

Patrice Ladwig\*

## THE MIMETIC REPRESENTATION OF THE DEAD AND SOCIAL SPACE AMONG THE BUDDHIST LAO\*\*

### ABSTRACT

The practice to bury a deceased's bones and ashes in a stupa-monument is widespread in the Buddhist world. Among the Lao, the spatial positioning of this 'bone stupa' is directly related to their conceptions of social space. But the bone-stupa, despite its Buddhist origins, also represents an ancestral shrine located in the heart of the community.

### KEYWORDS

Lao – death – ritual – space – Buddhism

### Introduction

Among the Buddhist Lao, a distinction is made between 'good/normal death' (*taai thammadaa*) and 'sudden/bad death' (*taai huung*).<sup>1</sup> After the cremation has taken place and the bones have been separated from the flesh of the deceased, the remains (i.e. bones and/or ashes) of those who have died a 'normal death' are ritually transported to the temple (*wat*) where they are enshrined in a funeral monument called 'bone stupa' (Lao: *thaat kaduuk*).<sup>2</sup> The procession to the temple and the enshrinement of the remains of the dead is the last sequence – in Hertzian (1960: 55f.) terms the 'second mortuary rite' – of the funeral rites to be

\* Patrice Ladwig is currently a PhD-candidate in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge.

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<sup>1</sup> The Lao term *taai huung*, which can roughly be translated with 'sudden death' implicates a complex classification of different types of deaths: victims of murder, pregnant mothers dying in childbirth, drowning, falling from a tree, road accident, plane crash etc. (Formoso 1998: 9). Zago has stated that persons who die a death classified as *taai huung* receive little attention (1972: 253). Formoso, on the other hand, has stated that bad death requires a special ritual due to its inherently dangerous aspects (1998: 9). For a detailed description of guidelines to deal with a *taai huung* death among the Lao see Archaimbault (1973: 179f.).

<sup>2</sup> This tradition represents an 'idealtypic' funeral. Obviously, there are many exceptions to that pattern. Some villages have cemeteries which are positioned outside the village area or have abandoned their traditional spatial conceptions due to resettlement or war. This also reveals something about the ambiguities involved in the rather structuralist approach taken here towards social space. Furthermore, – and this should usually prevent us from 'essentialising' culture – the burial technique involving an erection of a *thaat kaduuk* is often only reserved for more or less wealthy and male members of a group. For a detailed ethnographic description of this part of the death ritual see Abhay (1956: 835); Deydier (1952: 39); Zago 1972: 250 and Archaimbault (1973: 193).

accomplished. This practice is encountered with local variants in many parts of the Theravada Buddhist world of Southeast Asia (SEA) and is at least partially based on a mythological and mimetic conception related to the funeral of the Buddha.

The questions that arise and that shall be discussed here are related to two points: why are the remains of a person if possible enshrined in this specific monument and why is the *thaat kaduuk* preferably positioned in the compound of the *wat* or directly around its premises? The significance of social space, in particular with regard to the role of the *wat* as its centre and 'head' of the village, is encountered here. Both practices, in turn, are linked to the questions: What does a *stupa* 'stand' for and how does a *stupa* containing the relics of a deceased 'represent' him? The different ideas related to the *stupa* in Buddhism, in general, and in its SEA variant, namely in Laos, relate to the cult of the relics in its specific context. As sources directly relating to the *thaat kaduuk* are almost non-existent, I will try to clarify their significance largely by referring to other Buddhist concepts of death and funeral monuments. Furthermore I will try to show that the *thaat* as a funeral monument also a mediating nature between classical Theravada-Buddhist conceptions of death and those related to a pre-Buddhist ancestor cult of the Tai.

### The stupa as a Funeral Mount and a Living Entity

Buddhist monuments called *stupa* or *cetiya*<sup>3</sup> have attracted a vast amount of excellent scholarship. The *stupa* is probably the Buddhist monument par excellence and its symbolism is discussed in almost all the academic works on Buddhism and on SEA in general.<sup>4</sup> Originally they are reliquary monuments and their architectural structure, despite all its variants, is one that reproduces the Buddhist-Hindu idea of the cosmos with Mount Meru in its middle and different hierarchically arranged levels of the universe; an *axis mundi* mediating between microcosm and macrocosm. In the Lao context as well, the *thaat* is a replication of the sacred topography with Mount Meru in its middle and forms the focus of various rituals (Zago 1972: 345-53).

