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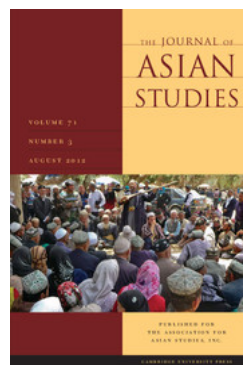
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The Journal of Asian Studies / Volume 71 / Issue 03 / August 2012, pp 655 - 677

DOI: 10.1017/S0021911812000642, Published online: 06 August 2012

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### How to cite this article:

Ian G. Baird (2012). Lao Buddhist Monks' Involvement in Political and Military Resistance to the Lao People's Democratic Republic Government since 1975. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 71, pp 655-677 doi:10.1017/S0021911812000642

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# Lao Buddhist Monks' Involvement in Political and Military Resistance to the Lao People's Democratic Republic Government since 1975

IAN G. BAIRD

*There is a long history of Theravada Buddhist monk involvement in militarism in mainland Southeast Asia. Here, I examine recent Lao monk support for political and military activities directed against the communist Lao People's Democratic Republic government and its Vietnamese supporters since 1975. Monks have not become directly involved in armed conflict, as monastic rules do not allow participation in offensive violent acts, or arms trading, but they have played various important roles in supporting armed resistance against the Lao government. Some monks assisting insurgents have been shot in Thailand. Now most of the Lao insurgent-supporting monks live in the United States, Canada, and France, where a few continue to assist the political resistance against the Lao government, arguing that providing such support does not contradict Buddhist teachings. This article demonstrates how Lao Buddhist monks have negotiated religious conduct rules in the context of strong nationalistic convictions.*

THE 65-YEAR-OLD abbot of the Lao Buddhist temple in Edmonton, Canada, and I sat on the floor. Achan Sounthone Inthirath (known as Achan Sounthone Nyai) periodically sipped on a mango smoothie as I began to interview him. I sat a few meters away, at a slightly lower level with both my legs crossed to one side, as is polite when speaking with a member of the Buddhist clergy. I rapidly took notes, happy that he was willing to speak about his involvement in Lao politics since 1975. We conversed only in Lao. "I first encountered the communists in the late 1950s," he explained. "They came to my village in Savannakhet province and killed the village headman." Achan Sounthone later ordained as a novice and then became a monk in Vientiane, the capital of Laos. In March 1975, before the Lao People's Revolutionary Party seized full control of the country, he fled to Thailand. "I dreamed that a monk told me to flee Laos before the communists started a new war and that if I waited to leave until the sixth Lao (lunar) month (May–June) I would have to swim across the Mekong River to escape."

Achan Sounthone stayed at a temple in Kalasin province, northeastern Thailand, for the next five years. "I used to collect uneaten rice and dry it for

the insurgents when I was in Kalasin,” he acknowledged. “They would pick it up in large bags.” After being regularly hassled by Thai government officials, however, the monk decided to register as a refugee and enter the Lao refugee camp in Ubon Ratchathani province in 1979. But he soon found himself disgusted with the corruption in the camp, and he became increasingly convinced that the cause of the insurgents was just. So in 1980 he moved to a village in Thailand on the edge of the Mekong River where one of the main “white Lao” groups headed by Boualien Vannasay, a former Lao communist soldier who had switched sides in the late 1960s,<sup>1</sup> was headquartered. He spent over eight years treating injured insurgents, both those with bullet wounds and patients suffering from malaria and other illnesses, and training medics. “I trained four groups of five medics each during the time I was there,” he explained proudly. He would also sometimes sneak into southern Laos with the insurgents. “In December 1981, when I was with Achan Souny [another monk] in the Xe Bang Nouan forest on a Buddhist mission [*samana kit*] to provide support to insurgents [*thahan kou xat*] staying in the forest, I was shot at by Red Lao soldiers [*thahan Lao deng*],” he explained. “Fortunately, we were able to escape uninjured.”

In 1988, when the Chatchai Choonhavan government announced its policy to transform “battlefields to marketplaces,” making it difficult for insurgents opposed to the Lao government to continue operating from bases in Thailand, he entered the Lao refugee camp at Napho. From there he ended up being sponsored by the Lao Buddhist temple in Winnipeg, Canada, where he arrived in December 1990. He has not been back to Thailand, and has no plans to ever return to Laos. He remains, however, keenly interested in Lao politics and religion, now as a diaspora. “I don’t travel to Thailand because I would rather save my money to support the building of Buddhist temples in Laos,” he commented. “Since 1995 I have been sending money to an insurgent group that still lives in the forest in southern Laos,” he later told me. “You know the Lao government is giving out land concessions to destroy the forests that the white Lao can hide in,” he stated.

Finally, I got the nerve to ask the senior monk if he felt he had violated Buddhist rules (*vinaya*) by supporting Lao insurgent groups in various capacities over the years. “No,” he replied confidently, “I have not violated any rules. I have only provided humanitarian support, food and medicine, and Buddhist teachings. I have never been involved in military operations or arms trading.” “But you send money to insurgent groups,” I commented rather timidly. “Isn’t that

<sup>1</sup>He gave up together with two other Pathet Lao officers, Thit Tanh Douangmala and Bouasay Senethip, along with a large number of other Pathet Lao soldiers, after their commander, General Phomma Douangmala, died when receiving Vietnamese medical treatment. The Vietnamese were accused of killing the General because he was not willing to strictly follow their wishes. Some have also suggested that he may have been planning to revolt from the Vietnamese.

providing support for violence?" "No, I just provide money. I don't tell them to buy guns with it."

According to Buddhist rules, monks must disrobe (*pharaseek* in Lao, *parā-jikā* in Pali) if they (1) kill humans, (2) steal, (3) have sexual relations with others, or (4) lie, including incorrectly claiming to have become enlightened. Lao monks I have spoken with mainly interpret the teachings of the Buddha to mean that even ordering someone to kill is prohibited, and is grounds for disrobing.

A thought came to mind. Wasn't the monk's justification for providing insurgent groups with money similar to the legitimization that many monks give for consuming meat, even if they are not allowed to kill animals? They typically state that it is appropriate for monks to eat meat provided that they do not kill animals or directly encourage others to do so. Most monks must realize, however, that if they did not eat meat, fewer animals would be slaughtered, but since it is not formally disallowed, most monks choose not to be vegetarians. Similarly, monks who send money to insurgents do not directly encourage them to engage in violence, but as another Thai monk who speaks Lao and is the abbot of a Lao Buddhist temple in the United States told me, "Monks should help people, but they should think about their reasons for helping, and what the support will be used for." One can see how monks interpret Theravada Buddhist rules differently, with some leaving room for providing indirect support for military activities.

