it allows individuals to tell their own signifying stories. Somchit, Somseun and Phumi's narratives are split between the "pedagogical" and "performative" signifiers. Their stories have a similar pattern - patriotism, loyalty and sacrifice - but they also claim difference. Ong Keo's memory has been invested with an ideological content taken from the nationalist movement, but the reaction of some residents of Ban Paktai has been to re-appropriate the figure to assert their role as ethnic fighters in the 'national' history. In brief, they reject their marginalisation to a peripheral role and ask, instead, for the recognition of their full participation in the construction of the Lao nation¹⁵⁷.

Conclusion

For Ricoeur, narrative originates in lived experience: the composition of a plot is grounded in a "pre-understanding of the world of action" (Ricoeur 1984 (1983): 54). However, one may comment critically that it is wrong to assume that people's "lived experience" is nothing but their own consciousness, that there exists an essence of things 'out there', ready to be picked up. Miller thus vigorously asserts that "there is no

¹⁵⁷ In his interview, Lieusai, a retired *vilàson avuso* of Sekong - a title that rewarded him for the years he spent fighting with the Pathet Lao - was categorical in insisting that it was the "Lao Theung", and "not the Lao", who fought during the American War in what was then the Eastern Province. Moreover, did not Somseun himself confide to Sisouk that his father once told him to join the battle only if the struggle were in the "East"? The common story I often heard, though I do not have it confirmed officially, is that the creation of Sekong (the vast majority of the population of which is non-ethnic Lao) in 1984 was to reward its people for their participation in the "revolutionary struggle". There are thus clear historical and ideological boundaries between Sekong and Saravane, the neighbouring province. The latter was known as the "enemy" province, and the stigma of the wrong side appears to remain. In effect, Saravane "chose the wrong nation", a military officer told me, "whereas the Eastern zone was truly a heroic zone (*khet vilàson*)".

such thing as an 'experience of being in the world and in time' prior to language. All our 'experience' is permeated through and through by language" (Miller 1987: 1104).

The issue is therefore power. The vocabulary, the 'heroic' style, shows how socially constructed the narratives of Somchit, Somseun, et al are. They are produced in a particular social context, a regime of power conveyed by a State that emphasises such values as patriotism, sacrifice and heroism. Somchit and Somseun have internalised these principles to the extent that their behaviours and thoughts may appear to them deceptively natural and rational; in Foucault's words, they are "an effect of power" (Foucault 1980: 98). However, does this mean then that Somchit, Somseun, et al are not worth hearing, let alone worth listening to, because their voices may in fact be disempowered? Or, worse, because they may be the "claim of another's *will of power*" (Ricoeur 1978: 45, original stress)?

Ricoeur's argument is that there is no lived reality, no human or social reality, which is not already *represented* in some sense, or *mediated* by ideology. In other words, there is no non-ideological place (or, in Foucault's vocabulary, there is no social space that is not within a regime of power): all individuals belong to a group, hence there is no knowledge totally open to critical reflection. "All *objectifying* knowledge concerning our position in society, in a social class or in a cultural tradition is preceded by a relation of *belonging to* [...] which can never become completely transparent to reflective thought." (Ricoeur 1978: 58, original stress). Having stressed the constraints, external as well as internal, upon individuals' actions, Ricoeur none the less argues that a critique of ideology - or individual agency - is possible, although it will never be "total": "it is condemned to remain partial, fragmentary, insular" (Ricoeur 1978: 59). As

Alonso stresses, "we are simultaneously the subjects, in both a political and a phenomenological sense, and the objects of our own understanding" (Alonso 1988: 51).

My intention was not to de-construct my informants' narratives so as to reveal the 'truth', but to uncover the unity, and also the discontinuities, within these narratives. The narratives of Somchit and Somseun may be partial and fragmentary. But, as Bevir in his criticisms of Foucault's rejection of autonomy observes: "[t]o deny that subjects can escape from all social influences is not to deny that they can act creatively for reasons that make sense to them. On the contrary, we must allow for agency if only because we cannot individuate beliefs or actions by reference to social context." (Bevir 1999: 358). Concretely, in the cases of Somchit, Somseun or Phumi, this means that the narratives of their experiences, though they may be structured by a specific social context, are also the products of their consciousness. Their words of suffering are not dictated by techniques of government and technologies of self (although they may be *a posteriori* ordered in a narration that is influenced by social forces); these words spring initially from these individuals' very own feelings and reasoning. To deny these individuals agency is to deny them, I believe, their humanity. As Ricoeur emphatically reminds us: "We tell stories because in the last analysis human lives need and merit being narrated. This remark takes on its full force when we refer to the necessity to save the history of the defeated and the lost. The whole history of suffering cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative." (Ricoeur 1984 (1983): 75).

Furthermore, the effects of the dominant historical discourse may be divergently interpreted. The provincial government has recognised Ban Paktai as heroic on account of the villagers' ancestor, Ong Keo. But the interpretations of the meaning of the term "hero" (*vilàsòn*) differ between the state and the local people. The national history has

transformed Ong Keo into a guerrilla fighter of the independence struggle, while for the villagers he is also the invulnerable ethnic leader with supernatural powers. In other words, in the oral memory the magical and mythical aura is as significant as the ideological element. Moreover, according to the logic of the descent line - being Ong Keo's 'children' and following the nationalist rhetoric that stresses the deeds of extraordinary individuals as models for others - the villagers feel that some of their fellow men and fellow women also have the right to bear the title of "hero" for their actions during the war. But, during my fieldwork in Ban Paktai, I often heard the villagers complaining that despite the fact that they were a "heroic village", they were forgotten by the authorities. Accordingly, Somseun's anti-colonial struggle remains on the margins of the 'national' history. In the historiographical agenda of the Lao P.D.R, the 'national' history gives little weight to the history 'on the ground'. These members of minority groups still show loyalty to a country in which, in their perception, ethnicity and socialist ideals have blended. Their claims to being "revolutionaries" constitute the reflection of a collective identity, and of a sense of belonging to a national community. However, in my view, the discourse that underlies their claims is being progressively overshadowed by the newly reformulated nationalist discourse, the consequences of which will be discussed in the next chapter.

7. Ethnicity Reconsidered in Post-Socialist Laos

In Chapter Five, I have discussed the ambiguities related to the process of naturalisation of the national culture, the tensions surrounding the constitution of the Majority, i.e. so-called 'Lao-ness'. For Hall, national identities appear to be unified, homogeneous, encompassing, because of their discursive power. In fact:

national identities are not things we are born with, but are formed and transformed within and in relation to *representation*. We only know what it is to be 'English' because of the way 'Englishness' has come to be represented, as a set of meanings, by English national culture. It follows that a nation is not only a political entity but something which produces meaning - a *system of cultural representation*. People are not only legal citizens of a nation: they participate in the *idea* of the nation as represented in its national culture.

(Hall 1994: 292, original stress)

But, according to the accepted wisdom, processes of globalisation in the late twentieth century have brought about structural changes that in turn have led to the fragmentation of identities, be they national or personal. In essence, identity is in crisis. In so-called post-modern societies, as McCrone advises, one should no longer assume "that there is much fixed, essential or immutable about identity, but that individuals assume different identities at different times which may not even be centred around a coherent self" (McCrone 1998: 32). Hence, from the proclaimed death of the idea of a 'stable' identity has emerged the notion of "dislocation or de-centring of the subject" (Hall 1994: 275).

In this chapter, I would like to explore not so much the processes of globalisation as this idea of fluidity and plurality of identities within the context of crisis. Specifically, I intend to further discuss the notion of "fictive ethnicity" among the members of ethnic minorities whom I encountered in the course of my fieldwork, by examining their own perception of their ethnicity. How do they take on a 'national' identity that is increasingly essentialised? Likewise, how do they handle an ethnic labelling over which they have little, if any, control? Do they have any margin to maintain a personal identity? I will first discuss the phenomenon I have called "duality of being" among cases of elite minority people¹⁵⁸. Then, on a wider scale, I will assess the post-socialist identity crisis in Laos as lived by these individuals, and its causes, symptoms and consequences.

7.1. Duality of being

7.1.1. A 'normal' Lao family

I will begin my discussion with the presentation of a family life in a provincial city, Pakse. I have already mentioned the father, Somchit, and Manivong, his wife, in the previous chapter. Somchit works in the Department of Minority Affairs at the local LFNC branch, and Manivong in the Department of Propaganda at the LWU. Lao is their first language, though they can fluently speak their respective ethnic groups' languages, Oy and Phuthai. Both are relatively well educated, as they were teachers in the past. Manivong met her husband in 1975 during a "summer political seminar" near her home area, in Champhone District (formerly a province), in Savannakhet Province. This district was located in the then "zone 5" that had been recently "liberated" by the Pathet Lao. She was a primary school teacher, and like all the civil servants who had been educated under the old regime, she went through the so-called "seminars of political re-

¹⁵⁸ I borrow the notion from Anagnost's book (1997)

education". As she was a low-ranking employee, she attended the seminars 'only' for one month and a half, during which time she was lectured on "Political Theory".

Somchit was actually supervising the classes. Following this experience, she carried on her teaching, became the deputy-head of the LWU at the district level in Champassak Province, and finally got promoted to the LWU provincial headquarters in 1993.

Somchit and she have a fairly active social life. In early March 2000, a month that is considered to be a propitious time for getting married, Somchit and Manivong were invited to five weddings within two weeks. They subsequently had to split the *sukhuan* ceremonies and the dinner parties so as to cope with all the invitations. On two occasions, Manivong went to help the bride's family to prepare the dinner party while her husband went to assist at a *sukhuan* ceremony at another house. They also carefully calculated the sum of money to be given to the bride and groom, the traditional form of wedding gift. They only earn the standard civil servant's salary - between 100,000 kip and 150,000 kip a month (at that time, 1USD was equivalent to approximately 8000-9000 kip). Their budget therefore is tight. Still, they went to all the weddings and spent nearly a month's salary on them. Manivong's favourite expression in March was "helping the house, helping the community".

One of Somchit's favourite conversations with me is to explain to the *farang Lao* (the "foreign Lao" or "Lao from abroad"), who I am in his eyes, what "being Lao" (ຄວາມເປັນລາວ (*khwam pen lao*)) means. For instance, one evening on our way back home after one of the wedding parties, he considered it useful to define the 'Lao'¹⁵⁹ way of entertaining. In his words, this was to "be able to drink, to sing, to dance, to eat and

¹⁵⁹ I use quotation marks here to emphasise the conflation, in my informant's mind, between nationality and ethnicity with regard to the term 'Lao'.

to talk"! Somchit's wish is to promote relationships between the Lao community abroad and the LFNC because, as he declares, "all the Lao people, even those abroad, remain Lao: if they eat sticky rice and *padaek*, and play *khaen*, then they're Lao!" He even tries to forbid his children to listen to Thai or Western songs, but with no great success. Like most urban teenagers, they like listening to Lao, Thai and foreign music and watching Thai programmes on TV, though they usually promptly switch to the Lao channel when their father comes back home. Somchit has also suggested several times that I should wear *pha sin* (the Lao sarong) more often so as to look like a 'real' "Lao girl". Somchit insists on the most distinctive, if not stereotyped, characteristics of the Majority culture. He likes boasting about his knowledge of it. In other words, he over-communicates his Lao-ness to mark his sameness with the ethnic Lao and to legitimate his membership of the group.

Living in Pakse, one of the biggest and most populous towns of the country, Manivong and Somchit's children - four girls and one boy who were between 24 and 14 years old in the year 2000 - have easier access to education than most Lao children of their age, all the more so since their parents strongly encourage them to pursue their schooling. All five are still at school. Three of them study at the Teachers' Training School in Pakse. The eldest daughter got married with an ethnic Lao businessman in January 2000, but still continues her studies while working part-time for the Department of Information and Culture as a radio broadcaster. The second daughter has just finished a pre-university degree in pharmaceutical studies in Vientiane and is debating whether to carry on at school and therefore to return to the capital, or to look for a job in her hometown.