<sup>3</sup> The Sanskrit word *stupa* derives its meaning from "the upper part of the head, crest, top, summit" (Trainor 1997: 34), but the meaning adopted in later Theravada-Buddhism is 'relic monument'. *Cetiya*, a term which in the Buddhist literature is used interchangeably with *stupa*, probably derives from *cīta* ('funeral pile'). In Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit the term can have the sense of 'an object worth of veneration' (Trainor 1997: 36).

<sup>4</sup> For a general overview on *stupa* literature see Brown (1986) or the standard work on the symbolism of the *stupa* by Snodgrass (1985). The best work that sees the *stupa* in relation to the importance of the cult of relics in Buddhism is Trainor's (1997) seminal study *Relics, Ritual and Representation in Buddhism*. Literature on the *stupa* in Lao Buddhism is, as usual, quite rare. Only Zago (1972) and Archaimbault (1973: 20ff.) discuss the topic. Sources directly relating to the *stupa* in a broader Lao context are Lafont (1957) and Ladwig (2000).

The aspect of this monument that is of interest to our topic here is the stupa as a funeral monument for the Buddha himself as well as for 'ordinary' Buddhist believers who have died a non-violent, 'natural' death. In order to accomplish this analysis in the context of the Laos' burial practices, however, we must at first clarify which characteristics are attributed to the *stupa* in general and specifically in Laos. *Stupas*, said to contain the relics of the Buddha or another high-ranking person, are places of worship and 'spiritual' power/potency, because they are thought to contain the 'essence' of the Buddha and are sources of the *dhamma* (the universal Buddhist 'law', doctrine) (Mus 1935: 248). Moreover they are considered as places where it is possible to make merit (Lao: *het bun*), in both Lao tradition and Theravada-Buddhist conceptions (Archambault 1972: 79). Originally, they are conceptualised as funeral monuments and they are attributed active qualities. There are innumerable textual sources that reveal that the *stupa* – when containing a relic of the Buddha – is, in actual fact, the Buddha himself, a 'living entity'. Bareaux succinctly states the underlying concept: "Comme toute personne, le stupa a le droit de possession [...] et ce droit doit être protégé [...] Le stupa est plus que le symbole du Buddha, c'est le Buddha lui-même" (1962: 253). Other sources state the same for the contents of the *stupa*, the relics: here the physical relics of the Buddha are identified with his personal presence when he was still living (Trainor 1997: 92). Schopen reports that passages in the different canonical sources repeatedly state that the relics are endowed with 'life' and 'breath' and that they are 'infused with concentration and wisdom' (1997: 126f.). The same words are used in the canonical texts to describe the Buddha himself. Although these qualities of the *stupa* are taken from a general Theravada context, there are intriguing parallels to be found in the Laos' indigenous ontology, because some *thaat* are believed to have 'life-essence' (*khwan*)<sup>5</sup>, a quality they share with humans, houses, buffaloes and so on (Zago 1972: 328). Furthermore, as we shall see later, they seem to be connected to a specific spirit (*phii*). After having clarified some of the characteristics of the *stupa*, we can return to our ethnographic case and deal with

<sup>5</sup> The term *khwan* has been translated as an "unsubstantial thing supposed to reside in the physical body of a person" (Rajadhon 1962: 119), or as "vital essence" (Heinze 1988: 393). Phongphit and Hewison translate it as "spirit or essence of life, [...] principle of life" (1990: 72). Regardless of the gloss, it can be assumed that *khwan* lies at the basis of the indigenous ontology of the Lao. *Khwan* is a central force animating not only human beings, but also other beings designated as belonging to a specific social space such as houses, domesticated animals, domesticated plants etc. Every human being already has a *khwan* when it is born. The *khwan* is bound to the body, sometimes even to different organs (Finot 1917: 79f). There is not one sole *khwan*, but a multitude of *khwan*. Among the Lao, there are 32, probably modelled on Hindu and Buddhist concepts of the body. Among other Tai, there are sometimes over one hundred *khwan* thought to be present. They seem, however, to be treated as a unity (Kannitana & Placzek 1986: 154).

the relation between those *stupas* containing the relics of the Buddha and the ones erected for the 'normal dead' in Laos.

### Mimetic Performance and the Construction of a 'New Body'

Mimetic rites, i.e. the ritual re-enactment of a mythologized and/or historical event, is a very common pattern in religious systems. The classical approach to mimetic rites has been worked out by Eliade (1974), who sees religious ritual as a re-enactment of sacral events that took place *in illo tempore*. This is, to put it mildly, a somewhat speculative and romanticised way of viewing rituals. Girard has put forward a somewhat more updated, but still speculative and evolutionary version with his idea of 'mimetic desire' in *Violence and the Sacred* (1977). Hence I do not want to follow the evolutionary and speculative implications of both and instead only refer to Turner (1988), who combines mimesis with ritual performance theory.

