

A Scandal in Colonial Laos: The Death of Bac My and the Wounding of Kommadan Revisited

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The “Holy Man’s Uprising” or the rebellion of the “Phu Mi Boun” (lit. men with merit) which stirred the Lao and minority populations of northeast Thailand and southern Laos between 1901 — 1902 has not only become the object of speculation on the part of modern historians but was equally the subject of controversy in the local press of the day.¹ In the broader context of researching the nature of anti-colonial and anti-“feudal” rebellions in colonial Laos, with a view to determining the pre-conditions of revolutionary change in that country, I have had the occasion to recover a sample of the documentation on the rebellion from French archival sources.² Without seeking to duplicate Murdoch’s exemplary study on the historical setting of the rebellion — notably the events surrounding the replacement of Thai hegemony over the east bank of the Mekong by French colonial power in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries — and Moppert’s fine archival-based longitudinal study of the entire rebellion, I will seek here, firstly, to throw new light on the revolt as an anti-colonial phenomenon — as revealed by the colonial record and the colonial press — and, secondly, to reopen the inquest into a barely suppressed scandal which ensued in the context of the revolt, namely, that surrounding the death of Bac My, one of the principals of the “Holy Man’s Uprising”, and the wounding of his more celebrated accomplice, Kommadan, an erstwhile national hero in Laos.

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1. T. Bunnag, *The Provincial Administration of Siam, 1892-1915*, Kuala Lumpur, Oxford, 1977
 J.B. Murdoch, “The 1901-1902 ‘Holy Man’s Rebellion’”, *Journal of the Siam Society*, Vol. 62, part 1, January 1974, pp. 47-65.
 Y. Ishii, “A Note on Buddhist Millenarian Revolts in Northeast Siam”, The University of Hawaii, Honolulu, 1977, pp. 67-75
 C.F. Keyes, *The Golden Peninsula: Culture and Adaptation in Mainland Southeast Asia*, New York, Macmillan, 1977
 F. Moppert, “Mouvement de resistance au pouvoir colonial francais de la minorite proto-Indochinoise du plateau des Bolovens au Sud-Laos a 1901-1936”. These pour le doctorat de 3ieme cycle en histoire, Universite de Paris, 1978
2. see the author’s unpublished Ph.D. dissertation submitted to Monash University, 1983, viz. “The Road Through the Mountains: Vietnamese Communist Power in the Lao Struggle for National Independence: 1901-1954”.

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The Revolt : Preludes and Leading Actors

While it is well documented that the “Holy Man’s Uprising” began in 1901, Bac My, the individual most closely identified with the Phu Mi Boun, had hitherto attracted official attention as early as January 1895.³ Actually described in period colonial reports as a Phu Mi Boun, he initially attracted the surveillance of the colonial authorities in the context of having “concealed cult objects from the Catholic missionaries” en mission in the Bahnar country of Cochinchina. His accomplice in this affair was a certain Ong Dam (Black God) who had earlier evaded capture by agents of the King of Bassac (Rasadanai) and who had sought sanctuary in the “Kha” (montagnard) villages at Ban Nasia.⁴

According to Jean Jacques Dauplay, the leading colonial protagonist in the repression of the ethnic minority rebellions in southern Laos and who took up his official appointment as the French Administrator of Saravane in January 1906, Bac My, a Kha Alack by ethnicity, was the son of a Pho Ban (village chief) of the little village of Chakam, tributary to the Lao “mandarins” of Saravane. Not of the mandarin class and holding no position higher than that of village chief, Bac My was nevertheless considered “more intelligent than his fellows”. Proficient not only in Lao but in Pali, he had prior experience of the study of Buddhist texts and had even made a pilgrimage to Bangkok, all of which lent him a certain prestige in the eyes of his fellow Kha Alack tribesmen. Having proclaimed himself Phu Mi Boun in the opening months of 1901, Bac My then assumed the appellation, Pha Ong Keo (Pha meaning “sacred saint”, Ong meaning “king, prince or divine person of high rank” and Keo meaning “diamond or precious stone”). Similarly, he employed a title otherwise reserved for the king of Luang Prabang, namely, “Chao Som Det Phali Pha Nhoc Thong Phou Zhong Pha Sat Na Maha Khong Thoï” (Supreme Chief of the religion or Pontifus Maximus).⁵

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3. (a) That would place Bac My/Ong Keo as four years senior to the Thai *phu wiset* (wise man) who appeared in the northeast in 1899, rather than two year junior as stated by Keyes. See Keyes, op. cit. p. 295n
 - (b) While the reports and missives drawn up by the first French commercial agents and Residents in colonial Laos were — to degrees — more carefully researched than those submitted by their counterparts in later decades and are therefore more interesting as history, they suffer from deteriorating condition, poor classification and are subject to major lacunae.
 4. Archives Outre Mer (AOM) Aix Laos F6, “The Commercial Agent in Bassac to the Administration”, Bassac, 24 January 1895
 5. AOM Aix F6, “The Administrator-Commissioner of the Government to the Resident Superior of Laos”, Saravane 1910

