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RELICS, "REPRESENTATION" AND POWER. Some Remarks on Stupas Containing Relics of the Buddha in Laos

Introduction

The relics of the Buddha have from the start been a subject of 'political dispute': after the cremation and the *parinibbana* ('complete extinction') of the master the eight tribal monarchs of India could not agree on how to divide up the remains of the Buddha and a war of relics, as described in the *Mahaparinibbanna Sutta*, could only be prevented through the intervention of a Brahmin. Leaving the questions about myth or reality aside, it is obvious that the relics of the Buddha¹, enshrined in architectural monuments called stupa (from Pali *dhatu* = 'element', 'relic'), played a crucial role in the spread of Buddhism as a world religion (Strong 1983:217f). Early Indian Buddhism was a religion without script and the remains of the Buddha and other items associated with him became objects of worship and sources of 'spiritual' potency. It is a commonly held view in the Buddhist world that they embody the active presence of the Buddha and his Dhamma². Consequently, stupas are the medium through which the believers can offer their prayers and gifts to him in order to obtain spiritual power and/or material welfare.

The idea that stupas and relics mark the 'presence' of the Buddha and his teachings became even more important with Buddhism's intrinsic connection to kinship, which was modeled on the prototype of all Buddhist kings: Asoka. According to the legend he ordered the erection of 84,000 stupas and significantly this number corresponds to the number of the sections of the Buddha's law, the Dhamma (Trainor 1997:41). One could say that this process "représente symboliquement l'introduction de la Loi dans tout le royaume, on

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¹ Theoretically all objects which come into contact with the Buddha or with another Buddhist saint can fall into the category of relics. In order to limit the scope of this study, we will here concentrate on stupas which are said to contain the relics of the Buddha, although similar qualities are attributed to relics of saints or other high-ranking persons like kings. There are two other important forms of the stupa, which will not be discussed here, but fall partially in the domain of this essay: the sand-stupa ('cetiya'), which plays a role in different ceremonies in Laos and Thailand (Gabaude 1979) and the stupa as a funeral monument for other persons than the Buddha himself (for a general overview see Schopen 1997; for Laos see Condominas 1998:35).

² There are probably few words in Pali which have a broader semantic field than Dhamma, but essentially it can be translated with the 'teachings of the Buddha, truth, law, doctrine' or broadly speaking anything which is fundamentally true or real (Strong 1995:358).

peut dire la territorialisation de la doctrine" (Lingat 1989:118). The movement of Buddhism to Southeast Asia and its alliance with sacred kinship and the cult of the 'cakkavattin' once more emphasized the prominent place of stupas and the associated notions in the cosmo-political affairs. The classical analysis of Mus (1933) and Heine-Geldern (1956) to the constitutive relation of architectural symbolism, power, space and kinship were later on refined by writers like Tambiah (1976; 1985).

Sources relating directly to the stupa in Lao Buddhism are quite rare. We have an excellent architectural account of Parmentier (1954:311ff.) and various other interpretations summed up by Zago (1972: 345-53) who accurately pronounces the polyvalent symbolic qualities of the stupa (Lao: *thaat*³). He gives us different accounts, describing it as the center of the universe, an *axis mundi* mediating between micro- and macrocosm, a replication of the sacred topography with Mount Meru in its middle (reflecting the hierarchical world order) and as a space of cosmogonic rituals. Most of the other accounts refer to the *thaat* in the context of kinship and what westerners would perhaps inappropriately call 'political' power.

Although the political situation in the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia has changed significantly, it is obvious that the deeply rooted belief in the potency of relics and their relation to political and spiritual power, which in fact have never been really separated, continues up to today⁴. The (post-)socialist government of the Lao PDR has chosen the *Thaat Luang*, which is said to contain some bodily remains of the Buddha, as a new national symbol after the collapse of world communism. Beside the annual procession of the *Pha Baang*, the ritual of the *Mahaa Thaat* (grand stupa) in Vientiane, consciously linked to smaller stupas in the provinces, is probably the central 'state' ritual in contemporary Laos although the central figure in the ritual, the king, is certainly absent today. Congruent to that, we can observe a clear shift in symbolism from frugal class-struggle images in the tradition of socialistic realism to Buddhist icons or anicons like the *Thaat Luang* (Evans 1998:41)⁵.

³ Both terms are used equally in this article.

I will use the transcription system as set out in *Tai Culture* (Vol. II, No. 1). The transcriptions in quotations follow numerous other systems, but usually the words are easy to identify.