This article examines a topic that has so far evaded scholarly attention—the role of Lao Buddhist monks in supporting armed insurgent groups opposed to the communist government of Laos since 1975. My goal is not to endorse the actions of monks who have supported rebels in various capacities, nor to condemn them, but rather to explain how different members of the Lao Buddhist Sangha have interacted with insurgents, and variously legitimized or condemned different levels of involvement in political and military activities. I wish to examine the debates amongst Lao monks regarding what is considered acceptable conduct for monks in relation to supporting insurgent activities, and also demonstrate how monks have frequently relaxed or even disregarded Buddhist *vinaya* rule in the name of supporting the nationalist cause of liberating Laos from communist control.

## BUDDHISM AND VIOLENCE

Buddhism is generally considered to be a religion that does not tolerate violence. The Pali Canon encourages Buddhists to refrain from killing animals, even insects, and does not appear to provide any explicit legitimization for engaging in violence against humans, although some believe violence could be legitimized for defensive purposes. Thus, many Buddhist scholars and practitioners claim that

any Buddhist justifications for violence are contradictory to the teachings of the Buddha, and should not be taken seriously (see Jerryson 2010a; Schober 2006; Victoria 2010). There is, however, considerable evidence that violence has frequently been legitimized in the name of Buddhism. Thus a number of scholars have recently attempted to upturn the idea that violence and Buddhism are rarely connected, with expelling the myth being the primary purpose of Bartholomeusz (2002), as well as the edited volume *Buddhist Warfare* (Jerryson and Juergensmeyer 2010; see, in particular, Faure 2010; Jerryson 2010a). Paul Demieville's (2010) chapter titled "Buddhism and War," which originally appeared in French in 1957 and was translated into English and published in *Buddhist Warfare*, provides considerable evidence of violence associated with Buddhism in China over history. In Japan, "Soldier-Zen" during twentieth-century wartime, including the direct involvement of Buddhist monks in violent acts, relied on Buddhism to legitimize Japanese wartime violence (Victoria 2010).

The most expansive literature linking Buddhism to violence and nationalism, however, relates to modern-day Sri Lanka. Following Stanley Tambiah's controversial 1986 and 1992 books about Buddhism and the civil war with Tamil Tiger rebels (Tambiah 1986, 1992), a number of books, chapters, and articles have appeared about Buddhism and violence in Sri Lanka. For example, Tessa Bartholomeusz and colleagues have contributed considerably to our understanding of Buddhism and the civil war in Sri Lanka (Bartholomeusz 2002; Bartholomeusz and De Silva 1998), as have Schmithausen (1999), Harris (2001), Abeysekara (2001), Seneviratne (2003), and Schober (2006). Most recently, Daniel Kent's work on the links between Buddhist monks and the Sri Lankan army has further expanded our knowledge of the links between Buddhism and the civil war in Sri Lanka. He demonstrates how Buddhists have intentionally killed people and then viewed these acts through the lens of karma (Kent 2010a and b). Considering Abeysekara's (2001) point that the discursive construction of what constitutes "Buddhism" and "violence" is important, it should not be assumed that these terms always have the same underpinnings. Throughout history, violence has been variously defined in the context of Buddhism, and the two have not always been as detached as is often assumed.

Buddhism has also been variously linked with violence in modern-day Burma (Myanmar), whether in support of student uprisings against the government in and after 1988, with regard to violence directed against Burmese Muslims in 1997 and more recently (Walker 2009), or in relation to targeted violence against Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy supporters during a brutal attack in 2003. In the latter two cases, Buddhist monks not only encouraged violence, but directly participated in violent acts (Schober 2006).

Karen Buddhists fighting both in support of and against the Burmese junta have also supported violence. The Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), a group of former Buddhist soldiers and officers inspired by aggressive Buddhist

monks, broke away from the predominantly Christian Karen National Union (KNU) in 1994, and have since claimed responsibility for numerous violent acts, including assassinations of Karen rebel leaders (Walker 2009; Wikipedia contributors 2010). However, some Buddhist Karen remain loyal to the KNU, including one well-known Karen Buddhist monk, Saw Wizana, commonly known as “Monk Rambo.” His nickname clearly links him to violence, even if he is not known to have killed or even injured anyone personally. He claims that his support for the KNU’s longstanding fight against the Burmese government ultimately saves lives (Sussman and Jones 2008).

In August and September 2007, tens of thousands of Burmese monks protested during the so-called “Saffron Revolution” against the Burmese military government using only nonviolent means, indicating that there are various opinions regarding the legitimization of the use of violence within the Burmese Buddhist Sangha. Those monks, however, were brutally oppressed, thus bolstering arguments by monks such as Saw Wizana, who claim that armed resistance is necessary, even if peace is desirable (Sussman and Jones 2008). For many in Asia, the concept of separating religion from the state is weak (see Appleby 2000).

In Thailand, political violence has been variously linked to Buddhist monks. During the Cold War, the right-wing monk Kittivuddho was famously quoted as stating that it was not a sin to kill a communist (see Keyes 1978). Writing about much more recent events, Michael Jerryson (2009, 2010b) has provided an interesting ethnographic account of a “military monk” operating in the troubled southernmost provinces of Thailand. Soldiers there have ordained as monks in order to guard Buddhist temples and populations of Buddhists threatened by Muslim insurgents. Unlike other modern examples in Sri Lanka and Burma, these monks not only are involved in promoting violence, but are actually carrying handguns and war weapons, ostensibly for defensive purposes. Buddhist temples have been converted into de facto army bases, with defensive military barracks constructed on temple grounds and large numbers of soldiers residing in temples, thus using spatial symbolism to discursively and materially link Buddhism and monks with the state military apparatus and state-sanctioned violence against Muslim insurgents and their supporters.

#### BUDDHISM AND VIOLENCE IN SOUTHERN LAOS

In southern Laos, there is a long history of violence involving Buddhist monks. In the nineteenth century, one of the most famous millenarian movements, which tend to be inspired by charismatic individuals (*phou my boun* in Lao), was led by a Buddhist monk named Ay Sa, who evidently supported widespread violence. He had an unusual fortress-like temple built near present-day Kiet Ngong village in Pathoumphone district, Champasak province, where he

organized military-like training for his followers. Later, around 1819, his thousands of largely ethnic minority followers ransacked the center of the Kingdom of Champasak, burning buildings and killing those who had not fled. Some claim that he eventually lost his powers because his soldiers went against Buddhist morals and had intercourse with the dead bodies of victims of village raids he organized (Baird 2007, 2008).

