Echoes from the Sacred Mounts: The Challenge of Female Tutelary Spirits in Luang Prabang

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Abstract—Many studies on Lao rituals focus on symbolic legitimation of the authority of the king and are written from the perspective of royalty and state leaders. This focus emphasizes the changes and reinvention of traditions in socialist Laos, with the absence of the king. By contrast, this paper, drawing on the ritual life of Luang Prabang in popular culture, or non-official context, examines Nang Kwang Hi, the legendary queen who became the great tutelary spirit of Luang Prabang, whose popularity and significance has not yet been investigated by scholarly work on Lao rituals and spirit cults. The paper argues that only by including female spirits in our analytical framework can we understand how Lao spirits are gendered, and how female gendering is significant in the study of Lao tutelary spirits. The paper also demonstrates how the traditional political and social structure of "*Muang* Luang Prabang", as embodied in the female tutelary spirit cults, has persisted in contemporary Laos.

Introduction

This article examines the potency of female tutelary spirits in Luang Prabang, the former Lao capital. Many studies on Lao rituals focus on the perspectives and roles of royalty and political authorities, emphasizing the legitimating aspects of rituals. Such studies investigate the spirits associated with the establishment of the royal line or the mandala structure (e.g., Archaimbault 1973; Aijmer 1979; Holt 2009). In contrast, this research draws on the memories and experiences of the original townsfolk who are the main preservers and custodians of Luang Prabang traditions, especially women, who form the majority of participants in both Buddhist rituals and those relating to the spirits. The article highlights the significance of goddesses in popular culture, especially Nang Kwang Hi, the legendary queen who became the great tutelary spirit of Luang Prabang.

A second point of difference is that previous studies on contemporary Lao rituals explore ritual symbols formerly associated with the concept of galactic polity and argue that rituals under the socialist regime have been significantly changed or reinvented by the modern state for its political interests (Evans 1998; Trankell 2000: 191-213). By contrast, this paper studies the complex legendary landscape of Luang Prabang from the perspective of Lao villagers, demonstrating how the political and social structure of

Muang Luang Prabang is embodied in female tutelary spirit cults, and thus arguing that the traditional structure of Luang Prabang has persisted in modern-day Laos.

The setting: "*Muang*" Luang Prabang and its political and social structure

Luang Prabang is situated at the confluence of the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers, with the natural hill called Mount Phusi at its center. On the summit of Mount Phusi is the golden stupa of That Chomsi, containing Buddha relics. On the opposite street from the mountain is the royal palace, today a national museum. The location of the palace and the establishment of the stupa on Mount Phusi by a Lao king seems to reinforce the concept of galactic polity, coined by Tambiah (1976) to characterize the twin axes of kingship and Buddhism in palace architecture, where the replica of Mount Meru resides.

Figure 1. Palace in foreground and Xieng Maen Village opposite

Arrayed along the bank of the Mekong opposite the city are two hills, Phu Thao and Phu Nang, with Xieng Maen Village at their foot. The village faces the palace-museum across the Mekong River (see Figure 1).

During the premodern period, the political structure of Laos was based on the *muang*, referring to any Tai political domain, such as a chiefdom, federation of chiefdoms, principality, or kingdom. The term "*muang*" implies some interdependence between Tai and non-Tai populations, and represents linguistic, cultural, and social hierarchy between the two groups (Turton 2000).

In a myth of origin commonly related among Tai-speaking peoples, after Khun Bulom founded *Muang* Theng (present-day Dien Bien Phu, Vietnam), he sent his sons to conquer southern regions. Khun Lo, his eldest son, conquered *Muang* Swa (modern-day Luang Prabang), which had been ruled by the indigenous Kha, Austroasiatic-speaking hill peoples. Khun Lo pushed the Kha out of the *muang*. Thereafter, the *muang* belonged to the Tai, and the forest to the Kha. "The Tai" refers to people with a highly developed civilization who distinguish themselves from the Kha, forest men (ibid.). The Tai rulers of Luang Prabang claimed Khun Lo as their ancestor.

The adoption of Buddhism in Southeast Asia is significantly involved with state legitimation (Tambiah 1976). The religion is an important criterion that distinguished the civilized Tai from the animist Kha. The hierarchical structure of *muang* is based

on the dichotomies between *muang* and *pa* (forest, wild), Buddhism and animism, and civilization and non-civilization.

All the "original land holders" in Tai *muang*, including the Lua in Chiang Mai, the Wa in Chiang Tung, and the Kha in Luang Prabang, used to have ritual relationships with the king (Tapp 1989: 73; Keyes 1995). The indigenous were portrayed as uncivilized non-Buddhist cannibals and yet recognized as holders of rights to propitiate the tutelary spirits of the domain. This signifies the indigenous people's superiority over the Tai in ritual terms. In Chiang Mai, Pu Sae Nya Sae, the cannibal demon ancestor spirits of the autochthonous Lua, receive an annual buffalo sacrifice sponsored by the local ruling prince (Kraisri 1967; Tanabe 2000).

Suksavang (2005) shows the social hierarchy and ritual relations between the King of Luang Prabang and the Kha, specifically titled in his research as Kha Kasak. After Khun Lo chased the Kasak into the forest, the Tai-Lao became the ruling authority, while the Kasak lost power and became slaves/servants (*kha*) in the Lao feudal system. While the Tai-Lao maintained power in the *muang*, the Kasak lived in the rural areas nearby. To promote coexistence and reconciliation, the Tai-Lao aristocrats developed reciprocal exchanges with the Kasak in a framework of fictive brotherhood. The ruler of the Kasak was appointed by the Lao king as Phia[1] Kasak and had the title of Chao Ai (Elder Brother Prince) of *Muang* Swa, as the Kasak were the original landholders. The Lao king was Chao Noong (Younger Brother Prince), as the Tai-Lao were newcomers.

