

LUE ETHNICITY IN NATIONAL CONTEXT: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TAI LUE COMMUNITIES IN THAILAND AND LAOS

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Abstract

The Lue are a Tai-speaking people whose home land is the Sip Song Panna region of Yunnan, China. There are also large Lue populations in Thailand and Laos. This paper compares Lue communities in northern Laos (Muang Sing) and northern Thailand (Nan), focusing on the relation between Lue ethnic identification and territorial cults. I seek to explain the transformation of Lue ethnic identity in terms of the way the Lue relate to the nation-state and, in particular, to discourses of national culture and development.

Michael Moerman, in his paper 'Ethnic Identity in a Complex Society: Who are the Lue?' (1965), noted that for the Lue villagers of Ban Ping of Chiang Rai province in northern Thailand, identification as Lue did not preclude them from identifying as Thai in some contexts. The point is reiterated in a more recent publication: 'But the Thai-Lue of Ban Ping have always been both Thai and Lue' (Moerman and Miller 1989: 317). This might be so but in the early 1960s identification as Thai was obviously very weak. Then, Ban Ping was physically isolated by poor roads. Contact with the Thai state was largely limited to the payment of taxes for which the Lue felt they received little or nothing in return, and central Thai officials were feared and distrusted. In response, the Lue of Ban Ping often spoke nostalgically of the 'Old Country' in Sip Song Panna in southern China in recounting legends of their migration in the mid nineteenth century from Muang Phong in that region (1967: 406; 1968:13). Moerman concluded that at the time 'ethnic identification as a minority people can sometimes impede national identification' (1967:406). Returning to Ban Ping in the mid 1980s Moerman and Miller found the village much more diverse occupationally; villagers had extensive contacts with the outside world; the government was

perceived as a benign source of assistance (e.g., for education, employment, health services, agricultural information, and development funds). Consequently, 'villagers now more often feel themselves to be citizens of a nation rather than members of a disadvantaged minority group'. However, they add: 'Their distinctiveness is now being lost into the stream of national culture' (Moerman and Miller 1989: 317).

In this paper, following Moerman and Miller's precedent, I examine Lue ethnic identification in national context, though I extend my analysis beyond Thailand to compare Tai Lue communities in Nan in northern Thailand with those in Muang Sing in northern Laos. In this comparative study I also focus on the relation between Lue ethnicity and territorial cults of guardian spirits that link the Lue to their ancestors.

In Nan it cannot be said that Lue identity has been swamped by national culture. On the contrary, there has been a Lue cultural revival of a kind in some Lue villages in Nan; but it is a

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revival linked closely with national culture, the manner in which national culture constructs Lue identity, and state intervention in rural development. In Muang Sing, by contrast, Lue ethnic consciousness is an example of what Charles Keyes (1993: 44) has termed 'localized ethnic identity', that is, a local identity that is unself-consciously 'rooted in tradition' and 'not challenged by those who seek to impose a national hegemony on peoples with different cultural heritages' (ibid.: 46).

The political origin of Lue ethnicity

George Condominas (1990:37–38) claims that the first phase in the evolution of Tai political systems was one in which loose 'confederations' of Tai principalities (*muang*) were formed as the Tai 'war chiefs' pushed westward from what is now northern Vietnam and north-eastern Laos. The second phase was a consequence of one chief imposing his authority on a group of *muang*, thereby creating a larger, more centralized state, for example, Lan Na centred on Chiang Mai, Lan Sang on Luang Prabang and Siam on Ayutthaya. These new, more centralized states comprised a 'kingdom of kingdoms' (Lehman 1984: 243). The Lue kingdom of Sip Song Panna represents another example of the general Tai pattern of political organization, with the Lue king (*Chao Phaen Din*: "Lord of the Land") ruling over a number of principalities and their princes (*Chao Muang*: 'Lords of the Principality')¹.

According to Moerman (1965: 1223), Tai 'tribal' names (Lue, Khoen, Khon Muang, Lao, etc), are political in origin. This view gains support from the fact that the names of states (*muang*) and of ethnic entities 'exhibit parallel variation'. Thus, those who identify themselves as Lue can claim origin from the state of Sip Song Panna (earlier known as Muang Lue). But in other contexts these Lue may also identify as Yong, Lue Muang Phong, Lue Muang La, Lue Muang Sing, etc. that is, Lue who originate from smaller *muang* of the kingdom of Sip Song Panna or at least within its political orbit. The relative autonomy and localized identity of these smaller *muang* were arguably reinforced by the limited political sway of the king (largely restricted to the capital, Chiang Rung and

adjacent *muang*) and by the political instability caused by frequent civil wars in the nineteenth century (Tanabe 1988: 5).