Despite both their parents being non-ethnic Lao, these young people feel unambiguously 'Lao'. One evening, Tik, the third daughter, 20, witty and tomboyish, made this comment to me:

- Mixed-race people are said to be clever... like you, Lao-Thai!

I then remarked in turn:

- But you too, you're mixed-race people!

Nou, her elder sister, 22, looked surprised and asked, perplexed:

- What do you mean, mixed-race? Lao-Lao?
- No... I mean...mixed-race Phuthai and...

But before I finished my sentence, the two sisters burst out laughing:

- That's right, we're mixed-race inside Laos!

My remark obviously sounded like a good joke. Nou insisted:

- It doesn't matter: our nationality is Lao.

And Tik added:

- Our race is Lao, our blood is Lao, our nationality is Lao! Not like the Viet, their race is Viet and their nationality, Lao.

This conversation clearly shows the conflation between race, nationality and ethnicity with regard to the term 'Lao' in the minds of Tik and Nou. These children are aware of their parents' ethnic origins, though in unclear terms, especially as regards their father's. His ethnicity is an alien element, from which they clearly distance themselves. Here is another conversation I had with Tik. She wishes to become a teacher for ethnic peoples at the Boarding School for Ethnic Minorities in Pakse, or in the "mountainous areas" (*khet phudoi*), as she describes it. But, despite her motivation and enthusiasm, she is apprehensive about the task she will have to face. She thus told me:

- These children don't have the same way of thinking as we do. They think differently. And, if you shout at them or get upset, they may put a curse on you or poison you.

I then asked her about the occasion upon which her father ate their pet dog, when his relatives came to visit from his native village. She immediately burst out:

- My father has a dark heart (ໃຈດຳ (*chai dam*))! He's got a dark heart, he's an ethnic person (ຄົນໃຈດຳຄົນຊົນເຜົ່າ (*khòn chai dam, khòn sòn phaw*))!

Likewise, Sisouk Chonmaly, the Director of the LFNC Research Department on Ethnic Groups, a Mākong, insisted I should wear *pha sin* (the Lao sarong) more often. He also pretended he could dance all the types of *Lamvong* and sing all the 'Lao' classics! His three children are well integrated into 'Lao' urban society, too¹⁶⁰. His eldest daughter, 19, is studying political economy at the National University of Laos and is hoping to carry on a Master's degree abroad, either in Thailand or Australia but "not in Vietnam", specified her father when I asked him, because, as he explained, she could not speak the language. But, surely, the linguistic barrier is not the only reason. A more secure future for his offspring may well be worth a transgression of the Lao-Vietnamese bonds of 'brotherhood'. He does not teach them his native language either: "It's not useful. They'd better learn English". To Sisouk's great despair, however, his son insisted on studying at a music school - Sisouk bemoans that he can only sing Thai or Western songs, and only one 'Lao' song ("but very well") - but thanks to the help of a close friend, his son has

¹⁶⁰ Being socially integrated also allows Sisouk to gain advantages from networking. Apart from his position at the LFNC, Sisouk and his wife also started a small bar-restaurant business in Vientiane in 1999 serving Lao dishes and playing (very loudly) Lao and Thai songs on TV. Though I have no concrete proof, I nevertheless suspect that his political position might have helped him to acquire the excellent location that his business occupied, situated as it was right next to the LFNC building and only a few metres away from one of the major markets and the main bus station of the capital. Being a 'communist' is no longer incompatible with success in capitalist business in post-socialist Laos. I shall return to Sisouk later on.

been enrolled for free in an English language private school. His youngest daughter is still at a secondary school.

7.1.2. Being One and the Other

Somchit does not hide his ethnic identity, but keeps it within a restricted sphere that does not even include his own family. Neither Somchit nor Manivong encourage their children to learn their native languages. None of their children can speak them, though the two eldest daughters can understand Phuthai, which they learnt with their maternal grandmother in their early childhood in Savannakhet, their mother's native province. Lao is the only language used at home. While I was staying with them, I never heard Manivong or Somchit using their native vocabulary, even in an interjection. The Lao and non-Lao milieus seem to be hermetically separated.

On a few occasions, people from his native village in Attapeu came to visit Somchit and sometimes stayed overnight. They spoke in both Oy and Lao, and once cooked the pet dog to the great horror of the children. The children and their mother displayed a polite but distant attitude with them. Manivong rarely stayed in the evening to take part in the conversation, which was anyway mostly conducted in Oy when Somchit and his visitors were on their own. The first time these visitors came during my stay, Manivong whispered to me as if it were a secret that they came from "Somchit's village, Ban Tok of Attapeu. They are Oy "; while her eldest daughter, intrigued and amused, would observe that "Father and they are speaking in an ethnic language (ພາສາຊົນເຜົ່າ (*phasa sòn phaw*)). Last night, I heard Father talking to them in that language".

But, paradoxically, Sisouk and Somchit, who seem to be well-integrated into ethnic Lao culture and society, are not ashamed to declare themselves non-Buddhist; Somchit

makes no effort to hide his scorn for the religion when he is with me. For example: it was mid-October and we were waiting for the bus that would take me to Sekong. I promised him I would try to come back to Pakse for the end of Buddhist Lent, during which time an even larger number of believers than normal make merit by offering food to the groups of monks that walk the streets just after dawn. His answer was abrupt:

- Don't bother! If you can't make it on time, it doesn't matter. Buddhist rituals are a legacy from feudal times. But the religion is too popular for the government to abolish it. 90% of the population follow it. But, if we could suppress it, we would.

He then added contemptuously:

- The monks are like beggars in the morning when they go along the streets asking for food.

Yet his wife and children are openly Buddhist. Moreover, his eldest daughter's religious wedding ceremony was organised according to Buddhist rituals. Similarly, Sisouk lent his restaurant's premises for a *sukhuan* ceremony to celebrate the birthday of his friend's son. I was present during the ceremony but did not see Sisouk. He only re-appeared during the dinner-party, which he organised, in the late afternoon. Later on, I met him in his office. He simply said that he did not want to be involved. On the other hand, animism is also administratively recognised as a religion. On the ID card of Khamdaeng, a Katu and head of the Minority Affairs Section of the LFNC in Sekong, the word *phi* ("spirits") is mentioned beside that of "religion" (*satsàna*). However, I wondered if this category has solely a negative meaning, i.e. 'non-Buddhist'. When I asked Sisouk directly whether he was Buddhist or not, he gave me this intriguing answer:

- Yes, I'm Buddhist here and animist (*satsàna phi*) over there.

- What do you mean by "over there"?
- At my home place¹⁶¹. I give up Buddhism because over there you have only *phi*.

Yet, in his house in Vientiane, there is a small Buddhist altar that honours his mother's picture and memory. Incidentally, she always refused to speak her native language because she was too ashamed of it.

Sisouk is not the only LFNC official to express his ethnic awareness, though. The case of Khamphorn, a LNFC official at the Research Department on Ethnic Groups in Vientiane, is interesting. The man writes ethnographic studies. He left his village in Samakixay district, Attapeu Province, in 1973 at the age of 15 and went to Vieng Xai like many others. He studied cinematography for three years. But it was not his personal choice: he only followed instructions. His affiliation in 1976 to the Department of Cinematography at the Ministry of Information and Culture in Vientiane was also decided by the bureaucracy: "I wasn't particularly interested but that's where I was sent to" he told me. Eventually, in 1984, he asked for a new post at the Central Committee on Ethnic Groups because he "was interested in ethnic groups". The dissolution of the Committee led him to take up his new position at the Department of Ethnic Groups at the LFNC in Vientiane in 1989. He is now the assistant to the Vice-Director of the Department. One of the most prolific writers of the mass organisation, second only to Sisouk Chonmaly, paradoxically he never studied ethnology. All he knows he has learned from Sisouk, who considers him as his disciple. He is subsequently strongly, if not entirely, influenced by the Director of the Research Department on Ethnic Groups.

Khamphorn always uses a very old typewriter manufactured in the former Soviet Union. Whenever I visited him in his office at the LFNC in Vientiane, I was almost certain to

¹⁶¹ Ban Namtok in Savannakhet.

find him behind the machine, sniffing as the air-conditioner was permanently on, but always frenetically writing or correcting a so-called ethnographic paper, many of which had been published (most of them in *Vientiane Mai*, the State Lao-language newspaper). Articles on ethnic groups started to appear in 1992 - until then, he had been writing (and still does write) propaganda texts. But Khamphorn's greatest wish is to publish a collection of tales and myths, told by his mother, of the Oy people of Attapeu. He typed them in Lao and had them roughly bound, but the document stays on his desk among dozens of others piling up, waiting to be published, under an impressive layer of dust. What is quite intriguing is the underlying evolutionist ideology. Khamphorn, who knows Somchit, makes a clear distinction between 'his' Oy and 'those' of Somchit. Thus, according to Khamphorn, Somchit believes that the Oy still behead the dead, throw their bodies in the river and bury the head under the house's stairs. In addition, they still file the upper teeth of the young women when they are 18. Khamphorn told me these details with a certain expression on his face and tone in his voice that implicitly suggested that 'his' Oy people were surely not such barbarians as to practice these 'backward' rituals. In brief, 'his' Oy are much more 'civilised'.

These individuals (Somchit, Sisouk and Khamphorn) are neither 'authentic' minority people nor 'true' ethnic Lao. On the one hand, they share *almost* all the mainstream cultural features: they speak in Lao, eat ethnic Lao food and respect ethnic Lao customs, including Buddhist traditions as a social activity. To put it another way, there are no cultural or physical¹⁶² traits that can distinguish them from the ethnic Lao people. But, as individuals, they say that they are not Buddhists (while in public they conceal this trait, or to be exact, they let themselves slip into the cultural mainstream). Yet their

¹⁶² Perhaps their skin is sometimes slightly darker, but in any case people (be they ethnic Lao or not) from southern Laos, for example, in Champassak Province are known for having a darker complexion than average.

'intermittent' non-Buddhist attitude reveals that they deviate somewhat from stereotypical 'Lao-ness', with the potential to possess a split cultural identity. Or, to put it differently, they do not possess all the attributes for a full membership of the Majority.

On the other hand, these men never had a culture of origin, or to put it another way, a cultural point of attachment: their Other ethnicity has no stable cultural content but only the consciousness of being different (though they try to conform with the state's minority representation). But Somchit got it all wrong when trying to explain the Oy traditions to me, in particular their funeral ceremony. To his great surprise (as well as to mine), he was promptly contradicted by his fellow male villagers who said that they no longer practised these "backward" rituals!

- Oh, you no longer collect the bones and chop the head? [Somchit asked, looking confused.]

One of the villagers shook his head and replied:

- No, we no longer do that. Now, we use the coffin. It's cleaner now. We stopped the backward rituals. We've evolved now.

I intervened in the conversation by asking a question I knew sounded anti-evolutionist, and hence anti-Party rhetoric:

- Do you not regret the disappearance of the rituals of your ethnic group?

It was Somchit who promptly answered, with the silent approbation of his fellow men:

- No, no, these practices were backward. We regret nothing. The ethnic groups come closer. Like circles following a concentric movement.

But all of a sudden, that same evening, Somchit expressed regret that the history of ethnic groups (ປາວັດຊົນເຜົ່າ (*pavàt sònphaw*)) was neglected, because of the lack of funding.

- We need people like you to be able to conduct research. But it depends on the leaders...

Somchit then had this intriguing comment: "The flag of three colours [i.e. the Lao flag] is in the fist of the leaders (ທຸງສາມສີຢູ່ໃນກຳຕັ້ງນຳ (*thùng sam si yu nai kam phunam*))".

I did not ask him to explain his remark, but the expression of resignation on his face suggested he was referring to his sense of powerlessness before the authorities.