The position of Chao Ai had meaning only in rituals performed with the Lao king. The Chao Ai had responsibility to carry out a ceremony for nourishing the spirits of *Muang* Swa at the Lao New Year in the fifth lunar month and to offer the fruits of longevity and prosperity to the king in the twelfth lunar month ritual, or Bun That Luang (Buddhist Reliquary Festival).[2]

Keyes (1995: 20) argues that the relationship between the indegenous and the Tai was more highly structured at Luang Prabang than elsewhere. After the Kasak performed rituals to stabilize the prosperity of the kingdom, they received some gifts, including a buffalo and articles of clothing. Finally, they were chased back to their villages with a curse. These rituals reinforced the hierarchical relationship between the two ethnic groups.

In the Lao kingdom the Tai rulers of Luang Prabang performed the rituals with the Kasak, as initiated by their mythical ancestor Khun Lo (Suksavang 2005). Many now elderly informants witnessed the rituals between Phia Kasak and the king at the palace. The ritual relationship between the king and Kha finally disappeared after the communist takeover of Laos in 1975.

Luang Prabang has long been the center of Lao *muangs*. Its previous names were *Muang* Swa and Xieng Dong Xieng Thong. It appeared under the name Luang Prabang

[1] A title of nobility.

[2] That Luang (Grand Stupa), containing Buddha relics, is the most important Buddhist monument and a national symbol of Laos. The king appeared in the That Luang Festival as the Buddha-king (Archaimbault 1973; Thararat 2011: 46-99; Thararat 2013). Evans (1998) and Trankell (2000: 191-213) contend that the festival has recently been reinvented to legitimate state leaders who replaced the king at the festival.

when the Lao capital was moved to Vientiane in 1563. The old capital was renamed after the Prabang Buddha image, the royal palladium kept in the city as its protector (Chanthaphon 2004). Luang Prabang remained as the Lao royal seat for six centuries until 1975, and was nominated as a World Heritage Site in 1995.

Investigating the tutelary spirit cults of Luang Prabang

Many studies on Lao rituals, notably the work by Archaimbault (1973) and an important summary by Aijmer (1979), focus on Pu Nyoe Nya Nyoe, the ancestral spirits who had ritual relationships with the king. The spirits are also called the *thevada luang* (grand deities) in Luang Prabang. They occupy a key place in the Lao foundational myths that structure traditional relations between the Tai and non-Tai populations. The myth of Khun Bulom says that the couple cut down *kheau khao kat*, the gigantic liana that completely covered the earth. After it fell down, the sun penetrated the world and crops survived. Pu Nyoe Nya Nyoe died from the fall of the liana, and became the tutelary spirits of Luang Prabang (Archaimbault 1973; Aijmer 1979).

Similar to Pu Sae Nya Sae, the ancestral spirits in Chiang Mai who were vanquished by Buddhism (Kraisri 1967; Tanabe 2000), Pu Nyoe Nya Nyoe show their submission to Buddhism at the New Year rituals by paying respect to Buddhist monuments and Buddha images at the ritual sites (see Figure 2). The scene repeats the theme of the contact between the non-Buddhist indigenous people and the Buddhist Tai ruler.

Pu Nyoe Nya Nyoe also appear in the form of mosaics on the wall behind the throne in the palace-museum of Luang Prabang, which seems to signify that the coronation of the king was bestowed by the spirits. As a symbolic legitimation of the authority of the Lao king, the grand deities are used by the state to promote the current regime. A play featuring the couple was officially organized to commemorate the achievements of the Communist Party during the fifth Conference of the Communist Party Committee held in Luang Prabang in 2005. The director of the play explained the new meaning: "by cutting the liana, the *thevada luang* made the sun shine, '*song saeng*', in the world just as the leaders of the socialist party '*song saeng*', enlighten the people".

Today Pu Nyoe Nya Nyoe have disappeared from the That Luang Festival, which underpinned the sovereign's power, but they participate in parades recently organized to promote tourism in Luang Prabang, such as on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the nomination of Luang Prabang as a world heritage site in 2005. The ancestral spirits have become a logo of the world heritage site: tourists are allowed to take pictures with them; and mascots of the spirits are available for visitors. Tourism growth contributes to a new image of Laos fashioned by the state with reference to the forces of economic globalization.

In the conventional analysis, ritual symbols associated with royalty and the kingdom have been reinvented or secularized for the state's benefit (Evans 1998; Trankell 2000: 191-213). However, in the popular culture of Luang Prabang the tutelary spirit cults remain sacred, as exemplified by the revival and popularity of Bun Duean Chet, or the ritual of the seventh lunar month, and the strong belief in Nang Kwang Hi, the legendary queen who becomes the tutelary spirit of Luang Prabang governing the

Figure 2. Pu Nyoe Nya Nyoe paying respect to the Phra Bang (postcard, photo by Michel Huteau)

Mekong riverbank opposite the city, where the royal palace sits.

I will now examine Bun Duean Chet and the cult of *phi muang*, the tutelary spirit of domain, in Tai states to elucidate how Nang Kwang Hi has become the tutelary spirit of Luang Prabang and how she remains sacred to the Lao people.

Lao villagers practice *hit sipsong*, the twelve-month traditions. During Bun Duean Chet villagers venerate the guardian spirits of the realm (village, city, etc). The guardian spirits are invoked by mediums to dismiss malevolent spirits and keep the domains peaceful (see Mani 1986: 113-40; Sommai and Doré 1992: 193-256). Offerings are also made to guardian spirits before ploughing in mid-year and after harvesting at the end of the year to ask the spirits for a good harvest (Tambiah 1970: 263-84).

"Superstitious" ceremonies in Laos declined after the communist revolution in 1975, as the ruling party launched a campaign to abolish spirit cults, considered as backward, and put its effort into creating "a socialist man" on the basis of scientific reasoning (Evans 1998: 71-82). During the austere years of the communist regime a vigorous attempt was made to get rid of mediumship and spirit cults. Meanwhile, Bun Duean Chet was secretly performed in some villages. In the present post-socialist period, marked by economic growth and political relaxation, Bun Duean Chet and mediumship have been widely revived. The campaign by the socialist regime against superstitions was unable to challenge the genuine beliefs of Lao villagers. Some people, including state officials, consult spirits about their everyday problems, such as their career and income, while others ask mediums for lotto numbers, amulets, charms and medicines, and ask them to read their fortunes.