Without intending to plunge to deeply into the concept of mimesis, one could say that myths are believed to deliver a (pseudo-) blueprint for ritual actions, although this is not to be understood as some kind of mechanical reproduction, but a constantly changing and creative process in which myth and ritual enter into a process of mutual signification and semiotic 'remixing'.

In order to give a proper example of this mimetic strategy, I would at first like to turn to a completely different ethnographic and historical context and consult an analysis of Daniel De Coppet (1992) concerning the royal funeral ceremonies during the French Renaissance era. Here the empty coffin or litter displayed to the public in the course of the funeral rites is seen as a re-presentation of the deceased. Furthermore the funeral of the king (and other persons) is set in relation to one of the most crucial events in Christianity:

"This mystery and this journey, as well as the repetition of this 'absence here/ presence in the next world', recall and re-present a fundamental disappearance, that of Christ's body from the Holy Sepulchre on the way to his resurrection. [...] Thus the funeral repeats for the deceased – royal or not – Christ's disappearance from this tomb, one of the fundamental events of Christianity. The empty coffin or empty litter, as a *re-présentation*, at once recaptures a prior experience – death to earthly life – and constructs a new experience – birth into eternal life – [...]" (De Coppet 1992: 67)

The repetition of this event is a representation in the creative sense, not a means of coercion in the sense of René Girard. However curious, this model of an efficacious mimesis is also applicable to large areas of the Buddhist world and present-day Laos. In Theravada-Buddhism, the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* ('Sutra of the complete extinction') is a major reference for conceptions of death. Obviously only a few components of this mythological narrative directly entered

into the conceptions of ritual practices among Buddhists all over the world and the Lao, but one component, namely the enshrinement of the bones of a person into a *stupa*, is of real significance for our case here.

The fact that the bones of a person - identified as 'living entities' through their reception of food and merit<sup>6</sup> - are finally placed to rest in a *thaat kaduuk*, can be illuminated with reference to the work of Bernhard Faure, who has compared the mortuary practices of Buddhist societies all over the world. He emphasises that the *stupa* is not only the 'container' of the relics of the Buddha or the remains of the deceased, nor simply a monument and a 'symbol', but the Buddha and the deceased himself:

"The grave (or the *stupa*) is not only the habitat of the deceased, it is the deceased himself. Moreover, every grave is a reconstruction of the original *stupa*, the one of the Buddha, which, as we have already remarked, is not just the Buddha's reliquary, his commemorative monument or his symbol, but himself in person. Through a series of quasi algebraic equivalences one will come to the conclusion that the Buddhist deceased is no one else than the Buddha himself. This equalisation enhances the value of the funeral, which in itself is meant to transform the deceased into an enlightened person, a Buddha." (Faure 1998: 106 - my translation; original emphasis)

This enshrinement has then to be understood as a re-enactment of the Buddha's funeral. Just as the empty coffin in the Renaissance era in France, the placing of the deceased's remains in a *stupa* efficaciously repeats the construction of the first *stupa* for the Buddha and his remains.

The *stupa* may also be seen in another perspective: the idea that funeral rites try to produce a new body (or double) for the deceased is common in many societies. Hertz, in his classical *Death and the right hand*, notes that the aim of the final obsequies of a 'double funeral' is to "give the deceased a new and glorified body" (1960: 55) and it is evident that for a Buddhist no body could be more glorifying than the one the Buddha had. Paul Mus, in his monumental study on one of the biggest *stupas* of the world in Barabudur, sees the connection between the dead and his new body, the *stupa*, in a comparable perspective:

"Il en résulte que la tombe devient beaucoup moins l'habitation du mort qu'une sorte de corps artificiel substitué à la dépouille mortelle, un 'homme cosmique' funéraire, où logera l'entité magique qui prolonge le défunt [...] C'est un nouveau corps architectural, qui est, si l'on veut, le logis du mort, mais seulement à la manière dont son corps l'avait logé de son vivant." (Mus 1935: 213)

<sup>6</sup> For example directly after the cremation the bones or ashes, sometimes placed in an urn, undergo a rite of merit transfer that Zago names *bangsoukoun* (1972: 250). In the *bangsoukoun* rite, the bones are connected to the gifts presented to monks and the monks themselves by a cotton thread. The *bangsoukoun* is not only a rite for transferring merit to the deceased, but to a living person as well.