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Significant preludes to the Phu Mi Boun rebellions of 1901–1902 should not, however, be ignored and indeed other uprisings labelled millenarian have been recorded in Thailand from the seventeenth century onwards.⁶ With respect to Laos, according to one colonial observer, the Kha of the Bolovens plateau (the geographic locus of the revolt) had risen up twice before during the nineteenth century. On the first occasion, a certain Asa Thiet Guon and his rebel forces pushed onto the Bolovens to free it from Lao domination. The revolt lasted two years and terminated with the capture of Asa Thiet Guon and his subsequent decapitation in Bangkok. Around 1850 a “sorcerer” or shaman known as Mo Ha, a native of Sisaket (Thailand) fomented a similar uprising to that of the first. In an analogous manner, this movement came to an end with the capture and death of its leader.⁷

Archival sources reveal that within two years of the establishment of the French protectorate in Laos in 1893, agents of the colonial state were successful in collecting taxes from the various Kha “tribes” inhabiting the Bolovens plateau. Erroneously, as it transpired, the prospect of rebellion on the plateau was then viewed as a distant prospect. As elsewhere in the colonial periphery where colonial state power had been imposed over a subject people, a certain social, political and economic restructuring of local society was involved. In tandem with the imposition of taxation and corvée demands over the subject peoples (paid or requitted in cash in lieu of payment in kind) and the redrawing by the colonial administration of the local *muong* or province boundaries came the appointment of an indigenous class of collaborators in replacement of uncompliant or “independent” indigenous authorities. Thus by 1895 the Kha of the Bolovens had been administratively removed from the jurisdiction of the local province of Bassac, to which they traditionally existed in tributary relationship, and according to geographic location were reassigned under the jurisdiction of a number of provincial mandarins. These new French appointed or approved indigenous authorities included the Phaya Ma Ha Tilat and the Phaya Mong Hoa of Saravane and Kamtong.⁸

By 1901, then, the province of Saravane had been subdivided into eight *muong*, namely, as one proceeded up the Sedone river, Kamtong-niai, Kong-wape, Lakone-peng, Kamtong-noi, Sapath, Samia, Saravane and Soutably. The entire province englobed 183 Lao and 194 Kha villages and included 4,853 registered

6. Ishii, 1977, p. 6

7. AOM Aix F5, “Rapport du 24 October 1907 de M. Dauplay, Commissaire du Gouvernement a Saravane”.

8. AOM Aix E6, “Rapport sur la reconnaissance du plateau des Bolovens”, January 1895

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Lao tax-payers versus 2,971 Kha. A total of 24,934 Lao were deemed to have “submitted” to colonial authority, versus 12,084 Kha. That left a balance of some 30,000 “independent” or unpacified and hence non-taxpaying Kha in the province. Among the “submitted” Kha were such sub-groups as the Kha Bolovens, the Kha Hin, the Khatong, the Kha Nie and the Kha Alack. The “independent” Kha included a section of the Kha Alack as well as the Kha Pou Kao, the Kha Khou Tou and the Kha Ta Hoi sub-groups. The official French record reveals that the province of Saravane then hosted a European population of three only.⁹

During early 1901, Bac My withdrew to Phu Tatun, a local mountain redoubt, while his devotees displayed his portrait in numerous temples throughout the province. In March his movement had taken a more threatening turn, the prelude to a general insurrection. Indeed the rebels responded to the burning by the Commissioner of Saravane of a temple erected in Bac My’s honour on the Nong Met plateau by murdering, during April of the same year, a Frenchman named Menard.¹⁰ The Resident Superior of Laos, who was apprised of the deteriorating security situation in southern Laos on 13 June, immediately set about organising the machinery for the suppression of the rebellion. The “pacification” operation involved the dispatch of military reinforcements to the Bolovens plateau from Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina. During the rainy season the rebels divided into two groups; while Ong Keo’s group refuged in the mountains at the source of the Sedone, a second group based itself in the upper reaches of the Sepion. Both resisted the French forces with impunity. Although the French themselves suffered heavy losses in operations against the rebels, their tactics of starving the latter of rice and depriving them of outside supplies of powder, lead, sulphur, saltpetre, salt and opium proved to be efficacious in the long run.¹¹

Aside from Bac My — clearly only *primus inter pares* in the revolt at this stage — other chiefs included Ong Luong, Luong Sakda and Vong Tasseng, a Kha Bolovens chief from Nong Bok. The presence from June onwards of Lao mandarins among the rebel population must have been particularly damaging to the French cause, however. Prominent among the latter were the Chaomuong of Khamtong Niai, the Oupahat of Kamtong Moi, the Ratsavang of Saravane, the Oupahat

9. *Indochine Francaise Annuaire de l’Indochine*: 1901

10. Murdoch, *op. cit.* pp. 55-61

11. AOM Paris A30 (106) carton 21, “Rapport special sur les evenements survenus sur la plateau des Bolovens et sur l’ incident sur la Poste de Psi”, Saigon, 26 September 1901