We can trace the political origin of Muang Sing to the founding of Chiang Khaeng in the fourteenth century by Chao Fa Dek Noi, a Lue prince from Sip Song Panna². Chiang Khaeng was located on the east bank of the Mekong River, near the confluence of the Luai and Mekong rivers. In c. 1858 the capital was transferred to the village of Ban Yu on the western side of the Mekong (Grabowsky and Kaspar-Sickermann: 8). In 1885 the ruler, Chao Fa Silinor, again relocated the capital to the valley of the Sing River, some 60 kilometres southeast. Chao Fa Silinor brought about a thousand of his subjects with him but most new settlers came from the nearby principalities of southern Sip Song Panna: Muang La, Muang Phong, Muang Yuan, Muang Hun and Muang Mang. The documents of that period refer to the new capital alternatively as 'Muang Sing' and 'Chiang Khaeng' (ibid.: 10). Neither Chiang Khaeng nor Muang Sing was ever incorporated into the kingdom of Sip Song Panna. Rather they remained small, semi-autonomous Lue states that were variously peripheral sub-vassals to China, Burma and Siam via the intermediary states of Sip Song Panna, Chiang Tung, Chiang Mai, and Nan. In the late nineteenth century Muang Sing was called 'a principality under three overlords' (*muang sam fai fa*), those being Chiang Mai and Nan (tributaries of Siam) and Chiang Tung (tributary of Burma). As a result of border negotiations between Britain and France, Muang Sing became an autonomous polity under French protection in 1896. It only came under direct French rule in 1916 following a rebellion led by Chao Ong Kham (son and successor of Chao Fa Silinor). Nevertheless Muang Sing, under French colonial rule and subsequent royalist and communist governments of independent Laos, has preserved a strong sense of local autonomy and identity as 'the secret capital of the Lue in Laos' (ibid.: 16).

The cult of the guardian spirits and localized ethnic identity in Muang Sing

Keyes briefly visited Muang Sing in 1991 and came to the conclusion that here Lue ethnic

consciousness exemplifies what he calls 'localized ethnic identity' (1993: 44). He writes: 'Local identities are perpetuated by stories, myths, and legends about forbears; in the case of the Lue, such stories link them with pre-modern principalities known as the *muang* of the Lue. There is little reason for such people to reflect on what Lue means because there are few occasions when people find themselves having to be self-conscious about who they are'. He adds: 'I suspect that many of the villagers in Chiang Kham district in northern Thailand with whom Moerman worked in the late 1950s and early 1960s also called themselves Lue for similar reasons' (ibid.:46).

My own research in Muang Sing reveals that the 'stories, myths and legends about forbears', which have shaped localized ethnic identity and remain unchallenged by national discourses, are closely connected with the cult of the *muang* guardian spirits (*phi muang*).

The present guardian spirit cult of Muang Sing was initiated by Chao Fa Silinor. The annual ritual was held on the 13th day of the 3rd Lue month (January) in a forested area near the village of Chiang Mun less than a kilometre northwest of the walled town of Muang Sing. It comprised the sacrifice of a black buffalo to the 32 guardian spirits (*phi muang*) of Muang Sing. The two main ritual officiants were the *mor daeng* (literally 'red doctor', referring to the red headdress) and *mor luang* ('great doctor'). The *mor daeng* was responsible for the spearing of the buffalo and the *mor luang* for the cutting up of the buffalo and presentation of offerings at a nearby shrine to the 32 guardian spirits. Other ritual officiants included a specialist who invoked the spirits (*mor khap*), a flautist (*mor pao pi*) and a female medium (*thi nang*).

Further details of the ritual need not concern us here. What is important is to emphasize the collective nature of the ritual. First, all the villagers of Muang Sing shared the cost of the sacrificial buffalo, with contributions collected by the sub-district (*taseng*) headmen. Second, after offerings were presented to the 32 guardian spirits and several guest spirits the remaining meat was divided between the assembled representatives of all the *taseng* and villages, to be eaten together at the ritual site. It was thus at once a rite of communion with the guardian

spirits and a rite of commensality between all the villages of Muang Sing.

The traditional rulers (Chao Fa Silinor and Chao Ong Kham) and subsequently the French and Lao civil authorities used to sponsor the annual cult ritual. However, the left-wing Pathet Lao withdrew this patronage in 1973. About ten years ago the district officer (*chao muang*) prohibited buffalo sacrifice, claiming that it was wasteful. Yet the cult has survived, relatively unchanged, despite disassociation from political authority and lack of official support. The ceremony I witnessed in 1997 was attended by several hundred devotees, many bringing with them gifts of candles to represent fellow villagers.

The 32 guardian spirits of Muang Sing comprise quite recent historical figures such as Chao Fa Silinor and one of his wives, Nang Pinkaeo Lortfa, remote legendary figures such as Panya Tanhai³ or spirits of mythical beings linked to the natural landscape, such as the mermaid (*ngeuak*) Nang Phomkhiao. In the words of one of the cult officiants, all 32 spirits 'are ancestors whose spirits have shown beneficence towards the Tai Lue of Muang Sing' (*banphaburut thi mi bunkhun tor Tai Lue Muang Sing*). This beneficence is expressed in a several ways: the building or renovation of Buddhist temples and monuments, the exercise of 'power and influence' (*idthiphon*) and expertise in magical spells (*wetmon katha*).

The identification of the guardian spirits as 'ancestors' (*banphaburut*) raises the issue of the role of ancestors and ancestor worship among the Lue. According to one authoritative source: 'There is no evidence of an ancestor cult at any level of Lue society; the Lue (except for the sinicized nobility) place little emphasis on remembering their ancestors, and pay little attention to kinship ties beyond those of the immediate family' (LeBar et al. 1960: 209). This certainly does not apply to Muang Sing where great store is placed on ancestors in both Buddhist and non-Buddhist ceremonies. For example, a key ritual in what is widely considered the most important village-based Buddhist festival—*Bun Than Tham*—consists of the transference of merit (*bun*) to ancestors. These include recently deceased kin and more distant kin going back many generations (both

are categories of consanguines to whom kinship is traced bilaterally). In the case of the *phi muang* cult, ancestry is not based on consanguinity but on the identification of the collectivity of (ancestral) spirits with the territory of Muang Sing. The fact that these ancestors are not dynastic ancestors, as in some Tai guardian spirit cults, no doubt makes the severance of the cult from political authority easier and allows the ancestors to be identified purely with locality.

