
The Ambivalence of the Gift in Transnational Humanitarian Projects. The Generosity of the Associations of French Lao and its Reception by the People in Laos

Les ambivalences du don dans les projets humanitaires transnationaux. De la générosité des associations de Lao de France, et de sa réception par la population du Laos

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Isabelle Wilhelm

Introduction

- 1 This article proposes to look at the relationships that are forged between French Lao and Lao of Laos¹ within the development projects that those in France are carrying out in their country of origin. This aid to Laos will be analyzed here as a form of gift. This will allow us to decipher the intentions of the givers and the way they shape the gift as well as to observe the reactions that the gifts provoke among the recipients and their consequences on the relations with the donors.
- 2 Since the 1990s, the relationships between migrant populations and their countries of origin have often been analyzed using a transnational approach (Basch et al. 1994), which allows for the consideration of migrants as actors within a space encompassing two or more states (Faist 1998; Portes 1997). Studies on the transnationalism of migrants largely focuses on the familial practices of these populations (Fresnoza-Flot & Merla 2018; Parreñas 2008), but also looks at collective remittances, i.e., “money raised by a group that is used to benefit a community” (Goldring 2004: 808). These include, for

example, the projects of humanitarian associations created by migrants to help their country of origin.²

- 3 Thomas Lacroix (2013: 1032) notes that these development initiatives “renew an allegiance toward the place of origin.” However, this desire to maintain ties with the community of origin often comes up against misunderstandings linked to a gap between the perceptions of one and the other; a gap that widens over time (Levitt & Lamba-Nieves 2013). Jørgen Carling (2008: 1474) also considers that the geographical distance between migrants and non-migrants creates inequalities that are a source of frustration for both parties. These inequalities affect the balance between conflict and cooperation within transnational relations. In order to refine the understanding of these relationships, J. Carling (2014) emphasizes the importance of considering these transfers (whether intra-familial or community-based) as a whole composed of material and emotional as well as relational elements. With this in mind, researchers have chosen to draw on gift theories to analyze these transfers (see Lindley 2009; Taylor et al. 2012 and more specifically in Southeast Asia, Small 2018). In particular, Lisa Cliggett (2005) developed the concept of gift remittance to explore both the material and social nature of goods sent by migrants to their relatives.
- 4 As we can see, one of the fundamental interests of gift theories is the bringing together of material and relational elements. According to Jacques Godbout (2000: 18), an approach based on the gift actually imposes “the analysis of the circulation of things and social links within the same model.” It is therefore relevant for analyzing the dynamics of relations between migrants and non-migrants involved in these transfers. This work has already been initiated in the intra-family framework by the authors mentioned above; I propose here to use this theoretical framework to analyze the collective remittances made by French Lao, both to their native villages and to villages they did not know before carrying out their projects there.
- 5 Jacques Godbout and Alain Caillé (1992: 29) describe a gift as “any provision of goods or services made, without any guarantee of return, with a view to creating, nurturing or recreating the social bond between people.” Let us recall here that according to Marcel Mauss (2012), the gift and counter-gift present the ambiguity of having, in theory, a voluntary nature, that is to say free and altruistic, but of being, in practice, obligatory and self-interested. Alain Testart (2007: 18) criticizes this Maussian definition in which the notion of “obligation” appears meaningless, according to him, and considers that Mauss should have distinguished between moral obligation and legal obligation. Then Testart endorses J. Godbout and A. Caillé by confirming the necessary absence of the guarantee of return within the gift. He specifies that the consideration must exist only as a “possibility” (ibid.: 36) which can be hoped for or expected but cannot be demanded or legally required (“exigible” in French language) as otherwise the “gift” would be an “exchange.” Yet, with regard to the purpose of the gift, A. Testart relativizes the objective of the gift, that of creating, nourishing, or recreating the social link, put forward by J. Godbout and A. Caillé. He establishes a classification (ibid.: 161-168) in which only one of the categories of gifts would aim at maintaining relationships; those made “without the counterparty being central.” These gifts correspond to those defined as such by J. Godbout and A. Caillé, but thus represent, for A. Testart, only one form among others.
- 6 These debates on the “obligations” inherent in gifts and counter-gifts and on the question of the finality of gifts will be placed at the heart of this article. To this end, I