Then, in the 1850s, another Buddhist monk, Niam—whose parents were forcibly relocated to Siam from Vientiane after Chao Anou (Anouvong) was defeated by the Siamese in the late 1820s—instigated a short-lived holy-man revolt against the Siamese and their Lao administrators in the southern Lao province of Attapeu. Again, his followers were mainly indigenous minorities (Baird 2008; Baird and Shoemaker 2008).

At the turn of the nineteenth century, one of the key collaborators with Ong Keo and Ong Kommadam in their well-known revolt in the Bolaven Plateau and nearby areas (Gay 2002; Gunn [1990] 2003; Keyes 1977; Murdoch 1974; Nartsupha 1984; Pholsena 2006; Wilson 1997), Ong Kam Somdet, or Ong Thong, the son of a Lao royal, Chao Southisan, was a Buddhist monk in 1895 when he organized against the French colonial government and was arrested by the authorities.<sup>2</sup> Later, in 1901, the idea of “monk magicians” was a significant part of the rebellion again involving Ong Thong, along with Ong Keo and Ong Kommadam (Gay 2002). Buddhist symbolism, such as the construction of a Buddhist temple-like structure by Ong Keo’s followers, was used to empower the rebels. This is not surprising considering that Ong Keo had previously spent two years in Bangkok as a Buddhist monk (Gay 2002).

While all of the monks mentioned above were arguably unorthodox, Ay Sa, Niam, and Ong Thong were apparently all properly ordained, and thus their actions cannot be easily disassociated from Buddhism.

#### CHANGES IN THE GOVERNMENT IN LAOS

Before explaining the involvement of Lao Buddhist monks in political and military activities opposed to the Lao government after 1975, it is necessary to provide a short review of the recent political history of Laos.

In 1973 the Nixon administration in the United States was faced with increasing American public opposition to the war in Vietnam and the closely linked conflict in Laos. There had also been a recent breakthrough in relations with China. Therefore, a plan was executed to allow the U.S. military to withdraw from the war. This required orchestrating a peace agreement between the North and South Vietnamese governments, and between the Royal Lao Government

<sup>2</sup>Rumany, Commissaire to chief of Battalion, Tournier, Sup. Commandant of Bas-Laos. Report, 7 July 1895, CAOM Indochine 20756, Foreign Archives, Aix-en-Provence, France.

(RLG) and the communist Pathet Lao. In Laos the RLG was initially hesitant to sign a ceasefire agreement, due to being suspicious of the communists, but after Henry Kissinger, the U.S. secretary of state, flew into Vientiane for a short, private, and apparently frank discussion with the prime minister of Laos, Souvanna Phouma, the RLG relented and signed. The U.S. government was bankrolling the Royal Lao Army, so the stern threat of withdrawing financial support apparently delivered by Kissinger was sufficient to lead to the Paris peace agreement in February 1973 and a coalition government in Laos soon afterwards. This agreement, along with the one involving Vietnam, provided the United States with a chance to militarily withdraw from the war in an orderly way, without losing face.

However, over the next couple of years a series of events, culminating in mass protests against key right-wing ministers—organized by students in early 1975—led to the largely nonviolent takeover of the government by the Pathet Lao. Even though the Paris peace agreement was violated, by 1975 the Americans had ostensibly withdrawn, and nobody in the international arena wanted to stand up to the Pathet Lao or their Vietnamese and Soviet backers, especially if it might lead to more armed conflict. Some of the Lao military and political leaders supportive of the RLG fled the country in early 1975, but others were willing to work with the new regime. Most, however, were tricked into traveling to “re-education” (*seminar*) camps in various remote parts of the country, the harshest of which were in Vieng Xay district, Houaphanh province, a political stronghold of the Pathet Lao. Many would endure hard labor and poor living conditions, including little food and virtually no medical care, for over a decade. Some would die in captivity; others would escape and make their way to Thailand (Bouphanouvong 2003; Kremer 2003; Thammakhanty 2004), where some would take up arms against the communists (see, for example, Jonsson 2009). In the midst of the dramatic political purges and sociopolitical changes occurring in the country, hundreds of thousands of people fled to Thailand between 1975 and the late 1980s.

Initially, the Thais were fearful that Thailand would be the next “domino” to fall to communism, unless they were proactive in resisting communist advances, both domestically and regionally. Thai security services secretly encouraged Lao refugees to engage in subversive activities against the government of Laos from bases in Thailand. Lao insurgents were also used to gather intelligence for Thai security services during clandestine operations inside Laos.

This unofficial but crucial support for Lao right-wing and neutralist insurgent groups operating along the Laos-Thailand border continued, in various forms, until the late 1980s when the Chatchai Choonhaven government in Thailand decided to implement a new policy of reconciliation (battlefield to marketplace), at which time the Thais began making it clear that insurgents would no longer be allowed to use Thai soil for conducting military operations against the Lao government. The Thai government included many factions, however, including



some in the military with other ideas, so implicit support for insurgents continued along some parts of the border, but the changes in Thai government policies regarding Laos had triggered the beginning of the end for the insurgents, although spurts of armed resistance have continued even up to today, especially amongst ethnic Hmong.

#### THE INVOLVEMENT OF LAO BUDDHIST MONKS IN SUPPORTING ARMED INSURGENT ACTIVITIES AFTER 1975

When the communists gained control of Laos in 1975, many were deeply concerned about the apparent lack of respect the Pathet Lao had for Buddhism. Although in more recent years senior political figures have embraced Buddhism, during the regime's early years the leaders of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) were not openly supportive of any religions, and thus did not publicly attend Buddhist ceremonies. The government no longer encouraged young men to join the Sangha, and the Buddhist hierarchy of the country was completely revamped. Only a single Buddhist sect was permitted, one led by monks fully supportive of the new government, and under the political direction of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party.

Many Buddhist monks feared that Buddhism itself was under serious threat in the Lao PDR, and fled the country. For example, Achan Khamphuey Bounthon, a monk originally from Phonthong district, Champasak province, in southern Laos, who now lives in the United States, remembers how he was called into the district center from his village temple after being accused of strongly criticizing the implementation of the Pathet Lao's eighteen-point plan. Fearing that he would be sent to a re-education camp, or worse, he decided to flee to Thailand with another monk. After narrowly evading soldiers who were sent to arrest him, he arrived in Thailand in late 1975.