Furthermore, each of the 32 guardian spirits is identified with a particular feature of the natural landscape within the Muang Sing valley: Doi Heua, a hill at the northern end of the valley; an area called Pak Bong at the south-eastern extremity of the valley (near the main route leading to the Mekhong River via Muang Long and Chiang Kok); a lowland forested area called Pa Dong Mao, near the southern most Lue village of Yang Piang; and Doi Chiangteum to the south-east, site of the sacred Muang Sing reliquary (That Chiangteum) and overlooking the Nam Sing River and main route to Luang Nam Tha. Two spirits have their abodes at the western and eastern flanks of the valley near the Lue villages of Tapao and Silimun respectively. Several spirits are identified with locations near waterways within the valley.

According to Gehan Wijeyewardene (1993: 163), a Tai *muang* is a 'river valley bounded by mountains . . . an ecological, agricultural unit in which the watershed and catchment provided the irrigation for wet-rice agriculture, and the mountain passes articulated relations with the outside world'. At the time of Chao Fa Silinor the centre of Muang Sing comprised a fortified town (*wiang*) surrounded by a moat and earthen walls with gateways facing the four cardinal directions. In the centre of the walled town was Silinor's palace (*hor Chao Fa*). The town was divided into four administrative sections: Chiang In, Chiang Cai, Chiang Yeun and Chiang Lae (where Lue officials related to the ruler resided) and was surrounded by another four administrative areas called Muang Nam, Luang Wiang, Luang Nam Kaeo, and Yang Piang. This is what Nguyen Duy Thieu (1993) refers to as the 'middle area' which was 'intercalated between the centre and the outermost area'. Topographically the middle area 'remained in the limits of the valley bottom' and was inhabited

by Tai commoners (mostly Lue and some Tai Neua). The outermost area comprised the surrounding mountains and was inhabited by Akha and Yao highlanders who practised swidden agriculture and who were collectively called *Kha* (literally, 'slaves'). These were divided into administrative units called *buak*, each controlled by a Lue official (with the title of *Chao Buak*) who exacted tribute and corvee labour⁴.

It can be argued that the collectivity of guardian spirits and their abodes (enumerated in invocation and in sacred texts) provides a kind of spiritual map or sacral topography, which has the cadastral function of setting the physical limits to the Lue-inhabited political core of the *muang*. It also serves to mark the boundaries of Lue as an ethnic group both different from and superior to neighbouring highlanders. A French report on Muang Sing of early this century comments on the 'proclivity of the Lue to surrender themselves to pomp and pageantry as long as it gave them the "illusion of being a great people" or at least being at the top of an ethnic hierarchy which placed the montagnards at the bottom' (Gunn 1989: 62).

The villages of the Muang Sing valley have their own local cults centred on 'pillars of the village' (*lak ban* or *cai ban*) and village guardian spirits (*phi ban*). The timing of the annual propitiation of these local spirits varies from village to village and is not integrated with the annual ritual of the cult of *muang* guardian spirits⁵. Furthermore, at the time of the propitiation of the village spirits the village is ritually sealed off from the outside world for periods of up to three days. It seems to me that a principal function of the *phi muang* cult is to create, through its collective rituals, a sense of local loyalty that transcends village autonomy and particularism.

The Lue diaspora

The Lue population of Sip Song Panna has been estimated as almost a quarter of a million (225,488) (Hsieh 1989: 62). Estimates for the total Lue population of Laos vary from about 100,000 to 125,000⁶. Moerman gives a figure of 50,000 Lue for Thailand (1968: 4) but this obviously does not include the Lue-Yong

population of Lamphun Province which probably numbers between 240,000–320,000⁷. There is also a sizeable Lue population in Burma to the west of the Mekong (e.g. in Muang Yong and Chiang Tung), though I have been unable to discover any figures for this region. While estimates for the Lue population outside the homeland of Sip Song Panna are rather imprecise it is reasonable to conclude that there are many more Lue outside Sip Song Panna than inside. Some of this is due simply to the redrawing of borders in the nineteenth century (e.g. loss of Muang U and Muang U Tai to French colonial Laos) but the Lue diaspora can be largely attributed to migration. The reasons for this exodus are many and varied. In Laos migration reached as far south as Luang Prabang with the establishment of the Lue village of Ban Phanom. Here the original settlers accompanied wives offered as tribute (*tawaa*) by Sip Song Panna princes to the Lao king Fa Ngum in the fourteenth century⁸. However, most Lue migration from Sip Song Panna into Laos has occurred during the last two centuries, some to escape marauding Haw armies, some enticed by the prospect of unoccupied fertile land, and others to escape the turmoil of civil wars.