propose to uncover both the pre-existing link on which the willingness of French Lao to carry out projects in Laos is based and the form taken by this type of gift and the relationships that may be nourished by these projects. First, I will present the context in which French Lao created their humanitarian associations. I will then question the “sense of the gesture” (Godbout 2000), that is, the intentions of the French Lao at the origin of their humanitarian activities. Next, a presentation of the implementation of the projects will shed light on the distortions between a discourse in which French Lao emphasize the altruistic nature of the gesture and the conditions that they will actually impose on the Lao of Laos, such as, for example, a participation in project construction. We will look at how the latter react to these constraints and, more globally, to the gift that is given them. Finally, the analysis of these interactions will shed light on the social links that are established and negotiated within these humanitarian projects.

- 7 The data presented in this article were collected through ethnographic fieldwork conducted in France and Laos between 2013 and 2018³ with a dozen associations, via participant observation as well as informational and semi-structured interviews conducted with the various actors involved: presidents and members of associations, villagers in Laos, representatives of Lao authorities in France and Laos. Within the associations, my primary interlocutors were those who travel to Laos in the framework of project coordination. They are, most often, the presidents, vice-presidents, secretaries and/or accountants. My ethnographic fieldwork then consisted of going back and forth between the two countries with these most-active members.⁴

The Creation of Associations by French Lao

- 8 A brief history is necessary to understand the circumstances in which, more than twenty years after leaving their country, the French Lao created their humanitarian associations. We will then see the impact of these circumstances on the forms adopted by these associations and on the profiles of their founders.

Historical, Political and Social Context

- 9 In 1975, the Communist Party took power and proclaimed the birth of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (LPDR). The policies of this new regime prompted more than one in ten Lao to flee (Condominas & Pottier 1982: 136). The main destination for Lao refugees was Thailand, a country that was not inclined to offer them a permanent solution. Faced with the magnitude of the events, Western countries (including France, the United States, Canada, and Australia) organized the resettlement of some of these refugees on their own territories. In 1992, an official report from France Terre d’Asile stated that 35,680 Lao had been welcomed in France.⁵ Before their arrival, the Lao presence was limited to a thousand students (Choron-Baix 1993: 26), most of whom were financed by French scholarships.
- 10 For about fifteen years, many refugees had the hope of being able to return to Laos (Alili 1993: 33) and lived in fear of “losing their culture,” as some of my interlocutors testified. This is why, during this period, in several cities in France, they created associations that aimed at mutual aid, as well as the safeguarding of Buddhist religious practice and Lao culture, within the community. At this stage, the associations were aimed at the exile community and were therefore not yet oriented towards Laos. Then,

the years passed, and these Lao settled permanently in France. Most of them started families, got stable jobs, and acquired French nationality. At the same time, the Lao government, faced with the failure of its collectivist policy, undertook steps to open up the economy starting in 1986, and eventually joining ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) in 1997. The country's integration into regional projects and its openness to capital and people helped attract foreign investors and tourists. The 1990s saw the return of Lao exiles and/or their children to their country on a permanent or temporary basis (Sisombat-Souvannavong 2000). Many took advantage of their vacations to visit their families, of whom they had received little news since their departure some twenty years earlier. These first returns were opportunities for them to "rediscover" their country and their village and to realize the gap between their environment in their host country and the life of the villagers. This experience, which they often describe as a "shock," led some of them to decide to create new associations that they define as "humanitarian" to help the Lao population.⁶

- 11 The creation of these humanitarian associations therefore occurred in a very specific political and social context: the reopening of the country of origin and the established financial stability and administrative security of French Lao. It is the conjunction of these two conditions that, at the end of the 1990s and in the 2000s, enabled the birth of these associations. Their objectives include improving the state of educational and medical infrastructures as well as sending and distributing medical equipment, clothes, computers, bicycles, etc.