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Luong of Attopeu. Among the montagnard adherents to the rebel cause were found, Kha Bolovens, Alacks, Nhaheuns, Kha Phou Thong, Loven and Souk Kha.¹² Thus by November 1901, as a consequence of armed actions by the rebels and armed repression by the colonial military, one third of the local population of the greater Bolovens region had been annihilated with 28 Garde Principal and 100 militia killed. Only after two years of military operations was the western part of the Bolovens considered pacified.¹³

Continuing through 1901, however, a parallel non-violent movement emerged in northeast Thailand. In March 1902, this rebellion had been joined by Ong Man – a so-called Phu Wiest – and his followers in a confrontation against a Thai army dispatched to the northeast to crush the movement. Driven back into Laos, Ong Man joined forces with the followers of Ong Keo in a mass attack on the French Commissariat before escaping to Phou Luong in the Bolovens in league with other Loven rebels including Kommadan.¹⁴

Following an attack by Ong Man's 1000 strong band on the provincial Thai town of Kemmarat on 28 March 1902, the Resident Superior of Laos took precautions that events in Thailand did not ramify in Laos. The French record reveals that the original request to suppress the rebellion in the 24 kilometre "neutral" zone along the Mekong came from the Thai side. The French Minister in Bangkok was of the view that the authorisation be given to the Thai to intercede militarily in the zone provided that "cooperation" would be entered into. The ensuing French response was to immediately dispatch a company of 200 Vietnamese riflemen reinforced by 30 Europeans to Bassac from where, according to circumstances, they would assist the Thai in suppressing the revolt by way of a march on Udom.¹⁵ In the event, the Thai authorities forbade the French to cross the Thai side of the Mekong.¹⁶ Reservations over allowing the Thai authorities a free hand in suppressing the revolt in the neutral zone were in turn expressed by the Minister of France in Bangkok. Observing inter alia that Japanese agents circulating in the Mekong valley were encouraging anti-French sentiment at Korat, Ubon and Battambang, he argued that Thai military

12. *ibid.*

13. F. Moppert, "Le revolte des Bolovens (1901-1936)", in *Histoire de l'Asie du sud-est: Revoltes, Reformes, Revolutions* (ed). P. Brocheux, Lille, Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1981

14. Murdoch *op. cit.* p. 55-61

15. AOM Aix F16, Governor General to Minister of Colonies, Hanoi, 10 April 1902

16. Murdoch, *op. cit.* p. 59

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actions would have the unfortunate results for the prestige of France in what he clearly implied was a French sphere of influence.¹⁷

As a response to the success of the Thai military operation, Ong Man and his followers, 15,000 strong and armed with 300 rifles departed Thailand for the region between Savannakhet, Muong Phine and Song Khone where they set about cutting telephone communication between Hanoi and southern Laos. On 24 April 1902, the band led by "Phu Mi Boun" attacked Savannakhet on three occasions in the same day. Driven back by the colonial Garde Indigene, the rebels suffered 100 dead. Further detachments of military were directed towards rebel headquarters in Song Khone. Despite the manifest religious colouration of the revolt, the Governor General of Indochina, Brevie – with some degree of understatement – declared it a "rebellion against French authority".¹⁸

Following the Savannakhet incident the rebels withdrew to Phou Luong mountains in the northeast of the Bolovens. The situation remained relatively calm up until 1905 when on 30 November a group of rebels surrounded Ban Nong Pok Kao and massacred 41 Loven tribesmen.¹⁹ It was at this time and in this context that Kommadan first became known to colonial observers.²⁰ According to Dauplay, even by the confession of the rebels they were discouraged, almost reduced to powerlessness by the end of 1903 following the shortlived rebellion of 1901. Contrary to expectations that the administration might have redressed the underlying grievances of the rebels, the years of administrative inaction between 1904–05 turned out to be favourable to the rebels and the respite gave them the chance to resupply themselves with munitions. Indeed, during September 1905 the Kha Bolovens of Nong Lao approached the Commissariat and bought up supplies of salt which they then offered to Bac My in his redoubt on the left bank of the Sekong.²¹

According to Dauplay, an underlying anxiety on the part of the French was that Bac My could conceivably be the beneficiary of rapid firing rifles passed on by sympathetic anti-French Vietnamese emigres based in Thailand.²² No matter the

17. AOM Aix F16, "Governor General to Commander-in-chief of the Forces", Hanoi, 5 May 1902

18. AOM Aix F16, Governor General of Indochina, Broni, to the Commander-in-chief of Division, Hanoi, 5 May 1902

19. Murdoch, *op. cit.* p. 61

20. Moppert, *op. cit.* p. 51

21. AOM Aix F5, "Rapport Dauplay", 24 October 1907

22. AOM Aix F6, "The Administrator Commissioner of the Government to the Resident Superior of Laos", Saravane, 15 September 1910

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seeming incongruity of such an alliance, Dauplay's anxiety was actually borne out by events, albeit at a different juncture in Lao history, when Vietnamese and montagnard elements coalesced in an anticolonial coalition.²³ By that stage, however, the colonial state no longer has a monopoly on coercion while the antagonists of the French received a much more active level of support from non-montagnard and non-Lao elements.