Individuals like Somchit, Sisouk and Khamphorn locate themselves in both cultural spheres, ethnic and non-ethnic Lao. To put it differently, they are exhibiting a dual ethnicity, the Majority's and the Minority's. More precisely, the state's discourse of "fictive ethnicity" more and more centred on the cultural (national) (ethnic Lao) Majority leads them to position themselves in a dual manner within the regime of representation. Consequently, it may be the "duality of being"¹⁶³ that can best characterise men such as Sisouk and Somchit; that is, the experience of being *partially* One (members of the Majority) and *partially* the Other (members of the minorities) in post-socialist Lao urban society. But I argue that this dual display of ethnicity has been heightened by the "loss of a stable 'sense of self' "(Hall 1994: 275). From their childhood, their ethnicity has been subsumed within a social and political identity. These members of ethnic groups indeed show loyalty to a leadership whose project, in their perception, has blended ethnicity and socialist ideals. But, today, their world is progressively eroding under post-socialist transformations; subsequently, what has constituted the values and meanings of their identity is being shaken.

¹⁶³ Anagnost defines the experience of a "duality of being" as being that which is experienced by a subject who is forced to play a role or occupy a status imposed by the spinning of power's own fictions, so that it is experienced by the subject as alien or "inauthentic". She uses this framework in a radically different context, i.e. Chinese society during the tumultuous years of the Cultural revolution, which forced people

7.2. Post-socialist loss of a stable 'sense of self'

7.2.1. A Status-Role

Benoît de Tréglodé has argued in his study of "revolutionary heroes" in northern Vietnam that the promotion of such values as loyalty and patriotism has contributed to the social transformation of traditionally subordinated people (Tréglodé 1999: 27).

When I first met Manivong, perhaps eager to make me feel at home, she promptly told me that she and her husband, Somchit, understood my work because, as she explained: "we have the same intellectual culture. We are civil servants (*phànàkngan*). We know what it's like to conduct research when one is a student, unlike the merchants who wouldn't understand". My presence, as a young female foreign scholar, possibly gave her the opportunity to assert their social rank, which she clearly placed above the rich but ignorant and despised traders. In fact, Manivong explicitly reckoned that "civil servants are a distinctive category [because] they are better educated, better aware". In the 1991 Constitution of the LPDR - the first one promulgated since 1975 - "workers, farmers and intellectuals" are defined as "the key components" of the "multi-ethnic people", while all references to other social groups are omitted (Article 2). Manivong obviously classifies herself and her husband as "intellectuals". The hierarchical differential between "civil servant" and "trader" thus clearly does not so much denote professional classification as embody feelings of having a status, or to be exact, a status-role. I borrow here Marshall's definition of 'status':

... The main argument for the merger [between status and role] is that a status, conceived as a position in a social system, can be imagined only in terms of relationships, and the substance of social relationships is expected behaviour. [...]

to learn how to disguise and to manipulate their identities. While keeping the notion of multiplicity, I,

It can be argued, therefore, that if the dynamic aspect of status is removed, nothing is left except a fallacious conception of a position in social system as a static objective thing.

(Marshall 2000 [1977]: 305-6)

Accordingly, Manivong's high self-esteem and that of her husband are induced not by their structural rank (civil servant above merchant), nor by their social status (i.e. their position in the hierarchy of social prestige within the community (Marshall 2000 [1977]: 308) - which is anyhow difficult to assess) but by the pedagogical role made possible by their education and attached to their position as members of political mass-organisations, i.e. the LFNC and LWU. As Marshall summed up, "status emphasizes the position, as conceived by the group or society that sustains it, and role emphasizes the person who occupies the position" (Marshall 2000 [1977]: 306). But, since the mid-1980s, the expectations associated with their position have become more and more blurred, especially for Somchit. For the last 13 years, he has been waiting for a promotion, whereas he initially steadily climbed the career ladder and improved his social status. However, his status, i.e. his social role, has changed along with the structural transformations that have affected the post-socialist regime. I recount below Somchit's interrupted social and political 'trajectory'.

7.2.2. The end of an exemplary trajectory

After he fled his village (see previous chapter), Somchit started cooking for the staff of the Pathet Lao administration in Ban Mae Mork Namkong, in the district of Sanamxay. His father's youngest brother, Bounmy, was then the head of the administration, and along with the head of the province, Khamkhieng, they supported him. In 1964, he became a soldier in Sanamsay, and after just three months he was wounded - Somchit

showed me the scar twice during one interview. He did not return to battle but was sent instead to a one-year training course in Ban May Hinlaat, in Sanamxay, to become a primary teacher. After the completion of his education in 1965, he started his career: "it was the beginning of my service" (ການສັບຊ້ອນ (*kan sàpsorn*)). Indeed, year after year, his geographical movements went in hand-in-hand with his promotion within the Pathet Lao system, and then within the Party-State's administrative apparatuses.

First, he was sent as a primary teacher to Ban Khanmaknao, in Sanamxay. But, a few months later, the staff of the "Southern zone" administration located in Ban Mae Mork Namkong was transferred to the "Eastern Province" (now, Sekong Province), then called "Lao Tai zone". Somchit left his native province to work in the education administration in the "Lao Tai zone", the headquarters of which were in Meuang Bualapha, then in Savannakhet Province¹⁶⁴. In 1969, however, the "Lao Tai zone" was dissolved by the Pathet Lao administration. Its staff were then dispatched to three different areas: some returned to the former "Southern zone" in Attapeu Province, while others were sent to the central level, in Huaphan Province. The rest left for Vietnam to study. Somchit was among those who had been selected to go and study in Vietnam. But, for reasons that remain unclear, the conditions were not ripe: Hanoi could not receive the students yet. Instead, he went up to the province of Huaphan, to Vieng Xai (formerly called Nakai), then the headquarters of the Pathet Lao administration. He attended some upgrade courses during the next few years to become a secondary school teacher. Finally, in 1972, he was sent to Vietnam to attend courses in political theory.

¹⁶⁴ Meuang Bualapha is at the present time located in Khammuan Province. It is bordered by two districts (Vilabuly and Sepon) of Savannakhet to the South; and it shares a boundary with Vietnam to the East. Meuang Bualapha was created in 1967 (along with Meuang Langkhang) from areas previously belonging to Meuang Mahasay, also in Khammuan Province. In 1975, they were all unified under the present Meuang Bualapha administration. The eastern part of Khammuan was a stronghold of the Pathet Lao from the 1950s onwards. The Ho Chi Minh trail also ran through that area, and Meuang Bualapha was the main entry point into Laos for Vietnamese trucks. (Handicap International 1997: 11).

He went along with 24 others, including "the wife of Uncle Kaysone". Two years later, he came back to Laos and got promoted to the position of head of the administration of the Education Service of the Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS or Lao patriotic Front) in Huaphan Province. The following year, he was appointed to supervise a seminar for Education officials in the newly "liberated zones" in Savannakhet Province (then called "zone 5"), for a month and a half. Then, he taught the Party's policies in the same area for another month. In 1976, he came back to Vieng Xai and again got promoted, this time to the position of head of the Teacher Training Course at Dong Dok University in the prefecture of Vientiane. He stayed there for four years. In the early 1980s, the Ministry of Education sent him down to Pakse to administer the Teacher Training School. He carried on teaching political theory there. In 1983, he went to Vietnam for the second time, again to study. He stayed another two years. When he returned to Laos, he was nominated as a member of the Teacher Training School's management board in Pakse. Finally, in 1988, the first general assembly of the LFNC of Champassak Province appointed him as a permanent member of the mass-organisation. He was ranked seventh out of 51 senior members, and included in the permanent committee at the next general assembly. Since then, he has moved up to the third-ranking position.

Somchit's narrative, recorded on tape and for which he got prepared well in advance, appears as an uninterrupted flow, imprinting a logical, quasi-bureaucratic pattern upon the story. I heard different people talk in the same manner on several occasions.

Bourdieu, in a short and compelling essay, has condemned the illusion of a 'life history' that makes life falsely appear as "a whole, a coherent and finalized whole, which can and must be seen as the unitary expression of a subjective and objective 'intention' of a project" (Bourdieu 2000 [1986]: 297). I do not disagree with him about the fact that the series of events Somchit recounted to me are to a certain extent structurally selected and

ordered (consciously or unconsciously) to form an ascendant trajectory. These people, who became the cadres of the "revolution", went through the same educational system and ideological circuit. Their individual lives were absorbed by the bureaucratic and political machinery to such an extent that it seems that private and public spheres have merged in their personal identity. As Paul du Gay comments, Bourdieu's argument reflects "the ways in which humans' capacities, including the capacity for self-consciousness and self-reflection, depend upon definite forms of discourse and definite sets of activities and techniques in which they are trained and implicated as agents" (du Gay 2000: 280).

It is precisely the "biographical illusion" (Bourdieu 2000 [1986]), however, that gives meaning to these peoples' existence. The revolutionary period of their lives has transformed them. They most intensely lived these moments. Victor Turner stressed the importance of the disruptions (such as war, or more mundane events like marriage) that are extracted from their everyday life by individuals and expressed in various forms such as narratives and plays. Turner saw experience as isolated sequences of events marked by beginnings, middles, and endings, as ways in which people told what was most meaningful about their lives (Turner 1986: 36). Somchit's upward route through the "revolutionary" bureaucracy is one case among many. From childhood to adulthood, members of ethnic peoples were indeed educated and trained within a geographical space, i.e. the Pathet Lao "liberated zones", which also crossed the 'national' borders into the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. In his interview, Khamdaeng, the head of Minority Affairs of the LFNC of Sekong Province, defined himself as a "fighting civil servant". What follows is his account of his 'life/history', which is almost identical to Somchit's. He left his Katu native village in Kalum district in 1963 and went to study in Nakai. He was then 17. He stayed in Vieng Xai (or Nakai)

for seven years until he graduated as a schoolteacher. After a few years working in the provincial administration of the former "Eastern Province", he also was sent to Vietnam in 1983 for one year for further political training. Upon his return, he was appointed head of Kalum district.

Recruits from minority groups recount similar experiences or breaks in their early life, i.e. irruption of the war and separation from their birthplace, which were concomitant with their 'entry' into the 'revolution'. During one of my informal conversations with a woman called Keothong - when I was not working with her husband, a high-ranking LFNC official - I found out that she also had been educated under the Pathet Lao administration. As a matter of fact, Keothong called herself a "child of the war" (ເດັກສົງຄາມ (*dàek sòngkham*)). She left her village when she was seven - she was born in 1954 - and went to the primary school in Nakai, then later to Vietnam to continue her studies. She stayed in Vietnam in a boarding school, "only for children like me who came from Laos. We were hundreds, almost a thousand!" she said proudly. In 1972, most of them returned to Laos. Only a minority did not come back. She herself stayed in Vietnam from 1968 to 1978 to study irrigation systems. She met her husband in Nakai, during one of her return trips from Vietnam, and gave up her career to raise their children.

By these narratives of self, these people are expressing the desire to delineate and to retain a conception of cultural identity that is immutable and homogenous. Their stories follow the same pattern, composed of a series of identical events which is "organized as a history, and unfolds according to a chronological order which is also a logical order, with a beginning, an origin (both in the sense of a starting point and of a principle, a *raison d'être*, a primal force), and a termination, which is also a goal" (Bourdieu 2000

[1986]: 298). In brief, they are conceptualising their identity as One (Hall 1990: 223). Changes that have occurred since the late 1980s, however, have cracked the unified narration. As Kobena Mercer notes, "identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty" (Mercer 1990: 43).

7.2.3. The loss of a stable sense of self

After several months, Somchit and Manivong could no longer hide their frustration at their situation in my presence. I have decided to transcribe in full the following conversation to try to render its emotional and sincere tone. The couple deserves close attention. Somchit was seated in the armchair. He looked tired and gloomy. I had just come back for lunch. He asked me if I had brought back the report of the LFNC's 1998-99 activities that he had given me that very morning.

- Who wrote the document, Uncle Somchit? [I asked him]
- I wrote the report. But to be approved, it had to be sent to the districts and villages. It took two weeks! But they removed some portions out of my text... a big section, in fact.