Once in Thailand, most Lao monks found themselves either residing in Thai Buddhist temples along the border or living in the various Lao refugee camps set up in Thailand beginning in 1976. Some monks also ended up in Bangkok temples. Achan Khamdeng (Deng) Sengpraseut was originally from what was Sithandone province (now southern Champasak province) in the deep south of Laos. He ordained as a novice in southern Laos and then moved to Vientiane after he turned twenty and became a monk. Beginning in 1973, he studied Buddhism in Nong Khai, in northeastern Thailand, before continuing his studies at Wat Sena temple in Bang Khen, Bangkok. He finally took up an offer to become a refugee in France in 1986, where he is now the abbot of a Buddhist temple in Strasbourg.<sup>3</sup> When still in Thailand, he became close to Phoumi

<sup>3</sup>According to Sith Phetphakhian, the French visas for both Achan Khamdeng Sengpraseut and Achan Savat Vinaythenes were actually arranged by members of the Lao resistance through

Nosavan, the former Lao military general who had fled to Thailand after a failed coup attempt in the mid-1960s. General Phoumi became a key leader of the Lao resistance to the Lao PDR government. Achan Khamdeng frequently visited him for meetings at his nearby house at Ban Champa, and also interacted with Achan Chanh Ly (see below), attending meetings with him and raising small amounts of funds when requested.

One particularly well-known monk from Champasak province, southern Laos, Achan Ky Thammo Thammo, fled his “forest temple” just outside of Nong Pham village in Champasak district, where he had been the abbot since establishing the temple 20 years earlier,<sup>4</sup> in 1978. He ended up at a temple in Phibul Mangsahan district, Ubon Ratanathani province in Thailand, near the border with Laos, where a Thai monk who respected him took the elderly monk in and eventually, in 1979, arranged for Achan Ky to become the abbot of a forest temple three kilometers outside of Phibul Mangsahan town that had been abandoned by Thai monks due to fears of ghosts linked to an old human burial/carnal ground nearby. Achan Ky was well-known for his ability to ward off spirits, and so did not fear ghosts. Wat Pa Sanamsai would become a key monastery for Lao Buddhist refugee monks and insurgents.

As with most other Lao Buddhist monks supporting Lao insurgents in Thailand, Achan Ky apparently followed Buddhist *vinaya* rules that prevented him from directly handling weapons or supporting the purchase of arms. One of the five professions that Buddhists should not engage with (*meexa xeep* in Lao, *miccāṅṅiva* in Pali) (incorrect professions) is trading in weapons. Achan Ky also avoided direct involvement in military planning operations, or related activities, which is considered by all the Lao monks I have spoken with to be in violation of Buddhist rules. However, one monk who was close with Achan Ky said, “He was strict when it came to Buddhist practice, but once he came to Thailand he had to become less strict to fit with the difficult circumstances.” It would appear that nationalism was influencing his interpretation of Buddhist practices.

The support provided to insurgents from Wat Pa Sanamsai was significant. One former insurgent who now lives in France, Singto Na Champassak, told me how he stayed there for a short period after escaping from a re-education

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their contacts with the military attaché at the French embassy in Bangkok in order to facilitate fundraising activities in support of rebel activities. Achan Khamdeng apparently helped Achan Chanh Ly and dissidents that he supported later (Sith Phetphakhian, pers. comm. June 26, 2011). Another Lao dissident source added that later, when he visited France, Achan Savat gave him an envelope with 2,000 francs in it. Somebody with him commented that he had never seen a monk give a layperson an envelope with money in it, only the other way around (Anonymous, pers. comm. July 24, 2011).

<sup>4</sup>The land used to establish the temple was gifted to Achan Ky by a member of the Champassak royal family, Chao Sone Koutala-oubon, whose daughter, Pheng, would later marry the future chief of the Lao Royal Army when the government fell in 1975, Brigadier General (Phon Tho) Boumpone Makthepharak.

camp in Attapeu province in the late 1970s (see Na Champassak 2010). It was, he claimed, a place where insurgents could stay in times of trouble. Initially Achan Ky lived there in very basic conditions together with Lao insurgent soldiers. “Achan Ky would go out for alms in the morning and get food which he would eat and give to insurgents (*thahan kou xat* in Lao) to nourish them as well,” explained Singto. “He also used *katha* [Buddhist verses] to protect rebel soldiers.” Achan Ky gave out various kinds of *katha* to protect insurgents, such as one that was kept on the waist to protect one from bullets. Singto explained that he was required to *tang khai*, or prepare an offering that included candles and flowers (no money) (*khan 5* in Lao). Singto was then told to sit and do wishful meditation (*phavana* in Lao) while Achan Ky chanted (*chom* in Lao) the *mon katha* or verse.<sup>5</sup> After the ceremony, an insurgent soldier tied Singto up with rope. If a soldier could free himself, the *katha* was believed to become attached (*tit* in Lao). Singto was able to escape.

Another monk who resided at the same temple, and fled from the same temple in Laos as Achan Ky, and is now a monk in the Midwest of the United States, explained that Achan Ky provided food, a place to stay, and medicine to all Lao refugees who came to his temple, whether they were insurgents or not. “The support provided was all humanitarian,” he claimed. “Achan Ky had *metha* [compassion in Lao, *mettā* in Pali] for all the Lao in Thailand.” Achan Ky was well-known as a traditional medicine expert, and he treated many insurgents and their families. He also gave money to insurgents, sometimes without expecting repayment. In other cases, insurgents repaid him once money arrived from supporters in the United States or elsewhere. Achan Ky and other monks staying at Wat Pa Sanamsai helped insurgents who were, because of their refugee status, unable to retrieve money sent to Thai banks from overseas. Lao monks, even though they had the same official status as laypeople, were able to retrieve money sent to refugees. The Lao monk commented, “I used to collect money sent from overseas to refugees. I did not know what the money was for, if it was to support insurgent activities. I just collected it, usually a few hundred dollars at a time, and delivered it to those who could not access it.”

Other monks situated along the border, especially those from southern Laos, supported insurgents in various other ways. For example, Achan Khampheuy explained that apart from providing rice and medical support that he received from Thai people (he even administered injections for the injured) who respected him and offered him supplies to make merit, he also helped teach insurgents about “the nation” (*xat* in Lao), which he felt was an important part of his duties. “The insurgents did not understand the importance of the nation, so I taught them,” he explained. He encouraged insurgent soldiers to

<sup>5</sup>It is also possible that this protective verse could have been called a *paritta*, which is a *katha* with a series of set verses, used for protection.

differentiate between good and bad people, and to not do bad things to the innocent. He explained that if they did bad things to the people, their cause would be damaged, and thus they would be “destroying the nation.” Morality and sacrificing for the nation were linked discursively. Nationalism was a strong theme expressed by all the insurgent-supporting monks I interviewed.