But at the time when Dauplay took up his post as Commissioner of Saravane in 1905, Bac My and his band were one among four rebel groups in the province. In his version, the first was the Ka Duc band (five rifles) and which was dissolved following the capture and "death in prison" of its leader in April 1906. The second was the Ong Xit and Ong Veun Bands which mustered a force of 100 rifles until their surrender and return to their *ray* or village gardens in December 1906. The Bac Preuil (Ong Thong) band composed of forty rifles constituted the third, and fortified itself in the Phou Kate volcano situated twenty kilometres from Saravane where it was attacked by the militia in April 1906. This band was finally eliminated in October 1907. The fourth of these groups, that of Bac My, was in turn composed of three sub-groups. a) Bac My with Mun Viset and Luong Thep b) the rebel Latsavang along with Chan Thong Thip c) the Bolovens under the leadership of Kommadan (father of the future Pathet Lao leader and hero, Sithon) along with Kommaseng together headed a band with a reputation for "ferocity". Kommadan, for one, made his headquarters at Thong Vai in the northeast of the Bolovens. The entire band, however, was composed of "all the known races of lower Laos" — Lao, Souei, Phoi Theng, Kha, Bolovens, Alack Nge and even Cambodians and Burmese. Characteristically all of these groups supported their respective *bao* or clientele.²⁴

The foregoing notwithstanding, Dauplay was of the opinion that Bac My was only a "straw man" and that the real heart and soul of rebellion was the Latsavang, a person with a "reputation for intelligence" and whose forefathers had exercised authority in the *muong* of Saravane. The roots of the revolt of the Latsavang, he pointed out, go back in history and accordingly must be viewed in that context. According to local myth — no doubt historically founded — the king of Vientiane, towards the end of proselytizing the Buddhist faith, founded *muong* on the east bank of the Sekong to which the name Muong Laman was given. Simultaneously the conversion of the Kha was undertaken. Following the success of

23. see author's Ph. D., op. cit.

24. AOM Aix F5, "Rapport", Dauplay 1907

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the “pioneers”, numerous other Lao families established themselves at Laman. For an unknown reason this group was stricken with discord. The dissidents among them crossed the Sekong and founded a new *muong* at Ban Phone. This *muong* was centred on the village of Vieng Khma prior to its transformation into the *muong* of Saravane. The *muong* of Laman in turn went into decline and when the last chaomuong or provincial lord died in the early eighteenth century he was not replaced by a successor. His descendants then settled at either Ban Phone or Saravane. Lao and Kha residents of Ban Phone and Don Chan and its environs only tolerated with impatience the domination of Saravane. Rather, they sought to have the last descendants of the Chaomuong of Laman — which included the rebel Latsavang and the Chaomuong of Soutabali (then in prison in Vientiane) — shake off the domination of Saravane and recover their traditional autonomy or at least semi — autonomy.²⁵

In the event, Dauplay continues, when the rebellion burst out in 1901, the Latsavang and the Chaomuong believed the moment was opportune for them to make their running and at that point took up the rebel cause along with Bac My. With the surrender of the Latsavang on 14 June 1907, a corresponding spread of French influence over the dissident montagnard population was recorded. The reenrollment of 32 villages onto the tax rolls and the end of tension between Dong Chan and Ban Phone and the indigenous authorities of Saravane was directly attributed to the capitulation of the Chaomuong. Yet, as Dauplay conceded, not only was the Latsavang the most loved and popular figure in the region but his better qualities — notably his honesty — was even recognised by his enemies. Accordingly Dauplay applauded the tactic of reconstituting the *muong* of Laman and in confiding its leadership upon the Latsavang as the most appropriate measure towards winning him over and in restoring the *pax gallica*.²⁶

Bereft of the real leader of the rebel band, Dauplay surmised the disaggregation of Bac My's band would necessarily follow.²⁷ As it happened, Bac My surrendered at Lamman on 13 October 1907. Conditions drawn up on this occasion specified that 1) he would remain at Lamman for some time 2) he would surrender all his weapons 3) he would renounce his titles and 4) he would henceforth adhere to the rites and customs of the Kha Alacks and abandon the religion that he founded.

25. *ibid.*

26. *ibid.*

27. AOM Aix F5, “Rapport du 24 October 1907”.

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Although he acquiesced in all conditions, he retained some of the rifles and did not relinquish the title of Chao Sadet.²⁸ In consideration of Bac My's surrender, as Dauplay had written some three years earlier, there were a number of points to take into consideration: his "person", his "partisans" and his "arms". Whatever prestige the rebel chief may have derived in the past, Dauplay commented, would have been lost in the act of coming to seek grace from a representative of the colonial power (ie. Dauplay) whom he had otherwise boasted to drive out of Laos. This was borne out, he continued, by the relative state of indifference of the population over the surrender of Bac My compared to that of the Latsavang.²⁹ Certainly what comes through in this account is the degree of personal antagonism displayed by the French official towards the rebel leader.