Although the *thaat* erected for the dead in Laos are sometimes rather small and aesthetically simple, it can be assumed that the *thaat* also represents 'l'homme cosmique', as expressed by Mus, for its architectural design is based upon the cosmological model of the Hindu-Buddhist world. The new corpse of the deceased is a cosmos en miniature (Mus 1935: 219), prolonging his life on earth.<sup>7</sup>

Then the *stupa* is the new body of the deceased, prolongs his earthly life and its erection re-enacts the Buddha's own funeral. Representation in this context has to be understood in the sense of *marking the efficacious presence of something* (Chartier 1989; Ginzburg 1991). In the case of the *stupa*, it can be said that it 'lives' and even 'possesses' something. Yet western approaches to 'special objects' (ancestor statues, objects of worship etc.) in general are often rather ethnocentric.<sup>8</sup> Western conceptions of ontology and epistemology do not usually consider that material objects can even possess a sort of agency, as Gell for example (1998) has put forward.

Accepting the notion that *stupas* mark the presence of the Buddha and, as observed by Faure, that the construction of a *stupa* for a 'normal' dead is an efficacious mimesis of the Buddha's funeral monument, it becomes clear that the deceased himself is present in the *stupa*. The deceased is not simply 'represented' in the sense of 'being stood for'. As the *stupas* containing relics of the Buddha provide access to the Buddha without bringing him back into *samsara*, so the *stupa* for the normal layman provides his family access to him without hindering his reincarnation. We here have a seemingly paradoxical interplay of presence and absence. Although the Buddha has reached *nirvana* and the dead have been reincarnated, the Buddha and the deceased are still 'here' in form of their relics and the *stupa* that encloses them - it provides a concrete visible and 'visitable' new body for them.

The active presence of the deceased actually opens the possibility of seeing the rituals taking place for a deceased in front of his *thaat* as a process that includes the possibility of 'communication'. The ritual actions in form of offerings do not focus on a dead object, but a living being, the deceased's new body. Likewise, a ritual performance that focuses on a *stupa* containing a relic of the Buddha can

<sup>7</sup> Just to mention another example: In the Greek world, there was a comparable conception, namely that associated with the *kolossos*, often translated with the term 'statue'. The research of the linguist Emile Benveniste established an older meaning, which *kolossos* implies in relation to the cult of the dead among the Greeks. There the *kolossos* had a similar function as the *stupa* in Buddhist cultures: "Voilà le sens authentique du mot: des statuettes funéraires, des substituts spirituels, des doublets, qui prennent la place des absents et continuent leur existence terrestre" (Benveniste 1931: 118).

<sup>8</sup> The modern gaze often fails to grasp the essential qualities of the *stupa* and other Buddhist icons such as statues (Faure 1997). We perceive art and architecture from a historically specific mental organization (Benjamin 1964:155) that often emphasizes radically different criteria than the societies anthropologists deal with (cf. Gombrich 1963: 3-9).

not be seen as a worship of a dead material object, but as a ritual involving the Buddha himself. The gifts regularly presented to the deceased among the Lao in the course of e.g. 'merit transmission rites' or the meals served (usually placed in front of the *thaat*) on specific days can be conceptualised as reaching out to the dead. Often, whether immediately after the mortuary rites or years later, a ritual called *bun thaan haa* ('rite for the transmission of merit in favour of the person XY') is performed (Zago 1972: 252; Condominas 1998: 73). During the course of this rite, the monks are once again invited to the house to which the dead person 'once belonged'/'still belongs'. On the next day the family visits the local *wat* and presents "tout un équipement de bonze" (Condominas 1998: 73) and offers the deceased a meal at the *thaat* where his bones are enshrined. Another rite that is intimately linked to the dead and the ancestors is the *bun khau salaak*, an expression that Zago translates as "fête du riz tire au sort" (1972: 222f.). Archambault simply refers to it as "fête des morts" (1973: 317). During both rites however, the living enter into a form of communication with the deceased when they transfer merit to them and present gifts through the intermediary role of the monks. Zago describes the process as follows:

"Les dons et les objets personnels du défunt ne sont plus, sauf les vêtements et le peigne, brisés et par là transmis au trépassé, mais remis au service des bonzes, qui peuvent communiquer au mort le mérite de l'action accomplie; nourriture et dons sont également présentés en faveur des morts par l'intermédiaire des religieux. [...] L'aumône aux bonzes se présente comme le moyen privilégié de transmission des mérites au défunt; le rite de remise des dons aux bonzes s'appelle Bangsoukoun. Pendant l'accomplissement du rite, les bonzes récitent des formules sur la fugacité de la vie ou des souhaits de transmission et de profit pour les trépassés." (Zago 1972: 254-55)