Specificities of the Lao Associations in France and Their Founders

- 12 In many of the cases studied, migrant organizations involved in home country development emanate from a grouping of people from the same region or village. They are generally referred to as hometown associations (HTAs) and defined as groups whose members share a common origin and whose actions are directed towards their community of origin (Fox & Bada 2008; Opiniano 2005). The example of French Moroccans from the village of Kasbat-Aït-Herbil, analyzed by T. Lacroix (2003), illustrates this case perfectly: these migrants gathered and then contributed to projects in their village of origin. Other associations of this type have been studied, including those of French Malians (Daum 1998; Quiminal 1993), Dutch Ghanaians (Mazzucato & Kabki 2009), and American Salvadorians (Waldinger et al. 2008).
- 13 Such groupings presuppose a sufficiently massive migration so that many people from the same locality of origin can mobilize, ideally to the same city of settlement. This was not the case for the Lao. Less numerous in France than the Malians or Algerians, it should also be remembered that on their arrival, they were dispersed to homes across the country. In addition, because of persistent political tensions, any participation in the development of Laos was considered by a large part of French Lao as support for the regime responsible for their exile. For these reasons, it was difficult for them to gather by village or city of origin. Most often, the Lao associations were born through the will of a leader who knew how to mobilize other Lao people, whether or not they were from his home province, but also numerous French. This situation has had several consequences. First, the projects carried out are not necessarily targeted at a particular village as is usually the case with HTAs. They are sometimes implemented in the founder's home village, but often more broadly in his or her home province, or even in

other provinces. Second, funds are not raised within the community. French Lao contribute little to the financial efforts needed for the projects. Most of the funds come from French private donors, companies, partner associations, and local authorities as well as from various activities organized by the associations for this purpose.

- 14 My interlocutors, most often founders and/or presidents of the associations, have the particularity to belong to the Lao ethnic group. Aged from 50 to 72 years old, they were all born in Laos, even if some of them only lived there a few years. Half of them are women. In terms of migration history, they are divided between former students who arrived in France before the events of 1975 and former refugees. Only one member is an exception and arrived a little later, in the 1980s. They are relatively evenly divided between being of an elite or more modest Lao background. Based in different cities in France, their associations are scattered across the country. In Laos, the beneficiary villages of the projects in which I conducted observations are located in the provinces of Champassak, Savannakhet, and Vientiane. It is also worth noting that all of my interlocutors were able to quickly develop new social networks in France. This enabled them to create their associations with French support and thus to bypass the reluctance and criticism of their Lao community.

Before the Gift: The Intentions

- 15 We will now explore how French Lao imagine the projects they want to carry out in Laos. According to Vincent Descombes (1996: 19), “to have an intention in doing something is to do what one does with a goal in mind, so there is a relationship of intention between the present activity and an expected result.” He later adds that “by leaving out the intention, the description that sticks to raw facts leaves out the gift itself” (ibid.: 240). The analysis of the gift thus calls for an interest in the intentions that precede and accompany the action, as well as an observation of the way in which each of the actors gives and receives. What interests me here is to identify the meaning that French Lao give to their involvement in humanitarian projects. The analysis of their discourses will allow us to shed light on their own perceptions of the action carried out and then to compare them with observations made in the field.

Helping Others

- 16 According to my interlocutors, the sense of belonging to their country of origin was a determining factor in their decision to help the Lao population. The literature on transnationalism⁷ confirms the importance of this link as the first motivation expressed by migrants involved in the development of their country of origin. This link to the country is often expressed through the terms “roots” and/or “origin” neither of which my interlocutors could “betray” or “deny.” This notion of attachment to one’s “origins” is also found in the expression commonly used by my interlocutors: “It is my country.” For them, this attachment justifies helping not only the population of their native village, but also strangers, i.e., people they do not know before carrying out a project in a village. In both cases, they identify with the beneficiaries of the projects, on the one hand, as Lao people (for example, through the comparison that some make between their situation and that of those who remained in Laos) and, on the other hand, as “human beings” (we will return to the use of this term). This erasure of

difference, including this self-identification of donors with “strangers” or “unknown” recipients, was also observed by J. Godbout and A. Caillé (1992: 83) in their analysis of the way association volunteers look at the people they work with. In the more specific context of non-governmental development organizations (NGOs), Roderick L. Stirrat and Heiko Henkel (1997: 80) also note an ideal of a “unity of humanity” that leads individuals to donate to NGOs in order to help beneficiaries they will probably never meet.