Bac My's surrender, notwithstanding, his partisans commenced to launch 'propaganda' all over the plateau to the effect that whoever fell into line with the rebel chief would have their personal tax and labour due (*prestation*) obligation paid by him. The anti-French character of this activity was revealed on the occasion of a projected tour by the Governor General to Pakse in January 1909. In the manner of upstaging the visit, which in the event was cancelled, the population of Pakse and Dong Khe offered up two great *boun* (religious ceremonies) in honour of Bac My. The Bolovens was 'flooded' with invitations to attend the *boun*. Bac My was offered the greatest marks of respect by villagers throughout the country he travelled, receiving such offerings as candles, flowers and mats. His devotees, moreover, built him what the colonial rapporteur described as "without doubt the most beautiful indigenous habitation in the province". On his part, Bac My increased the number of his wives and, no doubt, his perceived merit. In the event, the *boun* given on the occasion of the inauguration of his new *sala* (rest house) appeared, in the words of the colonial official, as a "bizarre religious melange of Buddhist cults and gross and bloody Alack rites".³⁰ Clearly, as it transpired, Bac My was more of a danger to the colonial order as a prisoner than as a rebel in the mountains.

Thus while *all* the notables who had taken part in the rebellion on the Bolovens likewise surrendered along with Bac My on 13 October 1907, a notable exception was Bac Preuil who, until captured and executed at Pakse on November

28. AOM Aix F6, "The Administrative Commissioner of the Government to the Resident Superior of Laos", Saravane, 15 September 1910

29. AOM Aix F5, "Rapport du 24 October 1907", op. cit.

30. AOM Aix F6, The Administrator Commissioner of the Government to the Resident Superior of Laos", Saravane, 15 September 1910

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1909, had taken refuge in Bassac.³¹ However, several weeks before the surrender of the Latsavang, Kommadan and Kommasan had become separated from Bac My along with the rest of the rebels on the Bolovens whereupon they proceeded to organise a resistance centre in Attopeu province.³² Bac My, on his part, was adamant in denying contact with Kommadan at this point and professed not to have known the exact location of rebel headquarters on Phou Louang. In February 1908, Kommadan signalled his appearance as rebel to be reckoned with by attacking Pak Bong. On 5 December he wrote to Bac My scoffing at the “indifference” of the latter’s *bao*. Bac My, while not actually doing anything to facilitate Kommadan’s surrender, had by that juncture clearly diminished in the latter’s eyes as a meritorious rebel chief.³³

Bac My’s Death, the Wounding of Kommadan and the Exoneration of Dauplay

The death in captivity during December 1910 of Bac My is graphically recorded in a colonial memo dispatched by Dauplay to the Resident Superior of Laos. In his own words, the rebel chief and his confreres, Xieng Kham and Boun Ta, were invited into his quarters under the pretext of being photographed in a room without strong light. Having closed the door to the room, Dauplay wrote, he then took out his revolver and ordered the trio to sit down if they did not want to be killed. Understandably the rebels fell into line with this order. Dauplay’s deputy Stoeckel, Garde Principal of the Garde Indigene, also with revolver in hand, then barred the exit and summoned the militia who proceeded to chain up the rebels. Xieng Kham’s last utterance took the form of a public address to Bac My: “leo leo” (all is finished). In turn Bac My’s last words took the form of a plea to Dauplay not to do him any evil, “because he loved his sons and wife”. Bac My, in the event, was bayoneted to death by a Lao called Doi Nhan, sixty metres from the house while “attempting to escape”, although the Frenchman was still evidently holding onto one end of the

31. *ibid.*

32. AOM Aix F5, “Rapport du 24 October 1907”

During April 1909, Bac Preuil and his followers were observed to have crossed the Mekong and installed themselves in the frontier region. Bac Preuil, who had earlier been propositioned by the French authorities with a view to surrendering retorted that he feared capital punishment.

Two phobans accused of rendering support to Bac Preuil were imprisoned on 22 November 1907. Their defense was that in so far as the population feared or were in awe of Bac Preuil, they lacked the wherewithal to intercede.

AOM Aix E6, M.F. Simon, Commissioner of the Government at Bassac to M. the Resident Superior of Laos, April 1909.

33. AOM Aix F6, 15 September 1910

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chain. In the event, Bac My was decapitated and his head sent to Saravane where it was preserved in formalahyde. As Dauplay commented upon this macabre act:

“...the spectacle of Bac My preserving his head on his shoulders after all the crimes that had been committed would have constituted the most deplorable example to offer the indigenous people, that is tangible proof that one could attack French domination and human laws with impunity”.³⁴

On 13 December, Vang Na, an *homme de confiance* of the rebel chief Kommadan, presented himself at Dauplay's residence bearing a set of demands from the rebel chief in the form of a letter as well as an invitation to visit him in his *sala* (rest-house) in order to enter into negotiations over these demands. These included: 1) the revocation of the position of Chaomuong and all positions of authority in Muong Bolovens 2) the nomination of a “Phya Khome” (“Khome” according to the same account was an old word used by the Thai to designate what the French called the Bolovens), ie., a chief of the Bolovens, including the respective parts of the territories of the muong of Pakse, Saravane and Attopeu 3) other races inhabiting the plateau such as the Nha Eun, Souei and Phou Thay were to be driven off 4) tax imposed on the Kha was to be limited to 1.5 piastres a year including corvee redemption fees. Further, as Kommadan's letter continued not without pathos:

“...When the French came to the plateau to annoy or oppress the Khomes, was it necessary for me to give them the rotin, put them in prison, that I inflict penalties upon them. At the same time they enjoined me to change my title from Mahaekaphachomchaochaidi to that of Commissioner”.³⁵

As this program indicates, the notion of paying taxes was not questioned by Kommadan, what mattered more was that his tribal cohorts' place in history would be upheld in the new order of values.