Achan Khampheuy was not particularly keen on *visa akhom* (magic), since he felt that monks should generally disconnect themselves from this, but Lao insurgents often believed strongly in magic, and frequently asked him for blessings that would protect them from harm. This was also the case for Thai soldiers who fought in the Vietnam War (Ruth 2010). “I had to provide them with what they wanted,” explained the monk. He would make what is known as *mak lote katha* (*tagroot* in Thai) (a talisman scroll based on verses) in order to protect insurgent soldiers, writing *vixay songkham* (war victory) on a small, thin piece of brass and then wrapping it around a type of thin plant with a hollow center. The plant would then be threaded with string to create a talisman that could be worn as a necklace for protection against bullets, bombs, etc. Much like Kent (2010a) described for monks in Sri Lanka, the Lao monks attempted to assist soldiers from becoming injured or killed, but mainly did not specifically encourage them to kill or injure their enemies, although neither did they explicitly tell them not to kill enemy soldiers.

However, not all monks provided *katha* to insurgent soldiers. Achan Sounthone Intharath and Achan Souny apparently did not, as these monks were active, and apparently did not have quiet places where they could meditate. Linking meditation with worldly matters, such as those related to merit making and protective ceremonies, is not as common in Buddhism as linking it to more transcendental matters, such as nirvana, but this seems to be the case for at least some Lao monks. According to one former insurgent close to these monks, who himself was a monk for about a decade before becoming a soldier, calm places for conducting meditation are required before *katha* can be done.

There were other monks who strongly supported Lao insurgents. For example, Achan Phom, originally from Nakadao village in Khong Sedone district, Salavan province, was known to be a strong supporter of insurgent activities. Achan Somboun (nicknamed Boun) was another Lao monk who was well-known for supporting insurgent activities. One monk even went as far as to describe him as a “*nak leng*” (ruffian). He was originally from Phonthong district, Champasak province.

Achan Sounthone Silaphet (known as Achan Sounthone Noi) is another Lao monk from southern Laos with a long history of supporting Lao insurgents but not violence directly. Born in 1948 in Khong district, Champasak province, he ordained as a novice and later became a monk. He studied at Vientiane's Wat Sithan Neua temple,<sup>6</sup> and later traveled to India in 1966–67 to visit the site

<sup>6</sup>The village of Sithan Neua was the village of Pheng Phonsavanh and Soukanh Vilaysan, two prominent neutralist Lao politicians before 1975.

where the Buddha became enlightened. He returned to Khong in 1970 to be the director of the monk school there. He voluntarily disrobed in 1973 at the request of his parents, who wanted him to live at home and marry. He did not, however, stay home long, and soon took up a civilian position as an official in the Thamman (Religion) Ministry in Vientiane, which was under the control of Maha Kou Souvanamethi (Pathet Lao) and Soukanh Vilaysan (Neutralist) during the coalition government period. He claimed that the Pathet Lao wanted to dissolve the ministry and prohibit men from ordaining as monks. The ministry was, in fact, dissolved in 1975, and was replaced by a department under the Ministry of Education, under Phoumi Vongvichit (Pathet Lao). Men were never officially prohibited from ordaining as monks, but many were discouraged from doing so.

Sounthone Silaphet fled to Thailand in December 1984, where he entered the Napho refugee camp as a lay refugee. Some other Lao monks were already drying rice they obtained from alms (*bindabat*) to give to Lao insurgents. Sounthone became involved as an activist for an anti-Lao PDR organization based in the United States. In 1986 he decided to reordain by a Thai monk in Phibul Mangsahan district. He was still registered as residing at Napho, but he actually moved to Ubon Ratchanthani. He went to stay with Achan Chanh Ly outside of Bangkok during the same year. According to Achan Sounthone, “Achan Chanh Ly spoke a lot about supporting Lao insurgents, but Achan Ky did more in reality (Figure 1). He supported Lao insurgents more than any other monk.” Achan Sounthone Noi stayed with Achan Chanh Ly outside of Bangkok for three years, until 1988, when he moved to Wat Pa Sanamsai to stay with Achan Ky. He returned to Napho in 1990, and in 1991 he immigrated to Canada, initially staying at the Lao Buddhist temple in Winnipeg. He had to immigrate or risk being arrested by Thai



**Figure 1.** Achan Chanh Ly (left) and Achan Ky (right) receiving offerings from a Lao insurgent at Wat Pa Sanamsai in Ubon Ratchathani Province, Thailand (1982).

authorities for supporting Lao insurgents. He remains a supporter of groups opposed to the Lao PDR government. When asked if it was appropriate for a monk to support insurgents, he replied that monks could not become involved in providing guns, but that giving money was fine. "I do not tell them to buy guns," he commented, much like Achan Sounthone Nyai had stated. This implies that Achan Sounthone Noi is more concerned about the karmic consequences of his actions than whether he violates the *vinaya*. Nationalism justifies this approach. I have only been able to ask a limited number of Lao monks about this matter, but it appears that most believe that monks should not become involved in directly supporting armed groups, although my interviews also indicate that individual monks interpret this matter differently.

In the United States, in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, a now deceased Lao Buddhist monk from southern Laos, Achan Seuam, used to give Lao insurgents money, especially to pay the costs of flights to Southeast Asia. He provided support as a monk in Nong Khai, Thailand, before 1984 when he came to United States, where former insurgents helped him establish a temple.

Although the Buddhist tradition of laypeople gaining merit (*boun*) through providing offerings certainly provided monks with a good opportunity for raising funds to directly or indirectly support insurgent activities, my research does not indicate that any Lao people ordained particularly to raise funds for insurgents. Instead, those who were already monks sometimes used their positions to fundraise for insurgent activities, with Achan Chanh Ly being the most successful.

Although not all Lao insurgents were strong Buddhists, it appears that they were generally more pious than noncombatants. Therefore, it was important for many to have close contacts with monks. Also, some groups maintained a particular code with links to Buddhist morals (*sin* in Lao). For example, Boualien Vannasay's group, which operated in southern Laos from bases in Thailand near the Mekong River, as well as within Laos, required that all its members not kill wild or domestic animals when on missions. One of his key deputies said, "Even killing lizards [*kapome*] was not allowed, and if we learned that anyone had done that, we would tell them to stop." This moral oath would also have made protective Buddhist amulets more powerful. Following Abeysekara's (2001) argument, this group's legitimization of violence through linking it to a Buddhist moral code discursively made it more palatable to Buddhists, since it was positioned as being linked with righteousness and Buddhist morals.