⁴ We might just recall an event in Thailand, which resembles the war of relics mentioned before: in 1947 the police chief of Chiang Mai had to call in the army, because he feared that the crowd gathering for the presentation of the body of the Thai-saint Khruba Siwichai would fall into an uncontrollable rage and would pull the body of the saint to pieces in order to obtain a piece of it (Keyes 1981).

⁵ There is in fact very little to add to what Evans (1998), in his analysis about ritual change and nation-building strategies, says about the persistence, change and paradoxes of symbolism and its enactment in ritual in Laos. In contrast to that, the ethnographic sources used here are usually a bit dated, but taking into account the underlying continuity of the notions of the stupa, they are probably still appropriate for a number of points.

However, changes in political culture do not necessarily imply a similar shift in cosmological conceptions like the ones linked to the stupa and relics. Cosmology and politics do not stand in a simple causal relation. They are rather part of a single space of meaning, which is at the same time adjusted to a contemporary social context, but keeps its connection to a seemingly unchangeable and 'transcendental' order. In reference to Laos I will try to argue that stupas are the ideal locus for deriving a continuous flow of symbolic power which is indispensable for the preservation and proper interaction of cosmology and social life. They are objects of ritual worship, therefore representing and constituting social order and with that hierarchy and identity, but as well allowing modifications of those. The reasons for these inherent qualities are to be found in the underlying continuity of Buddhist conceptions of relics and stupas and their specific mixture with other Tai beliefs in Laos.

The Mythological Origins of Stupas and Relics in Laos

Somewhat surprisingly Louis Finot writing about the cult of relics in Laos concludes: "En fait, il est douteux que le culte des reliques ait jamais tenu une grande place au Laos" (1917:69-70). Probably Finot's statement can be explained by his focus on scriptural sources in the analysis of religion, which was and still is a quite common approach in the study of Buddhism. The results of this perspective are often a devaluation of social practices and a neglect of the quite ambivalent position of the doctrinal texts in society⁶. The numerous ethnographies which deal with the rituals associated with the *thaat* and the central place of it in those stand somewhat in contrast to Finot's conclusion.

The mytho-logical connection between the erection of stupas and the presence of the Buddha and/or Asoka in person are, as in other places of Southeast Asia, also documented for Laos. According to this the area of Vientiane was visited by the Buddha, who predicted the exact place for the construction of the stupa later accomplished by Asoka (Zago 1972: 328). The stupa in Luang Prabang, also called Sridhammasoka-stupa, is also attributed to the king who according to the legend brought the relics himself from Sri Lanka (Reynolds 1978:170). Lafont (1957:45ff.) reports of a manuscript dealing with the founding myth of the *thaat* of Muong Sing containing a bone of the Buddha. It depicts the Buddha performing all sorts of miracles and promising the city to be prosperous in case

⁶ The influence of what has somewhat polemically been called 'orientalism' (Said 1978) on the study of Lao Buddhism still remains to be discovered. Statements of key persons in the study of Laos' culture like Pierre Ngin or Thao Abhay reveal a strong bias towards the idea of a 'real' and 'civilized' Buddhism (see as well Lopez 1995 for an excellent discussion of the influence of colonialism on Buddhist studies). Relic veneration stands obviously in contrast to most doctrinal sources, which state that the Buddha has vanished and that the veneration of mostly decomposed and impure remains is a sort of attachment.

of the erection of a *thaat* and its proper worship. In general, most of the older and important *thaats* in Laos are connected with at least one of those two historical figures, and the *bun mahaa thaat*, the festival of the stupa, recalls the glory of Asoka, his promotion of Buddhism and the introduction of the relics (Abhay 1956:962). Whether these stupas actually contain relics of the Buddha is a question, which is of less importance for the anthropologist. They are objects of ritual worship and the mytho-logical events associated with them legitimize their existence, 'naturalize' them.

In different canonical sources the active potency of relics (and of Buddha statues as well) is said to stem from their ability to display the 'six-colored Buddha rays', linked to the enlightenment of the Buddha and the diverse supernatural deeds he has committed. This illumination is widely known from Indian sources (Trainor 1997: 93) and is as well described in the traditional Thai cosmology of the 'three worlds' (Archambault & Coëdes 1973:184f.). Similar accounts or ideas probably found their way to Laos. The relics of the Buddha also have an eschatological dimension: the myth of the reunion of all the Buddha's relics at the end of this age is documented for Laos (Finot 1917:71) and has a place in traditional Thai cosmology (Archambault & Coëdes 1974:234). All these sources state that the future Buddha Maitreya, whose irradiating body will be formed out of the relics, will then preach the last great sermon.