The French reply to this demarche, however, proved to be in violent opposition to the spirit and letter of Kommadan's program. The following day at 7 o'clock

34. 34. AOM Aix F6, “Mort de Bac My et capture de ses lieutenants”, Dauplay to the Resident Superior of Saravane, 19 December 1910

Moppert, op. cit., without revealing a source, reproduces Burchett's basic version of events, namely that Dauplay (or another French agent) profiting from a local custom of not touching anothers' head, shot Ong Keo with a pistol which he had concealed in his pith helmet. See W. Burchett, *Mekong Upstream*, Hanoi, Red River Publishing House, 1957, pp. 207-212.

35. “Mort de Bac My”, *ibid.*

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in the morning, Vangna again sought out Dauplay, inviting him to visit the rebel chief's *sala* where Kommadan himself along with Kammaseng, One, Sakdan, Cheui Bam and other lesser "lords" were assembled. As recorded by Dauplay, the invitation was accepted. Indeed the events which ensued merit elaboration not only as history but as confession:

"The reception of the envoys of the great Turk by Louis XIV was certainly no less remote nor more haughty than Kommadan when he deigned to take my hand at the moment when I entered the *sala*"

After an interval of ten minutes Dauplay decided to take the initiative.

"Deftly removing my pith helmet, I took hold of the Browning and delivered from two metres, two shots, striking him (Kommadan) under the armpit and in line with his liver; the points of impact were clearly indicated by the little red spots on his white vest. Three shots hit Loung Visa at this moment when he rushed to the aid of his brother. In an instant all the rebels, including Kommadan, leapt out of the *sala* as the rifles of the partisans started to crackle".

With scant attention to the consequences of his own actions or indeed the ramifications of his own report, Dauplay observed with supreme irony that although Kommadan possessed considerable strength, it appeared "impossible" that he could have survived his wounds. The village, including Kommadan's *sala* was put to fire. Three days later the heads of Bac My and Xieng Van Di (another rebel chief) along with seven prisoners in chains were exposed in front of the Garde Indigene quarters to serve as an example to the population.³⁶

Dauplay, however, did not reckon with Kommadan's physical resilience nor the colonial press. On 20 February, the Advocate Lefevre published in *L'Impartial*, a Saigon newspaper, an article exposing the circumstances surrounding the wounding of Kommadan who, in the event, survived the vicious assault. According to an official colonial memo in the form of a telegram, Lefevre's informant was a certain Doctor C., a witness to the scene. Lefevre, in turn, raised the issue with the Advocate General in Saigon. The latter, evidently sufficiently impressed with the seriousness of the allegations of administrative excesses in dealing with the rebels, raised questions with the Governor General of Indochina. The latter, in turn, requested the Resident Superior of Laos to supply information with a view to conducting an enquiry into the affair. As the Resident Superior retorted in a missive delivered to the French

36. *ibid.*

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Counsellor Jurist on tour in Laos, the newspaper account misrepresented the facts of the case. The "untoward" article, the Resident Superior noted with apprehension, potentially had the capacity to create a new scandal.³⁷

According to another intra-governmental memo, the Deputy Outrey requested the Governor of Cochinchina to issue a clarification to the effect that the allegations of Lefevre, the editor-in-chief of *L'Impartial* and the Advocate General in Saigon were "unjustified" and that, to the contrary, Dauplay had rendered services to the cause of the French in the Bolovens region.³⁸ This and other interventions were clearly symptomatic of the degree of solidarity evinced by colonial officials in support of Dauplay's role. In the event, Dauplay was completely exonerated

"I have the honour to make it known to you that following the enquiry into the decease of the Lao, Bac My, and the wounding of his compatriot, Kommadan, in 1910, the case is definitely closed. I am happy to give you the assurance that your attitude in the conduct of these events leaves no place for criticism".³⁹

Causes of the Revolt

If those colonial actors most closely associated with the suppression of the revolt tended to stress its religious dimension, there was a nagging anxiety on the part of the colonial authorities — and more acerbically — the colonial press, that religious epiphenomena disguised structural abuses and administrative excesses. For instance, on 1 July 1901, *Le Courier Saigonais* reported that the revolt of the Kha had become permanent and presented itself as an "oil stain" in the recently acquired French possession. Noting that the capitation tax had been abruptly increased from one to four piastres along with an increase in corvee obligation, the author of the article pointed out that the intention of the Kha to defend their liberty was obvious. Three days later, the same newspaper, while scoring the excesses of the local administration in exacerbating the revolt, entered the plea:

"It is high time to lift the pretense which hermetically seals the system of governmental administration practiced in Laos in the