Bun Duean Chet reflects the Lao common belief in the *phi muang* cult, which is an ancient Tai belief and is usually practiced in *muang*. Davis (1984: 273-5) elegantly explains that the cult is the propitiation of the earth spirits of particular territories, and is primarily concerned with maintaining the fertility of soil within the cultivated area of

a sedentary community. In certain cases it continues to exist despite the collapse of the political system that it once paralleled.

Drawing on Mus' hypothesis that the territorial spirit cults of Monsoon Asia are related to both territorial integrity and dynastic succession (1933), Davis stresses that the *phi muang* cult usually involves the rulers of the domain. When the cult of territorial spirit was assimilated with the ancestral cult of the local chief, the dynastic and territorial concerns merged, which gave rise to statehood. This merger is dramatized in the *lak muang* cult.

The *lak muang* (city pillar) is often installed at the center of the city by the highest authority of a *muang*. It is regarded as a *phi muang*, the most powerful of all guardian spirits, protecting the entire domain (Terwiel 1978), and demonstrates the relationship between the authority of the chief and the *muang*'s territorial spirit. The Inthakin pillar, the *lak muang* of Chiang Mai, was periodically propitiated through animal sacrifice by the local ruling princes (Tanabe 2000). Throughout Thailand the *lak muang* is associated with a story in which the omnipotent guardian spirit is created by the sacrifice of human life which returns to provide protection for the political domain (Terwiel 1978; Mayoury 1993: 11; Tanabe 1991: 200; Tanabe 2000: 303).

Searching for the origin of the *lak muang*, Terwiel (1978) and Tanabe (2000) reviewed Maspero's research on the *phi muang* and *lak suea* in Tai domains in Northern Vietnam. The *phi muang* resides in a great tree at the entrance of the village of the *muang*'s chief. The *lak suea*, a wooden post, represents a personal relationship between the post's spirit and the ruler. When a new ruler assumes political power, he removes his predecessor's post and erects his own to affirm his political power. A buffalo is annually sacrificed for the spirit, but there is no tradition of human sacrifice in these Tai domains. Terwiel (1978: 168) suggests that this practice may originally have represented separate customs.

In his analysis of the guardian spirit cults of present-day Luang Prabang, Holt (2009), also influenced by Mus (1933), argues that the ancestors and territorial spirits of a domain can refer to the same thing, and that the authority of the ruler in a political unit depends on his relationship with the territorial spirits. The territorial spirits are hierarchical in structure and correspond to the structure of mandala, a political characteristic of Tai states: the king resides at the center of the cosmos, surrounded by several circles of power. Each polity had its tributary rulers, but only the polity overlord had the right to receive tribute-bearing envoys (see also Wolters 1999). In terms of religion, each village within a *muang* is protected by the *phi ban*, empowering the village headman, while the *muang* is ruled by *phi muang*, empowering the chief of the *muang* (Holt 2009: 164).

Although Holt (2009) has recognized that the political structure of *muang* is embodied in the Lao spirit cult, one gap in his analysis is that the category of spirits he discusses is gender-neutral. I will argue that, without an investigation on female spirits, it is impossible to gain a complete and thorough understanding of the tutelary spirit cults and spirit worship in Luang Prabang, not only because goddesses are particularly prevalent in this setting, but also because the great tutelary spirits there are female.

The Luang Prabang chronicle relates that before the Tai arrival, and preceding the Kha dynasty, Luang Prabang was a matriarchal kingdom ruled by the non-Tai dynasty of

Nang Kwang Hi (Saveng 1987). Mayoury (1993: 10) quotes Vo Thu Tinh (1970: 11) that "women were first born on the Lao soil. Assault on their lives would draw misfortune and ruin to the kingdom". Veneration of the indigenous princess as the autochthonous owner of the land seems to derive from the classic Southeast Asian legend of Kaundinya and Soma, a daughter of the king of the *naga*, dating to the early Common Era. The couple gave birth to a royal line and became a symbol of male potency and fertility. Many kings of ancient Indochinese states traced their origin to the legendary couple. The famous record of Chou Ta-kuan indicates that the mystical union was still commemorated in the 13th century at the Angkorian court, where the king nightly united with a snake princess (Cœdès 1968: 37-8; Keyes 1995: 65-6). Sahlins (2008) shows that the marriage between a stranger-king and the daughter of the native ruler has been commonly found since early times in Southeast Asia and Oceania.

The myth of Nang Kwang Hi reflects this theme. The Luang Prabang chronicle (Saveng 1987) relates that Puchao Thani (or Nantha in some versions) was a demon coming from Langka. After his arrival in *Muang* Swa, he married Nang Khong Bhali. They had a daughter named Nang Kwang Hi. After Puchao Thani died, Nang Khong Bhali designated her daughter to govern *Muang* Swa before leaving for *Muang* Indhapathanakhon. Nang Khong Bhali married the king there, and was appointed to be his first queen. The king already had twelve wives, but they became his minor wives. The twelfth one had a son with the king named Buddhasen. The prince married Nang Kwang Hi. Thereafter, Buddhasen and Nang Kwang Hi ruled *Muang* Swa.

The veneration of the autochthonous princess as the owner of land, the Tai recognition of the aborigines "as the first to tap the fertility of the lands of the realm" (Keyes 1995: 20), and the Tai belief that it is in the indigenous spirits that the guardian spirits lay (eg, Kraisri 1967; Tanabe 2000) seem to merge in the Lao *phi muang* cult. This complex of beliefs may have allowed female spirits to become the highest tutelary spirits of Laos, including the *lak muang* of the nation and Nang Kwang Hi.

The *lak muang* of Luang Prabang is called Chao Mae Lak Man (Doré 1972: 46; Mayoury 1993: 12-13; Tanabe 2000: 302), and that of Vientiane is called Chao Mae Simuang. The title *chao mae* indicates that the spirit is female. Stories of human sacrifice under the city pillars are also told in Laos, but while in Thailand the victims are men (Terwiel 1978), in Luang Prabang and Vientiane a pregnant woman is said to have volunteered to sacrifice herself.

