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Michel Lorrillard

Insights on the Diffusion of Lao Buddhism

UNTIL NOW, THE IMPACT OF BUDDHISM on Lao culture has only been approached from an ethnological angle (Condominas 1968; Tambiah 1970; Zago 1972; Formoso 1992).¹ This method, which describes the current state of religious practice, is interesting for many reasons, especially because it allows us to identify, by comparison with the other regional forms of Buddhism, the idiosyncrasies of the Lao religion. However, these particular characteristics remain poorly understood and unexplained, for they are the result of a long evolution and a slow process of acculturation, that only historical research is likely to bring to light. Unfortunately, knowledge of the history of Lao Buddhism is currently limited to the singular repetition, often incomplete and *always* totally lacking in any critical analysis, of the historiographic tradition from Luang Prabang on the introduction of the religion. This can be summarised as follows:

- Buddhism was introduced into the Lao lands in 1369, under the reign of Fa Ngum, whose wife was a Khmer princess.

1. Other authors (Gabaude 1979; Bizot et al. 1996) have combined the anthropological approach with philological study.

- It was the Khmer king who, at the request of his daughter, sent a religious mission to Luang Prabang in order to spread Buddhism.
- This mission introduced Buddhism in a kind of “packaged” fashion, since it brought a clergy with great legitimacy (it was said to have come from Lañka); a complete collection of texts including the *Tipiṭaka* and its companion volumes; two extremely precious relics (a cutting from the Bodhi tree and a bone from the right hand of the Buddha) used to sanctify the first temple and the first *stūpa* (which have never been found); the Phra Bāng, which was to become the palladium of the Lao people; plus a team of astrologers and a host of sculptors, painters, statue casters, etc.

I have already stressed, in a previous article, the completely artificial nature of this narration, and have established its links with various similar literary traditions found in T'ai realms (Lorrillard 2001). The conclusion is that this historiographical tradition is without doubt far removed from historical fact. I have also recently revealed evidence relating to the foundation of temples which, far from proving a southern origin for Lao Buddhism, actually demonstrates the importance of a northern influence—from Lān Nā to be more precise (Lorrillard 2003). This present paper continues from these past two contributions. Its goal is simply to stimulate reflection on what Lao Buddhism is, considered in a historical perspective, on how one defines the idea of diffusion; and, in a general way, on the impact that the Buddhist religion has left on Lao culture.

KNOWLEDGE OF HISTORY IS BASED ON EVIDENCE, especially written documentation. Lao history before the nineteenth century can not be grasped from foreign sources alone, for these are extremely rare and the information they give is too sparse. It is above all on the basis of Lao artefacts that this past begins to emerge, from the beginning of the fourteenth century. All this evidence is linked to Buddhism, both as a set of written texts, and as vestiges of a material culture.

The Lao historiographic tradition seems only to have been fixed in writing from the beginning of the sixteenth century (Lorrillard 1999).² The chronicles certainly do refer to a more ancient past, but they rely on an oral tradition that to compensate for its gaps, utilises myths and legitimising references. The historian, when approaching the earliest period of the Lao past, should thus use the manuscript data with great care, even more so when the texts, although they are few, show divergence. While they all preserve a fairly clear record of a dynasty of chiefs and sovereigns, whose historical existence is fixed, beginning with the Lord (*Khun, Phrayā*) Fā Ngum in the middle of the fourteenth century, they nevertheless contradict each other on what happened during these reigns. These inconsistencies cause serious anachronisms, which break the historical continuity and slant

2. The Lao historiographic tradition is mainly represented by two families of texts originally composed in Luang Prabang: the *Nithān Khun Borom* and the *Phongsāvadān*.

perspective. In the case of Buddhism, the first factual data in the chronicles that can be proven historically is the promulgation by King Phothisarāt of an edict against spirit worship in 1527.³ For earlier references, it is necessary to go further than simply reading the historiographic sources, and to use other approaches.

In a rather paradoxical way, it is not the material evidence that allows us to penetrate deeper into the history of Lao Buddhism, but the linguistic evidence. Buddhism is the expression of a teaching, and is first recognisable by the specific vocabulary that it generates. In the case of Lao language, it is onomastics—the study of proper names—that enables us to fix the moment when Buddhist terms began to be assimilated. Personal names have the particular quality of being fixed in time. When they are linked to a chronology that historical analysis can guarantee, they become the first signposts of religious, ideological and political evolution.