37. AOM Aix E7, "Official Telegram", Resident Superior Laos, Garnier to Counsellor Juriste, mission Xieng Khouang, 2 March 1918

38. AOM Aix E7, "official telegram", Vientiane, 14 March 1918

39. AOM Aix E7, Governor General to Dauplay, Hanoi, 9 July 1918

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name of France”.⁴⁰

In another article published in *Le Courier Saigonais* on June 10, the blame was laid upon Disiere, Commissioner of the government at Muonang for permitting such excesses to be perpetrated as looting and burning villages, “raids” on coolies and women and particularly the “ill considered” practice of offering firearms to the Lao notables. Although the Lao themselves had not joined in the revolt alongside the Kha, the same journalist remarked that little wonder the “rebellion against capitation tax” was growing day by day and that the population of southern Laos had risen up against the French administration.⁴¹ The underlying fear of the administration was expressed by yet another journalist writing in *Le Courier d’Indochine* of 1 August 1901 and who observed that should the revolt spread beyond the regions bordering Cambodia, Cochinchina and Annam and should communications be cut between upper Laos and Cochinchina, then the French *conquete morale* (moral conquest) of Indochina would be in peril.⁴²

A contrary explanation of the causes of the revolt — not surprisingly — was provided by Dauplay. The Bolovens like the Israelites, he averred, awaited the arrival of a Phu Mi Boun who would purportedly assume leadership of the country and lead them on the path to happiness and justice. This was abundantly proven, he continued, by the simultaneous occurrence of the revolt in several places in southern Laos and Siam as well as the involvement of monks, mass massacres of albino animals (suspected of being reincarnations of the souls of Europeans!) and other occurrences. Yet the overtly religious phase of the rebellion soon dissipated; as the rebels lost their mass following and returned to their villages the rebellion lost its momentum. At that point, Dauplay contended, the rebel band could be described simply as the “party of discontents”. As the redoubtable French administrator stated in a remark that would not palpably have been challenged by many of his colleagues and contemporaries: ‘Who would boast to know what transpired in the brain of this brute of a Kha Alack?’’. Bac My, he contended, had developed his implacable hatred of the French as a consequence of his brutalisation at the hands of certain Europeans — notably the Garde Principal, Sicre — at a time when he was employed as a coolie in Pakse.⁴³

The revolt of the Latsavang, Dauplay also attributed to a version of

40. *Le Courier Saigonais*, 1 July 1901

41. *ibid.*, 10 June 1901

42. *Le Courier d’Indochine*, 1 August 1901

43. AOM Aix F5, “Rapport du 24 October 1907”

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psychological alienation, in this case out of frustration at seeing the position of Oupahat awarded to another as well as being on bad terms with the majority of mandarins in Saravane. Similarly, he described Kommadan and Kommaseng as “rebels before the rebellion”. However, by dismissing them as “chiefs of a band of elephant and cattle robbers” he sought to deny them their status as aggrieved victims. Moreover, by joining up with Bac My, the latter merely attempted to impart a “quasi-legal” existence to their band.⁴⁴

Notwithstanding the acknowledged “brutality” of certain subordinate French officials — notably Remy — in the way they went about collecting corvee tax redemption fees, Dauplay remarked that such actions were merely the spark which ignited the brushfires. Rather, he identified the underlying cause of the revolt on the Bolovens as the *lam kha* or tribal intermediaries who imposed themselves between the Kha and the Lao, especially in consideration of their function in facilitating commercial exchanges. At the same time, however, the Kha Bolovens also reproached certain Frenchmen, namely Demoly and Menard (killed at the outset of the revolt) for acts of bad faith in their commercial dealings with the Kha. To redress this situation, Dauplay undertook to revoke the positions of the *lam kha*. Indeed, he claimed to have revoked nine-tenths of those *lam kha* in “office” in the period since he took up his position in Saravane, leaving remain only those intermediaries whose presence had been endorsed even by their victims. To a similar end, the Lao were requested to leave the plateau altogether, which in any case was reorganised under a single *muong* and placed under the authority of local indigenous authorities.⁴⁵

As the French Minister of Colonies commented upon this report, while the events in question may have had as their origin a religious ferment and may have been exacerbated by the “imprudence” of certain French colons, the conclusion was inescapable that the “troubles” in Laos were equally caused by the activities of the French agents and the implementation of “fiscal measures”, meaning the resented collection of the capitation tax and corvee demands placed upon the population.⁴⁶ While in retrospect this would appear to be a more accurate assessment of the situation, the fact that anomalies in the system were not addressed at that point is

44. *ibid.*

45. *ibid.*

46. AOM Paris A30 (106) carton 21, Minister of Colonies to the Governor General, Paris, 20 January 1902

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a telling commentary on the *modus operandi* of the French colonial state project as it worked itself out locally, especially in the impecunious montagnard milieu.

As far as the “imprudence” of certain French officials were concerned, they did not reckon on the manifestly hard-hitting and relatively fearless local colonial press of the day. If the memory of the repression of the revolt was not lost in the collective memory of the Kha — as subsequent events demonstrated — neither could individual “tyrants” among the colonial officials act with impunity and in total disregard for the consequences of their actions — although that is in fact what they thought they could achieve.