Doré (1972: 46) specifies that the spirit of the *lak man* is a woman of ethnic minority (Kha) status. Similarly, Trankell (2000: 196) mentions that it is the spirit of a Khmu woman, Nang Palasini. The gender and ethnic identity of the *lak man* reflects the Tai belief that the indigenous were the holders of the right to propitiate the guardian spirit of the domain, and that women once held power in the matriarchal kingdom of Luang Prabang.

Although the *lak man* is known among middle-aged and elderly villagers of Luang Prabang, it is not as popular as other spirits in this locality (see also Tanabe 2000). Unlike the *lak man*, Chao Mae Simuang is widely respected in Laos. Even Lao migrants overseas ask their relatives in Laos to solicit her assistance to overcome problems regarding immigration or resettlement in a new country (Mayoury 1993: 12). Chao Mae Simuang is also celebrated during the That Luang Festival.

The city pillars are *phi muang*, which have juridical implications. As discussed above, the *lak muang* is a temporary symbol and can be removed by a new political ruler. The *lak man* may have lost its power after the capital was moved to Vientiane by King Saisethathirath. The king built That Luang and Lak Muang (Mayoury 1993: 11-13; Zago 1996). Pre-Buddhist and Buddhist beliefs were used to legitimate the king and his rights over land. Since Chao Mae Simuang replaced Chao Mae Lak Man as the *phi muang* of the Lao nation, this may have resulted in the rise of the city pillar in Vientiane and the decline of that in Luang Prabang.

While *chao mae lak man,* somewhat similar to the case of Pu Nyoe Nya Nyoe in the socialist regime, lost its functions and popularity when the political system once attached to it collapsed, Nang Kwang Hi has remained famous and powerful in Luang Prabang. She appears in the form of Phu Nang Mountain lying on the Xieng Maen bank, and is featured in Nang Sipsong (Twelve Sisters), a popular myth of Luang Prabang. Although Chao Mae Lak Man and Nang Kwang Hi were both of indigenous background, Nang Kwang Hi was not regarded as the *phi muang* of the nation who could empower the Lao king. One might surmise that, because she was the symbol of matriarchy and belonged to a previous dynasty that ruled over Luang Prabang, her spirit did not support or legitimate the power of the Lao king, a newcomer whose rights over land needed to be stabilized. In fact, there is evidence which suggests that the power of Nang Kwang Hi has been deliberately suppressed by political authorities, such as the construction of Buddhist edifices in places related to her spirit, and the change of the ending of the myth of Nang Sipsong. Despite these efforts, the potency of Nang Kwang Hi still presents a challenge to Buddhist forces at the center of Lao galactic polity.

Nang Kwang Hi: the legendary queen of Luang Prabang

Archaimbault (1973) argues that the New Year dances of Pu Nyoe Nya Nyoe refer to the origin of the world in deluge, which was entirely dark and occupied by *phi phet* (bad spirits) and *nyak* (demons). When the couple arrived in the world and expelled the malevolent spirits, the earth appeared and humans were born. Since the ancestral spirits, vanquished by Buddhism, are a symbolic legitimation of the Lao king, and since the *naga* and *nyak* represent the indigenous people or their animist beliefs (e.g., Davis 1984: 35; Suchit 2000), the New Year dances of the couple seem to signify the expulsion of the indigenous by the Tai and the suppression of spirit cults by Buddhism.

Still, the complex legendary landscape of Luang Prabang in association with *naga, nyak* and Nang Kwang Hi and the annual worship of her spirit reflect that it is animism that has the deepest root in Laos, and that Luang Prabang has been importantly remembered by Lao villagers as a matriarchal kingdom.

The myth of Nang Sipsong is associated with several locations in Luang Prabang, especially the Xieng Maen riverbank, where the spirit shrine of Nang Kwang Hi is located. The riverbank is characterized by Phu Thao (Mountain of the Lord) and Phu Nang (Mountain of the Lady). When describing how the two adjacent mountains look like a man and a woman, some Xieng Maen villagers say "*ying non ngai─sai non khwam*," the man was lying on his stomach and the woman on her back. The local

description of the mountains' shapes comes from the story of Nang Sipsong. The story below was told by an elderly villager of Xieng Maen Village, an expert in rituals and myths associated with the village.[3]

> When a couple could no longer afford their twelve daughters, they left them in the forest. The girls lived by gathering fruits and vegetables, and hunting frogs. They used small and thin pieces of bamboo trunks to stick into both eyes of the frogs to collect them, all except Nang La—she stuck the sticks only into one eye of the frogs she collected.
>
> The girls roamed in the forest until they arrived at *Muang* Phantawan, the kingdom of *nyak* (demons). When the demon queen found the girls, she transformed herself into a beautiful woman and adopted them as her own daughters. Many years later, the twelve sisters found that their adoptive mother was a flesh-eating demon. They escaped from her for fear of being eaten.
>
> When they arrived at *Muang* Champanahongnakorn, they met the king in the forest. The king married them all. Soon afterwards, the king met the demon queen who had assumed the form of a gorgeous woman. He married her and appointed her to be his first queen, while the twelve sisters became second queens. Finding that the second queens were her "ungrateful" daughters and that they were pregnant, the demon was outraged and jealous. She feigned sickness and told the king that she could be cured only when the eyes of the twelve sisters were presented to the gods. The king was so infatuated with her that he ordered his men to remove the eyes of the twelve sisters, except La, the youngest sister, who had only one eye taken. This resulted from their karma--what they did to the frogs.
>
> The sisters were confined in a cave without food. They ate their newborns. But Nang La hid her son, Buddhasen, from her blind sisters. The boy was also protected by a god. When Buddhasen became a young man, he was famous for cock-fighting. The god helped him win at gambling so that he could get food for his mother and aunts.
>
> When the demon queen found that Buddhasen was alive, she planned to kill him. Again, she feigned sickness and told the king to order Buddhasen to bring her *mak muang hao mak nao ho* (magical limes), growing only in her kingdom, to cure her. Before Buddhasen left, the demon queen gave him a message to be relayed to Nang Kwang Hi, her daughter.
>
> On his way, Buddhasen stayed overnight at the pavilion of a hermit who knew by his clairvoyance that the demon queen's message instructed her daughter to "eat the man on his arrival". To help him, the hermit changed the message to "marry him on his arrival". After Nang Kwang Hi, in the form of a woman, read the message, she married Buddhasen.
>
> Finding that his wife was a demon, Buddhasen escaped from her. Before he

[3] Nang Sipsong also appears in the form of a folktale in Thailand. Since Lao people routinely watch Thai TV in their everyday life, and since Nang Sipsong has featured in Thai TV dramas many times, it is problematic to verify whether the Lao version has any Thai influence.

left, he stole the eyes of his mother and aunts, the magical limes and other magical plants, and the heart of the demon queen.