- 17 Giving to “strangers” thus appears to involve identification with the other. This identification is reinforced, in our case, by a common geographical origin. As a result, the motivations of the French Lao are different from those of other development actors. Indeed, a feeling of connection pre-exists their involvement in the projects and explains their desire to “do something for the country.” This is most often translated into a desire to share what they were “lucky” to have access to in France. At first, the migrants had experienced their exile as a trauma. However, following their first return to Laos, they realized that their coming to France gave them access to opportunities that those in Laos had never known. Although they do not express it in terms of a feeling of debt or guilt, this situation appears to have generated a moral obligation to “give back” to the people of Laos a little of what had been received in France. The desire to help is presented, more or less explicitly according to my interlocutors, as a form of “duty”⁸ towards “their country.” For instance, consider Tong’s statement:

We created this [an association] because we consider, after all, it’s the country of origin! So, we wanted to, we feel a little..., not really obliged, but we feel, how to say, in a way, a duty towards this country. Because we were born there. We grew up there.

This example shows the feeling of duty but also shows, as my interlocutors occasionally remind me, that this duty is not imposed on them by a third party. We thus find here both the free and the obligatory character of the gift, as defined by M. Mauss (2012).

Let us now take a closer look at the way in which French Lao envision action in the name of this “duty.” How does their desire to “do something” for their country translate? My interlocutors agree that they want to “help” by carrying out “humanitarian” projects.

It is indeed the term “*humanitaire*” (humanitarian) that is used by the French Lao to describe their associations and projects, and not “*développement*,” (development[al]) which would however be more accurate. As Laurent Vidal (2012: 245) points out, temporality is a central distinguishing criterion between the concept of “development” and that of “humanitarian aid.” The notion of emergency generally characterizes humanitarian aid, whereas development is a long-term process. Moreover, humanitarian aid is provided either after a disaster or in a period of crisis, whereas development is more likely to be considered in a more stable context. That being said, it is conceivable that these distinctions are not as clear to the French Lao who prefer the term “*humanitaire*.” First, French is not their native language. Furthermore, the boundaries between the two concepts, developmental and humanitarian, tend to become blurred, not only in common understandings but also in the discourses of some NGOs (Atlani-Duault 2012: 33). Perhaps their preference for the term “*humanitaire*” is based on a desire to translate the equivalent Lao term *manoutsatham*? We observe that the “human” (*manout* in Lao) is at the heart of both terms, French and Lao. This is the element that my interlocutors systematically point out to justify their choice. Their intention is to carry out “charitable” actions towards “humans,” by being “human”

themselves, i.e., by giving “from the heart.” The term “development” is set aside by the associations, because it does not seem to express this helping relationship. Moreover, the term development (*kanpatthana*) is assimilated to the vocabulary used by Lao authorities. The preference for the term “*humanitaire*” therefore also allows the French Lao to distinguish their actions from the overall development policy of the government.

In all cases, my interlocutors strongly value the idea of providing help directly (or human to human) in their native country. As such, they emphasize that relationships are at the heart of their intentions and stress the fact that they are similar to those they wish to help (Lao, humans, etc.).

Giving Without Expectation of Return

18 As discussed in the introduction, gifts can take the form of goods or services. Within the literature on transnational relations and/or development projects, authors have also qualified giving time, attention, and support to relatives during visits (Cliggett 2005), providing emotional and spiritual support (Taylor et al. 2012) or working as a volunteer (Stirrat & Henkel 1997) as gifts. In the case of the projects run by French Lao, they offer, first and foremost, time and energy. This is how they manage to raise the necessary funds for projects. The construction of an elementary school with five classrooms, for example, represents a budget of 20,000 to 30,000 euros. Raising such a sum in France requires a lot of time and energy whether for organizing parties, galas, tombolas and other events, to apply for subsidies from local authorities, to search out partners (companies, associations, etc.) and maintain those relationships, or to build project awareness with potential donors. This may be carried out via a regularly updated Internet site and/or through a physical presence at various public events.