Lue migration into northern Thailand began on a large scale in the early nineteenth century as a result of military and forced resettlement campaigns carried out by Prince Kawila. Two centuries of Burmese rule had left the Chiang Mai valley devastated and virtually depopulated. Kawila, backed by his suzerain, the Siamese king (Rama 1), initiated a policy known as 'putting vegetables into baskets, putting people into towns' (*kep phak sai sa kep khon sai muang*) in order to rebuild Chiang Mai and re-establish it as the political and cultural centre of Lan Na. To achieve this he launched numerous military raids to the west and north against Red Karen, Shan, Khoen, and Lue villages and towns to resettle war captives in Chiang Mai, Lamphun, and Lampang. According to Volker Grabowsky (1999: 21, 22), the largest influx of manpower to Lan Na was a result of the conquest of the small Lue kingdom of Muang Yong, which surrendered in 1805, and 10,000 people from here were resettled in Lamphun. In 1807/8 further attacks were made against various *muang* in Sip Song Panna and many Lue families from

here were resettled in Lampang⁹ and Chiang Mai.

Nan similarly suffered under the yoke of Burmese domination and towards the end of the eighteenth century it was devastated and depopulated. The repopulation of Nan appears to have begun in the early 1790s. In 1790, 585 families from Muang Yong avoided deportation to Burma by fleeing to Nan (ibid.: 24). In 1812, 6,000 war captives from Muang La, Muang Phong (in Sip Song Panna) and from Luang Phu Kha (northern Laos) were resettled in Nan (ibid.: 25)¹⁰. However, Grabowsky suggests that Nan's resettlement policy was based less on military force and more on voluntary resettlement and notes that after the late 1830s numerous Lue fled anarchy and civil war in Sip Song Panna and sought refuge in Nan.

Such voluntary migration accounts for the Lue settlement of the Thawangpha basin in Nan. For example, in 1836 or 1837 a civil war developed between two aristocratic factions over precious elephants from Laos. One group from Muang La (in southern Sip Song Panna) fled the turmoil, sought sanctuary in Nan and established three villages in the Thawangpha basin (Nong Bua, Ton Hang and Don Mun) (ibid.: 26; see also Pachoén 1984: 9–12). As a result of these migrations there are now some 50 Lue villages in Nan province (Ratanaporn 1996: 6).

Whether or not Lue migration has been forced or voluntary, historical 'memories' of migration are for many Lue in diaspora an important component of localized ethnic consciousness¹¹. These 'memories' also comprise recollections of the locality from which the Lue migrated and of the guardian spirits of that locality. Furthermore, these memories are preserved through various forms of representation: naming the new settlement after the original, resettlement in an area that is geographically and ecologically similar to the homeland, and recreation of the local guardian spirits¹².

The transformation of the cult of guardian spirits and Lue ethnicity in Nan

Diasporic representation is less complete in the case of the three Lue villages of the Thawangpha

basin in Nan. Thus the village of Nong Bua was named after a local swamp, not the village of origin in Muang La. However, the cult of the 32 guardian spirits of Muang La has been represented, albeit with modifications. In Muang La the annual ritual of 'sealing off the *muang*' (*pithi kam muang*) and of worshipping the 32 guardian spirits of Muang La used to take place over a period of 96 days, that is, three days for each of the spirits whose shrines were situated in different locations. Later, all the guardian spirits came to be worshipped collectively (though each with its own shrine) in the same place under a large banyan tree just outside the city gate. The three main officiants at this ritual were the *Mor Muang* (literally, 'doctor of the kingdom'), *Chao Muang* (ruler) and *thi nang thewada* (female medium) and the major offerings comprised a black pig, a white buffalo and a black buffalo (Thai-Yunnan Newsletter 1988: 2–3). Today a similar ritual (also called *pithi kam muang*) is performed in Nong Bua village, though only every three years. For three days the village is ritually sealed off. In the past only Lue people were permitted to attend and no one was allowed to enter or leave the village (Ratanaporn 1996: 14). Nowadays, outsiders, including tourists, may attend with the payment of a fine. In Nong Bua the same types of ritual officiants known by the same names (*mor muang*, *Chao Muang*, *thi nang*) participate; the *Chao Muang* is said to be a direct descendant of the Muang La ruler and has always lived in Don Mun village. As in Muang La there are 32 guardian spirits. The Lue of Thawangpha worship these guardian spirits as 'ancestor spirits' (Baba 1996: 31). The pre-eminent spirit, Chao Luang Muang La, is at once the guardian spirit of Nong Bua village and of the three Lue villages as a whole. The shrines of the other 31 spirits are spread out over the three villages and 5 are located in non-Lue villages. Only 21 of the 32 spirits are included in the *kam muang* ritual (Baba 1993: 10–11).

One major recent innovation was the building, in 1984, of a statue of Chao Luang Muang La near his spirit shrine at Nong Bua. It is said that the statue is a replica of a drawing made by a famous monk (Ajan Montri) from Phrae, based on a vision he had of Chao Luang Muang La¹³. The statue was built as a memorial

(*anusawari*) to Chao Luang Muang La, considered 'a fearless fighter of great skill' and an ancestor (*banphaburut*) of the Lue of Nong Bua, Ton Hang and Don Mun (Pachoen 1984: 37). According to Yuji Baba, the statue also 'commemorates their migration from Muang La in Sipsong Panna' (1993: 3).