Knowing that her husband was escaping, Nang Kwang Hi followed him. Buddhasen then threw the magical plants, one after another. Suddenly, there was a mountain, fire, and river, separating her from him. Nang Kwang Hi was suffering from exhaustion and dying of grief. Before she died, she willed that Buddhasen would come to die at her feet.

When Buddhasen arrived in his kingdom, he used the magical limes to restore the eyes of his mother and aunts. Then he revealed to his father that the first queen was a demon, and stabbed her heart that he had taken from her kingdom.

At the end, Buddhasen left his father's kingdom as he wanted to return to his wife. Once he found her dead body, he was heartbroken and died of sorrow. His body was placed at her feet. However, Indra, the king of the gods, viewed that this was an omen that would cause misfortune to people in the kingdom if women were to be superior to men. Thus, he changed the position of the corpses: it was the woman who lay down at the man's feet. Their bodies became the mountains of Phu Thao and Phu Nang.

The story of Nang Sipsong is repeatedly told in Luang Prabang, especially at locations in the city and Xieng Maen that are claimed to be places mentioned in the myth.

Tourists who take a thirty-minute boat trip from The Grand Hotel located in Xieng Kaew Village on the city bank to Xieng Maen Village may enjoy the story and its association with locations along the Mekong River, for local people may relate each part of the story as the boat passes the appropriate place. Opposite the hotel is Pha Tat Kae Mountain, Mountain of Changing the Message, where there is a cave believed to be the cave of the hermit who changed the message from "eat him" to "marry him".

Further north on the city bank is Phabat Tai Temple and Hat Mak Nao, a group of huge round lime-shaped rocks in the Mekong River, which are exposed at low tide. Hat Mak Nao is said to be the place where Buddhasen threw magical plants while escaping from Nang Kwang Hi, and then a river appeared to separate them. She could not cross the river and died of grief at Xieng Maen. Alternatively, the place is said to be where Buddhasen dropped some *mak muang hao mak nao ho* when he was escaping from Nang Kwang Hi.

Close to the Phabat Tai Temple is the That Luang field, believed to be Suan Dhan (literally the divine garden), the plantation of magical limes of Nang Kwang Hi.[4]

Continuing northward, the boat reaches Xieng Maen Village lying along Phu Thao Phu Nang. In the south of Xieng Maen Village is situated the spirit shrine of Nang Kwang Hi. Her spirit is annually worshipped by Xieng Maen villagers during Bun Duean Chet. The legend and rituals related to Nang Kwang Hi sound comparable to those of Chao Luang Kham Daeng, a legendary king who founded the first kingdom

[4] Ranh (1970: 31) mentions that Nang Kwang Hi died at Suan Dhan. However, according to Lao villagers, Nang Kwang Hi died at Xieng Maen Village, as her body became Phu Nang.

of Chiang Mai and introduced Buddhism to the indigenous Lawa (Lua). Chao Luang Kham Daeng became the tutelary spirit of Doi Ang Salung Chiang Dao Mountains, ruling over the mountains and the surrounding area (see Wijeyewardene 1986; Swearer, Sommai and Phaithoon 2004). He is annually propitiated to assure a good harvest in April, the Thai New Year. He also appears as a lineage spirit whose descent group members are considered as his *luk-lan* (literally children and grandchildren), while the congregation are described as slaves (see Turton 1972: 247).[5]

In Luang Prabang Nang Kwang Hi rules over Phu Thao and Phu Nang. Her cult is preserved through a group of Xieng Maen villagers descending from the same matrilineal family, known as *kong khoi*, meaning a group of slaves/servants (of the spirit). Her spirit shrine is looked after by two custodians (*kuan ho*), members of the *kong khoi* family.

Bun Duean Chet of Xieng Maen Village falls on the twelfth to fourteenth days of the waning moon of the sixth lunar month.[6] The three-day ceremony includes the nourishment of the spirits and spirit-possession. Nang Kwang Hi is invoked by a medium at her shrine. Also invited to the ceremony is Queen Kham Ouane (1885–1915), the first wife of King Sisavang Vong and the mother of the last and uncrowned Lao king, Sisavang Vatthana. She was buried in the royal cemetery situated in Xieng Maen Village. Since the spirits are *chao* (lords), during the spirit worship the *kong khoi* use language indicating the spirits' superior status, such as *doi* (meaning "yes") and *khanoi* (meaning "I"). These words express politeness and indicate the speaker's lower status in terms of age or social class.

During the ceremony male villagers gamble over a pitch-and-toss game using *mak ba*, elephant creeper seeds (*Entada phaseoloides*), and cock-fights. They told me that these games originate from the myth of Nang Sipsong, as Buddhasen was famous for gambling. The games are played as a commemoration to Nang Kwang Hi. Although their opinion may not be wholly correct, as the games can be found throughout Southeast Asia and the Pacific (see Davis 1984: 100; Tanabe 1991), it shows that the myth of Nang Sipsong remains meaningful to Lao villagers, and Nang Kwang Hi is remembered by the villagers who have continued to worship her.

The potency of Nang Kwang Hi is not limited to her territory on the Xieng Maen bank. The myth of Nang Sipsong is widely told by city people. Today, Bun Duean Chet has been revived in many villages on the city bank. Nang Kwang Hi is said to possess mediums in the city. Although her dynasty has long disappeared, Nang Kwang Hi is frequently asked by villagers to give advice about their business and recommend lotto numbers in the next draw.