19 Devoting their time and energy, the members of these Lao associations in France emphasize the altruism of their gesture. For example, one of my interlocutors expressed it in the following way:

I come from a background where it was difficult. I had to get myself up and running. After obtaining my certificate at the end of primary school, I entered secondary school. At that time, I didn't have two sandals of the same color [he looks at me for a long time so that I realize the standard of living that this implies]. I haven't forgotten. We've all overcome obstacles, but different ones. So, is it my duty to pull others through their difficulties? Partly yes! I came from there and I must not forget it. It's like a plant that needs water. I don't expect anything in return, neither money nor recognition. My satisfaction is that others can move forward in life.

20 Whether my interlocutors carry out their projects in their native village or in initially unknown villages, the altruism of their gesture is strongly communicated. They present their assistance as a free gift in the sense given by J. Godbout and A. Caillé (1992: 190)—free, with no binding obligation or required return. One of my interlocutors, who has carried out most of her projects in her native village, told me one day that she “doesn't expect anything in return” and that she does it because “it makes her happy.” Yet the gift is also presented as one-sided as she then added that sometimes some villagers thank her, but that anyway, “they can't do anything more.” She therefore considers that the beneficiaries, even if they wanted to, could not offer any material return. Behind the expression of the altruistic nature of the gift, we can also see the way in

which French Lao perceive the beneficiaries and the profound inequality, material at least, between them.

- 21 The expression of the altruistic nature of the gesture can also be understood through the analysis of the type of relationship established by the gift. Let us observe the vocabulary used by my interlocutors. One of them describes the Lao exiles as “children of the country.” Another uses the term “little brothers” to refer to students who benefit from his help in a Lao school. It is important to remember that the people I spoke with were between 50 and 72 years old. It is likely that, for them, considering themselves as a “child of the country” entails obligations towards that “country,” like adults towards their parents, but these obligations are fulfilled by helping Lao children or “little brothers.” In this way, they establish “elder to younger brothers” relationships (according to the principles of Southeast Asian hierarchy⁹) with project beneficiaries. The relationships are governed by the obligations attached to each status: the former have the duty to help and the latter the duty to show respect to the former. Free gifts are inherent in this type of relationship in which material aid does not necessarily imply material return but is supposed to generate a gain in honorability/respectability for the donors.¹⁰ Let us then observe the way in which projects are concretely carried out in the field in order to refine the analysis of this form of gift and the relationships that are thereby constructed.

In the Field: A Gift with Conditions?

- 22 We will try to understand how projects are carried out through the example of the construction of elementary school. First of all, most often the associations receive requests from the chiefs of villages close to the one in which they have already carried out a project. This is followed by a meeting between the president of the association, sometimes accompanied by other members, and the village representatives. The objective for the association is to evaluate the relevance of the project and the capacity of their counterparts in the village to mobilize the villagers for its implementation. At the end of these discussions, the village chief, usually accompanied by the school principal, approaches the district to obtain authorization for the association’s intervention. Two associations showed me examples of the needed authorization. These documents consisted of formal letters written by village authorities asking the association to finance the project. The document concerning the construction of an elementary school had been countersigned by the district; the other, concerning a secondary school, had been countersigned by the district and the province.
- 23 This procedure, described to me by several association presidents, seems to be different from that of the large NGOs which are obliged to contact the ministries before intervening. My meetings with officials from the Lao Embassy in Paris and the Lao Ministry of Foreign Affairs revealed the limited interest shown by the State in these school reconstructions, considered small-scale projects. However, although the associations are not subject to the same administrative burdens as larger NGOs, the local authorities (district and province) do not fail to remind them by various means that they retain full control over their activities.¹¹
- 24 That said, in the preparatory discussions between the associations and the village leaders, it is not the subject of obtaining official authorization that takes up most of the time. Instead, the distribution of efforts to bring the project to fruition is the key issue.

In exchange for providing funds, French Lao request villagers to participate in the construction effort. This participation generally consists of a physical contribution to the work but can also take the form of a financial contribution through a fee paid by each family or a contribution of construction materials (sand, wood, etc.). The choice of the type of participation is sometimes left to the beneficiaries which allows, for example, those who have a salaried job to pay the amount equivalent to the hours they cannot work on the site.