Lao Buddhism takes a quite special form through its constant amalgamation with ancient Tai beliefs. Significantly the edifices with the Buddha's relics were usually erected in or near places which were formerly occupied by different gods and spirits like *phii* ('spirits', 'ancestor') or *naak* (nagas = 'mythical serpents'). Sometimes, these supernatural beings were expelled, as the spirit living on the ground where the *Thaat Luang* of Luang Prabang stands today, but usually they were transformed into the guardians of the *thaat*. The stupa of Müang Sing is at the same time the seat of a being related to the *phii müang* and of the protective spirit of the village (Lafont 1957:40). Hence we can assume that this was a common strategy for the erection of stupas in the whole of Laos. For the *Thaat Luang* in Vientiane it is reported that a pregnant woman sacrificed herself and is today the guardian spirit of the city (Abhay 1956) and Archambault remarks that the place was formerly occupied by two nagas (1973:20). The rituals commemorating the introduction of Buddhism are sometimes equally a worship of the different 'non-Buddhist' supernatural beings, reflecting the typical amalgam of Buddhism and other religious conceptions of the Tai. For Abhay the ritual of the stupa in Vientiane therefore becomes a "double hommage au Bouddha et à la gardienne de la ville [...] par un extraordinaire et curieux mélange des valeurs et des croyances" (1956:963).

The other center beside the *thaat* which designates the conceptions of power and space among the Lao and many other Tai, is the *lak* ('pillar', 'post'), often the home of a local genius and/or protective spirit. Taking into account that there can be a substantial overlap of meaning concerning Buddhism and other Tai beliefs, the *thaat* can sometimes equally be regarded as the center of a *baan* (village) or *müang*⁷:

"In Thailand, Laos and with Tai people in Southern China there has often been built a *wat* (Buddhist monastery) around or near the *lak* of a *baan* or of the *müang*. Occasionally the monumental *thaat* or *cheedi* (stupa) of that monastery, then called *thaat luang* or *cheedi luang*, throws the *lak* itself into shade. Sometimes the *lak* is hidden behind the *thaat* or in the edge of the monastery, or exists only in the remembrance of the people, who now worship the *thaat* as their *lak*. [...] Thai people do not make a clear difference between *lak*, *sau* ['post'], *büü* ['navel'] or *thaat*. All the monuments [...] are worshipped as places of concentration of spiritual essence and power" (Raendchen 1998:147).

Seeing the stupa from that perspective, we are directly reminded of the idea formulated by Paul Mus (1975), who proposes that in the context of the 'Indianization' of the Southeast Asian religions the different ('animistic') deities of the soil were gradually integrated into the cult of the stupa and other forms of images which were originally reserved for depicting Buddhist and Hinduist deities. The stupa then not only commemorates the introduction of Buddhism and the relics, but is sometimes as well a home for the different other supernatural beings, which are in charge of the protection of the *baan* or *müang*. This syncretistic adaptability makes them an extraordinary locus of power⁸. What remains to be clarified is how this importance manifests itself in different contexts and how the potency contained in the stupas has to be understood concerning its efficacy and transmittance.

Some Characteristics Attributed to the Stupa in Laos and Buddhism in General

What does the stupa in Lao Buddhism then 'stand for' and why is it as monument containing some sort of active power so central in the rituals associated with it? In case of the proper ritual worship, which can equally be analyzed as some kind of exchange process, its potency manifests itself in various forms: it is a source of merit *bun* [Pali: *punna*] and in connection with 'politics', a source of Dhamma. In some contexts it is a respiratory of fertility. The question, where the ability of the *thaat* to give something stems from, is directly linked to the concept of 'representation' so widely used in anthropology today. If we want to grasp the

⁷ One of the basic units of Tai social organization. See Condominas (1990:36 *passim*) for a useful approach to the study of *müang*. Condominas also mentions the conjunction of the *lak* with the *phii müang* (*ibid*:54f.).

⁸ It is quite difficult to describe the form this power or potency takes in the traditional conceptions. Usually power 'flows' from the center and its concentration is the highest in the middle of the *müang*. For a discussion of power concepts in Southeast Asia see Anderson (1972) or Errington (1989).

qualities attributed to the *thaat*, we have to take a closer look at what the stupa and the relics symbolize or better represent specifically in Laos and Buddhism in general. By briefly examining some ethnographies relating to the stupa, this aspect can probably be clarified.