I then asked him what this section contained, and he answered:

- I'd written a long section about the ways of solving problems and the way of behaving. It was me who wrote the document, but somebody else signed it. I, myself, can't. I don't have the authority to sign. In fact, those who decide are Phonchai, Khamkhong, Noulune.... They are old people but newcomers, while Vanphone and I may be young but we were here before them.

Very intrigued, I asked again:

- But were they in the office? I never saw them.

- Of course, they are... somewhere... [Somchit replied elusively.]
- But Phonchai and Khamkhong, what do they do? [I insisted.]
- Nothing.

Manivong suddenly irrupted into the conversation:

- You're talking nonsense! Of course, they do have responsibilities!

Her husband burst out in turn and retorted:

- Can you tell me which ones? Phonchay does nothing but scratch his balls all day!

He then turned his head towards me and said in a quieter but still bitter tone:

- You're in touch with the central level, so please go and ask them why they've [i.e. Phonchai and Khamkhong] been nominated, while I remain in the same position.

Because I'm from an ethnic group? Because I'm not a womaniser (ຫຼີ້ນຜູ້ສາວ (*lin phusao*))?

Somchit enunciated these two questions in a voice loaded with bitterness and irony. I did not know how to answer and silence ensued. Then, Manivong decided that they should give me a fuller explanation:

- When Uncle Khampheng [the former head of the LFNC of Champassak Province] retired, he had to find someone else to replace him. Instead of choosing your Uncle Somchit who has worked at the Front for nearly 9 years now, Uncle Many went far away to choose Phonchay from the district of Champassak. Someone who wasn't particularly competent, whereas your Uncle has finished 'high level' in political theory, and Phonchay was only a district-grade Party member.

She then finally expressed her anger:

- Let me tell you, my niece, those who've got the power don't care about the ethnic peoples! It's all for the Lao Lum, and only for the Lao Lum. But, we are honest people (ສັດຊື່ (*sàtseu*)), we don't benefit from favouritism (ຫຼີ້ນພັກພວກ *lin*

phàkphuak). It's not the Party-State's fault, but the fault of those who apply the doctrine!

I was surprised by the unexpected outburst from the couple who over all the preceding months had been presenting an image of a model pair of "revolutionaries". Obviously, there were some cracks in this representation, which they were no longer able to conceal before me. Somchit and Manivong's accusations were very explicit. They said they were discriminated against because of their ethnicity. They expressed a fierce criticism of favouritism (*lin phàkphuak*) along ethnic lines. As such, they implicitly referred to themselves as the 'minority', in terms of power and status, versus the 'majority', i.e. the "Lao Lum", who are here accused of monopolising political power, or in other words, of nepotism.

Consequently, the obvious first analysis would be to refer to that infamous "Janus face of nationalism", Nairn's seminal expression (Nairn 1977), which Eriksen has defined as "a nationalist ideology of the hegemonic group that underlies a particularist ideology rather than a universalist one, where the mechanisms of exclusion and ethnic discrimination are more obvious than the mechanisms of inclusion and formal justice" (Eriksen 1993: 119). However, I argue that the concept of a vertical ethnic differentiation in which, to put it simply, one ethnic group is subordinated to another (Mason 1992) is too limited to comprehend the scope of variation of these people's identities. In reality, categorisation can be deceptive and even problematic: as we have seen, Somchit feels both 'Lao', to a certain extent, and non-ethnic Lao. The fact is that Somchit's social and political identity is being challenged in the post-socialist era. His sentiments of social and political exclusion lead to the emergence of negative ethnicity. The quality of "being an ethnic person" (ເປັນຄົນຊົນເຜົ່າ (*pen khòn sòn phaw*)) has at

present negative connotations, while under wartime conditions it was promoted (see Chapter Three). "Being an ethnic person" during wartime and the revolutionary period embodied social and political values, such as equality between all individuals, respect for cultural diversity, equality of opportunity, unity in the form of struggle against a common enemy. However, these values seem to progressively be losing their aura under the current regime. As their values are being undermined, the quality of "being an ethnic person" itself is turning into a stigmatised identity. In other words, Somchit's social and political identity is becoming overwhelmed by *enforced* ethnicity, as his status-role is losing its meaning. In brief, he *is becoming* the Other in post-socialist Laos' representation of a nation.

In a wider context, the following study of the work of the LFNC in the provinces shows the increasing disjunction between the functions of the political mass organisation and the new objectives of the government.

7.2.4. Discourse of lack

From approximately 1935 to 1945, the Lao nationalist movement was known as the Lao pen Lao ("the Lao are Lao"). Just prior to the surrender of the Japanese in August 1945, the Lao Issara or Neo Lao Issara ("the Front for Lao Independence") was formed and replaced the Lao pen Lao until approximately 1954. From this time until 1979 the organisation was known as the Neo Lao Hak Sat ("the Lao Patriotic Front"), and following the cessation of hostilities in 1975, the name was finally changed to one which would reflect the peacetime role of development - that is, Neo Lao Sang Sat or Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC) - during its Fourth Congress in 1979. Until 1975 the organisation had indeed served as the public face of the LPRP. The need for a legal political partner, with which the Pathet Lao's adversaries could negotiate under

'respectable' terms (see Chapter Three), had evaporated. Consequently, the LPRP came out onto the official political scene.

The organisational structure of the LFNC consists of a President, three Vice Presidents and a Permanent Committee of three persons. There is also a Secretariat and three Departments: Ethnic Minorities, Religion and Information. Each of the three members of the Permanent Committee acts as an advisor to one of the departments. In addition, the LFNC has a representative at each administrative level: provincial, district and village. The mass organisation operates under an official directive as an official arm of the government and has the mandate to provide socio-cultural support (i.e. local knowledge) in the planning and implementation phases of development projects. In other words, its official role is to co-ordinate socio-economic development projects with all partners, whether they are state-controlled institutions, NGOs, or from the private sector (Khampheuye 12/08/99: 3). On a political level, as Khampheuye Chantasouk, the vice-president of the LFNC, bluntly explains in an interview, the mission of the LFNC is to guide people's minds in the right direction: it instructs them about the Party's policies as well as about the Government's laws and rules. It is the interface that links the Party-State and the "masses", defined as "people of all ethnic groups, social backgrounds and religions" (Khampheuye 12/08/99: 3).

However, the LFNC's field of responsibilities is as vast and vague as its power of decision at the central level is limited. In 1950, 1956, 1959 and 1964, membership of the LFNC Central Committee consistently reflected the Party leadership's composition. Those who held power covertly, such as Kaysone Phomvihane, Nuhak Phumsavan, Khamtay Siphandon, Phumi Vongvichit or Prince Souphanouvong, were also enlisted in

the LFNC¹⁶⁵. The situation changed in 1979 when the LFNC called its first congress since 1975. Only one member of the LFNC Central Committee belonged to the Party's Politburo: Prince Souphanouvong, who was also the president of the newly formulated LFNC. The other leaders had already left and joined the real decision-making organ, the Politburo. The Sixth Congress of the LPRP and the Third Congress of the Front, which were held in the same year (1996), reflected the same political realities. The then LFNC President, Udom Khattigna, who died in December 1999, was ranked number four in the Politburo hierarchy (Stuart-Fox 1998: 1)¹⁶⁶. The latest government reshuffle in March 2001 confirmed the lack of influence of the LFNC. The deposed prime minister, Sisavath Keobunphanh (at present politically marginalised) was appointed as its new president and fell from second to seventh position in the composition of the 2001 Politburo, which now includes 11 members.

While I was working with the LFNC officials in different provinces, I heard a recurrent comment, often expressed in a weary tone. The remark was: "We're taking care of everything. We must be everywhere". Sentiments of frustration were eminently perceptible among the members of the mass-organisation. First, there was a striking contrast between, on the one hand, the immense scope of their role and on the other, their material and financial deprivation. For instance, among the 8 provincial LFNC offices I visited¹⁶⁷, only two had a car - Savannakhet and Champassak - with the others having motorbikes or bicycles. LFNC members, especially outside the capital, sincerely felt that they were neglected both by their government and foreign aid donors, whereas in principle they should have been the principal vector of the country's development. In

¹⁶⁵ Norindr (1980: 990) and Kooyman and Stuart-Fox (1992: 247)

¹⁶⁶The other 1996 Politburo members by ranking order were: Khamtai Siphandon, Saman Vinyaket (President of the National Assembly), Chummali Xainyason (Commander-in-Chief and Defence Minister), Thongsing Thammavong, Osakan Thammatheva (Minister of Information and Culture), Bunyang Vorachit (Mayor of Vientiane), Sisavath Keobunphanh and Axang Laoli (Minister of Interior).

Savannakhet, for example, they complained about their undervalued status (with a salary that rarely exceeded 15 USD a month), their lack of means, the absence of projects. I describe below the kind of situation I often came across in the course of my countless visits to LFNC offices in the provinces.

The LFNC office in Sekong - three rooms rented from the provincial National Assembly, two Japanese motorbikes, one Russian typewriter and no phone line - looked particularly deserted when I visited in late March 2000. The atmosphere of boredom and apathy contrasted sharply with the frenetic activities at the Department of Information and Culture whose premises were located a few metres away. The latter department was preparing the ceremony for the Year of Tourism in Sekong, which was scheduled to take place over three days. But the LFNC played no part in it. Subsequently, the office was as lethargic as ever. In addition, the LFNC head was sick. He asked the organisation for some financial support to help cover his hospital expenses in Pakse. But, because of the financial crisis, he could only have his petrol costs refunded. The head of the Religious Affairs section, an ethnic Lao, the only official present that day, shook his head while telling me the story. Fortunately, the province had just received a godsend from the central level: 11 million kip to support programmes against AIDS. A special bureau, supervised by the vice-governor of the province, had been created to fight the pandemic disease, and the LFNC would receive some funding. Their role would mainly be to inform the population by gathering together the heads of the LFNC at the district level, who in turn would call in the heads of the LFNC at the village level within their respective administrative areas. The head of the Religious Affairs section once more shrugged his shoulders: "That's the way it is. We can't do anything more", he concluded.

¹⁶⁷ From the North to the South: Luang Namtha, Udomsai, Sam Neua, Savannakhet, Champassak,

Resentment was even greater when comparing their situation with the other mass organisations, the Youth Union and the LWU. The case of Champassak offered a good example of the gap between them. Below is a synthesis of the 1998-99 budgets of the LFNC and the LWU:

LFNC	LWU
<p>Budget: 14 million kip</p> <p>Three offices rented from the provincial National Assembly (shared charges)</p> <p>Three motorbikes</p> <p>A car - exclusively reserved for the LFNC president's use</p> <p>Petrol and maintenance charges refunded</p>	<p>Budget: 114 million kip</p> <p>Own premises</p> <p>Several motorbikes</p> <p>Two cars, of which one is shared by all the members</p> <p>Petrol and maintenance charges refunded</p>

Source: personal communication (LFNC Champassak).

In the following year, the LFNC budget was over twice as high. They received 40 million kip (excluding salaries) from the province. But, it was still the smallest amount distributed by the provincial authorities to any of the State organs. By comparison, the 1999-2000 LWU budget again exceeded 100 million kip, of which 70 million was assigned by the province and the rest provided by NGOs and international organisations' programmes. By contrast, the LFNC did not get any external aid. One of their members

admitted that the public image of the LFNC was too politically connected; consequently, foreign organisations were reluctant to have their name attached to it.

During my fieldwork, the then president of the LFNC, Sihot Banavong, was touring the country to meet staff at LFNC provincial and district headquarters. In February 2000, he came to Champassak and among the new projects he announced to its members was a change of name of the LFNC, following the example of the Vietnamese who had already modified the name of their equivalent. According to the LFNC president of Champassak Province, there thus existed the idea of reverting to the former name, the Lao Patriotic Front, or simply the Lao Front, which would sound ideologically more neutral and less "narrow"; hence, more attractive to foreign investors and donors¹⁶⁸. In summary, the LFNC seems outdated and defined by a discourse of lack: lack of means, projects and authority¹⁶⁹.