- 25 As we shall see, it is not always easy to mobilize villagers to work on a voluntary basis. The association presidents therefore insist on this condition from the very first preparatory meetings for the implementation of a project. The associations and the village leaders reach some form of agreement either finalized orally or more formally recorded.
- 26 A contradiction seems to appear here between the desire expressed by French Lao to give “without expectation of return” and, in the field, the setting up of conditions including, in particular, village participation. We can see that there is indeed an expectation of return, although it is expressed in terms of “time” devoted to the project and not in terms of material compensation. However, it should be noted, first, that the contractualization of these conditions, whether oral or written, has no value under Lao law; indeed, it is unthinkable that the French Lao would turn to Laos’ justice system to complain about a lack of participation on the part of the villagers. Secondly, we will see later that non-compliance with the conditions does not dissuade the French Lao from completing their projects. It seems interesting to ask why they are so committed to the idea of villager participation. What is the significance of this participation to them?

Participation Seen as an Essential Principle of Development

- 27 Before delving into the explanations of my interlocutors, it is important to remember that participation is a central notion in current development policies.¹² French Lao were confronted with the world of development rapidly after the creation of their associations. Their discourse and their ways of looking at development were then colored by the logic of their interlocutors and, in particular, their funders. Local involvement reinforces belief in the effectiveness and sustainability of a project. Thus, during the various events organized to raise funds, the Lao associations prefer to exhibit photos in which the mobilization of the villagers is visible. The same strategy is often used to illustrate the projects presented on their website. Finally, village participation is highlighted in grant applications to local authorities. It is presented as a reassuring element in the face of the concerns of some funders about the “sustainability and autonomy of projects after completion.”¹³
- 28 In development circles, the concept of participation is seen as a way to foster a “bottom-up” (as opposed to a “top-down”) approach (Stirrat & Henkel 1997). A key element of this concept is the incorporation of local knowledge into development programs (Mosse 2001). This method aims to promote the empowerment of the populations receiving aid. In Laos, the implementation of development projects by the State (in partnership with international donors) seems to follow this principle (see in particular the projects linked to the Poverty Reduction Fund carried out jointly by the government of Laos and the World Bank and analyzed by Holly High [2014]). However, as Katie Willis (2011) observes across the field of development, this level of

participation is rarely achieved, and local populations are mostly called upon to work onsite. In Laos, this contribution even tends to be imposed on the associated population by the authorities (see, for example, the case described by Vanina Bouté and Steeve Daviau [2009]).

- 29 The French Lao, not being an exception to the rule, have translated the notion of village participation into more of a contribution to construction than into a collaboration in decision making. However, the importance given to this notion goes beyond the sole objective of obtaining funds and attracting donors. It is a primary goal throughout the implementation of the projects.

Participation: A Tool for Co-construction?

- 30 Let us now return to the explanations of my interlocutors by taking the example of Duan, a sixty-five-year-old woman who has been conducting projects in her home village and surrounding villages for about twenty years. During one of my visits to her village in 2015, we had two discussions during which we compared her work with that of Westerners involved in school construction. These discussions shed new light on the issue of village participation. At the time of the first discussion, I had just read an article by H. High, an Australian anthropologist, in which the author explained the setbacks she experienced after agreeing to support the reconstruction of a village school in southern Laos.¹⁴ I spoke to Duan about the difficulties the author had encountered to get her opinion on what had happened. According to Duan, these difficulties were primarily related to the fact that H. High is a Westerner. She explained to me that a request made to an Australian woman is nothing like a request made to a Lao woman like her: when the villagers feel they can have money, they ask for it. Thus, they took the liberty of asking the Australian woman for money because they knew she could afford it. I responded that the villagers were also asking Duan herself for money to rebuild schools, but she told me that this was not the case. When villagers approach Lao people (from abroad), they do not do it the same way; they ask for help, not money.
- 31 During our second discussion, I asked Duan what differentiated her intervention from that of the Japanese government, which is also particularly active in the field of elementary school construction in Laos. She replied that the Japanese, on the one hand, have more resources than she does, and on the other hand, do not operate in the same way. In a critical tone, she went on to explain that they come to the villages, build schools, hand over the keys to the village chief and leave. She herself says she has neither the means nor the desire to do things this way. She feels that if she brings in money, the villagers must provide the labor because everyone must make an effort.
- 32 These discussions provide several insights. First, Duan distinguishes the relationship she has with the Lao of Laos from the relationship they would have with Westerners. In this discourse, addressed to a Western interlocutor, she valorizes her Lao origin and emphasizes that it leads to an inter-understanding with the villagers that Westerners could not claim. Along a similar line, I have often heard French Lao claim to have assets that Westerners who intervene in Laos would lack; they speak the local language, were themselves born in Lao villages and therefore they understand the organization and way of thinking of the villagers. According to Duan, this inter-understanding would mean, for example, that the villagers would know how to address her for a request. There would be a proper form—to ask for help—and an improper form that would