In his detailed accounts of the rites connected e.g. with the *Thaat Luang* in Luang Prabang, Charles Archaimbault describes the stupa as a "réservoir de Dhamma" and points out its interaction with potency and kinship in pre-revolutionary Laos: "Méditant près de ce Dhamma architectural le souverain du Laos s'identifie, chaque année, par delà les premiers mandataires du Dhamma, à Acoka" (1973:37). In the ritual of the *thaat* at Siang Khuang (Xieng Khouang) he proposes that the stupa is a "reliquaire, réservoir de Dhamma, l'ordre naturel, juridique et moral" (Archaimbault 1972:79)⁹. We find other indicators for the active qualities of the stupa in this context. Archaimbault reports that in the rituals for new year the two mythical ancestors (grandfather and grandmother *Njöö*) bend down before the *thaat* because their speech can obtain its "efficacité" (Archaimbault 1973:50) merely in that way. At the beginning and the end of the performance the ancestors pay homage to the *thaat*. It is important to mention that the dance performed is linked to the regional cosmogony, re-enacting the creation of the universe and by that its annual purification.

Zago, another expert of Lao Buddhism, calls the stupa - probably echoing Eliade - a "hierophanie permanente" (1972:349) and points out the intrinsic importance of the Laos' central stupa in Vientiane: "Le Thaat Luang de Vientiane est tenu pour le Ming Khouan de la nation lao, c'est-à-dire le gage de la fortune, la réalité qui cause la prospérité, le Khouan de la nation" (1972:328)¹⁰. In this context the stupa is not only a source of Dhamma, but a repository of prosperity and perhaps fertility as well, when we take into account that the notion of *khwan* has a connection to the concept of *phii*, which according to Condominas (1970:15) have an intimate relation and refer both to the category of 'nature' (1975:273). Interestingly, we can find in the adjacent areas of Thailand, as in Lanna, a mixture of relic and fertility cult. The latter is usually celebrated in Laos during the rocket festival *bun bang fai* which tries to initiate the rainfall by shooting rockets and worshipping the guardian spirit of the territory. Bearing in mind that the guardian spirit sometimes is incorporated into the cult of the stupa, it seems

⁹ It is interesting to note that the *thaat* in Xieng Khouang didn't exist any more when Archaimbault observed the rites, but it was still an object of veneration. The 'sacredness' of the *thaat* seems to reach beyond visibility.

¹⁰ *Khwan* is here certainly the 'life-essence' or 'soul' of the Tai (Anuman 1962) and *ming* is identical with the Chinese expression for 'life' or 'fate' (Granet 1968:376). The fact that this *thaat* possesses *khwan* could be evidence that the stupa has to be conceptualized as a living being.

not contradictory that Lanna people ask the relics (the stupa) for rainfall and then fire rockets (Doré & Premchit 1992:193).

Transferring these ideas to a more modern political context it is not surprising that Evans, focusing on the process of nation-building and symbols of identity in contemporary Laos, states that "this stupa [in Vientiane] has become the central symbol through which the nation remembers itself" (1998:41). In his analysis he shows how the socialist government has replaced the monarchy in the ritual of the stupa and 'uses' the *Thaat Luang* as a core symbol to construct continuity, cultural homogeneity and identity. In a time of rapid change this stupa is "the nation's stillpoint" (ibid:42), a Mount Meru in a modern context.

When we set these ethnographically quite special features of the stupa and the relics in relation to Buddhism in general, we find very interesting parallels and further explanations for the active qualities of the *thaat*. Particularly the groundbreaking work of the French Buddhologist Paul Mus proves useful in this regard. Mus, in his seminal study of Barabudur, a Mahayana-stupa on Java, sets this work of architecture directly in relation to the Dhamma and the Buddha's body. He describes the stupa as a "materialisation de la loi cosmique" and as "le Dhamma rendu visible" (1935:248). For him the stupa is actually the body of the Buddha and by this a 'representation' of the cosmos. Finally Mus concludes in short: "stupa = cosmos = Buddha" (1935:218).