The first Lao king whom we are sure took a Buddhist name is Saiya Chakkhaphat (P. *cakkavattin*; Skt. *cakravartin*) Phaen Phaeo, who reigned in the middle of the fifteenth century. He is an exact contemporary of Tilokarāt, one of the Lān Nā sovereigns most responsible for the expansion of Buddhism. It is thought that Tilokarāt, whose official regal name also refers to the *Cakravartin* king—the universal monarch of Buddhism—exercised great influence over the Lao sovereign. It is moreover from this time that the *Chiang Mai Chronicle* begins to refer to Lān Xāng (Notton 1932:138; Wyatt et al. 1995:99). This should be noted, for there is no other evidence proving the importance of the regional role of the Lao before the middle of the fifteenth century. In this context, recognition of a regional role and the emergence of a new ideology based on Buddhism seem to be profoundly linked. From the beginning of the sixteenth century, all official regal names were to be in the Pāli language.

After onomastics, epigraphy can also help us delve further into the past of Lao Buddhism. Inscriptions are not necessarily the written sources that preserve the oldest or the most detailed history. However, in comparison to chronicles, which have been copied many times and thus modified, they do have the advantage of preserving a truly original text, a product of a precise historical, social and economic context. Often dated or datable, inscriptions provide sure benchmarks for establishing a chronology. They are important for linguistics as they give markers for the state of the language at a given time and thus allow diachronic studies. While the purpose of epigraphical sources was to commemorate a religious act connected to temples—namely their foundation or a donation—they also permit study of the historical geography of religious sites, that is to say their progression in both space and time (Lorrillard 2003).

It seems that in the T'ai kingdoms where Buddhism spread, a very clear distinction had been established since the earliest times between two forms of

3. This information is verified by the text of the unpublished Vat Sangkhalok inscription, which was probably the source used by chroniclers. It is possible that the manuscript tradition relating the foundation of Vat Visun in 1512 also has a historical basis, though no epigraphic source has been found to prove this.



Fig. 1.
Temple foundation stele dated April 17, 1494,
found near Tha Khaek
(now in front of That Sikhot, Khammouane province)

scripts. The first form could be categorised as common, despite the fact that epigraphic evidence shows that such scripts were largely used in a religious context. These are the Sukhothai, Fak Khām, and Lao secular scripts. The second form might be termed sacred, for these scripts were essentially used to record texts in Pāli. It is represented by the Khom (Khmer), Tham Lān Nā and Tham Lao scripts. It has long been established that the two Lao scripts, which are more recent, are directly derived from models in use at Lān Nā during the fifteenth and

sixteenth centuries. The degree of similarity between these Lao scripts and the Lān Nā models has never been studied however, and it is worth dwelling a little on this question, as it undoubtedly gives us a better window onto Lao Buddhism in its first stage, and the subsequent evolutions that it would go through.

The first known example of Lao inscription is an unpublished foundation stele from a temple, dated 17 April, 1494 (fig. 1). This stele was found near Tha Khaek, on the site of a very old *muang* some 200 km downstream from Vientiane.⁴ Of all the epigraphic sources in Laos, it is this inscription that best reveals the influence of Lān Nā, for it portrays a horoscopic disc and very precise calendrical data, characteristics which are elsewhere found only in northern Thai inscriptions that appear from the middle of the fourteenth century. While the secular script of this stele is certainly related to the Fak Khām script from Lān Nā, it differs significantly in its palaeographic style and it can be inferred that this is already the result of independent development. A similar conclusion can be drawn from examining an unpublished Luang Prabang inscription dated as 1530 (fig. 2),⁵ which also happens to be the sole epigraphic example of which the content is not religious. The particularities of these palaeographic developments are all the more significant if we take into account that in the Lao lands, from the second quarter of the sixteenth century, there was a reversion to the Fak Khām type, as if the secular script of Lān Nā had in fact been introduced a second time. This phenomenon is in line with the appearance, from 1527, of the