In the next section, I analyse the return of "revolutionary men and women" to their villages. I encountered there a similar, and perhaps even more acute, sense of loss.

7.3. Outcasts of the nation?

7.3.1. Lack of integration

On my first visit to Ban Paktai, I wrongly assumed that Khamsing, a very tall and well-built man whom I understood was a direct descendant of Ong Keo (though at that time I

¹⁶⁸ But at the time of writing, the mass-organisation still bears the name LFNC.

¹⁶⁹ I recall a conversation with Khamdaeng, the head of the Minority Affairs section of the LFNC of Sekong Province. He had just come back from Vientiane where he had attended a meeting about the government's campaign for preventing AIDS, which had gathered the leading members of the provincial Fronts. When we met, he promptly asked me if I knew a Hmong named Tuamua, a former LFNC official. The man, whom he saw in the capital, was now "a successful businessman with five houses and three cars" (Among his new projects, Khamdaeng told me, was the construction of a 50 km-road in Udomsai, in the North, which would lead directly to a Hmong village)! Khamdaeng looked to be full of admiration.

did not know exactly what his kinship tie was with his ancestor), was the head of the village, so authoritative was he with the other villagers and so at ease with Sisouk. Conversely, the real head of the village was so discreet that I was unable to confirm his identity until my second visit. Khamsing offered us a meal after we finished our work and then spent most of the rest of the evening talking with Sisouk after they realised that they had some common friends back in Savannakhet, where Khamsing fought in the 1970s. They even started talking in Vietnamese, as both of them went to Hanoi for their studies. Khamsing and Phumi, the Party's village representative, were actually the only two men who directly addressed Sisouk. They solemnly asked him for permission to talk then bent down to the wooden floor with their palms joined over their head. Thus, Khamsing and Phumi displayed signs of allegiance before Sisouk (the high-ranking official who had travelled a long distance from the central level especially to come to the village) and in front of myself (vaguely perceived as his 'protégé'). The contrast was thus quite striking between Khamsing and Phumi, on the one hand, and, on the other, the rest of the villagers present during the meeting, who mostly remained quietly in the background unless they were asked a question.

Khamsing left the village in 1961 for Vieng Xai, Sam Neua, following the advice of his father who wanted him to go and study in Hanoi. Accordingly, the following year he went to the then capital of the DRV to study what he called "culture" courses. "There were one thousand people, Lao people. From all over the country, all the provinces!" he told me, obviously moved by memories that were still vivid. He returned to Sam Neua in 1965 and was rapidly integrated into a battalion. He then was sent successively, with return trips to Huaphan between each mission, to: Meuang Hiem, Luang Prabang Province (1965-66); Meuang Kham, Xieng Kouang Province (1967-69); Savannakhet

With his meagre salary as a civil servant (less than 12 USD a month), he spent more of his time in his

Province (1971-73), and was then finally transferred to Vientiane in 1974. He went to Vietnam for a second time in 1982 for a year, until his wife asked him to come back to Laos, arguing that she could no longer bring up the family on her own. He finally retired in 1987 and returned to Ban Paktai in 1991.

I rapidly realised upon my second visit to Ban Paktai that the real head of the village was actually Nieung, the head of the LFNC, as he was the most senior member of the dominant lineage of Ban Paktai. It was he who in the following days guided me in my research on Ong Keo. One evening, a stormy argument erupted between him, Khamsing and Bounmak, his cousin and assistant in his LFNC duties. The three men had already drunk a sizeable amount of alcohol. They were almost shouting in Nieung's house. The rest of the family (his son and daughter-in-law, his youngest daughter and me) had already gone to bed. Bounmak started by accusing Khamsing of laziness, of spending his time drinking and waking up late while the others were already at work. Khamsing retorted that he was a "revolutionary" who had helped the country, unlike him or Nieung. Bounmak then abruptly replied that the Party-State did not feed people.

The least poor-and most powerful villagers also happen to be those who did not "join the revolution" (*huam kan pàtivàt*). Nieung told me briefly in his interview that he had been neither on "the enemy's side nor with the French nor with the Lao Issala": "I didn't go anywhere. I didn't fight on anybody's side". In fact, he was among the first ones to return to the village after the end of the war. He came back in 1977 after having fled to a village 25 km outside Pakse, where he stayed for 20 years. As for Bounmak, a man in his sixties, he and his family were the only household who never left the village. They stayed in the forest nearby during the periods of most intense fighting. As a matter of

rice-field than in the office.

fact, he served both under the "French/American" army and under the Issala troops. He thus told me, laconically: "it depended on the sides. They were swapping all the time. All we did was to follow". He is now the head of one of the least poor households in the village. His extended family (his household includes his two daughters and their husbands, his son and daughter-in-law and one grandchild) is among the few who possess a wet rice field (see Table 1) and they were planning to dig a joint irrigation canal with Bounmak's brother (who also lives in the village) in 2001.

Both Khamsing and Phumi endure the loss of their status, being reduced now to plain *pàsasòn* (ປະຊາຊົນ ("citizen")), as a punishment mixed with sentiments of guilt and shame. Moreover, their families are among the poorest households in the village. Individuals, like Khamsing and Phumi, had to accept what was left when they quit the Army and came back to the village years later. But they bitterly resent their condition and the domination of the hierarchy by the 'civilians'. Every year they fail to grow enough rice to be self-sufficient. During my fieldwork, I heard that Khamsing offered his labour in exchange for rice, but his offer was refused because the harvest season was long over (which was true). Phumi also lacks rice every year. As a result, their debts keep increasing and provoke scorn among the other villagers. Their poor harvests are interpreted as being a result of their laziness and heavy drinking. In brief, the other villagers think that they have themselves to blame for their poor condition; it is their own fault if they have an irresponsible way of living. One evening, in a moment of sobriety, Phumi, playing down his pride at being the most educated person in the village, bitterly confessed to me that "despite my education, my experience, I've come back to square one. But that's my fate (ວາດສະຫມາ (*vatsàna*)) to end up living in poverty". Khamsing, on the other hand, used the term "to abandon" (ປະຖິ້ມ (*pàthim*))

(the Party-State) to explain his present situation: "It is not because the central level expelled me. I myself abandoned the Party-State", he said in his interview in a lifeless voice.

Tableau 1: Agricultural practices in Ban Paktai

Rice sufficiency - always	0 houses
Rice sufficiency - sometimes	50 houses
Rice sufficiency - never	6 houses
Rotational swiddening cultivation (alone) ¹⁷⁰	45 houses
Pioneering swiddening cultivation (alone)	0 houses
Rice-field cultivation (alone)	0 houses
Rotational swiddening and own rice-field	11 houses
Irrigation scheme	Yes
Number of families with Irrigation Scheme	4 families
Number of Hectares Irrigated	3.5 hectares

Source: *Province of Sekong, Meuang Thateng*, Integrated Rural Accessibility Planning (IRAP), Accessibility Data, Ministry of Communications, Transport, Posts and Construction, June 1997.

¹⁷⁰ There are two categories of swidden cultivation in Laos, pioneering and rotational:

- Pioneering swidden cultivation involves the periodic movement of a group or village into a new location, usually one that is densely forested. The area is then completely cleared of trees and cropped until the soil fertility is depleted. At this point the villagers either continue to clear more land nearby or relocate the village. The area is left in a condition where regeneration of forest and soils would take many years.
- Rotational swidden cultivation is carried out by sedentary villages that rotate the cultivation of fields. The land is partially cleared of brush, scrub and (small) trees. This plot may be then cropped for one to three seasons, depending upon soil fertility. Some rotating shifting cultivation systems have fallow periods that may be as long as 12-20 years.

They are not the only "revolutionaries" of the village, though. There is Nok, a woman who is strongly feared. I was told that she could cast spells on people so that they got ill. On the other hand, she also has the power to cure unmentionable 'diseases' that mostly affect women who care about their reputation. In brief, I was advised not to listen to her and not to go to her house, because she was "powerful" and "insane"- a fearful combination indeed. Her external appearance is also different. She wears her hair short, which is very unusual for a woman (at least in the countryside) and always wears an army shirt that covers the upper half of her sarong. Her walking pace is fast and her way of talking loud and abrupt. In addition, she more often mixes with men than with women, and feels equally comfortable with both genders. In fact, she is considered to be an immoral woman. Each of her trips outside the village is interpreted as a device to enable her to spend time with men, which is considered to be all the more immoral since she is married and has two boys from previous marriages. Above all, she is educated and is aware of it. She is a "revolutionary", as she presents herself. She often expresses nostalgia when recalling wartime: "People were so united as if they came from the same mother's womb!" But she then carries on with a bitter tone in her voice: "Now, it's no longer the case. Nobody cares for each other; it's only for oneself."

She was born in 1947 in Thateng district, Sekong Province. At around the age of 13, she went up to Huaphan Province, and in 1967 travelled on to Vietnam to take courses in radio-communication for three years. From 1970 to 1980, she worked in the Department of Telecommunications in the "liberated zones": first, in Phapilang district in Khammuan Province; then, in the districts of Phine and Nong, in Savannakhet Province. Finally, she was transferred to Kalum, in the eastern part of present-day Sekong Province. However, she then committed adultery and was forced to quit her position. According to her, this was the reason why she ended up in Ban Paktai two years ago.

She obviously still bitterly resents the sanction: "I became a *pasàson*, with no right to a pension", she complained to me. She strongly feels her loss of status as a disgrace, but at the same time keeps repeating: "it is my fault, my punishment, my fate (*vatsàna*)."
Feelings of guilt and shame emerge from the account when she confesses: "It's not the Party-Government's fault. It's me and only me who misbehaved, who is the sinner (ຄົນບາບ (*khòn bap*))".

Nationalists frequently use metaphors of blood and kinship. Lao nationalists are no exception: Kaysone called in 1975 for "brothers and sisters of all ethnic groups within the large family of Laos [to] have strong ties of solidarity, love for each other, help each other to progress" (Kaysone 1975: 118). Alonso argues that the "substantialization" of nations and states by means of metaphorical genealogy, may well explain why people identify so strongly with the nation that they feel justified in killing in its name. It transforms nationalism into a "structure of feeling" whereby "space [turns into] homeplace and individual and collective subjects [into] embodiments of national character - viewed as shared bio-genetic and psychic substance" (Alonso 1994: 386). Though the idea of political egalitarianism very much defines the nation, this felt fraternity can also serve to mask the effects of power. The persuasiveness of nationalism is indeed engendered by kinship idioms that transform the state into a sacralised subject, a *paterfamilias*, as they hide the vertical dimension of nationalism behind sentiments and morality (Alonso 1994: 385).

Narratives of individuals do not necessarily produce coherence out of chaos, or meaning out of discordance, though. In fact, narratives of self may be marked by confusion. Sentiments of loss dominate the stories of Phumi, Khamsing and Nok. For instance, the

reasons behind the departure of the two men from the army will always remain a mystery to me. Both of them retired at a relatively young age (Phumi was in his early forties and Khamsing in his late forties). They explained their early retirement on the grounds of various reasons: homesickness, the desire for "peace and rest", or the wish to "raise a family". These causes are not totally convincing, though. In his interview, Khamsing indeed became confused while trying to justify his resignation from the army:

My father had died a long time ago, in 1977. And then my uncle died, too. There was nobody, except my mother, to look after my younger brothers and sisters. I said to my bosses that I wanted to go and have a rest, that I wanted to quit my work. So, I suggested to my boss that I become a policeman because low-level employees didn't do their job properly, didn't follow the Party's line. But I changed my mind, because I said I was getting old and felt pity for my wife who raised the family all by herself. So, I stayed. It's not because the central level sacked me. I never had any troubles with my bosses during those 25 years of army life. I never committed anything wrong against the Party. I never went through disciplinary examination. I wasn't good. I was average, enough to get along with, to work with my mates.