By examining different texts of the Buddhist canon, André Bareau will give us our probably most apparent example: "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, 269). Other doctrinal texts or commentaries seem to display similar positions, although they may not be obvious for the western reader. The short excerpt of a conversation, taken from the Sri Lankan chronicle *Mahavamsa*, between a monk and the king of Sri Lanka reveals a lot about the ambiguities which are inherent in our language:

- Monk: For a long time O King, we have not seen the perfect Buddha, the Teacher. We have lived without a master. There is nothing here for us to worship.
 King: But Sir, did you not tell me that the perfect Buddha has entered *nirvana*?
 Monk: When the relics are seen [present], the Buddha is seen [present]

In this context the Pali word for "seen" (*dittha*) can equally be translated with "visible", "present" or "here" (Schopen 1996:133; 147). Although it is problematic to use sources from other Buddhist cultures, particularly when they are presented in an ahistorical perspective as here, it is nevertheless possible that these conceptions because they were so important in other societies dominated by

Theravada-Buddhism, somehow influenced the ideas about stupas and relics in Laos as well, quasi as some kind of underlying base for the interpretation in a different cultural context.

When we put all these different statements about the nature of stupas and relics together, we actually end up as following: the stupa, at least when it contains the relics of the Buddha, is a living entity. In some contexts, although this may not be explicitly stated, this entity may be the Buddha himself, made present through some kind of *pars pro toto* principle. The stupa is able to give something (the Dhamma) and can even possess things because it is a moral 'person' in the real sense of the term. The relic has a body, i.e. the monument, which is at the same time the body of the Buddha and a miniature replication of the cosmos itself. The introduction of the relics is often linked to Asoka in person. Evidence for both the adaptation of Buddhism to the regional Tai belief and the living qualities of the *thaat* can be found in the fact that it occasionally has *khwan*, similar to humans, rice or houses. This living presence makes it possible to participate in the essence of the Buddha, to receive the Dhamma (and we might add: power) and make merit. The same can probably be stated for the *phii* and the *naak* (nagas) living in or near the *thaat*, but probably the accent is here more on fertility and a regeneration of 'nature'.

The interpretations of the stupa have certainly varied in different historical eras and regions and we could even say that every *thaat* in Laos has its own history. But taking into account the prominence stupas enjoy in most Buddhist cultures, the above mentioned points perhaps denote some central features, which were later on adapted to regional and specific historical contexts.

The Question of Representation

Although many of the qualities of the stupa remind us of the classical notions of contagious magic, perhaps some things may come as a surprise, because Buddhism is often seen as some kind of psychological doctrine, free of animistic elements. In that perspective the stupa has usually been regarded as a work of architecture 'representing' or 'symbolizing' the Buddha and/or the structure of the cosmos. Taking into account that representation has become a keyword in social sciences at least since Durkheim, is it possible that the western concept of representation in general and particularly in our case relating to architecture and art is often not really appropriate for a profound understanding of some so-called non-western societies? Dealing with stupas and other works of Buddhist art has in the past mainly been the field of art historians emphasizing aesthetic and historical criteria. Parmentier (1954), probably one of the best experts on Lao art, fits perfectly into that paradigm. But what we encounter here is a

decontextualization of art, a kind of art which has no connection to its social or ritual embeddedness. This often purely stylistic approach is undoubtedly a product of a rather ethnocentric view echoing secularization and a loss of 'aura' of art in modern society, how Walter Benjamin (1964:154)¹¹ calls it. The modern gaze often fails to grasp the essential qualities of the stupa and other Buddhist icons like statues¹² (Faure 1997), because we perceive art and architecture out of a historically specific mental organization (Benjamin 1964:155), sometimes emphasizing radical different criteria than the cultures anthropologists deal with.

A look at the history of ideas and etymology related to the word 'representation' in the French and English context shows a quite ambivalent and even paradox meaning of the word, which has essentially two denotations, namely in the sense of marking the *efficacious presence of something*, and on the other hand *standing for something that is actually not present* (Williams 1983:267, Chartier 1989:1514). The latter shows that in the western perception a kind of separation came into being which can perhaps be attributed to the Jewish-Christian vision of icons (Ginzburg 1991:226ff.) and a tendency of modern societies to look at art in a more secular context, emphasizing aesthetic criteria and classification.