certainly amount to disrespect, given the tone she uses when she mentions a request “for money.” According to her, the villagers would also know that receiving help from her means contributing to the project’s implementation. For Duan, participation is part of a specific relationship between Lao abroad and Lao in Laos. Although she is aware that it is also an integral practice in development circles and not unique to Lao associations, through her description of the action of the Japanese (“they come, build, hand over the keys and leave”), what she points out is the absence of a relationship between the two in this particular case. The distinction she makes between herself and the non-Lao and the importance she places on the participation of the villagers thus reflect, above all, her desire to emphasize the existence of a particular relationship. And yet, the Lao of Laos tend to perceive those in France as foreigners, given the terms they use to describe them.¹⁵ And it should be noted that Duan, on other occasions, does not fail to point out the differences that have developed between her and those who have remained in Laos. Without developing these points further here, it is interesting to note that French Lao oscillate between the affirmation of a privileged link with the Lao of Laos and pride in the link they maintain with their adopted country. Ultimately, all are aware of the “differences in mentality and life” (Sisombat-Souvannavong 2000) that have been established over time and negotiate on the basis of what they think they have kept in common.

- 33 Let’s look at how Tong, another association president, explains asking villagers to contribute to the construction. He has been running projects in several provinces in Laos for about 20 years:

We bring the material and then, they provide the labor. [...] We always ask them to participate, like that, it also makes them proud, like that, it’s their school too! And so, like that, they pay more attention [to the school]. [...] For us, the goal [of participation], it is to give them the impression that the project is, in part, theirs. It’s not just us. The school project, for example, if we finance it, well, it’s not just us. They participate, so part of the project, it depends on them. For us, our goal, it’s like that.

According to Tong, if the villagers participate, it will be “their pride.” Some passages in these interview excerpts (“it’s their school too,” “the project is partly theirs,” “part of the project belongs to them”) show that the project is seen as a co-construction. The idea of empowerment/ownership, dear to development circles, also appears in Tong’s speech. However, the constant element in my interlocutors’ explanations is this will to mutualize efforts.

- 34 Let us take again the example of Daly, a Lao woman from France who built a school in her native province, outside the framework of an association. When I asked her how she went about this project, she answered:

I wanted a village responsibility. We don’t give handouts. I don’t want to turn these people into welfare recipients. I explained that this is not a donation, but a cooperation. I refuse to say that I am bringing money.

Like Daly, the French Lao do not want to turn the villagers into “*assistés*” (e.g. expecting everything to be done for them). The search for cooperation rather than “donation” (implied, in Daly’s discourse, as “alms”) seems to be aimed at erasing the imbalance in the donor/recipient relationship. Tong expresses this idea in a similar way by mentioning the “pride” of recipients. However, my interlocutors, while wanting to mitigate the inequality of the relationship, impose their own practices and thus reaffirm the imbalance. Duan uses the verb “must” when she talks about the participation of the villagers: they *must* provide the labor, they *must* make efforts, etc.

Tong also explains that the association “demands” that the villagers participate and implies that they have no alternatives. As for Daly, through the terms used (“I wanted,” “I don’t want,” “I explained” and “I refuse to say”), she also suggests that she imposes her own way of envisioning aid.

- 35 The speeches of my interlocutors present this ambiguity of expressing the will of a co-construction, supposed to equalize the relations, while affirming their position of superiority *vis-à-vis* the villagers. On the one hand, as we have seen, they feel close to the local population because of a common origin and put this aspect forward to distinguish themselves from Western aid workers. This proximity permits a better collaboration with the villagers thanks to a “natural” inter-comprehension. But on the other hand, they feel that their life in France has given them access to assets that the Lao in Laos do not have. They have benefited from a longer and better education than those in Laos and have accumulated knowledge through the experience of Western life. This background creates a sense of superiority that leads them to orient projects according to what they themselves consider to be best for the beneficiaries. To a school project, they would be likely to add, for example, a library room even if no request is made in this sense. It is this ambiguity that is also conveyed to the villagers through the implementation of the projects. Let us now look at how the request for participation is received by the beneficiaries and how they respond to the assistance provided to them.