### The *thaat kaduuk* as an 'Ancestral Shrine'

Although the Buddhist characteristics of the *stupa* already offer some reasonable explanations, this account is only partial. In addition, the relationship of Buddhism and the pre-Buddhist *phii* ('spirit', 'ancestor') cult has to be taken into consideration. The overlapping of the *stupa* as a 'house of the Buddha' and a place of residence for different *phii*, *yakkhas* and other beings of non-Buddhist origin is widely reported from Laos (see e.g. Lafont 1957: 40; Abhay 1956: 963) and has been discovered in continental SEA in general. Usually these beings of autochthonous origin live in or near the *thaat* and are its protective spirits. Mus called the worship of these beings 'cadastral cult' and proposed that they were later on integrated into the Hindu-Buddhist context (1975: 10-11).

When we take into consideration that *stupas* connect Buddhism and spirit-cult, a statement such as that by Keyes on the erection of a *thaat* for a deceased may be placed in its proper context:

"The northern Thai practice contrasts with what I observed in northeastern Thailand [i.e. among the Lao Isan] where the remains of every adult who died a normal death were enshrined in a reliquary (called *that*). [When] a reliquary is constructed – as it is even in the north for monks and for high-status lay persons – it becomes the object of rites focussed on the spirit that is connected with the shrine. Thus, a type of ancestor worship emerges." (Keyes 1980: 17)

The ancestral *phii* of the deceased inhabit the *thaat* and are, in an active sense, present there. They prolong the deceased's life here on earth. The *stupa* forms a body for them that is constructed in accordance with the Buddhist cosmology. The relics contained in the *stupa* not only possess the 'essence' of the dead, but through their new body connect the world of the living and the dead. Buddhism and the cult of ancestors are inseparably merged here in the form of the *stupa* as in so many other areas of the Lao worldview.<sup>9</sup>

### Burial *ad sanctos* among the Lao: the Representation of the Dead in the Centre of the Social Space

The different kind of meanings attributed to the *stupa* in general as well as to the ones erected especially for the normal deceased has been discussed above. We turn now to the question as to why the relics of a deceased are ritually transported to the temple and why a *thaat* is preferably erected in the temple compound. This clustering is by no means coincidental, but reflects a pattern that can be discovered among the Lao, among Buddhists in general and beyond that.

The perception of space, as understood in our analysis here, is always mediated by society. Hence, space is not a linear homogenous entity, but involves a process of signification with specific values attached to particular places. The collective representations of the social space of a society have an intrinsic connection to the social organisation in general, because the distribution of institutions or groups in social space – what Mauss called social morphology (1968: 369ff.) – forms an important part of the social organisation as a whole. The model of Mauss and Durkheim (1963) could be used here as the values deriving from the Laos' indigenous cosmology may be related to the order of social life in general and in our concrete case to the performance of the last ritual

<sup>9</sup> It would be interesting to research how this active quality of the *thaat* is conceptualised in the indigenous ontology. As we have already remarked, some *thaat* are said to have *khwan* or are inhabited by a specific *phii*. It might also be possible that parts of the deceased's *khwan* stay connected to an ancestral monument. The idea that the different *khwan* of a person split up, journey to, and arrive at their proper destinations (i.e. sky, under the earth, house, grave) is to be found among the different ethnic groups classified as Tai-speakers who are either not all influenced by Buddhism or, if so, only marginally. Among the Tai Dam, some of the *khwan* remain on earth, usually on the ancestors' altar. For more information on the post-mortem station of the various *khwan* among the Tai Dam see Pottier (1985: 242-44), Maspero (1971: 269f.) or Lafont (1955: 807).

sequence in space. In our ethnographic case we can observe a structural concordance between the division of social space and certain values, which govern many areas of the social organisation. In the mortuary rites of the Lao these concordances are of utmost importance and decisively mark the movements of the social group and the corpse in the ritual.