Applied to our analysis of the stupa ^{the front} ~~this latter~~ sense of representation is certainly more appropriate. Regarding the stupa solely as a symbol standing for the absent Buddha means dismissing its essential qualities. In contrast to that one could say that when we take into account that we deal with a monument which has an 'active presence' and 'emanates', we can discover some new perspectives. We can include the ideas of feedback and exchange into the analysis of the stupa, which become important in the case of ritual. In this case a ritual is not an act focusing on a dead material object, but a performative action with the purpose of getting into contact with another living entity, because "...[the] veneration of the Buddha's relics should be understood as directly equivalent to the veneration offered the Buddha while he was alive, both in terms of the intention that motivates it and with respect to the merit that results from it" (Trainor 1997:94). The rituals associated with the *thaat* can contribute to explain its ability to give

¹¹ This may not be the consequence of the techniques of reproduction as Benjamin noted, but an epistemological question relating the quite dualistic western approach of the so-called subject-object (mental-material etc.) question (see e.g. Rorty 1980:50-52 or Merleau-Ponty 1964:16)

¹² What has so far been said about the stupa, i.e. that is essentially a living entity, can be conveyed to Buddhist icons in general and especially to statues of the Buddha (Faure 1997) or amulets (Tambiah 1984). The second biggest ritual in Laos, the presentation of the *Pha Baang* (golden Buddha statue) in Luang Prabang, is focussed on an image which is (together with the Emerald Buddha now in Bangkok) one of the most worshipped icons of the Lao (Reynolds 1978a). These statues are imbued with living power (*saksit*), stemming already from the material, which is e.g. inhabited by a forceful *phii* as in the case of the Emerald Buddha (Lingat 1934). In an interesting analysis Trankell (1998) shows how the ritual of the Prabang has changed significantly, but that the cosmological background is still much intact.

power in form of e.g. the Dhamma and by that 'regenerate' life and cause prosperity.

The Stupa as a Source of Power in its Ritual Context

Rituals are a privileged locus for the interaction of the social and the cosmic order and, in fact, they reveal that in most societies these areas cannot even be neatly distinguished. The proper interaction of these 'two realms' (which is more an analytical distinction than a real one), often realized by exchange processes, is for many societies the key to the perpetuation of order and prosperity (Barraud et al. 1994). This furthermore explains why the regular ritual performance is seen as so crucial and why power and ritual have an intimate relation.

Coming back to our remarks about the stupa in the ethnographic examples concerning Laos we can now apply the efficacious presence of the Buddha, or in general of a 'transcendental' entity, to its ritual context. What we have to include is a notion of 'feedback' into the analysis of rituals. That means connecting ritual actions to the efficacy of the object they evolve around.

Crucial in this regard is certainly the ability of the stupa to act as a source of Dhamma. Coming back to the remarks of Archaimbault about the connection of kinship and the ritual of the *thaat* and bearing in mind that the stupa is a living entity with an ability to give and receive, we can perhaps conceptualize the meditation of the king near the *thaat* (in pre-socialist Laos) as a loading up with Dhamma. Zago (1972:332) reports that at the festival of the stupa most people stay near the *thaat* for the whole night. The king then acts as a mandate and protector of Buddhism, improving his *kam* (Kamma), as all people participating in the festival do. The annual re-enactment 'symbolically' repeats the introduction of Buddhism and with that the Dhamma into the country (Zago 1972:329) and this introduction is (as in many other Buddhist cultures) often directly linked to relics: "Mettre des reliques dans le stupa, image du monde, donc image rituelle du royaume, c'est symboliquement introduire la Loi dans ce royaume" (Mus 1935: 286). The relics of the Buddha brought to Laos by Asoka are in that respect the law itself and Buddhism is presented as a civilizing force bringing a socio-cosmic order and hierarchy. The stupa is then a living manifestation of the natural, moral and legal order, as Archaimbault mentioned in the quotation above.

Understanding the Dhamma as the truth of the Buddha or something which is fundamentally true or real, we find in the ritual of the *thaat* a profound relation between the idea of an ideal social order and its performative enactment linked to cosmological conceptions. Social order implies a priori the idea of hierarchy, which according to Valerie (1985) is intrinsic to almost every ritual. It is clear

that the king (or today the socialist party) as the organizer of the festival and biggest donator has a dominant position in the ritual. What is furthermore of interest here is that the *thaat* in Vientiane (and elsewhere) is in itself a hierarchical reflection of the cosmological order, including in its architectural design different spheres of existence: the 'kamaloka', the 'rupaloka' and the 'arupaloka', with the latter being the highest sphere of the godly beings (Zago 1972:350). The Thai-cosmology of the 'three worlds' refers to the same structure in which all beings are hierarchically classified according to their amount of merit (Reynolds 1976:204).