[5] The matrilineal spirit cult known as *phi pu nya* is common in Northern Thailand and is related to Tai uxorilocality (see Cohen and Wijeyewardene 1984). Generally the youngest daughter, who looks after her parents in their old age, inherits the parental house, including the spirit house where the spirit shrine resides, and inherits the position of lineage head or the custodian of the spirit. In Luang Prabang I have never found a matrilineal descent group equivalent to the *phi pu nya*, but matrilineally related kinsmen in Laos are responsible for specific spirits.

[6] In some villages Bun Duean Chet is organized in the sixth lunar month.

Spatial layout of Luang Prabang: the galactic polity versus the spirit realm

While existing studies of present-day Lao rituals focus on the perspective of political figures and emphasize that Lao traditions in the socialist regime have gone through changes, discontinuity, simplification and secularization with the absence of the king (Evans 1998; Trankell 2000: 191-213), I found that the traditions of Luang Prabang have been well maintained in popular culture. This section will show how the structure of the Tai *muang* in association with the spirit of Nang Kwang Hi has continued to govern the Lao local conceptualization of space between the city and the Xieng Maen riverbank, and the way the city people and Xieng Maen villagers view each other.

The space of Luang Prabang through which the Mekong River flows seems to be divided not only by the river, but also by different powers: while the city represents the galactic polity ruled by the Buddhist Tai king, Xieng Maen is the spirit realm ruled by Nang Kwang Hi.

In a Tai *muang* Buddhism is a key to classify the civilized Tai from animist Kha. In keeping with this conception, Xieng Maen Village is regarded by city people as the spirit domain associated with inauspiciousness and the land of uncultured and less sophisticated people. Xieng Maen villagers are viewed as poor, less educated and less culturally sophisticated than city dwellers. The contrasts between the city and Xieng Maen originate from the hierarchical structure of *muang*.

The dichotomy between the galactic polity in the city and the spirit realm on the Xieng Maen riverbank is expressed in the rituals related to King Sisavang Vong (1885–1959) and Queen Kham Ouane. The king participated in the That Luang Festival as the righteous king with great Buddhist merit. After his death on 29 October 1959, his remains were interred in a stupa at That Luang Temple, where there is also a Grand Stupa containing the Buddha's relics. Every year royal family members gather at the temple on 29 October to commemorate the king (see Evans 2008). The tomb of Queen Kham Ouane is in the royal cemetery on the Xieng Maen riverbank (see Figure 3), which is related to death and funerals. In the past city people took the corpses of their relatives in a boat across the Mekong River, and cremated them in the deserted area in the south[7] of Xieng Maen Village. Later, Khamsouk Boupha (1889–1979), a high-ranking official of Luang Prabang, realized that it was inconvenient and costly for each family to take the corpse across the river for a funeral at Xieng Maen, and thus built crematoriums in the city. City people then criticized him as they believed that funerals were inauspicious rites that would cause misfortune to the city (Khamphai, n.d.).

The royal cemetery is situated in Xieng Maen for this same reason and through fear of the potency of the spirits of those who have died bad deaths (*phi tai hong*). Royal members who were *phi tai hong* were buried in the royal cemetery. It is commonly said that those dying irregular deaths, including women dying in pregnancy, cannot be given the normal mortuary rites, and must be buried rather than cremated (Tambiah 1970: 189-90; Turton 1972: 248-9; Davis 1984: 262).

[7] The southern direction is associated with inauspicious rites (Davis 1984).

Figure 3. Grave of Queen Kham Ouane, and inscription, giving her birth on 15 July 1885 and death on 5 June 1915, aged 30.

An old Lao princess, a daughter of King Sisavang Vong, told me that Queen Kham Ouane and twelve members of the royal household died when her boat sank after hitting a rock in the Mekong River, a dangerous site associated with a *naga* guardian spirit. The rock was then called Kon Lo, Rock of a Dozen. Queen Kham Ouane was pregnant when she died. Her spirit was considered to be dangerous (see Terwiel 1978: 162; Terwiel 1994: 47; Davis 1984: 262). Each year, around February, the remaining vestiges of royalty in Luang Prabang meet at the cemetery to venerate the queen and organize a Buddhist ritual to transfer merit to her. Also, the queen is worshipped annually, together with Nang Kwang Hi, in Bun Duean Chet at Xieng Maen Village.

The dichotomy between the galactic polity and the spirit realm is present in the rituals related to the royal couple. This structure has continued to separate the city from the Xieng Maen riverbank and differentiate the people on the opposite banks of the Mekong River.

Mount Phusi: spirit challenges to the galactic polity

In Luang Prabang the hallmark of galactic polity is Mount Phusi. When I first arrived in the city and heard an elderly villager mentioning how astonishing it is that this natural mountain stands at the center of the city, I thought she conceptualized Mount Phusi as a perfect replica of Mount Meru, as I thought the concept of galactic polity sounded suitable for Luang Prabang, a long-time royal headquarters; and I was unaware of the Lao genuine belief system. After I revisited her and heard her stories about the *nyak* of

Phusi, which is frequently mentioned by other villagers, I gained an understanding of what Mount Phusi means to the townsfolk of Luang Prabang.

The local legend of Mount Phusi states that the mountain's original name is Nantha Kwang Hi Sisattanaga[8] (Khamman 1964: 8-9), before the establishment of the stupa on its summit by King Anourouth (r. 1791–1817). Nantha and Kwang Hi were demons ruling Luang Prabang. Since the death of Nantha, a demon has become the guardian spirit of Luang Prabang residing on the sacred mountain.

Stories about the *nyak* and spirits on Mount Phusi are often told by Lao villagers. Some may enthusiastically tell tourists to look at the seashell fossil embedded in a weathering rock on the hill's slope, before insisting that the huge rock looks like a palm with five fingers, belonging to none other than Nang Kwang Hi.