It appears that the majority of Lao Buddhist monks who supported Lao insurgents in Thailand were originally from southern Laos, especially south of Savannakhet province. Maybe the fact that some monks were heavily involved had the effect of making such activities more normative, thus encouraging others to become involved, since other monks were already legitimizing such activities in relation to Buddhist *vinaya*. There were, however, a few from central and northern Laos, such as Achan Damdouan, from Xayaboury province, who supported

insurgents in central and northern Laos, especially in Pak Chom district, Loei province, and Louang Pho Phoy, another monk from Laos based at Wat Hai Sok in Nong Khai, who also actively supported insurgents. According to one source, in the early 1980s Louang Pho Phoy successfully transferred a box of explosives for insurgents from Udorn Thani to Nakorn Phanom via public bus. He was not checked at police posts along the way because he was a monk. Later in the 1980s, he was shot and killed, although it is unclear if he was assassinated due to his support for Lao insurgents.

In contrast, however, the chief monk of Laos, Phra Sangkhalath, who himself fled to Thailand a few years after the government in Laos changed, apparently never provided any support for insurgent activities. Many other monks were similarly inclined.

#### CROSSING THE LINE—ACHAN CHANH LY

Most of the Lao Buddhist monks who supported Lao insurgents opposed to the Lao PDR government after 1975 believe that, provided that they did not explicitly become involved in arms trading or procurement or direct military planning operations, they were not violating the Buddhist *vinaya*. Most Lao monks who have supported Lao insurgent activities in the past believe, however, that Achan Chanh Ly<sup>7</sup> (his official Thai title was Phra Khou Uthai Thammasophit) crossed the line in terms of getting involved in insurgent activities that Buddhist monks should not participate in.

Achan Chanh Ly was born in 1941 in Khong district, Champasak province. In two separate recorded speeches of Achan Chanh Ly that I have copies of, he claimed to have become a Pathet Lao soldier during the last years of the French colonial period, eventually achieving the rank of captain,<sup>8</sup> before going to Thailand to work as a spy for the Pathet Lao. He stated that he later became disenchanted with the Pathet Lao and ordained as a Buddhist monk. A few different Lao Buddhist monks who knew his personal history well told me, however, that there is no truth to the above story. One monk who now lives in France told me, diplomatically, that “Everything that Achan Chanh Ly said sounded like the truth.”<sup>9</sup> Another monk, Achan Savat Vinaythenes, who is the abbot of the most important Lao Buddhist temple in France, is an excellent source of information about Achan Chanh Ly, as he was ordained as a novice at the same time as Achan Chanh Ly in 1955, and later ordained as a monk in 1963, the same year as Achan Chanh Ly, although in a different temple in Bangkok.

<sup>7</sup>In Thailand, they called him Phra Maha Chanla Tanboualy.

<sup>8</sup>His former position as a captain in the army is also mentioned by the *Daily News* (2004).

<sup>9</sup>Achan Khamdeng Sengpraseut, abbot of the Lao Buddhist temple in Strasbourg, France, pers. comm. October 9, 2010.

Achan Savat commented, in the same vein, but more bluntly, even though he also supported insurgents in the late 1970s and 1980s.

According to Achan Savat, Achan Chanh Ly fled to Thailand around 1977, where he met Chaovalit Yongchaiyudh, who was a lieutenant colonel in the Thai army at the time but who had many relatives in Laos, and was in charge of Internal Security Operations Command (*Kong amnuaykan raksa khwam man-khong phai nai*),<sup>10</sup> one of the five security agencies in Thailand. Through Col. Chaovalit, Achan Savat claimed that Achan Chanh Ly became connected to the Thai military. Others, however, claim that Achan Chanh Ly was actually not close to Chaovalit, but rather with more right-wing soldiers, including one full colonel named “Sit.”<sup>11</sup> He was also apparently close to senior members of the Royal Thai Air Force.<sup>12</sup> In any case, between 1977 and 1982, during the height of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), he frequently spoke to groups of soldiers, university students, government officials, and monks about the evils of communism, using totally fabricated personal accounts from Laos. “People did not believe what officials told them, so they needed a monk who would lie for them, as people believed monks more,” explained Achan Savat. Achan Chanh Ly was willing to do as the Thai security services asked, and he became well-known in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It is unclear whether the Thais knew that Achan Chanh Ly’s accounts of his personal history contained very little truth.

In 1978 the chief monk in Thailand, the Somdet Sangkhalat, provided him with land in Minburi province,<sup>13</sup> on the outskirts of Bangkok, so that he could build his own temple, Wat Samachanyavat (Wat Mai). Achan Chanh Ly gained Thai citizenship and received the rank of Phra Khu or Tham Ek<sup>14</sup> within the Thai Buddhist Sangha. The Thai government policy changed in 1982, when CPT members received amnesty, after which time Achan Chanh Ly was not utilized extensively for propaganda purposes.

Achan Chanh Ly became intimately involved with insurgent activities along the border between Ubon Ratchathani province and southern Laos. Apart from the “humanitarian” and moral support provided by other Lao monks, he was a strong supporter of the right-wing insurgent, former Royal Lao Army

<sup>10</sup>Referred to frequently using the acronym “Ko Ro Mo No.”

<sup>11</sup>Sith Phetphakhian, pers. comm. June 26, 2011.

<sup>12</sup>Anonymous, pers. comm. July 24, 2011.

<sup>13</sup>According to the *Daily News* (2004), the temple is on Phrayasuren Street, Khweng Bangchan, Khet Khlong Samwa.

<sup>14</sup>He actually only achieved “*phrayok 4*,” as in 1968, after achieving “*phrayok 3*” he was sent back to Laos after he was expelled from Buddhist school for not attending classes (Achan Savat Vinaythenes, pers. comm. October 22, 2010). The *Daily News* (2004), however, apparently incorrectly reported that he has achieved the rank of *chanh ayk*, equal to the rank of assistant abbot at Wat Phra Aram Luang Chan Ek. Achan Khamdeng Sengpraseut in Strasbourg, France, told me that Achan Chanh Ly did not actually achieve this rank, but that it was claimed that he had to the public after he was killed.



Lieutenant Pang Latamany, who gained prominence in the early 1980s in the insurgent stronghold in Dong Kanthoung forest, and neighboring Bunthalik district in Ubon Ratchathani province, near the tri-border area between Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand. However, after Vietnamese soldiers crushed insurgent forces in that area in 1984–85 (Tan, n.d.), Pang crossed the Mekong River with other insurgents and continued his activities inside Laos until he was finally killed in Phon Sa-at village, Khong district, Champasak province, in late 1988 (Vientiane Domestic Service 1988). According to various Lao monks and insurgent leaders, Achan Chanh Ly was directly involved in supporting Pang's military operations, including providing advice about military strategy. Because of this, many Lao monks, including those sympathetic to his cause, believe he "crossed the line." Achan Savat stated that Achan Chanh Ly had definitely violated the *vinaya*. A large part of his personal justification for doing this apparently related to his commitment to the Lao nation, something that he apparently saw as more important than Buddhism, even though he was a monk.