In 'non-western' cultures power or law is often not only exercised through written documents or brute force, but through the ritual performance itself and the means of "ritualization", as Bell (1992:193ff.) calls it. This order can only be perpetuated by a regular re-enactment of rituals, which stimulates the flow of potency from the center of the e.g. *müang* outwards. In this respect we can see the Dhamma as a kind of symbolic power, defined by Bourdieu as "the power to constitute the given by stating it, to create appearances and belief, to confirm or transform the vision of the world and thereby action in the world, and therefore the world itself" (1977:117). The ritual then reaffirms the Buddhist law and the hierarchical world order by performatively repeating the introduction of it in form of a relic.

In Laos, the ritual of the *thaat* has a special significance due to the involvement of the different minorities¹³. In the ritual Polo-Game (*tiki*) performed at the festival of the *thaat*, the conquest of the land, formerly occupied by the autochthonous *khaa* (roughly 'slave', today a pejorative term for minorities), is ritually re-enacted. The game is a annual rite which renews the contract between the invaders and the autochthonous tribes, the original owners of the land. Without intending to present a complete analysis, it is quite interesting in relation to the stupa that the *khaa* are, in some variations of the game, presented as the protectors of the *thaat*, the royal reliquary (Archaimbault 1973:70). The role they play in Vientiane is described as follows:

"Si à Wieng Can les esclaves du T'at, les gens de la brousse [the *kha*], après avoir remporté les deux premières parties aident les 'envahisseurs', des fonctionnaires, à gagner la dernière, reconnaissent ainsi un hiérarchie qu'ils contribuent à établir, cette hiérarchie est instituée et reconnu en bloc" (Archaimbault 1973:42 - my emphasis).

¹³ Certainly the ritual has changed in the course of time, especially after 1975. For a detailed account of the minorities in the current state rituals see Evans (1998:141). As well there are regional variations as documented by Archaimbault (1973). Instead of suggesting a fixed role of the minorities in the ritual, I will just point out some suggestions referring to the stupa.

The minorities are conceptualized as the slaves¹⁴ of the *thaat* and they defend the royal Dhamma contained in it. Thereby they renew the contract (and by that a system of hierarchy) with the invaders, the Buddhist Lao, and contribute to the regeneration of the whole *müang*.

When the stupa is the Buddha himself, as some sources seem to suggest, or at least an active part of him, we can say that the ritual is some kind of exchange process between the Buddha (and the other supernatural beings living in or near the *thaat*) and the believers (foremost the king or leaders of the state). But this relation of exchange is not a purely asymmetric one, it involves rather some kind of reciprocity. A ritual procession can be regarded as an animation process of the stupa and the relics through the believers (Mus 1954:238). The gifts (in material and non-material form) of the laity presented to the *thaat* are part of that exchange system. The believers can participate in the essence of the Buddha, receive the Dhamma and make merit, which works positively on their Kamma. Especially for the king (or today's Lao PDR government officials) the amount of merit acquired in the ritual is important, because that is what legitimizes his (their) position. 'Merit' is probably one of the key values in the life of most Lao people and obviously linked to the social hierarchy. The notion of Kamma, setting the parameters for the next rebirth and the social position to be occupied, shows that a social hierarchy is at the same time linked to one of the fundamental laws of the cosmos, and the festival of the *thaat* regulates the distribution of merit according to that.

But the *thaat*, the relics and thus the Buddha himself have to be worshipped, if this reservoir of potency wants to be preserved. In Lanna Buddhism, the 'twelve-months tradition', a kind of ritual calendar which has a similar equivalent in Laos, regulates the worship of relics. Doré and Premchit allude to the reciprocal relation of both: "Worshipping the Buddha's relics was a way to renovate their power and, consequently, the power of the king, kingdom and its people" (1992:128)¹⁵. The disturbance or interruption of this exchange system, i.e. neglecting the presentation of gifts and other material or non-material offerings to the stupa, has negative consequences (war, drought etc.), as for example reported for the stupa in Müang Sing (Lafont 1957:50). The ritual of the *thaat* is hence an absolute necessity when the socio-cosmic order of society is to be preserved.

¹⁴ The term *khaa* in Lao can also be used in the sense of 'being a slave of the Buddha'. Being a slave of the *thaat*, which we already identified as the Buddha himself, could then simply mean being a slave of the Buddha. And furthermore we saw above that the stupa can in different contexts own something because it is a moral person.

¹⁵ When the *Thaat* Luang in Vientiane has a sort of *khwan*, as Zago states in the quotation above, this life-essence must perhaps be treated in an appropriate way, i.e. through rituals, because the *khwan* can easily be frightened and escapes.