In traditional Lao society, the opposition of head (*hua*) and feet (*tiin*) is of fundamental importance: the head is taken for the 'pure' and most intimate part of a human being, in contrast to the feet, which are associated with impurity and a low status.<sup>10</sup> They have a clear hierarchical relation with *tiin* being the subordinate part. Interestingly enough this opposition not only structures the perception of the human body and related spatial practices, but is an encompassing principle, which can be applied to such diverse areas as the organisation of kinship<sup>11</sup>, the house<sup>12</sup> and the village as a whole (see Formoso 1990 for the Lao Isan; Davis 1984: 96ff for the Northern Thai). The values of head and feet thus form the basis of a number of structural homologies that embrace a classificatory scheme ranging from the individual body to the village. Hence one could say that these values belong to the most important criteria for the organisation of social relations in space. The temple has (here among the Lao Isan) as well a distinguished position in this classificatory scheme, as we are told by Formoso:

"A Ban Amphawan, comme dans la plupart des localités du Nord-Est, la pagode est située dans la partie orientale de l'espace habité. Or les Isannes confèrent à cette position une valeur particulière puisque le quartier oriental, en principe, le plus anciennement bâti, symbolise la 'tête' du village (*hwa ban*<sup>13</sup>), par opposition au quartier occidental, plus récent et qualifié de 'postérieur' (*thaj ban*)." (1992b: 238-39)

<sup>10</sup> The significance of these values becomes immediately important when moving in Laos. It is regarded as extremely impolite to step with ones feet over somebody lying or touching somebody's head without his permission. It is so to say a basic *habitus*, a symbolic structure inscribed on ones body and on space in general. This structure could e.g. be explained with a reference to cosmology and indigenous ontologies. The head is e.g. the seat of the most important life-animating substances, the *khwan*. The relation of these values directly reminds us of the classical work of Hertz (1960) concerning the symbolism of right and left. Hertz' model and later refinements as proposed by Needham (1973)<sup>10</sup> seem to be relevant here, with the exception that we have to substitute right and left with head (up) and feet (down)

<sup>11</sup> There also seem to be other structural homologies as for example [young : low : feet :: old : high : head]. Seniority is an important feature of the Lao kinship system. See Formoso (1992) for this and other details.

<sup>12</sup> Besides the human body, the house itself is structured according to similar principles. The house as a physical structure has a feet and a head side, with the post containing the life essence of the house (*sau khwan*) positioned near the head side (Formoso 1990: 71). The arrangement of the neighbouring houses corresponds to that scheme as well: two heads of a house should never face each other. The sleeping positions of the people who live in the house are also ordered according to that scheme (Charpentier & Clement 1978: 59f).

<sup>13</sup> The writing according to TC would be *hua baan* and *thoi baan*.

With regard to the indigenous ontology of the Lao, the specific value attached to the temple can as well be explained with reference other factors, which legitimate the pre-eminent position of it. It often houses a relic of a Buddhist saint or the Buddha himself (enshrined in another *thaat*) and is often built around the sacrificial post *lak*, which commemorates the first settler of the village and houses its protective spirit *phii* (Raendchen 1998: 147). The *vat* is then so to speak the germ cell of the village and its centre, in the temporal and topographical sense. It is – in a mytho-historical sense – the 'place of origin' of a village as it is often the oldest building and the only real permanent one. What is furthermore noteworthy is the symbolism connected to the directions east and west, partially alluded to by Formoso. Among the Lao, the east is clearly identified with 'life', while the west is associated with death. Tambiah states for the Lao Isan that the place of incineration is located to the west of the temple and that this spatial ordering represents a direct link to processes of life and death (1970: 183). Sleeping positions in the house are also influenced by this scheme, and significantly we encounter a ritual reversal in the case of death. One of Tambiah's informants states that "Normally when we are alive we point our heads to the east when we sleep. The dead are pointed in the opposite direction". (1970: 180)<sup>14</sup> The orientation of the deceased's corpse within and outside the house is of major significance throughout the entire funeral rite.<sup>15</sup> One could thus propose that the spatial journey of the corpse/the remains from the west to the east and to the 'head' of the village is a metaphorical one from death to new life – a transformative journey enacted in space.

Seen from a more Durkheimian sociological point of view we can say that the *vat*, exceedingly well described by Condominas, is also the classic locus of the collective in Lao culture as it has multiple functions and is *the* collective representation of the village unity.

"Une communauté villageoise lao ne prend réellement vie comme telle que lorsqu'elle possède son propre *vat*, son monastère, qui porte son nom et dont elle porte le nom. Au centre de l'espace social le *vat* remplit des fonctions multiples, à la fois école, mairie, salles des fêtes, lieu de soin pour les malades, d'accueil pour les âmes souffrantes, abri du voyageur, terrain des cours d'amour. Mais son rôle principal est évidemment religieux. C'est là que vivent les bonzes, dont la présence permet aux villageois de réaliser les actes de piété, l'aumône en premier lieu, par lesquels ils acquerront prestige ici-bas et mérites dans l'Au-delà. C'est encore autour du *vat* que s'organisent les grandes fêtes qui ponctuent l'année de la collectivité rurale, celles du calendrier bouddhique, mais aussi d'autres qui puisent dans d'anciennes traditions locales." (Condominas 1998, backside blurb)

<sup>14</sup> One could speculate here that the systems of spatial reference (east : head : life : purity :: west : feet : death : pollution) overlap and are part of one larger system of reference.