Fig. 2
opposite
page

4. This stele stands in front of That Sikhot, Khammouane province.

5. Conserved at Vat Visun, Luang Prabang.

sacred Tham script on Lao steles. This script again is perfectly identical to the model used in Lān Nā. All these inscriptions, which bear a very strong mark of northern Thai culture, are royal inscriptions commissioned by Phothisarāt and Setthathirāt, who were the first Lao sovereigns to appear in epigraphy during their lifetimes. It can be seen very clearly that the Lao lands, which had already been reached by a form of Buddhism originating in Lān Nā during the fifteenth century, experienced a second wave of Buddhism in the sixteenth century. This later movement differed rather significantly from the first, in that it was based both on more orthodox practice and on a more evolved

textual tradition. The introduction of the Tham script is clearly associated with the appearance of Pāli language traditions which probably had previously been unknown. The *Jinakālamāli*, the celebrated Lān Nā chronicle which was completed in 1527, reports that in 1523 the King of Chiang Mai offered the King of Lān Xāng, namely Phothisarāt, a 60-volume *Tipiṭaka* that had been presented to him by religious scholars. The same Phothisarāt had two edicts carved in 1527 and 1535, one in Luang Prabang and the other in

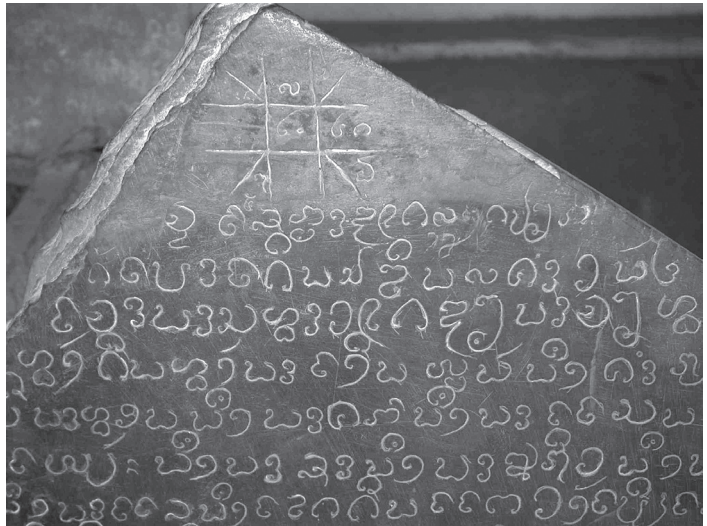


Fig. 2.
Luang Prabang inscription dated 1530
(now kept at Vat Visun,
Luang Prabang)

the Vientiane area,⁶ in order to purify the religion and to improve the monks' ritual practice. His son Setthathirāt was the first sovereign to record a Pāli composition in stone (Lorrillard 2004), an exercise that was hardly ever repeated. In the case of Lao Buddhism, it seems therefore that the scriptures appeared rather late, and there is still some question as to whether they then really spread out.

LAO BUDDHIST LITERATURE is particularly difficult to define, as there are several very distinct types. Each of these types has, in its own manner, contributed to the diffusion of religious perception.

6. The first is the stele of Vat Sangkhalok (mentioned above) kept in Vat Saen. The second is in Vat Daen Muang, Phon Phixay (Thailand), about sixty kilometres downstream from Vientiane.

Texts in the vernacular, such as certain examples of the *Jātaka*, have certainly contributed more to the popular embracing of the religion than have the canonical texts, which are more difficult to understand. It is very important to take this fact into account when considering the question of the introduction of Buddhism into the Lao lands.⁷

Historians have not always been conscious of the role played by their own terminology in the way that they perceive a phenomenon. The term “introduction”—and the connotations that it carries—is a good example of this. It is associated with the idea of importation, and implies a precise movement that can be delineated in space and time. It is perfectly acceptable to speak of the introduction of Buddhism if one means the transmission of a literary heritage between two peoples of very different identity, especially linguistic identity. In this case, the phenomenon is comparable to an historic event, as it implies a cultural shift followed by a slow acculturation. The role of the Mon culture in the development of Burmese civilisation is probably the best example of this kind of transformation. The driving force of Khmer culture in the emergence of the Buddhist kingdoms of Sukhothai and Ayuthaya is also very clear, although more diffuse, especially in time. The origin of northern Thai Buddhism is, on the other hand, more difficult to grasp. We know that it owed much to Sukhothai Buddhism, but that it can also be traced to Mon and Burmese Buddhism. So, in this context, it is difficult to speak of an “introduction,” unless this term is applied to the particular history of certain schools.