Conclusion

The *thaat* in Laos is more than a beautiful piece of architecture, it rather has to be conceptualized as a living entity making the Buddha and his teachings present. In this way it becomes a constitutive element in the sacred topography of Laos, linking social space (e.g. in form of the *müang* or the present nation state), cosmology and power. The ritual interaction with the stupa (and the contained relics) channels and regenerates the powers inherent in it. The distribution of that power, namely in form of the Dhamma and merit *bun*, follows the ideal social order, with the king at the top of the hierarchy, identifying himself with Asoka or at least recalling the spread of Buddhism and the relics by him. The ritual worship of the Buddha's relics in memory of Asoka reveals that symbolic power and 'real' political power cannot be neatly distinguished.

The *Thaat Luang* in Vientiane, as a steadily emanating source of Dhamma and as some kind of living form of the Buddha himself, is the old and new key symbol of the contemporary Lao nation. This *thaat* (and others) refers to mythical narrative, connecting past and present. It has the aptitude to be a 'catalyst' for overcoming the discontinuities of social life if it is properly worshipped, i.e. involved in an exchange or 'animation' process.

The continuity of the conceptions of stupas and relics are, although the central figure in the ritual (the king) has been replaced, still visible. Without plunging too deeply into the current political situation in Laos it seems obvious that the socialist party has partly taken over the role of the king although this naturally produces all kind of problems concerning the correct narrative of history and the transformation of social memory (Evans 1998:45). A sign that this transition cannot take place without references to the monarchy can be recognized in the increasing popularity of the Thai-King in Laos and a "rising cult of royalty" (Trankell 1999:191) e.g. in Luang Prabang. When we take into account the changes which have occurred in the past, the ritual of the *thaat* can perhaps as well express tensions and transitions, i.e. it not only re-affirms the order presented in the ritual, but adapts itself to changes or even provokes them.

But as in the past, the attendance of party officials and the control over the organization of the festival assure a continuous flow of symbolic power and legitimization through the spreading of the Dhamma. The cosmic polity associated with the 'mandala'- or *müang*-structure is still very much alive, when we look at the centralized nature of the festival of the *thaat*: the *Thaat Luang* in Vientiane is the navel in Laos' sacred topography and the smaller stupas in the provinces are linked to the main festival.

What we can observe here is an intrinsic mixture of a seemingly eternal and mythical order (the Dhamma of the Buddha is theoretically unchangeable), represented through the source of it, the *thaat*, and its adaptation to a more modern context of nation building and identity in times of increasing external influence after a period of isolation. The *Thaat Luang* and other stupas, one could say, represent something which is at the same time here and there, bridging the gap between the finite and infinite, between the human realm of 'samsara' and transcendental 'nibbana' (where the Buddha now 'exists'), between the 'real' social order with all its discontinuities and the eternal Buddhist order of the universe.

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Chinphat Unthaya

ON THE TRADITION OF THE DESIGNATIONS OF THE MUANG (CHIEF TOWNS AND CITIES OF THE LAO)*

translated from [si] by Phlangsene Sayarath, Jana Raendchen, Isabel Cole

The designation of a city is like a "linguistic tradition", indicating a close connection between linguistic, cultural and social development. The name reflects the geographical environment, the structure of a town or an area, or the culture and way of life of the inhabitants. First and foremost, the name of a town awakens interest as to the specific character of the town, and raises the question of whether the name provides a clue to this. To determine this, it is both important and extremely interesting to analyze the name of the town.

In general, towns, communities, etc. are named according to the same principle. They are usually defined by their geographical location. Over the course of time, names may be changed.

These are usually politically-motivated changes whereby a town must give up its original name and receive a new official name, which is nothing other than the serving of the new political interests. One example: after the Laotian People's Army's long, successful struggle to liberate "Baan Naa Kai" (meaning 'chicken yard'), it was renamed "Müang Wiang Sai (Mueang Vieng Xay)". This name means 'Victory-City'.

Many small communities or towns are given new names after expanding in area, or after the population has risen disproportionately.

Laos is a country whose language is very similar to that of its neighbor Thailand; moreover, they have almost the same traditions and culture. Beginning in historical times, the two states have had close political and economic relationships, for the majority of both peoples could communicate with and understand one another easily without having to study the language intensively.

In this analysis, a total of 155 names of towns (from the "Laos Map for Administrative Agencies" [Planning and Administrative Committee, Ministerial Committee 1996]) were investigated according to three categories:

- Etymological origin of the name
- Morphological structure
- Meanings/contents