A tradition of Luang Prabang is the Phusi drumbeating. Every three hours, beginning from 12.00 a.m., villagers in the vicinity of the mountain can hear drumbeats echoing from the hill's summit. Some elderly townsfolk said that the drumbeats mark the time each day, but at unusual periods, such as in the raging fire that destroyed the city in 1774 (see Khamman 1964: 32), or during the US airforce carpet bombing in the 1970s they served as an alarm system. These elderly villagers also insisted that this tradition has happened "*sen poh sen mae*" (since their early ancestors), and if the tradition was not maintained, a *nyak* would appear to cause trouble. The Phusi drumbeating, associated with animism, was prohibited after the communist revolution but was revived soon after political relaxation in Laos due to local belief in the spirits.

Phusi's tambour is placed in a small pavilion called "*ho kong*", close to the highest point where the stupa housing the Buddha relics is sited. The Phusi drummer is a public position, offering approximately US$50 a month. The current drummer told me that when he first began in this position, he was scared to climb the mountain at night, as his predecessors told him that they met a *nyak* or spirit on the mountain. He also learned from some old villagers that during the previous regime a buffalo was sacrificed annually to the *nyak* of Phusi. I found at least three mediums in the villages around the mountain slope. Although there is no longer buffalo sacrifice, spirit worship and spirit-possession is performed annually at Phusi's spirit shrine.

During the Lao New Year Festival some villagers of Xieng Mouane Village, located opposite Mount Phusi and close to the palace, donate money to the custodian of the spirit shrine situated in the village's temple to offer food to the spirit. The shrine is said to belong to Nang Kwang Hi. A donor told me that women in her village are *hai* (aggressive and brave) as they are *chum nyakini*, descended from *nyakini* (female demons). Although these villagers mentioned *nyak* and Nang Kwang Hi, none of them seems to be confident about confirming the spirit's identity.

Another woman, whose late mother-in-law had been the custodian of the shrine, told me that the shrine is called *ho kong* (drum shrine) or *ho nang* (lady's shrine). Although she did not know more about the spirit, she believed in its power. She recalled that in

[8] Sisattanaga is the *naga* residing on Mount Phusi. See Luang Prabang chronicle (Savang 1987) for the legend of the *naga* guardian spirits of Luang Prabang, and Archaimbault's research (1972) on the worship of the *naga* guardian spirits during the annual boat racing festivals in Luang Prabang.

1989 or 1990 the abbot of Xieng Mouane Temple told her mother-in-law that the shrine should be destroyed. The spirit was very angry and caused severe illness to the woman's four-year-old daughter. After her mother-in-law arranged some offerings for the spirit and asked for forgiveness, her daughter recovered.[9]

Although I did not find any villagers who could confidently confirm that the shrine belongs to Nang Kwang Hi, perhaps this is because it is an old tradition and some of its elements may have long been forgotten; but it appears that Nang Kwang Hi has been well remembered by Lao villagers, as well as city dwellers.

In sum, although Lao people acknowledge that Mount Phusi is an important Buddhist monument, the mountain does not seem to appear as a holy Buddhist center or a symbol of galactic polity in Lao popular culture. Rather, it is viewed as the perfect spirit realm, where the *phi muang* resides. Mount Phusi's original name, Nantha Kwang Hi Sisattanaga, may reflect early Southeast Asian traditions, as some Southeast Asian kings bore the title Sailendra, meaning "King of the Mountain" and the veneration of local divinities on mountaintops is a common practice in this region (Cœdès 1968). In Luang Prabang a *nyak* from the dynasty of Nang Kwang Hi is the *phi muang* residing on Mount Phusi (Khamman 1964: 8-9). From the perspective of Lao villagers, this natural mountain at the heart of the city is comparable to a *lak muang* where the *phi muang* resides. This interpretation is confirmed by Prince Khamman Vongkot Rattana, a royal member from Luang Prabang and a Lao scholar, who refers to Mount Phusi as "Phu Lak Muang" (ibid.: 8), literally the City-Pillar Mountain.

Marginalization of the cult of Nang Kwang Hi by political authority

The spirit of Nang Kwang Hi, a symbol of matriarchy and representative of the non-Tai dynasty, has been denigrated by Lao political authorities in several ways.

First, in the spatial layout of Luang Prabang, the spirit of Nang Kwang Hi has been set to one side. Her spirit co-exists with Buddhism, but in her own sacred space. This repeats the pattern of a Tai *muang*: When a Tai state was founded, the Tai chased the animist Kha into the forest. Similarly, Nang Kwang Hi has her territory outside the city on the opposite bank of the Mekong River. This pattern is present in the rituals related to King Sisavang Vong and Queen Kham Ouane, and differentiates the city people from Xieng Maen villagers.

Second, Lao kings have constructed Buddhist edifices at religious places associated with Nang Kwang Hi, such as the That Chomsi Stupa on Mount Phusi. Similarly, the plantation of Nang Kwang Hi was transformed into the That Luang field where the king meditated overnight during the That Luang Festival.

The construction of Buddhist monuments by the king at places associated with *naga* and *nyak* is common in Tai states. Davis mentions that "A number of apocryphal religious histories depict the Buddha subduing fearful man-eating *yakkha* (demons),

[9] Spirits are believed to be able to punish members of the community for certain misconduct, including mistreatment of the shrine. When the spirits are offended, they cause sickness, mainly to women (see Turton 1972: 235).

who probably represent primitive and possibly cannibals conquered by the Tai" (1984: 35). Grabowsky emphasizes that religious monuments, such as the Buddha's footprints, were designed to override the power of sacred sites associated with pre-Buddhist spirit cults. He argues that Buddhist monuments, centered on the worship of Buddhist relics, built by Lao kings "replaced the spirit cults and thereby legitimized the power and territorial rights of the king" (2007: 129).