Achan Chanh Ly supported various other insurgent leaders, including Chao Sanhprasith (Sith) Na Champassak, a key insurgent leader in southern Laos, based in Ubon Ratchathani, after he escaped from a re-education camp in Vieng Xay in 1981. While most other insurgent-supporting Lao monks eventually became refugees in the United States, Canada, and France in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Achan Chanh Ly stayed in Thailand until his inauspicious death in late 2004 (see below).

#### LAO BUDDHIST MONK CASUALTIES

In that Lao Buddhist monks provided support for militant Lao insurgents, it should come as little surprise that Lao monks also became victims of violence. The first Lao monk known to be shot due to insurgent connections was Achan Ky, who was hit once in his armpit in 1990 when he was sitting at Wat Pa Sanamsai with a visiting Lao insurgent. It is unclear who the main target was, but the insurgent, Phim, was killed by the hail of bullets from the automatic or semi-automatic pistol directed at them. Achan Ky, after being shot once, fled his assailant and entered his monastic living quarters (*kouti* in Lao), where he locked the door.<sup>15</sup>

Achan Chanh Ly was shot and killed in his temple on the morning of October 18, 2004. First, one of his two assailants bought food to feed fish in a pond on the temple grounds. The two pretended to bring in items to make merit. Instead, however, they carried out a targeted assassination. One of the two shot the monk three times with a .38 revolver as he sat on a sofa in his *kuti*; the other drove the getaway motorcycle. Later a photo of Somdet Sangkhalat with

<sup>15</sup>Achan Ky died of another illness unrelated to his gunshot wound about five years later, in 1995.

Achan Chanh Ly, with the latter's face crossed out, was found at the scene. It was apparently used by the assassins to identify the monks. The assailants were not apprehended (Daily News 2004).

Phra Rat Sara Vethi, the abbot of Wat Phrasi Maha That in Bang Khen, oversaw the funeral ceremony for Achan Chanh Ly, and Vichan Meenchaiyanan, the local member of Parliament (MP) for the Thai Rak Thai Party, attended. Not long before the attack, an overseas Lao opposed to the Lao PDR government warned Achan Chanh Ly that his life was in danger, since other Lao insurgents had already been assassinated in previous months, but Achan Chanh Ly brushed off concerns. Achan Chanh Ly remains a controversial figure in death, with some Lao continuing to respect him, while others are very critical of him.

Apart from monks who have been directly targeted by assassins, another monk who was working closely with insurgent soldiers in Boualien Vannasay's and Thit Tanh Douangmala's groups also died as an indirect result of his involvement with insurgents. Achan Souny, originally from Nakhonepheng district in Salavan province, was crossing by boat from Khamteu village in Salavan to Soi village in Simuangmai district, Ubon Ratchathani. It was November 1981, and water levels in the Mekong River were still quite high. The boat, which was overloaded with monks and insurgents, became caught in the rapids and flipped over. Achan Souny's Buddhist robes got caught over his head, causing him to drown. He was the only one who perished in the accident. Despite extensive efforts by insurgents and aligned monks to recover the monk's body, it was never found.

#### THAI MONKS SUPPORTING LAO INSURGENTS

Rather than being under the direction of Thalasangkhom, the national institution officially responsible for managing monks in Thailand, most Lao monks, except for a few, including Achan Chanh Ly, were under the jurisdiction of the Thai Ministry of Interior (*kasuang Maha Thai* in Thai), since they were only recognized as political refugees, not actually as monks. Although I initially suspected that the Lao monks supporting insurgent activities in Laos may have been influenced by the famous anti-communist Thai monk Kittivuddho (see Keyes 1977, 1978, 1987), most of those I have interviewed claimed that they had little or no contact with Kittivuddho, as he was not directly involved in supporting Lao insurgents, and was instead more active in supporting insurgents in Cambodia and southern Thailand.<sup>16</sup> Achan Chanh Ly, due to his strong connections in Thailand, did have some contact

<sup>16</sup>Achan Sounthone Intharath claimed that he went to see him once at his temple in 1982, but that Kittivuddho was not there so they did not meet. Achan Sounthone claimed, however, that Kittivuddho's statement that "killing a communist was not a sin" was actually a misinterpretation of his statement, and that in fact, Kittivuddho had meant to convey the message that killing the ideology (*lati* in Lao) of communism, not actually communist people, was not a sin (Achan Sounthone Intharath, pers. comm. August 17, 2010).

with Kittivuddho, but not much. Kittivuddho was also close with Luang Por Chamroon Parnchand, the abbot of Tham Krabok temple in Phra Phutthabat district, Saraburi province, which supported insurgents fighting against the Lao communist government (see Baird 2012 (see below)).

According to the Lao monk Achan Sounthone Silaphet, few Thai monks openly supported Lao insurgents, apart from a small number in northeastern Thailand. Lao insurgents did, however, receive some material and other support from the monks at Tham Krabok, particularly Chamroon Parnchand, who won the prestigious Ramon Magsaysay Award for Public Service in 1975 due to his work related to drug addiction. While Tham Krabok is best known for providing treatment for drug addicts, both Thai and foreign, the temple also played an important role in providing “humanitarian” support to Hmong insurgents, especially those in the Ethnic Liberation Organization of Laos and later the Chao Fa Party under the leadership of Pa Kao Her. The special relationship between Tham Krabok and the Hmong, and its link to the struggle between dissidents and the Lao PDR government, is described in Baird (2012), so I will not elaborate here.

In southern Laos, a number of Thai monks supported Lao monks who were providing assistance to Lao insurgents. Of particular importance was the head monk of Khong Chiam district in Ubon Ratchanthani province, Phra Khou Ratanawari. Sounthone Silaphet claimed that northeast Thai monks mainly just provided humanitarian support via Lao refugee camps such as Napho, without giving any direct assistance to insurgents.

In at least one case, a Thammayut sect monk from Laos contacted the chief of the Thammayut Buddhist Sangha in Nong Khai province, northeast Thailand, in 1976 and brought him to meet a Lao resistance leader and former MP in Laos, Khamphoui Sisavatdy, in an attempt to gain support from the Thai Buddhist Sangha for Lao insurgents. The monk did come, but not long after Khamphoui was arrested by Thai authorities, and the Lao monk, afraid of getting in trouble, fled to another part of Thailand, possibly Chiang Mai.