In the case of Lao Buddhism, the term “introduction” is even more inadequate. There is no perceptible rupture, nor is there any noticeable acculturation through contact with a foreign people speaking a different language. It seems simply that Buddhism, which propagated diffusely and almost imperceptibly throughout Lao territory, initially entered that territory in the same way, from Lān Nā, which had much the same cultural and linguistic base. The conditions surrounding this penetration remain very imprecise, due to the long duration of the process. Like at Sukhothai and Lān Nā, it was only following the addition of royal impetus that the movement began to accelerate, and that a higher literary culture began finally to emerge.

WHEN STUDYING THE SPATIAL DISTRIBUTION OF TEXTS, the first step is to compile inventories of surviving collections. It is then possible to evaluate the richness of a literary heritage, both quantitatively, by the number of manuscripts, and on the basis of diversity, by the number of different titles. It is necessary, however, to treat these inventories carefully, as they only reflect the current state of the heritage in any given

7. It can also be asked whether Buddhism actually needed writings to spread. Oral traditions, rituals, and forms of material and artistic expression (Buddha images, architecture etc.) can be just as important in popularising a religion.

place. Inventories do not themselves sufficiently bear witness to the development of an area's literary heritage, as they do not allow us to see the historical events which influenced, in both positive and negative ways, that development.⁸

The next step in studying the spatial spread of texts is to proceed with a complete philological study. Some manuscripts, especially religious texts, which as sacred objects better preserve their original form, maintain archaisms of the language, as well as linguistic particularities that allow us to identify their geographical origin. We can take here the specific example of the *nissaya*, texts with both a Pāli content and a translation or interpretation in the vernacular. Without going into detail, we can note simply that these documents still now show the linguistic character of northern Thailand. This fact tends to suggest a lack of, or a very weak tradition of translating Pāli in the Lao lands. Concerning the themes of religious literature, reference to Lān Nā is again necessary, since all the Lao manuscripts seem to have counterparts in northern Thailand. The case is rather different with secular texts, in which the Lao have often proved to be original.

Any study of Lao religious literature must begin with the collections of Luang Prabang, the first royal capital, as traditions there are certainly older and thus more complete. We know that in any case they have been transmitted in a relatively continuous manner, which is not the case with the traditions of Vientiane, and that they are also more diverse there, as is revealed by the study of regional inventories. Another advantage, and not the least, is that exhaustive lists of these collections have existed for almost 100 years, since the time when Luang Prabang was still a conservatory for traditions untouched by modernity (Finot 1917).

We have just emphasised that accurately perceiving a literary tradition's wealth, and thus its role in the spread of Buddhism, demands a previous knowledge of the historical context. Of course, it is vital that this knowledge must itself be sound. The description of Luang Prabang's traditions by Louis Finot in 1917 seems to be a good example of how an incomplete or superficial appreciation of the past can give rise to errors of perspective. At that time, comprehension of Thai regional history was very poor. George Cœdès had not yet published his major article on the political and religious history of "Occidental" Laos, that is to say northern Thailand (Cœdès 1925); the religious architecture of the region had still not been studied; and Thai epigraphic research was practically nonexistent. In contrast, several works had already been released on Angkor, and these had revealed a very

8. The example of the literary heritage conserved in Vientiane illustrates this very clearly. For a traveller visiting the ruins of the city in the middle of the nineteenth century, it would doubtless have been very difficult to find remnants of a written tradition. However, just a few decades previous (before the sack of 1828), there had been a tradition just as rich as that of Luang Prabang. Conversely, the great number of manuscripts today preserved in the temples of the Lao capital should not be misinterpreted. Far from being indicative of a long and unbroken development of an original literary tradition, this richness is actually merely quantitative: it is the simple result of the wholesale copying, over the course of the twentieth century, of a limited number of titles imported from other areas.

rich literary culture, transmitted in its original language: Sanskrit. Louis Finot was certainly heavily influenced by the convention associating the introduction of Buddhism to Laos with the famous mission from Cambodia. This led him to several presuppositions, such as when he wrote, about the *Tipiṭaka* collection:

From the original text only certain parts remain, and these are merely wreckage. When knowledge of Pāli was fading, the books that could no longer be understood ceased to be copied. Most of that which has survived is in the form of *nissaya* [...] Even some of these are no longer part of the corpus: interest in them has been transferred to other more attractive works. (Translated from French, Finot 1917:41)

This idea of the previous existence of a complete collection of canonical texts in the Lao lands has no basis, for it can not be supported by any precise evidence.⁹ The same applies to any supposed prior existence of a real tradition of Lao scholasticism. Louis Finot himself pointed out that the grammatical manuals of Pāli, inseparable from the canonical texts, since they alone allow them to be understood, are singularly absent from Lao temples. Only one library in Luang Prabang possessed them, and these texts seemed then to be recent, dating from around 1820, by which time the Lao capital had already become dominated by Bangkok.