Finally, as Wijeyewardene suggests that "the matrilineal cults may be taken over by men for specific political purposes" (1986: 146), a Lao expert of Luang Prabang origin suggests that the story of Nang Sipsong has been composed twice. The original version probably ended at the death of Buddhasen, whose head was placed at the feet of Nang Kwang Hi. The later version added that the position of the corpses of Nang Kwang Hi and Buddhasen was changed by Indra, who viewed that the male subordinate position at the feet of female was an omen that would cause misfortune to the people in this kingdom. In his discussion on the support of male supremacy by Indra in Northern Thai culture, Davis (1984: 67) refers to the Northern Thai religious folk text called The Annals of Lord Inda (Indra), which predicts that religion and ethics will decline because of female predominance over men. "Political stability, as well as moral rectitude, depends upon male supremacy: 'the leg of the prince rests over the leg of the princess'…is a literary turn of phrase meaning peace reigns in the land".

Huxley (1995) shows another version of Buddhasen which is a product of elite culture. In this version some fragments of the myth of Nang Sipsong were included in the Buddhist text of Dhananjaya. The text emphasizes Buddhist virtues for the king and his subjects and circulated circa the 15th century in Chiang Mai and other Tai states. This version relates that Buddhasen and Nang Kwang Hi were descended from the Bodhisattva Dhananjaya. Huxley suggests that an early Northern Tai king may have been inspired to found a kingdom of exemplary virtue, similar to the country of Dhananjaya, located in present-day Delhi, and that pre-Buddhist legends of origin were rewritten to promote the ideal Buddhist kingdom.

Considering these materials, it is possible that the myth of Nang Sipsong was rewritten to place the female in a position inferior to the male (signifying male Buddhist newcomers) to reinforce male supremacy.

Despite efforts to marginalize Nang Kwang Hi, such efforts have been only partially successful. Standing along the Mekong River, the Phu Thao and Phu Nang Mountains have been taken to embody the dynastic legend of the stranger-king and the autochthonous princess-owner of the land, and the Tai belief in the potency of the indigenous spirit. So too has Mount Phusi, even after the erection of the stupa on its summit. Taking a ferry from the city to the Xieng Maen riverbank and vice-versa, I usually saw Lao villagers asking the supernatural beings of Phu Thao Phu Nang and Mount Phusi for their protection. During the Bun Duean Chet festival Nang Kwang Hi is venerated by Xieng Maen villagers and remembered by city dwellers. The townsfolk of Luang Prabang continue to recall, venerate, and also fear her.

Conclusion

I have focused on the perspective of the original townspeople of Luang Prabang, with a particular emphasis on women, and on rituals as practiced in popular, non-official contexts. The research contradicts the conventional analysis of contemporary Lao rituals, which emphasizes that rituals have been changed, reinvented, secularized or discontinued for the state's benefit in socialist Laos (Evans 1998; Trankell 2000: 191-213). In my view, a methodological focus on the state authorities as authors of the rites leaves out the role of the many ritual participants and does not represent the traditions practiced in the popular culture. I have shown in this paper the tenacity of "*Muang* Luang Prabang".

Many studies of Lao spirits have focused on those spirits associated with the establishment of the royal line and disregarded the ubiquity and potency of female spirits in popular contexts. Despite her long-lasting influence on the people of Luang Prabang, Nang Kwang Hi has been neglected in scholarly work on Lao traditions (eg, Archaimbault 1973; Aijmer 1979; Evans 1998) or "spirits of the place" in Luang Prabang (Holt 2009). This research on female tutelary spirits aims to fill a gap in the study of Lao spirit cults.

The paper has shown that the hierarchical structure of *muang*, with a dichotomy between the civilized Buddhist Tai and non-civilized animist Kha, remains in place. Only by including the cult of Nang Kwang Hi in our analytical framework can we recognize the ritual relations between the Tai and non-Tai populations, and the continuity of the traditional structure of *muang* Luang Prabang. These relations are present in the rituals related to the last crowned king of Laos and his first queen consort, the spatial layout of Luang Prabang, and how city people and Xieng Maen villagers differentiate themselves.

Luang Prabang has a tourist reputation as the ancient Lao royal capital and a sacred Buddhist city. However, the Lao conceptualization of space reflects the townspeople's strong belief in animism. To Lao villagers, the river is not simply a river, nor is the mountain just a mountain. The river and mountain are related to the local myths and legends, telling the stories of the guardian spirits of the locality. These stories, especially the myth of Nang Sipsong, provide insights into the mythological origins of Luang Prabang as registered in space and memory. The echo of the stories pervades the rites that animate the life of Luang Prabang, structures its space, and fills the lives of its inhabitants with meaning.

Spirit worship is dominant in post-socialist Laos. Evans (1998: 71-82) argues that spirit cults survive because Marxism cannot serve human needs in the time of personal existential crisis, especially in the climate of uncertainty and rapid social change in modern Laos. Similar arguments have been made about the resurgence of prosperity religions and the cult of amulets in the postmodern context of Thailand in the 1990s (Jackson 1999). Observers have noted that the global decline of socialist regimes and the intensification of capitalist relations in the 1990s were attended by the rise of various religious movements (Taylor 2004). Holt (2009) argues that the pervasiveness of spirit cults in Luang Prabang results from the weakness of traditional (Buddhist) and modern (Marxist) states in imposing their authority and ideology in Laos.

I contend that Luang Prabang traditions, both Buddhist and pre-Buddhist, have been well maintained by women and because of the continuity of village life in Luang Prabang, which shows uxorilocal traits (see also Platenkamp 2010). Uxorilocality governs many aspects of Lao culture and social structure: the kinship and close-knit relationship of villagers in the same village; the shared attributes of Lao society; and the important status and roles of women in their family, and by implication, in society. Lao traditions have been passed down from the mother and her matrilateral kin to their daughters, allowing women to become the preservers of Lao traditions, and pass them down to the younger generation. In spirit worship, matrilineally related kinsmen share responsibility for specific spirits. The position of shrine custodians, including the custodians of Nang Kwang Hi, is passed down to a female member of the family.

To date little research has been conducted on Lao female spirits from the perspective of commoners, especially women who predominantly venerate them. To understand the spirit worship and the *phi muang* cults in Luang Prabang, it is crucial to pay close attention to female tutelary spirits, and the cult of Nang Kwang Hi in particular. Despite the long disappearance of her dynasty, Nang Kwang Hi has continued to confront Buddhist forces in the galactic polity and challenge socialist ideology in modern-day Laos.

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