<sup>15</sup> For a complete analysis for the whole rites and its spatial movements see Ladwig (2001: 60ff.; 96ff.).

When we take into account the ideas mentioned above, it is now possible to explain the burial pattern encountered among the Lao. Concerning the erection of smaller *thaat* for the 'normal dead' in the temple compound, it is clear that the temple represents the integrity of the village, is the locus of all collective social interaction and is considered as a pure and powerful place. These places have the highest concentration of what westerners have often misleadingly labelled 'sacredness'. Invoking an originally Christian concept, Schopen (1997) calls this practice in early Indian Buddhism burial *ad sanctos*. The active presence of these powers is believed to enhance the chances to free oneself from the *samsara* or at least aid in attaining a better rebirth. This belief is attested by the fact that the *dharanis* (stones or sheets of gold with inscribed texts deposited together with the bones or ashes in a *stupa* for the normal dead) express this desire among the Lao (Finot 1903: 662 f.) and in Buddhism in general (Schopen 1997: 120-23).

### Conclusion

Through a mimetic ritual strategy, the deceased receives a new body after his death in form a *thaat kaduuk* reliquary. This funeral monument has to be conceptualised as a living re-presentation of the deceased, housing its spirit and therefore being some kind of ancestral shrine. The deposition of the *thaat kaduuk* in the compound of the *wat* reveals a specific pattern. The monuments of the dead are located in an area that is of highest value for the Lao. Places like the Lao *wat* are considered as being 'pure', having a high concentration of 'power' and are sometimes regarded as the place of origin of a village. The *wat* is the embodiment of the village's identity and integrity and is congruent to that considered as the head of the village located in the east, the direction of life. According to doctrinal Buddhism, this practice is executed because this deposition is viewed as enhancing the chances of a prosperous rebirth of the deceased because he can benefit from the 'power' that is located there. The deceased are present at meetings of the village and the monks, the indispensable mediators between the living and the dead<sup>16</sup>, live in the *wat* as well. This unity is a necessary condition for the prosperity of the village and here the appropriate rites can be carried out and the dead and the living can interact. The transfer of merit to the dead in the course of various temple rites has an everyday character as indicated by Tambiah: "In the course of every *wat* ceremony, *yaadnam*, the pouring of water to transfer merit to the dead, is performed". (1970: 190) Thus the dead are honoured in many ceremonies that are performed at the *wat*.

<sup>16</sup> Abhay says that the monks are "la source de tous les mérites et l'intermédiaire entre nos morts et nous" (1956a: 926).

When we recall that the *thaat* of the deceased is equally a representation of the dead as an ancestor, then the *wat* has to be viewed as a type of ancestral tomb that unites all the deceased of a village at the centre of the social space. As Bloch has described with regard to the Merina of Madagascar in *Placing the Dead* (1971), the dry parts of the body are placed in an ancestral tomb that signifies the unification with the family's ancestors. Among the Lao, this unity seems to be more focused on the village as a whole as there is no kinship system that would encourage the formation of family tombs based on e.g. a clan system as among the Merina. The high value attached to this location reveals that the dead form a constitutive part of society and occupy a central place in the Lao's social morphology. It could be proposed that the remains of the dead and their collective arrangement in the *wat* have a positive influence on the village as a social community. Hertz also alludes to that phenomenon in a non-Buddhist context: "They believe that a beneficent influence emanates from the bones that protects the village against misfortune and helps the living in their enterprises. It needs only a development and a crystallisation of these beliefs and these feelings for a proper cult of relics to be established [...]" (Hertz 1960: 57). Hence, the cult of relics, on a different level so important in Buddhism, has also entered the burial practices reserved for 'normal' Buddhist believers and is not only restricted to the Buddha himself, saints or kings.