I recall the time Phumi expressed his grievances to Sisouk. Before he died, he said, he wanted to know what his duties were as a Party member, and how he could convince people to become Party members because they did not listen to him. Sisouk then gave a vague answer, to the effect that people were allowed now to make profits, to trade what they grew; however, it was strictly forbidden to lie to 'the people' and to infringe their welfare. Phumi, however, hardly reacted to these pieces of advice and kept saying that

the people were not listening to him: "I eventually will have to let them do what they wish, and choose whomever, an ordinary person, to be a Party member".

That short episode sums it all up: the search for material comfort is superseding the socialist rhetoric, though officially the regime still pretends it is not. Sisouk enthusiastically gave them tips on investment and profit while they asked for the Party's line! In his comparative study of Australian and Sri Lankan nationalism (1988), Kapferer focuses on the sacralisation of the nation, the process through which nationalism becomes equivalent to a political religion. The very characteristics through which the nation could be perceived as an extension of the individual are transformed by the state power, objectified and, having been turned into venerable objects, are alienated from individuals who then require direction in order to re-orientate themselves to them. There is an increasing disjunction, however, between the Lao society as a whole and individuals like Phumi, Khamsing or Somchit. These men somehow still believe, partly, in a status-role that has lost its substance; hence, the feelings of loss and confusion. The notion that the nation appears as an extension of the individual therefore seems no longer relevant in their case.

Finally, I turn to the case of Sisouk Chonmaly. Compared to the others mentioned above, he has better understood the structural changes occurring in post-socialist Laos and perceives clearly the state's new discourse of "fictive ethnicity". In my view, he is a remarkable example of the paradoxes that define the non-ethnic Lao officials within the LFNC in post-socialist Laos. He is among those who have stretched to a considerable length the 'duality of being', by creating a new ethnic identity for himself.

7.3.2. Pride in ethnicity and a new political identity?

What follows is his 'life/history'. I have changed neither the names, the dates nor the durations of time he gave me, although they sometimes clash with other sources of information (Evans (1999), for instance). It is, after all, *his* account.

Sisouk, a Mākong, left his native village in Savannakhet at the age of 13 to join the Pathet Lao. Like Somchit, he was considered to be too young to fight and instead served as a cook for the soldiers. He was soon sent to Vietnam and studied there for 13 years. He came back to Laos in 1972 to spend one year in Vieng Xai¹⁷¹. Then, he studied for a Master's degree in Anthropology in the former Soviet Union for four years. When he returned permanently to Laos, he was appointed as the head of successive ethnographic governmental institutions. In 1977, upon his return from the former Soviet Union, he became the Director of the Service of Data and Statistics of the Central Committee on Ethnic Groups in Vientiane, which in 1980 was re-named the Department of Data and Statistics on Ethnic Groups. In 1985, the Department was in turn incorporated within the newly created Committee for Social Sciences, and re-named the Committee of Ethnology. Three years later, this institution was replaced by the Institute of Ethnography, of which he became the Director. Finally, from 1993 - following the demise of the Institute of Ethnography - to 1996, he held the position of Director of the Kaysone Phomvihane Museum, before taking up his current position at the LFNC.

During our trip through the Southern provinces in August-September 1999, I observed Sisouk's remarkable lobbying work for the cause of the "Bru", an ethnic group officially classified under the Austro-Asiatic category in the Vietnamese census, but invisible in the Lao version (see Chapter Four). The desirability of being recorded as "Bru" might

come from the material benefits such a denomination would bring. As he cunningly explained to some villagers in Sekong during the trip: "We must no longer name the Makong, Pàkò, Tri, Kàtang, Ngae, Katu, Tà-Oy, Suay, one by one. Each of them, singled out, makes too low a number, whereas the "Bru" would amount to more than 300, 000 persons. That makes a bigger population, more influential!"

His cause was echoed recently in a project financed by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). The latter became involved in Laos in 1996 through its Project for the Promotion of ILO Policy on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples. In 1999, it started a study on the "Government's policies regarding the ethnic groups in rural development" (ILO 2000). In the following year, upon completion of that study, a two-year pilot project (with a budget estimated at \$140,000) was initiated in the province of Khammuan. According to the Project Document, the five target villages were mainly populated by the "Bru", with the Phuthai occupying second position (these two ethnic groups accounted for 78% and 22% of the population, respectively). This ethnic distribution apparently justified the inclusion of "Bru" and Phuthai as the project's languages, along with English and "Laotian". Similarly, the candidate for the post of Project Manager was required to possess knowledge of the "Bru" language (ILO 2000).

I have no evidence that conclusively proves Sisouk's direct influence on the choice of area or on the outline of the project; however, there are some disconcerting elements that make coincidence appear to be rather a weak alternative explanation. First, the LFNC, along with the Central Leading Committee for Rural Development, is the Government's agency for the project. Consequently, Sisouk is directly involved since he is responsible for all the foreign projects asking for the LFNC's co-operation. Although

¹⁷¹ In his chapter, Grant Evans writes that Sisouk stayed in Hanoi only from 1969 to 1973 (Evans 1999:

he has limited executive power, no project can be pursued without him as supervisor or co-ordinator. In addition, the project's target area is his very own native district, with which he still keeps in regular contact, notably via relatives and business partners. Yet, Sisouk is not the only scholar to argue for the existence of a "Bru" group in Laos. James Chamberlain, a linguist, also lists in his census of the ethnic groups of the Lao PDR the "Bru" as an Austro-Asiatic group, which corresponds, according to his classification, to the Makong and So peoples within the Lao nomenclature (Chamberlain 1995). It should also be noted that Chamberlain was the main author of the 2000 ILO consultants' report. One may conclude that Sisouk and Chamberlain's concordant positions, in addition to Sisouk's unique position within the project, have played a significant, if not decisive, role in the selection of the "Bru" as the main target ethnic group. The "Bru" became a living, distinct entity as far as the ILO project was concerned.

Could Sisouk's ethnicity be defined as strategic, then? His involvement in the ILO project seems to support that analysis. Ethnic solidarity is reinforced as the reaction of a culturally distinct periphery against the centre. Under these circumstances, ethnic differences do not disappear and indeed may form the basis for collective action by members of the peripheral communities against the central community because ethnic identity can not be detached from one's economic and political interests within the system. Sisouk is, through his project of creating a "Bru" ethnic identity, his own cultural agent. As a Lao anthropologist, he has been, and still is being, strongly influenced by the Soviet and Vietnamese ethnographic traditions. His study of minorities, like his conception of the "Bru" cultural identity, is therefore very much guided by taxonomic principles, whereby cultures are conceived of as bound, static and objective (see Chapter Four). For instance, he explained to me in a vague fashion that

166). This period does not include his pre-university years in Vietnamese schools.

the eight ethnic groups¹⁷² shared the same language - or, at least, they could understand each other - as well as a few traditions, though he did not specify which ones.

However, during a discussion with him on criteria for ethnic classification, he himself admitted that even the villagers from his native area were not self-conscious of their "Bru" identity. He also acknowledged that language could be a tricky criterion for drawing distinctions, as two ethnic groups could share the same language. He gave the example of his own father's village, Namtok, in Savannakhet, where no one spoke "Bru" any longer. In addition, they were all Buddhist. I then asked him how they introduced themselves. "Lao" he replied, a hint of disappointment in his voice. "But it doesn't matter!" he added. "They know in their heart that they're ethnic people (*pen khòn sònpaw*)!" Yet, there was no evidence of a higher degree of ethnic incorporation, except through their self-proclaimed advocate, Sisouk. Thus, the anthropologist, Stephen Sparkes, who carried out a study for the Nam Theun 2 dam project in Khammuan Province in 1997, reported that the people living in the area were embarrassed about his (Sparkes') use of the term "Bru" as it had derogatory connotations. Worse, another anthropologist who visited a few "Makong" villages in a district in Savannakhet in March 2001, revealed that the people dismissed the name "Bru" as a colonial term¹⁷³!

In essence, the process of identification seemed to remain limited to a very restricted number of persons, namely, Sisouk and his followers. Some of them were themselves LFNC officials in Khammuan and Savannakhet Provinces, Sisouk's territorial strongholds (his mother and father's native provinces, respectively). These two provinces, with Bolikhamsai in central Laos, were the only ones to list the "Bru" as an

¹⁷² Makong, Pàkò, Tri, Kàtang, Ngae, Katu, Tà-Oy, Suay.

ethnic group in Sisouk's version of the 2000 census, the most extreme case being Savannakhet where there were only three groups listed - Lao, Phuthai and "Bru" - despite this being the most populous province of the country.

The reason for his ethnic chauvinism cannot be reduced to a mere competition for resources. Sisouk cleverly understands the politics of culture and the desire of the international community to protect so-called 'indigenous people'. However, at the present time the benefits from such a strategy of ethnic incorporation remain largely uncertain. The newly released 2001 Lao census still does not recognise the "Bru" as an official ethnic group. Moreover, Sisouk lacks the support of those he seeks to categorise as "Bru". To sum up, his ethnicity is socially irrelevant outside his group of followers. In such uncertain conditions, Sisouk's campaign looks like a lost battle. He may count on the long-term effect of the labelling process, through which the name becomes the identity. But, as long as these people disregard the name "Bru" as a colonial legacy, it is difficult to see a process of self-identification occurring again as a result of the input of an external categorisation.

People - foreigners and Lao - who know Sisouk usually describe his ethnic chauvinism as if it were another aspect of his eccentric character, a sort of joke or piece of wishful thinking. But, as a high-ranking official, how can he entertain such unorthodox ideas as regards the egalitarian rhetoric, thereby challenging the political and cultural (national) 'homogeneity'? My suggestion is that what Balibar has called the "community of race" (Balibar 1997: 136), which along with the community of language forms the "fictive ethnicity", is flawed. By "community of race", Balibar refers to the sentiments of common roots and shared history felt by 'one people' within a bounded territory. But the

¹⁷³ I thank an anonymous informant for these telling accounts.

newly reformulated narrative of the nation in post-socialist Laos, which is increasingly centred on an essentialist ethnic Lao core (see Chapter Five), seems to be less effective in subsuming cultural differences. My argument is that Sisouk's ethnic chauvinism may reflect feelings of membership of a political nation-state coupled with *another* national culture, whereby belonging to an ethnic group means belonging to the Majority, and "being an ethnic person" is a positive identity.

Individuals, like Sisouk, are indeed showing signs of divergence from the national culture. I have mentioned his changeable attitude towards Buddhism; his views regarding the so-called indigenous national history are also ambiguous. During one of our discussions on Lao history and culture, with a smile on his face, he whispered to me that the Lao were not actually the first inhabitants of Laos. But nevertheless, in public, he always upheld the opposite version because "Uncle Nuhak would not be happy to hear such a thing"¹⁷⁴. A few years ago, he wrote a paper with the convoluted title, "Opinions and our Party's general policy towards ethnic groups during each period of the revolution". The essay was about the history of Laos from a 'multi-ethnic' perspective. The overall canvas - the chronology and the themes - was not original. The central thematic of resistance by the "multi-ethnic national community" to foreign aggression constituted once again the leitmotiv that sustained the regime's construction of the past. However, contrary to the contemporary tendency to weaken the non-ethnic Lao component of the "struggle" (see Chapter Six), Sisouk stressed the central role of non-ethnic Lao peoples during the French and American Wars, i.e. the "struggle for national liberation". He wrote, thus:

¹⁷⁴ Sisouk was referring to Nuhak Phumsavan.

Our Party rallied the highland peoples, such as those who lived along the Lao-Vietnamese, Lao-Chinese and Lao-Cambodian borders, and turned them into *the bastion of the revolution*. Our Party trained the children and grandchildren of these ethnic groups, who joined our troops to become political militants on the ground, guerrilla fighters and skirmishers. They then rose to become regular soldiers equipped with modern weapons of the Revolution. Thanks to the support, the supplies, the care and the collaboration of the ethnic population, the revolutionary forces took form and spread from the highland and remote areas to the plains, and surrounded the towns that were the enemy's bases.