The leader of the Lue migrants from Sip Song Panna was a descendant of the ruler of Muang La and was called Chao Luang Anuphap. He resided in Don Mun village and a line of male descendants who have continued to live in this village inherited his title of '*Chao Muang*'. In the nineteenth century it appears Chao Luang Anuphap was responsible for looking after nearby royal land and granaries of the Nan ruler (Baba 1996: 29) and presumably also were his early successors. It seems, at his time, the role of the Lue *Chao Muang* was one of real political power, possibly as a vassal *Chao Muang* to the Nan ruler (*Chao Fa*). Although Nong Bua villagers claim their village to be the oldest in the area, it is more likely that Don Mun was settled first and that Chao Luang Anuphap was the first to reclaim land through the construction of a dam and an irrigation canal (Baba 1993: 7).

During the centralization of the Siamese state under King Chulalongkorn at the beginning of this century, and ensuing changes in provincial administration, the three Lue villages were incorporated into a single sub-district (*tambon*) with Don Mun as the centre. But later Ton Hang became the centre of a separate sub-district, which also included Nong Bua. As a result, the political power of Don Mun and that of the *Chao Muang* there waned and thereafter the *Chao Muang* came to play only a ritual role (1996: 29).

Nong Bua villagers reclaimed a swamp near their village, by flood control and draining, probably early this century. Local tradition has it that an evil spirit, who often seized girls from the village, once inhabited this swamp. The chief local guardian spirit, Chao Luang Muang La, was invited to subdue the spirit and then lotus was planted in the swamp (an event which gave the village its name of Lotus Swamp [Nong Bua]) (Baba 1993: 6; 1996: 33).

Nong Bua has prospered since the expulsion of the evil spirit and the reclamation of the swamp. This prosperity was matched by

changing political fortunes when, in 1979, the village headman became the sub-district headman. In this position he carried out road and bridge development and promoted Lue culture, as represented by the old and beautiful Lue-style Buddhist temple and local Lue weaving (Pachoen 1984: 41–4), attracting a large number of tourists to the village. Later the King of Thailand awarded the headman the prize of the best village headman in the country (Baba 1993: 7). Also crucial to the promotion of Lue culture in Nong Bua by this headman has been the annual three-day ritual of Chao Luang Muang La, elaborated by the building of the statue to Chao Luang Muang La in 1984. The statue has thus become more than a memorial to an ancestor and to Lue migration for all three Lue villages; it has also been appropriated as a symbol of the successful ‘development’ of Nong Bua village (Baba 1996: 35).

Nong Bua has also appropriated history by presenting its own version, which places Nong Bua at centre stage of local history. This is exemplified in the publication commemorating the building of the Chao Luang Muang La statue. The third chapter provides a translation in Thai of a document in Lue script and held in Nong Bua. The publication asserts that Nong Bua was the first village settled after the migration from Muang La (Pachoen 1984: 11). But, according to Baba, the original document makes no such claim (1996: 36). It is noteworthy, too, that throughout the 54-page volume there is only occasional mention of the other two Lue villages of Don Mun and Ton Hang. Baba aptly observes that the commemorative publication ‘appears to be an attempt to rewrite local history with Nong Bua as its focal point’ (1996: 36).

By contrast with Nong Bua, Don Mun village has suffered political and economic misfortune—the loss of political power of the *Chao Muang* and relative poverty compared to Nong Bua. This has been accompanied by rivalry between the two villages, especially since Nong Bua’s push towards ‘development’ after 1979.

Don Mun villagers have not accepted their plight as ineluctable destiny but have sought redress through ritual action and assertion of Lue cultural identity. An astrologer told a young man from Don Mun village, who was working in Bangkok, that the wandering soul of Chao

Luang Anuphap needed a place to live and this was the cause of the economic failure of the village. Consequently in May 1991 a spirit shrine was built for Chao Luang Anuphap in the centre of the village. According to Baba, the shrine was built not only as a ritual means to alleviate poverty but also as ‘a concrete symbol of their own historical memories’ (of migration) and thus as a claim for ‘cultural independence’ from Nong Bua village (ibid.: 36).

In 1993 a ritual was held for Chao Luang Anuphap during the three-day ritual for Chao Luang Muang La in Nong Bua. Nevertheless, the *Chao Muang* from Don Mun and fellow villagers continued their customary participation in the Nong Bua ritual. However, in December 1996 Don Mun withdrew altogether from the triennial ritual of Chao Luang Muang La at Nong Bua and held a separate three-day festival at Don Mun. On the morning of the second day of the festival, at the edge of the village, animals (including a buffalo) were sacrificed to Chao Luang Muang La and to twelve of the lesser guardian spirits located in Don Mun. In the late morning offerings were presented at the shrine of Chao Luang Anuphap. Later, back at the ceremonial site at the edge of the village, a troupe of local village girls, adorned immaculately in Lue-style dress and woven shoulder sashes, performed ‘Lue’ dances in front of a large village audience, though the dances were not recognizably Lue at all¹⁴. Immediately following the dancing performance the attention of the audience was drawn to the large shrine of Chao Luang Muang La, indicated clearly in large letters in Thai script above the shrine entrance. Inside was seated a female medium (*thi nang*) and a *mor muang* clothed in red. The medium was soon possessed by the spirit of Chao Luang Muang La who, it was explained to me, had by-passed Nong Bua village! Here was a ritual performance aimed at appropriating the beneficent power of Chao Luang Muang La in an effort to turn the scales of fortune for the village¹⁵. It was also arguably an appropriation (or re-appropriation) of Chao Luang Muang La as a guardian spirit, since, as the villagers of Don Mun claim, until about a hundred years ago, the ritual of Chao Luang Muang La was held at Don Mun. The spirit possession seance was followed by Lue songs (*khap Lue*) sung by

several elderly women and by a soul-calling (*su khwan*) ceremony.