The ritual positioning of the bones in a special place indicates the inextricable connection between ritual and space. In our case, the 'living' relics of a person return to the heart of the collectivity. Parkin remarks adeptly on this direct concern with spatial ordering and orientation especially with regard to funerals:

"[...] what interests me is the use made [...] of directionality - of axes, cardinal points, concentric zones, and other expressions of spatial orientation and movement. [...] This might seem to apply most obvious to funerals, which, of all conventional rites of passage, seem the most directly concerned with proper spatial ordering and orientation, whether through Hertzian concepts of life, death, and the right and the left hands or through the very movement and direction taken by the corpse [...]" (Parkin 1992: 16; 22)

In summary, fundamental categories such as space play a decisive role in rituals. Among the Lao, the ritual moves through a classificatory framework which is based upon certain values inscribed in space such as *hua* and *tiin*, east and west, life and death etc. But the rituals does not simply follow this pattern, but also defines them: "Ritualizing schemes invoke a series of privileged oppositions that, when acted in space and time through a series of movements, gestures and sounds, effectively structure and nuance and environment" (Bell 1992: 140). Hence, rituals construct and reconstruct reality: "This environment, constructed and reconstructed by the actions of the social agents within it, provides an

experience of the objective reality of the embodied subjective schemes that have created it" (op. cit.: 141). Thus, it may be concluded that rituals not only act out and reflect values and ideology but are also constitutive elements of the social and, thereby, of reality itself. The transformative journey taken by the remains of a deceased can only in this perspective be an effective journey from death to new life.

In this light, the *wat* and the deceased represented there symbolise the unity of a social group reaching far beyond the domain of the people living in the present. In this sense the *thaat kaduuk* of the deceased – being a double and a new body continuing his existence – bridges the gap between the past and the present, the finite and the infinite. Due to the re-presentative qualities of the *thaat*, the deceased are simultaneously here and there, active ancestors involved in the life of living but who nevertheless are incorporated into *samsara* and move in the Buddhist great chain of beings.

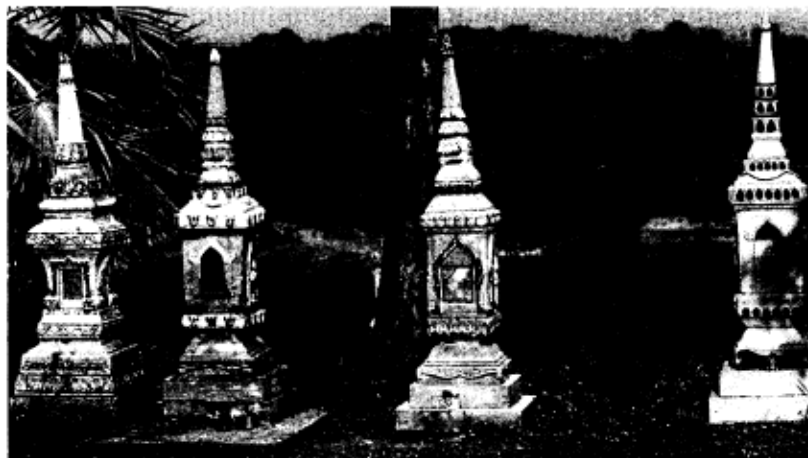
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picture:  
small stupas  
for the dead  
in Laos,  
along a river



Jana Raendchen\*

## THE ORIGIN OF THE LAO: Myths and Legends

### ABSTRACT

This article provides an overview on myths and legends concerning the origins of the Lao. These narrative sources partially found their way into the written literature, such as chronicles and religious works. Besides a short introduction into the content of each myth and legend, different versions are compared and apparent changes in contents are discussed.

### KEYWORDS

Lao – folklore – oral tradition – origin – myth – legend

### INTRODUCTION

Besides the Buddhist (Canonical and non-Canonical) literature and classical literature of the Lao Kingdom of *Lan Sang*, the Lao have a rich and colourful traditional folk literature, or narrative tradition. This, in principle, is an oral tradition. But many stories, myths, legends and tales also exist in written form (as palm leaf manuscripts), which are collected and stored in Buddhist monasteries (*wat*) or private collections of the nobility or learned people. It is possible to find whole set of palm leaf manuscripts in very remote villages and towns in Laos<sup>1</sup>, which are read to the laity on festive days (*wan sin*) or on special occasions, to teach the people, not only about the Buddhist values and prescriptions for the layman, but also about the local history and traditions, mythology, and folk heroes. Monks wrote down the legends, myths, tales, etc., which they heard from the people. But it is also believed that they themselves could have been authors of such written works<sup>2</sup>. Besides, to order the writing of Buddhist script or literary work from a monk counted as Buddhist merit-making.

The traditional folk literature, without any doubt has some pre-Buddhist origin. How else could one rationalize the many similarities in the folk literatures of the

\* Jana Raendchen MA is affiliated with the Institute of Sinology and Asian Studies, University of Muenster, Germany

<sup>1</sup> Jumsai 1992, p. 29

<sup>2</sup> Jumsai 1992, p. 13