For instance, in an open letter to the Governor General of Indochina published in *L' Opinion* of Saigon, Jacques Ducroit, a French journalist, laid the blame for the turmoil in Laos squarely at the feet of the ex-Resident at Bassac, Colonel Tournier and his agents. As Ducroit phrased the matter, if a fictitious peace reigned in the capital of Poland, otherwise drowned in the blood of the massacred, then in the Laos of the ex-colonel, in spite of the presence of corpses strewn around the forest by him and his agents, disorder reigned. Although the dead were no longer in a position to testify against Tournier, as Ducroit acerbically commented, it was patently obvious that the colonel was accomplice to what amounted to an armed version of the civilising mission. At Bassac, he continued, an “incapable and violent alcoholic” acted as administrative delegate to Tournier, “a brute who did not set himself apart from the savages he avowed to civilize” Yet another accomplice of Tournier was the French Garde Principal of the militia, a person whose name was synonymous with “brutality and ferocity”. Ducroit compared the barbarous actions perpetrated in Laos by the trio and their agents to the kind of disorder committed in Europe in the dark ages. Their direct inspiration, he pondered, must have been such “devourers of the dark continent” as Voulet, Chanoine, Stanley, Lemare, Marchand, etc. While the tacit complicity of Tournier in these “murderous crimes” doubtless served to protect their proteges, justice nevertheless should be forthcoming, Ducroit thundered.⁴⁷

The tenor of this and other press accounts of the day, then, is to be contrasted with the views of such colonial actors as Dauplay, who tended to separate the disruptive and intrusive role of the *lam kha* from that of the colonial state per se. As he pointed out, the reaction on the part of the Kha to the excesses committed by

47. “Letter ouverte a M. le Gouverneur General”, Jacques Duroit, *L' Opinion*, Saigon, 9 February 1908

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the Lao mandarins of Bassac, Saravane and Attopeu as well as by the infamous *lam kha* had already set in by 1899. The Bolovens, rich in such produce as cardamone, “ortie de Chine”, ginger and herds of elephant, served as the “milch cow” to which the *lam kha* attached themselves.⁴⁸

While the tendency of colonial rapporteurs has been to hive off blame for the rebellion upon indigenous actors, the colonial state and its agents were by no means neutral agents in the pacification of the country. The possibilities of colonialisation of the temperate Bolovens along with the exploitation of its mineral and agricultural wealth was not lost upon the French. As one official source acknowledged in 1908, the slopes of Phou Kate mountain and other regions inhabited by the rebels were rich in saltpetre, sulphur, copper and iron ore, worked primitively by the Kha, but raising the prospect of commercial exploitation.⁴⁹ The philosophical concomitant of the *mission civilitrice*, moreover, was the opening up of the country — largely by way of corvée-built highway systems (*route coloniale*) — linking Laos to the rest of Indochina, to metropolitan France and the external economy. Clearly, then, and a theme which has emerged in this study, the seeds to future dissent on the part of the Kha were sown by the colonial power in the way that traditional relationships and human and physical boundaries were disposed of indiscriminately.

Sequels

The sequels to the affair were not without consequence. The French were neither disabused of the rectitude of their *conquete morale* and, indeed, continued along the same philosophical trajectory for the duration of the colonial era. On the other hand, the Kha confirmed their worst expectations in their interactions with outsiders, whether as agents of “feudal” power or whether colonial state actors. Thus exonerated, Dauplay continued his career in the local administration, rising from Commissioner Administrator to an administrative position in northern Laos where he acted as local savant on minority affairs. Perhaps in the manner of closing the case once and for all, Dauplay went on to publish in 1929 his version of the revolt,⁵⁰ although the capstone of his career in Laos was undoubtedly the

48. AOM Aix F5, “Rapport du October 1907 de M. Dauplay”, Commissioner of the Government at Saravane.

49. *Indochine Francaise Annuaire Generale de l' Indochine, 1908*

50. J.J. Dauplay, *Les Terres Rouges du Plateau des Bolovens*, Saigon, 1929

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occasion of his appointment to acting Resident Superior, a position he held from 8 April until 14 May 1928.

Kommadan, on his part, resisted French efforts to pacify the Bolovens until 1937 when he was killed by military units led by elephant brigades which converged on Phu Luong as part of a general pacification campaign in the “Moi” or montagnard hinterland of French Indochina. Whether shared montagnard ethnic identity or sense of separateness from outsiders was the more primordial cause of montagnard resistance to pacification, there can be no doubt that the collective memory on the part of the montagnard of the iniquitous colonial tax and corvee structure linked with the abuses of the *lam kha* and exacerbated by armed repression was a leading factor in alienating the Kha from central power through colonial and postcolonial times. More crucially, from the perspective of students of social change, even revolutionary change in Laos, the legacy of the contest between local and central power in the montagnard milieu had its sequel at that point in time during the late 1940’s when the Kha commenced to enter into tactical alliances with the Lao nationalists and the Viet Minh.