(Sisouk [date not specified]: 4, my stress)

Sisouk's historical account is not anti-patriotic. He does not allow any historical autonomy for the "highland peoples". The Communist Party guided and formed them (Sisouk mentions in a later paragraph the long-term education policy for the young people who were sent to study in Vietnam, China and the Soviet Union during the war). But, in his version it is precisely under the Party's leadership that the periphery moved to the centre. The epicentre of the revolution was located in the Eastern mountainous zones, "strong bedrock of the revolution" and "safe bastions of the economic, social and cultural revolution" (Sisouk [date not specified]: 5): the socialist 'nation' was first built up in the 'East' (see Chapter Three).

Conclusion

To analyse different aspects of ethnicity, Banks has proposed three pictorial perspectives on the "location of ethnicity": "ethnicity in the people's heart" (the primordialist approach), "ethnicity in the people's head" (the instrumentalist approach) and "ethnicity in the analyst's head" (Banks 1997: 185-186). I will focus in particular on

the third perspective, defined by Banks as follows: "[ethnicity] is an analytical tool devised and utilized by academics to make sense of or explain the actions and feelings of the people studied" (Banks 1997: 186). Through this perspective, Banks, in fact, tells us that ethnicity is not always relevant in making sense of people's actions. This was my impression when I was recording my informants' accounts of their pasts. I had to accept that the concept of ethnicity did not encompass all the contradictory aspects of their identity. Likewise, Eriksen asks "if it [is] still analytically fruitful to think about the social world in terms of ethnicity". And he observes that "[p]erhaps a wider term, such 'social identity', would be more true to the flux and complexity of social processes, and would allow us to study group formation and alignments along a greater variety of axes than a single-minded focus on 'ethnicity' would" (Eriksen 1993: 157).

Actions of individuals such as Somchit, Phumi or Nok can not be encompassed within one analytical tool, i.e. the concept of ethnicity. Their identities have been shaped by history and war: they are proud to introduce themselves as "revolutionaries" (*khòn pàtivàt*), which identity is connected to a status-role, invested with entrenched meaning. What is more their shared consciousness of being 'One', i.e. members of the nation, is based on the awareness of their ethnic origins, enhanced by their education and socialisation under the Pathet Lao's administration. But structural changes within the post-socialist society have upset this social and political identity: their position within the society lies within a grey zone, with uncertainty surrounding their role. In addition, the state's newly reformulated project of the national culture exacerbates the destabilising experience for these individuals, who certainly feel that they are progressively coming to play the role of the Other in their own society.

That is why the case of Sisouk is even more remarkable. He is contesting the dominant discourse by attempting to create a new ethnicity. Hall has argued that national culture operates as "a source of cultural meanings, a focus of identification, and a system of representation" (Hall 1994: 296). But what happens when the discourse is no longer effective? Sisouk's instrumentalist ethnicity is perhaps a consequence of this dislocated identity (of being at the same time both One and the Other), which is "not an essence but a *positioning*" (Hall 1990: 226, original stress). We may therefore think of Sisouk's cultural identity as operating on two axes: one functions in the cultural mainstream where he *is* ethnic Lao/Lao and the other is activated in his native lands where he can express his difference. He is constructing his own ethnicity, outside Vientiane, in the provinces of Savannakhet and Khammuan. But, without a doubt, both ethnicities are constructed within finite forms of discourse. Sisouk wants his "Bru" group to be included in the countrywide census since it would be the greatest proof of legitimation. Once again, Knowledge pairs with its fatal partner, Power. Sisouk's lone search for counter-ethnicity contests, yet still lies within, the state's regime of representation. More than an ethnic identity, it is a political identity.

Conclusion: Outcasts of the Nation? Minorities and the Construction of a Nation in Post-Socialist Laos

To a great extent, theories of ethnicity and nationalism have drawn on Foucault's model of the state and the binary project of individualisation and totalisation. The state's power creates and defines both the national (normal) and the ethnic (deviant) identities. The very few recent studies on ethnicity *and* nationalism in Laos rest upon this asymmetrical pair, i.e. Majority-Ethnic Minorities¹⁷⁵. Thus, non-ethnic Lao peoples, according to these works, are either culturally integrated within the Majority, or modelled as objects to instil a degree of exoticism in the national culture. In both cases, their identities are externally defined. Their own perceptions of their membership of the nation are silenced, either blended in the cultural mainstream or muted under a label.

In this research, my aim has been to study the two facets of a nation in contemporary Laos: the state's discourse and its politics of representation, on the one hand, and the individual consciousness, on the other. My specific intention was to go beyond this dichotomy and to de-construct the apparent immutability of these two oppositional figures, the Majority and the Ethnic Minorities. In other words, I have tried to show that these two entities are dynamic. The Majority – or normality, to use the Foucauldian term – is not yet convincingly hegemonic, while the Ethnic Minorities – or deviant identity – can not always be represented solely as the ethnic Other, either by the government or by academic researchers. There is no complete hegemony, as the newly reformulated

¹⁷⁵ See, for example, Grant Evans (1998) "The Minorities in State Ritual" in [*Idem*] *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance. Laos Since 1975*, pp. 141-152.

nationalist discourse is itself unstable and still in the process of development. Neither is there an absence of autonomy on the part of those being represented: they express unease towards, and resistance to, the newly represented 'fictive ethnicity'.

Simultaneously, they display openly a loyalty to the Party-State and feel they have the right to claim for a full membership of the nation. In a departure from Foucault's theory on power, interactions (rather than unilateral or asymmetric action) may perhaps better define the relations between discourse and technologies of power, on the one hand, and agency and consciousness, on the other. To put it another way, normality (membership of the nation/the Majority) and deviancy (being an outcast of the nation/being an Ethnic Minority) still remain two inchoate representations in post-socialist Laos. To paraphrase Williams (1989), in the conception of the nation held by some members of non-ethnic Lao groups, those *outside* the mainstream are defined as ethnic Lao, politically stigmatised, as opposed to the non-ethnic Lao members of the nation who claim a historical legitimacy.

The nationalist discourse, once statehood is achieved, is defined as a "discourse of order, of the rational organization of power" (Chatterjee 1993a: 51). As Chatterjee comments:

Here the discourse is not only conducted in a single, consistent, unambiguous voice, it also succeeds in glossing over all earlier contradictions, divergences and differences and incorporating within the body of a unified discourse every aspect and stage in the history of its formation [...] Nationalist discourse at its moment of arrival is passive revolution uttering its own-life history.

(Chatterjee 1993a: 51)

I argue, however, that in Laos the construction of a homogenised national culture, including a seamless national history, is still very much in progress. The Lao government is undoubtedly searching for a compelling national(ist) narration. In his study on Lao nationhood (1998), Grant Evans has rightly pointed out the regime's dilemmas as regards representing a cultural homogeneity and interpreting the past. As the 'new' rituals of legitimation, introduced since 1975, fail to appeal to the population, the Lao authorities have indeed re-appropriated some symbols of the past. This, Evans suggests, represents a cultural continuity (an interpretation which I argue is similar to Anthony D. Smith's ethno-symbolism), in which the Lao nationalists call on 'older' cultural resources, especially Buddhism (Evans 1998: 70). This perennialist argument, however, assumes a conflation between 'timeless' ethnic Lao culture and the contemporary cultural mainstream; hence, it overlooks the process of naturalisation of the dominant group.

In Chapter Four, my intention was thus to demonstrate how one technology of power in particular - the Lao population census based on ethnic criteria - attempts to map the nation's 'invisible' ethnicity through a dual process, namely: the objectification of the Other ethnic groups' arbitrarily defined cultural features on the one hand, and the erasure of the dominant ethnic group's ethnicity (the ethnicity of the ethnic Lao) on the other. But this technology of power is limited, as the names and the lists of ethnic groups have remained subject to alteration every few years. Twenty years after Kaysone Phomvihane (Laos' foremost revolutionary leader) urged for a change in ethnic terminology and classification, the regime has yet to legitimise definitively the total number of ethnic groups in the Lao PDR.

In Chapter Five, I further stress these politics of representation between the One and the Other, particularly with regard to the formation of a national culture and history. In fact, the Majority is simultaneously being constructed both internally and externally against 'an' Other, i.e. the non-ethnic Lao groups and an outside world perceived as hostile, respectively. However, these politics of representation remain hesitant, ambiguous and, above all, subject to tensions and to changes. As the country progressively opens itself to the market economy and to tourism, anti-Western rhetoric is no longer appropriate for galvanising the population behind the leadership. The discourse of struggle has been replaced by a discourse of lack. The regime now calls for modernity. The education of the masses echoes the impetus to attain economic competitiveness in the world-economy. In other words, the question of identity and culture is closely tied to the issue of overcoming backwardness.

At the same time, however, cultural politics aim at reviving the 'Lao essence and values', which reflects a classical anti-colonial mode of thinking. To put it differently, this entails a search for a modular form of nation, different from the Western model. But neither can this construction of a distinct nation be based on the restoration of an *indigenous* culture, since the regime's very *raison d'être* is defined by a break with a 'distasteful' past. The tensions over the writing of a national history reflect well the dilemmas of anti-colonialism, caught between the revolutionary thematic and a myth-making narration that promotes a remote and idealised past. The reason for this immense amnesia is that the regime refuses to perform a critical analysis of the events of the last 50 years or so. A civil war shattered the country for more than 30 years, and involved foreign powers that operated more or less outside both the Royal Lao Government's and the communist Pathet Lao's control. The fratricidal conflict remains a wound as yet unhealed, a tragedy muted by the authorities' silence and denial. The

absence of reconciliation with the past has consequently led to an elliptical interpretation of history that satisfies no one.

In Chapter Six, I focus on the narratives of a number of individuals, members of non-ethnic Lao groups who fought during the American War in the Lao People's Liberation Army and/or were educated within the revolutionary administration. Their narratives, as a result, reveal another narration of the nation, born of specific historical, political and ideological contexts: during wartime when the "enemy", i.e. the rightist Royal Lao Government and the United States, served as the contrastive and defining figure of the Other; and when "being an ethnic person" (ເປັນຄົນຊົນເຜົ່າ (*pen khòn sòn phaw*)) had the positive connotation of being attached to the ideals of revolutionary fraternity. Life stories such as those of Somseun and Phumi, both members of non-ethnic Lao groups and former Pathet Lao soldiers, thus show a desire for recognition and a will to reclaim a role as part of the nation. However, the current tendency to re-write the 'national' history, i.e. to play down the role of the non-ethnic Lao during the War, progressively challenges their unified narration. As a consequence, these individuals may be coming to identify themselves less and less with the present representation of the national history and culture.

None the less, as a consequence of the newly reformulated cultural(ist) discourse, some of these individuals exhibit cultural signs in an effort to legitimise their membership of the Majority, while at the same time trying to comply with the state's minority representation. They fail on both counts, however: they do not fit the new fictive ethnicity, as they do not share entirely all the attributes of the national (normal) Majority; neither do they correspond exactly with the 'authentic' ethnic minority representation. The two mis-representations consequently induce a disturbing

experience of being *partially* One (members of the Majority) and *partially* the Other (outcasts of the nation), especially within Lao urban society. Worse, these individuals somehow feel as if they have become the Other in their own society, as expressed by Somchit's outcry against his social and political demotion. Like others, he benefited from the communist administrative and political structures to pursue an exemplary career as a civil servant. But for the time being his career is blocked. The Lao Front for National Construction's dramatic loss of influence within the regime is perhaps the most revealing example of the end of the socialist project.

I, in effect, argue that this duality of being has been heightened by structural changes within the post-socialist society. These changes have upset these individuals' social and political identity as their position within the society enters a grey zone, with uncertainty surrounding their role; hence, the feelings of loss and confusion mixed with those of bitterness and resentment. Yet, these very members of non-ethnic Lao groups can also act, or to put it differently, be their own agents. Through a divergent narrative of the nation or the creation of a counter fictive ethnicity, they in effect reject their representation by the State as 'deviant' individuals. Sisouk's efforts to create an ethnic identity, the "Bru", outside the regime's enforced categorisation may epitomise this struggle for the legitimation of a self-defined identity, despite the low probability of his succeeding at the present time. These individuals feel all the more justified in not complying with the state's representation of the nation as they sacrificed their family and their home for the nation's sake.