Lue identity in the context of Thai national culture and development

King Chulalongkorn initiated the process of administrative centralization in response to the threat of annexation of peripheral regions of the Siamese kingdom by colonial powers. Another component of national integration was the emergence of a policy that considered as 'Thai' anyone who spoke a Tai language. By the 1930s the government was energetically engaged in the promotion and codification of national culture, culminating in 1939 in the change of the name of the country from Siam to Thailand. Significantly, the promotion of national culture and economic nationalism became intertwined, with some of the Cultural Mandates issued in the period 1939–1940 designed 'to encourage the prosperity and well-being of Thai as against Chinese or ethnic minorities' (Reynolds 1991: 5–6). 'Development' thus became a sub-discourse within the broader, encompassing discourse of national culture.

However, it was not until about the mid 1960s that development at the rural level was actively promoted with the setting up of village-level farmers groups, credit associations, community development groups, housewives and women's groups, etc. The process of state intervention in rural development was accelerated after the student uprising of 1973 which pressured the state to pay more attention to rural poverty and other rural problems. Accompanying these state-controlled rural development programs has been a development discourse that emphasizes 'development' and 'progress' and 'participation' (within groups and projects initiated and controlled by the state). State-led rural development programs are markedly oriented towards the village as an administrative unit, with requisite local leaders in official roles. Competitions between villages (*kan prakuat muban*) are encouraged (e.g. competitions to select most progressive headman, housewife pageants, etc.) and, according to Philip Hirsch (1993: 332), these can be seen as 'disciplinary mechanisms in support of the official discourse of village'.

Underpinning this discourse is the assumption of access to state resources and improved rural welfare. The end result of this process of state intervention is a radical shift from a situation in which 'village and state are geographically and institutionally separate' to one in which the state has become 'part of the village' (Hirsch 1989: 35, 54).

Consistent with my point above concerning the integrity of economic development and national culture, Hirsch also notes (1990: 13) that development discourse in Thailand is not just about achieving economic prosperity but also about cultural development. Cultural development encompasses moral and spiritual development with the idealization of civic virtues such as diligence, punctuality, tidiness and honesty. It is noteworthy that the Lue of northern Thailand are especially renowned for their diligence (*khayan*) and textile weaving serves to enhance this reputation. Textiles are also strongly considered a culturally appropriate form of development for women and for this reason have been promoted by the royal family (especially by Queen Sirikit) as well as by government departments (e.g. Community Development). Textile production enables women to combine income earning with other domestic activities.

In Nong Bua the weaving of Lue textiles had lapsed for a long time but was revived by a local woman in 1977. Notably the subsequent development of a viable local weaving industry in the village owed much to assistance and promotion by the District Officer, the Governor of Nan, The Siam Society and, from late 1979 to early 1980, the Department for the Promotion of Weaving sent instructors to Nong Bua to train local women. Later, two women's groups (*klum satri*), comprising almost a hundred households, were set up to undertake weaving on a cooperative basis (Pachoen 1984: 43). Now, a cooperative store in Nong Bua displays a large variety of Lue weaving for direct sale to tourists or wholesale to buyers supplying the tourist market elsewhere.

However, Lue textiles are more than commodities for sale; they are an important part of contemporary Lue ceremonial and symbolic life. For example, at the 1996 rituals for Chao Luang Muang at Nong Bua and Don Mun,

described above, ornate and colourful Lue textiles featured prominently in the attire of the young female dancers and other local women present. Also, at Nong Bua, Lue textiles ostentatiously bedecked the many stands surrounding the ceremonial site in the village square.

The revival of Lue textiles in these Lue villages in Nan highlights the issue of the contemporary construction of Lue ethnicity in relation to the Thai nation and national culture in Thailand. I would argue that contemporary Lue ethnic identification in Thailand is, in part, a reflection of the way national culture constructs Lue identity. According to Keyes, from the viewpoint of the contemporary Thai elites who promote national culture, 'the Lue are of interest primarily as representatives of one variant of northern Thai culture'. This perspective is pronounced in the case of Lue textiles, which Keyes considers 'a consequence of appropriation of non-Siamese Tai traditions' as part of the heritage of the Thai' (n.d.: 16, 17). The revival of Lue-style weaving in the villages of Nong Bua and Don Mun, with the assistance of a host of government institutions, is a reflection of this process of appropriation, of elite Thai perceptions of where the Lue fit in national culture and what elements can be profiled and commoditized, and of the Lue response to these perceptions.

The intrusion of national culture into the local Lue world is also well illustrated in the case of the cult of the guardian spirits. The triennial cult ritual and the statue of Chao Luang Muang La serve to legitimize Nong Bua village as 'winner of the competition for rural development' (Baba 1993: 9). The re-invented, life-like nature of the statue—quite at variance with traditional representation of Lue guardian spirits—makes it an acceptable icon of national culture and development, as it is consistent with modern Thai trend of building statues of national heroes (e.g. modernizing kings such as Chulalongkorn). At the same time, the statue is symbolic of the beneficent supernatural power of Chao Luang Muang La that can be tapped in a quite magical way by the local community¹⁶. This polysemous symbolism allows local Lue identity to be meaningful within a national context.