#### THE STRUGGLE FOR BUDDHIST SPACE OVERSEAS

For the most part, armed insurgent activities directed against the Lao PDR government have ended. In addition, former Lao refugees living overseas, including those previously interested or involved in political activities opposed to the Lao PDR government, are increasingly returning to Laos to visit, and sometimes to invest or spend extended periods of time. Yet some continue to be strongly opposed to the Lao PDR government, even if there is little they can do to change the circumstances in Laos.

Some overseas Lao have turned to more subtle and symbolic forms of resistance, ones that have little substantive impact on the political situation in Laos

but which are of some satisfaction for those who remain bitter about the lack of multi-party democracy and associated freedoms in Laos. It is a bit like what James Scott (1985) described in *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, in which peasants generally do not openly defy authority, since they cannot afford the consequences of being caught doing so, but they instead resist in safer and less obvious ways, such as through foot-dragging, pilfering, or engaging in character assassination.<sup>17</sup> These symbolic struggles, not surprisingly, have become intertwined with Buddhist spaces overseas, since diaspora Lao have little power over spaces inside Laos. In Paris, France, Buddhist monks from Laos who are believed by some overseas Lao to be “communist monks” have been prevented from staying overnight in one temple whose president is a member of the exiled Na Champassak southern Lao royal family. In addition, in an act of defiance, when a Buddhist monk from Laos came to the temple, the three-headed elephant flag of the former government of Laos was put up prominently at the entrance of the temple, to symbolically taunt him. The idea is to deny supporters of the Lao PDR government places where they can make merit, something that is crucial for both one’s present life and also future lives. Thus, denying chances to make merit is concomitant with hurting one’s future.

There is another prominent Lao Buddhist temple outside of Paris at Saint-Leu-la-Forêt where the Lao PDR ambassador of France sometimes goes to make merit. At a 2010 political meeting in the United States organized by those opposed to the Lao PDR government, and attended by Lao representatives from France, it was announced that the executive committee of the temple had “taken control of the temple,” through preventing the Lao ambassador and other Lao political leaders from making merit at the temple. One dissident from Europe praised the symbolic victory, stating, “There are no longer any Lao Buddhist temples in the Paris area where members of the Red Lao [*Lao deng*] government can make merit.” However, upon checking with the abbot of the temple, Achan Savat, it was found that the claims of exclusion of the Lao ambassador have, in fact, been highly exaggerated. Achan Savat said, “Why would we disallow the ambassador from making merit at our temple? He is recognized by the government of France. We cannot deny him entry to the temple.” Clearly, statements about excluding the ambassador are themselves more symbolic than based on any actual exclusion.

In another case, in Montreal, Canada, a prominent political former refugee who is heavily involved in the Buddhist temple there is also concerned about ensuring that Buddhist monks from Laos who might be sympathetic to the Lao PDR government not stay at the temple. He told me that he has made it clear to the monks that his temple is for “refugees.” He said that monks from Laos can come to stay at the temple, but their political views must be guaranteed by members of the Lao refugee community who are related to them before they are approved to reside at the

<sup>17</sup>I have never heard of instances in which monks have turned their begging bowls upside down in protest in Laos or Thailand, although it does happen elsewhere.

temple. Again, Lao people opposed to the Lao PDR government are interested in retaining political control of Buddhist temple space.

## CONCLUSIONS

The objective of this article has not been to either support or condemn the actions of the different Lao monks who have variously become involved in rebel activities opposed to the Lao PDR government since 1975, whether in Thailand or overseas, but to review what has happened and outline the types of debates that the Lao Buddhist clergy have engaged in regarding the appropriateness of becoming involved in different types of political and military activities. It has also been to show the complex relationships that have developed between religion and nationalism amongst Buddhist monks who fled Laos as political refugees, with nationalism having increased influence on monks during the height of insurgent activities. All the monks who supported insurgents in one way or another reported having strong nationalistic motivations for doing so. These nationalistic views were, however, frequently balanced in particular and sometimes seemingly precarious ways with the rules governing monk behavior, or *vinaya*. In extreme cases, such as with Achan Chanh Ly, direct violation of *vinaya* was apparently justified on nationalist grounds. Thus feelings about Buddhist *vinaya* and nationalism frequently conflicted and left Lao political refugee monks in dilemmas, in situations in which monks found themselves wanting to support an important nationalist cause while at the same time not violating Buddhist *vinaya*. As members of the Lao diaspora, these monks should not just be located within Buddhism, but also as members of communities with continuing ideas about their homelands, including fearing that their country will disappear as a result of foreign occupation. Thus, different monks have variously justified their actions. I am not convinced that the increased support for violence by Lao monks after 1975 was particularly linked to what Obeyesekere (1991) called Buddhism of the heart, as that sort of explanation implies that a purer form of Buddhism existed in the past as compared to now, a position that tends to romanticize the past more than explain what has occurred.

Lao Buddhist monks have clearly played important roles in supporting those opposed to the Lao PDR government, even if monks have variously interpreted the level and type of involvement deemed “correct.” Some, such as Achan Chanh Ly, violated what is generally believed to be appropriate behavior for monks. Others can be situated in more ambiguous positions, with some interpreting certain actions as being inappropriate and others as located within the bounds of what the *vinaya* allows for monks. Some have tried to teach insurgents about morality, and others have taught about the importance of the “nation.” Still, no Lao monks appear to have actually taken up arms, although that is certainly not unknown amongst present-day Theravadin Buddhist monks in

Thailand (Jerryson 2009, 2010b). Interestingly, however, the positions taken by most Lao monks involved in insurgent activities are surprisingly similar, despite the geographical distance and relative lack of communication between the Lao and Sri Lankan Sangha, to those taken by right-wing nationalist monks in Sri Lanka (see Kent 2010a). That is, Lao monks generally believe that advocating or participating in violence is inappropriate, but that providing humanitarian and other nonmilitary support to soldiers is acceptable. Moreover, wishing soldiers success in battle would not be considered appropriate to many, but becoming involved, through combining Buddhism with other traditions more closely linked to animism, in order to protect soldiers from being injured or killed, is deemed necessary in certain contexts. Monks do indeed have individual agency, and their diversity of views demonstrates the nuanced but important differences that exist amongst the Lao Sangha.

### Acknowledgements

Thanks for the assistance of the various Buddhist monks and laypeople who provided their ideas and insights during this research. Thanks also to Michael Jerryson, Justin McDaniel, and Daniel Kent for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper, and to the four anonymous reviewers for the *Journal of Asian Studies*. Of course, I take responsibility for any deficiencies that remain.

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