The nation's narrative in post-socialist Laos is gradually changing its tone and may well challenge the political loyalty that emerged and was built up during the French and the American Wars between the Pathet Lao and its non-ethnic Lao fighters. This is,

however, only a hypothesis that will certainly need further research. I am reluctant to speculate further upon the basis of my current findings as I believe there is a need for further long-term fieldwork that should be focused on rural areas known for their cooperation with the Pathet Lao and the Viet Minh (such as the province of Sekong, known as the "province of heroes"). The reason I believe this to be so is that, as recounted in Chapter Three, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century some ethnic groups rebelled in rural areas of south-eastern Laos against French rule that encroached on their social and political autonomy. The French authorities had underestimated their sense of independence. It is far too premature to suggest that such conflicts between the contemporary authorities and sections of the population could happen again in this region, and indeed one must be very cautious not to exacerbate tensions between these parties. What is needed is research into the interactions between the State and the population of provinces such as Sekong, which may help us to understand how relationships between the State and the ethnic groups in these areas are changing. Clearly, it may well be difficult to perform such research, given the sensitivity of such issues in the Lao government's eyes. Nevertheless, there are a number of key questions that should be addressed: to what degree does the State control social and political structures at the provincial, district and village level? How effectively is the State's ideology being transmitted to them? How autonomous are these peoples within the ambit of the State's administration? To what degree, and how, do the revolutionary ideals and their own social, cultural and political structures conciliate and interweave? And finally, as socialist ideals fade away, will these ethnic groups' loyalty to the state's leadership die out, too?

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Ethnic Composition of the Population of Laos, 1911-1955

	1911		1921		1931		1936		1942		1955	
		%		%		%		%		%		%
Lao	276,801	45	429,000	52	485,000	50	565,000	56	441,450	43.6 60.9	856,000- 865,000 (Lao-Tai)	77-74
Tai	124,238	19	122,000	15	113,000	12	100,000	10	175,170	17.3		
Kha	195,996	32	221,000	27	268,000	28	247,000	24	300,138	29.6	210,000- 258,000 ^b	19-22
Meo-Yao	15,205	2	25,000	3	39,000	4	47,000	5	49,240	4.9	52,300- 52,900	4
Vietname se	4,109	0.7	9,000		19,000	2	27,000	2.7	39,470	3.9	8,000 ^c	
Chinese	486				3,000	0.3			6,100	0.6	32,350 ^c	
European	226 ^d 163 ^e		353 8 ^f		1,000	0.1			900	0.1	8,000	
Cambo dian	1,270		1,300				2,000					
Indian and Pakistani	6										500	
Total	618,5	98.7	807,653	97	964,000	96.4	988,000	97.7	1,012,468	100	1,291,951- 1,320,402	100

Sources : Lao Ministry of the Interior, 1955 figures; *Annuaire Statistique du Laos* 1913-22; *Annuaire Statistique de l'Indochine* 1930-31, 1936-37, Gouvernement Général de l'Indochine; *Bulletin de l'Office Colonial* 1911, No.62, Février 1913; Direction des Affaires économiques, Service de la Statistique Général (Hanoi), 1927; *Plan de développement économique et social, Royaume du Laos*, Mars 1959, quoted from Halpern (1961: 19).

^b Kha underestimated due to the exclusion of provinces that contain few Lao

^c 1959 estimates; 41,121 non-Lao Asians were registered in Laos in 1959

^d *Idem.*

^e French

^f Mixed-race

^g Other Europeans

Appendix 2: Ethnic composition of Laos, 1954-55, by percentage of ethnic groups in each province^a

Province	Total population	Lao & Tai ^b		Kha		Meo & Yao		Total %
			%		%		%	
Nam Tha	46,809	17,104	36.54	26,798	57.25	2,907	6.21	100
Luang Prabang	136,821	66,687	48.74	63,416	46.35	6,718	4.91	100
Sayaboury	98,516	86,389	87.69	8,167	8.29	3,960	4.02	100
Xieng Khouang	93,609	44,090	47.10	12,178	13.01	37,341	39.89	100
Vientiane	186,269	183,978	98.77	317	0.17	1,974	1.06	100
Khammouane	108,603	99,785	91.88	8,818	8.12			100
Savannakhet	214,974	171,743	79.89	42,231	19.64			99.5
Saravane	125,957	65,498	52.0	60,459	48.0			100
Champassak	122,078	117,769	96.47	4,309	3.53			100
Attopeu	43,315	12,865	29.70	30,450	70.30			100
Phong Saly ^c	50,000							
Sam Neua ^c	65,000							
Total	1,291,951	865,908		258,143		52,900		

Sources : Unpublished records of Ministry of Interior of the Government of Laos, Vientiane, quoted from Halpern (1961: 18).

^a exclusive of Chinese, Vietnamese and European population

^b includes Lu, Tai Dam and other tribal Tai groups; does not include Thai

^c data incomplete since most of the area was under Pathet Lao Control during this period

**Appendix 3: Assessment of the ethnic groups' names in the Lao PDR
accepted during the LFNC meeting on 13-14th August 2000**

Lao-Thai : 8 ethnic groups
ລາວ Lao
ຜູ້ໄທ Phuthai
ໄຕ Tai
ລູ້ Lue
ຍວນ Yuan
ແຊກ Saek
ຢັ່ງ Yàng
ໄທເໜືອ Thai Neua
Mon-Khmer : 32 ethnic groups
ກິມມຸ Kmmu
ໄປຣ Plai/Prai
ຊິງມຸນ Singmun
ຜ້ອງ Phong
ແທນ Thaen
ອີດູ Idu
ບິດ Bit
ລະເມດ Làmet
ສາມຕ່າວ Samtao
ກະຕາງ Kàtang
ມະກອງ Mākong

ຕຣີ T'li/T'ri
ຕະໂອ້ຍ Tà-Oy
ຢຣຸ Y'lù/Y'rù
ຕຣຽງ Tlieng/Trieng
ແຢະ Yàe
ລະວີ Làvi
ເບຣົາ Blao/Brao
ກະຕູ Kàtu
ໂອຍ Oy
ກຣຽງ Klieng/Krieng
ສະດາງ Sàdang
ຣາຣັກ Lalàk/Raràk
ຊ່ວຍ Suay
ຂະແມ Khmer
ປະໂກະ Pàkò
ຕຸ້ມ Tùm
ງວນ Nguan
ມອນ Mon
ກຣີ K'li/K'ri
ເຈັງ Chéng
Hmong-Mien: 2 ethnic groups
ມົ້ງ Hmong
ອິວມຽນ Iumien

Sino-Tibetan: 7 ethnic groups
ອາຄາ Akha
ສິງສິລິ Singili
ລາຮູ Lahu
ສິລາ Sila
ຮາຢີ Hayi
ໂລໂລ Lolo
ຫໍ້ Hor

Source: Sisouk Chonmaly (2000), "Meeting's Report on the Research and Study on the Ethnic Groups' Names in the Lao PDR", 16 November, Xerox Copy.

**Appendix 4: Assessment of the provincial LFNC censuses 1999-2000
(list of 55 ethnic groups)**

1) ລາວ Lao
2) ຜູ້ໄທ Phuthai
3) ກິມມຸ Kmmu
4) ມົ້ງ Hmong
5) ລື້ Lue
6) ກະຕາງ Kàtang
7) ມະກອງ Mākong
8) ກໍ Kor
9) ຊ່ວຍ Suay
10) ຢວນ Yuan
11) ຢຣຸ Y'rù
12) ຕະໂອ້ຍ Tà-Oy
13) ຕະຣຽງ Tàrieng/Tàlieng
14) ພູນ້ອຍ Phunoy
15) ຕຣີ T'ri
16) ພ້ອງ Phong
17) ຢ້າວ Yao
18) ເບຣົາ Blao/Brao
19) ກະຕູ Kàtu
20) ລະເມດ Làmet
21) ໄປຣ Plai/Prai

22) ຣາຣັກ Lalàk/Raràk (ອາລັກ) (Alak/Arak)
23) ປະໂກຍ Pàko
24) ກາໂດ Kado
25) ກາໄນ Kanai
26) ຕິງ Tong
27) ອິນ In
28) ໂອຍ Oy
29) ມຸເຊີ Musser
30) ກຽງ Klieng/Krieng (ແງະ) (Ngae)
31) ກຸຍ Kuy
32) ຫໍ່ Hor
33) ເຈັງ chéng
34) ເຮີນ໌ຍ໌ Herne, (ຍາເຫີນ) (yaherne)
35) ຢັ່ງ Yàng
36) ແຢະ Yàe
37) ສາມຕ່າວ Samtao
38) ຊິງມຸນ Singmun
39) ຕຸ້ມ Tùm
40) ແຂກ Saek
41) ເມືອງ Meuang
42) ບິດ Bit

43) ຫງ່ວນ Nguan
44) ໂລໂລ Lolo
45) ລະວີ Làvi
46) ສະດາງ Sàdang
47) ກະຢ້ອງ Kàyong
48) ຂະແມ Khmer
49) ແທນ Thaen
50) ໄທເໜືອ Thai Neua
51) ໄທຣາດ Thai Rat/Lat
52) ຊຸມມາ Summa (ກົງສາດ) (Kòngsat)
53) ກຣີ K'li/K'ri
54) ບຣີ B'li/B'ri (ຄົນ ປ່າ Khòn Pa ("man of the forest"))
55) ກິງ King (ຫວຽດ Viet)

Source: Sisouk Chonmaly (2000), "Meeting's Report on the Research and Study on the Ethnic Groups' Names in the Lao PDR", 16 November, Xerox Copy.

Appendix 5: Assessment of the names of the 34 ethnic groups

1) ລາວ Lao
2) ຜູ້ໄທ Phuthai
3) ກິມມຸ Kmmu, including Thaen (ແທນ)
4) ມົ້ງ Hmong
5) ລື້ Lue
6) ບຣຸ B'lù/B'rù (ກະຕາງ Kátang, ມະກອງ Màkong, ຕຣີ T'li/T'ri, ຕະໂອ້ຍ Tà-Oy, ປະໂກະ Pàkò, ກາໄນ Kanai, ອິນ In, ຕິງ Tong, ຊ່ວຍ Suay, ກະຕູ Kàtu, ກຮຽງ Klieng/Krieng)
7) ກໍ Kor (ຊຸມມາ Summa, ກິງສາດ Kòngsat)
8) ຢວນ Yuan
9) ຢຣຸ Y'rù
10) ຕຮຽງ Tlieng/Trieng
11) ພູນ້ອຍ Phunoy
12) ພ້ອງ Phong
13) ຢ້າວ Yao
14) ເບຣົາ Blao/Brao
15) ລະເມດ Làmet
16) ໄປຣ Plai/Prai
17) ຣາຣັກ Lalàk/Raràk
18) ໂອຍ Oy
19) ລາຮູ Lahu
20) ຫໍ Hor
21) ເຮີນ້ຍ Herne

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|--------------------------|
| 22) ຍິ່ງ Yàng |
| 23) ແຊກ Saek |
| 24) ສາມຕ່າວ Samtao |
| 25) ຊິງມຸນ Singmun |
| 26) ຕຸ້ມ Tùm |
| 27) ເມືອງ Meuang |
| 28) ບິດ Bit |
| 29) ຫງ່ວນ Nguan |
| 30) ໂລໂລ Lolo |
| 31) ຂະແມ Khmer |
| 32) ກຣີ K'li/K'ri |
| 33) ລາບຣີ Labri |
| 34) ກິງ King (ຫວຽດ Viet) |

Source: Sisouk Chonmaly (2000), "Meeting's Report on the Research and Study on the Ethnic Groups' Names in the Lao PDR", 16 November, Xerox Copy.

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