Furthermore, as Thawangpha Lue villages have become increasingly part of the Thai state and the state part of the village, the supra-village cult of Chao Luang Muang La has eventually collapsed and has fragmented into separate village cults under the pressure of administrative changes and state development programs that encourage inter-village competition. However, the competition between Nong Bua and Don Mun villages has not been waged purely on economic grounds. Ever since the spirit of Chao Luang Muang La expelled the evil swamp spirit, allowing Nong Bua to reclaim the swamp and prosper, economic competition has also been expressed in ritual action (statue, shrines, separate cults, spirit possession, etc.). Again there has been increasing rivalry between the two villages to become the paragons of Lue culture, in a sense to out-Lue each other. In this intensified competition it is apparent that economic and ritual action and the promotion of local Lue culture have coalesced and together have been subsumed by the hegemonic ideologies of national culture and development.

Lue ethnic identity in Muang Sing and Nan: a comparison

In both Muang Sing and Nan localized ethnic identity has a political origin centred on small principalities (*muang*) and their guardian spirit cults. In the case of the diasporic Lue of Thawangpha district in Nan, historical memories of migration linked them with their homeland and its guardian spirits who are also considered to be ancestors.

Memories of migration are not a feature of local identity in Muang Sing. The early Lue settlers of Muang Sing in the nineteenth century originated from many Lue *muang* in Burma and southern Sip Song Panna. However, Muang Sing is the *fons et origo* of localized ethnic identity. This identity has its roots in the relative autonomy of Muang Sing as a political entity, in the power and prestige of the founding ruler of the principality, Chao Fa Silinor, and in the cult of guardian spirits he initiated. These guardian spirits were also considered ancestors of the local Lue and were closely identified with the natural landscape of Muang Sing. I suggest that Lue ethnic identity served to

reinforce claims of political autonomy (in relation to neighbouring kingdoms) and establish superiority and control over neighbouring hill people. In Nan I suspect that a sense of superiority and separateness as Lue may have been initially in the nineteenth century directed at other Tai lowland settlers and as a means of justifying a special relationship and privileges with the ruler (*Chao Fa*) of Nan.

In Muang Sing localized ethnic identity has persisted relatively unchanged. One reason for this is that Muang Sing, since inception, has been able to maintain its political integrity. At the present time it forms a separate district (also called *muang*), in the modern socialist state of Lao PDR, which approximates to Muang Sing at the beginning of this century. The present district of Muang Sing still has significant political and economic autonomy. It is administered largely by local Lue officials—a consequence, in part, of the fact that Laos is legally a multi-ethnic state that proclaims the equality of all ethnic groups in the country. Furthermore, poor communications and an under-resourced state mean that there is minimal ‘development’ and state intervention in the district. The cult of the *muang* guardian spirits has survived too, albeit in a modified form that has disconnected it from political authority but not from locality. Thus it continues to be an expression of the unity and autonomy of Muang Sing (in relation to the state and tribal neighbours) and of local Lue identity unselfconsciously rooted in tradition. The Lue of Muang Sing do have a national identity as Lao—many Lue fought in the national struggle on the side of the Pathet Lao and many also identify with certain national festivals such as that for the New Year—but national culture does not encroach significantly on their local identity.

By contrast, the Lue villages of Thawangpha District in Nan no longer comprise a single political or administrative entity. Also, an intrusive Thai state has reduced much of the economic autonomy of the Lue, forcing them to quite consciously re-invent their local identity within the wider hegemonic discourses of national culture and development. As such, over the past twenty years or so, ‘localized ethnic identity’ has been transformed into a more

contrived ethnic variant of an over-arching Thai national culture.

State intervention in rural areas in Thailand in the name of development has tended to foster inter-village competition and, in relation to the Lue villages of Nong Bua and Don Mun, this has been exacerbated by local historical contingencies. As a consequence, Lue local identity has been turned inwards through intense rivalry between Lue villages, a rivalry that is expressed in the coalescence of economic, ritual and cultural action.

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Notes

¹ The *chao muang*'s village or town tends to be the political capital of his *muang*, and duplicates on a smaller scale the court and its bureaucracy as found in Chiengrung (LeBar et al. 1960: 211).

The number of *muang* varied over time; in 1780 there were some 20 *muang*, in 1950 more than 30 (Chiang cited in LeBar et al. 1960: 211). Peculiar to Lue political organisation was the system of 12 *panna* (literally ‘twelve thousand rice fields’). Hsieh (1989: 106) notes: ‘Although the *panna* was a larger organization than the *meeng* (*muang*) . . . there was no formal government for each *panna*. Some *Chao meeng* were called *Chao panna*. However, they were like coordinators whose responsibility was to collect

tribute within particular *panna* and submit them to the king. In general, a *Chao panna* did not have the authority to command princes of other *meeng*'.

Sip Song Panna was established as a state at the end of the twelfth century AD. It became formally a vassal state of China in the late fourteenth century. From the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century Sip Song Panna also paid tribute to kings of Burma. This type of dual tributary relationship enabled Sip Song Panna to maintain a high degree of autonomy with minimal interference from her suzerain powers. It was only permanently incorporated into the Chinese state in the late nineteenth century as a consequence of boundary treaties between China, Britain and France. Sip Song Panna (Xishuangbanna) is presently an Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan Province, PRC.