Pāli is the language *par excellence* of Theravāda Buddhism, but the rather artificial role of this language in the religion's practice has not been highlighted. It is probable that its presence in the texts has been maintained purely because of its sacredness, without any consideration for its meaning.

Copying the canonical texts is, in effect, regarded as one greatest sources of obtaining merit. The transmission of these texts is thus no more than the result of a ritual and mechanical action. Louis Finot expressed an idea close to this when he wrote:

the vast majority of Pāli texts are, due to the ignorance of the monks, dead texts. Some do however remain alive by virtue of their practical use. These are the texts belonging to the *Sut*, the periodical or occasional recitations. In the ceremonies they are used in, the monks must chant by heart the texts required by the ritual. It is this professional obligation that assures the preservation of the *Sut* in communities which are otherwise completely ignorant of the meaning of Pāli. (Translated from French, Finot 1917:53)

9. It can be noted that Laos is the only one of the five Theravāda Buddhist countries where the canon and its commentaries have still not been published, either in their Pāli version or in their Lao translation. An attempt was made in the year 2500 of the Buddhist era, but it only resulted in the publication of three volumes in Pāli (the Thai edition runs to 93 volumes) and three volumes of translation (the Thai edition has 91). This lack is representative of the paucity of the Lao scholastic tradition, even more so as these works are not based on Lao manuscripts. The Pāli volumes are merely transcribed in Tham characters from books published in Thailand, while the Lao texts are translations of Thai publications. No complete collection of Canon manuscripts has ever been found in Laos.

When studying the spread of Buddhism, one should never underestimate the importance of these texts, which include the *Paritta* and the *Mon* (P. *manta*) for they exercise without doubt a huge influence on the popular imagination. Used as protective charms in the same way as amulets or astrological superstitions, they are seen as a palliative to individual worries and collective fears. The same importance must be accorded to the *Ānisong* (P. *ānisaṃsa*), which describes the rewards earned by various acts of piety. We cannot conclude this topic without mentioning briefly the *Kammaṭṭhān* (P. *kammaṭṭhāna*) texts, which occupy a much more mystical position in Buddhism, and in which Pāli serves no other purpose than to support the practice of meditation.

THROUGHOUT THIS PAPER, we have tried to redefine the idea of the introduction and diffusion of Lao Buddhism and we have shown, through a few examples, the importance of the cultural influence of Lān Nā. This influence can be proved in a number of other ways, in particular through data from the history of art, especially the study of statues and religious monuments such as *stūpa* (Lorrillard 2001, 2004).

How, then, can we explain the traditional perception that Buddhism came from the Khmer lands? Particular importance should certainly be attached here to the question of the religious substratum. The role of the Khmer and Mon cultures in the development of the Thai civilisations of Sukhothai, Ayuthya and Lān Nā is historically recognised, because it can be established that direct contact existed between these different cultures. The Lao were also aware that the Buddhism they were practising was connected to an ancient form of the religion, which was foreign to them, though the link was only perceptible through material and artistic culture. We can be sure that the first Lao populations to arrive in the middle valley of the Mekong settled on the sites which many centuries previously had been occupied by the Mon. This is especially so in the case of Vientiane and the region of Vieng Kham.¹⁰ We are equally sure that these Lao discovered Mon Buddhist remains, because they reused them. For instance, large steles dating from the second half of the first millennium and bearing the stylised image of a *stūpa* were reemployed from the beginning of the sixteenth century, for the engraving of Lao inscriptions. As the memory of this distant past had vanished, tradition replaced it with a myth that preserved the idea of the presence of a foreign element. This became known as *khom*, a vague term covering all the Mon-Khmer. The Lao tradition of the introduction of Buddhism from a southern source could thus, in a certain manner, maintain the memory of another historical truth, one that is more distant and so less tangible.

10. Vieng Kham is situated about 50 km north of Vientiane, on the banks of the Nam Ngum. Both Mon (first millennium) and Lao (beginning of the sixteenth century) remains have been discovered here. The historic significance of this site is attested to by epigraphic sources and chronicles.

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