² The historical legend of Chao Fa Dek Noi is well known in Muang Sing and was recounted to me a number of times by Lue elders there. The story is also recounted in Saengthong Photibupha's recent *Pawatsat Muang Siang Khaeng* (1998). The Lue king of Chiang Rung, Sawaennifa, had a son, Chao Inpan (later called Chao Fa Dek Noi). As a boy Chao Inpan was inquisitive and intelligent. He was also gregarious and liked to play with other children (*dek noi*). This group of children, under Chao Inpan's leadership, stole an ox and a buffalo in the rice fields. The people saw this as an inauspicious portent for the country and they petitioned the king to intervene. As punishment the king exiled his son and sent him on a large raft down the Mekong with five pairs of servants and seven pairs of slaves. As they drifted down the Mekong Chao Inpan ordered his followers to found settlements along the way. Eventually the prince had a dream that he should establish his own settlement near a large rock in the river with the shape of a white tiger chasing a golden deer. As there were few of his followers left by this stage of the journey they would have to summon up courage (*khaengcai*). Hence the new settlement was named Muang Chiang Khaeng.

³ Panya Tanhai is also the paramount guardian spirit of the Chiangteum reliquary at Muang Sing. The annual reliquary festival (*Bun That*) attracts large numbers of Lue devotees from Muang Sing, northern Laos and Sip Song Panna. In the mythical history of the reliquary, recounted in the chronicle *Tham Tamnan That Luang Chiangteum Muang Sing*, Panya Tanhai is honoured as a devout Buddhist ruler responsible for the initial construction of the reliquary.

⁴ Today the conscription of Akha labour has been replaced by the extensive use by Lue of Akha wage

labour for wet-rice cultivation.

⁵ For an analysis of similar village territorial cults in Sip Song Panna see Tanabe (1988).

⁶ Keyes (1993: 37) gives a figure of 103,000 based on the 1985 Institute of Ethnology estimate. Chazee (1995: 48) gives an estimate of 125,000.

⁷ Pers.comm. Volker Grabowsky.

⁸ According to the headman of Ban Phanom (Kaentha Phaisomat) whom I interviewed in November 1995. He claimed that these settlers and their descendants specialized in the production of handicrafts and the performance of Lue dances for the royal court at Luang Prabang only a few kilometres away.

⁹ For details of Lue settlement in Lampang, see Prachan Rakphong (1987: 9–11).

¹⁰ Ratanaporn (1996: 5) also mentions refugees from Chiang Khaeng.

¹¹ See Tanabe (1984: 101) on forced resettlement of Tai Khoen from Chiang Tung as a basis of ethnic consciousness and 'historical memory of ethnic oppression' in resettled Khoen communities near Chiang Mai and as a basis of later rebellion (1889). Tanabe notes: 'Among the the Khoen peasants at least, old songs and verses recollecting life in the original villages in the Chiang Tung area and the sufferings of the Khoen people down to the present were chanted at village assemblies before the uprising'.

¹² An apt example of such multi-faceted representation is that of the Lue migrants from Muang Yong noted above. Oral tradition has it that the ruler of Muang Yong was promised fertile land near Chiang Mai but this had already been settled by other war captives. So he was asked to clear wasteland around Lamphun. The ruler was delighted because the geographical and ecological environment was similar to that of Muang Yong and he decided to settle there. 'He named his chief village 'Waing Yong', whereas smaller settlements nearby were named after former satellite *muang* of Yong. The villages of Yu and Luai were built on opposite sides of the Kuang River, corresponding exactly to the original locations of Muang Yu and Muang Luai. Furthermore, the four guardian spirits of Muang Yong (each represented by a stone-cut white elephant) were also 'resettled' along with the population and located at the main monastery of Wiang Yong (Grabowsky 1999: 33, 45).

¹³ Pers. comm. Yuji Baba.

¹⁴ The dances bore little resemblance to Lue dances I have seen in Sip Song Panna and Muang Sing. My

wife, who is Thai and who was also in the audience at Don Mun, claims the dances were standard northern and central Thai.

¹⁵ Yuji Baba, in a personal communication, informs me that he heard another version of this story, namely that the medium at Don Mun was possessed by the sister of Chao Luang Muang La, Chiang Lan, and that it was she who by-passed Nong Bua village, even though most of her devotees live in Nong Bua. Clearly both versions confirm that Don Mun villagers were engaged in competitive ritual action to attract the supernatural support of ancestral spirits.

¹⁶ Tambiah highlights this ambiguity in his use of the concept 'indexical symbol' in his study of Buddha images and amulets in Thailand. Indexical symbols are 'symbols that are associated with the represented object by a conventional semantic rule, and they are simultaneously also indexes in existential, pragmatic relation to the objects they represent' (1984: 4). Grant Evans (n.d.: 14) also uses this concept as a means of comprehending recent 'statue mania' in Thailand in which public statues of national heroes have become the focus of popular religious cults. For example, the equestrian statue of King Chulalongkorn in Bangkok reflects a nationalist project and stands for modernity, progress, and prosperity. At the same time, every Tuesday crowds gather at the statue 'because many people believe that it can work miracles for problems of everyday life and especially for business matters'.

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