Villagers’ Ambivalent Reaction to Assistance Provided by French Lao

- 36 We have seen that the expectations of French Lao in terms of collaboration are substantial. The collaboration of the villagers in the projects takes two forms; one is participation in the construction and the other is involvement by some villagers who play specific roles with the associations. In both cases, we will see that the stakes of the collaboration are not always the same for both parties.

Collective Participation Onsite

- 37 During the pre-implementation meetings of the projects, the condition of participation in the construction work is usually accepted by the village chief. This involves asking each family to provide a volunteer. The chief then forms teams of workers and schedules a rotation between these teams so that the work does not stop, and everyone contributes equally to its progress. This mode of organization is not unique to worksites run by associations. It is also set up by village chiefs at the request of the district or provincial authorities when they oblige a community to carry out work of collective interest (road construction, school renovation, irrigation system, etc.).
- 38 For association members, the results of this organization are more or less satisfactory depending on the village. They are often disappointed by the villagers’ “lack of motivation” and by projects that struggle to succeed. Several associations have relied on groups of French youth volunteers (students, scouts) to advance the construction work. In some cases, the French Lao also say that the villagers “get bored.” There are situations in which people mobilize for a first stage of the construction and then, a few months later, are reluctant to continue the work when the association provides a new part of the financing. There are also cases in which villagers contribute to a first project

but do not return to work when a second project is started. So how can we explain the villagers' "lack of motivation"?

- 39 Let's take the example of a village in which Chanh has conducted several projects. I spent a lot of time with a teacher who is one of the association's main contacts. One of her roles, thanks to her knowledge of social networks, is to facilitate communication between the village chief and the president of the association. One day, we talked about the groups of young French volunteers who work on the construction sites during the summers. She told me that she had noticed that they worked hard even though they were not paid. She then explained to me that the Lao are not used to working for free as the French do. What my interlocutor did not specify is that the Lao sometimes *do* work without being paid, but in other contexts. There is the case of organizing parties, cited by H. High (2014: 163-164). According to the author, the forms of cooperation and mutual aid she observed on these occasions work perfectly in the rural Lao environment because they are linked to interpersonal relationships. I have also witnessed large-scale collaborations carried out with the aim of renovating pagodas. Participation by the local population in the associations' building projects seems to be more akin to collective work imposed by the State. This was also the observation of Pierre-Yves Le Meur, Olivier Tessier, and Senpaty Sae (2006: 16) in their report on a project of the French Development Agency. They are related by the fact that the nature of the method used is similar and, in both cases, is imposed on villagers from above. The villagers' sitework then depends largely on the authority of the village chief and his ability/willingness to mobilize them.
- 40 Here we see a gap emerging between the perceptions of the French Lao and the Lao of Laos. The former think of collaboration in terms of sharing effort. They themselves have raised the funds and expect the villagers to provide the labor. However, the majority of villagers do not perceive the reciprocal relationship between the financing of the school offered by the associations and their participation in the construction, they see the "participation" as compulsory.
- 41 In any case, village participation rarely lives up to the expectations of the associations, and it is interesting to observe that the associations compensate for this problem by showing a certain flexibility in relation to the initial agreement. Some adjust their conditions; others end up paying workers to complete the work. Despite these difficulties, association presidents continue to carry out projects in the same villages (for example, adding a library or a nursery school) or in others, aware that they will probably experience similar situations again. This demonstrates that, in reality, for French Lao, village participation on site is not a real condition for providing aid. On the other hand, the cases where villagers have mobilized massively are highly valued and always recounted with great enthusiasm. When talking about the work required on the sites, French Lao sometimes emphasize that "volunteerism does not exist in Laos." In spite of this, they opt for this way of working and, when it works, they perceive the village mobilization as a recognition of the efforts they themselves have made to collect the funds.

Individual Participation in Specific Activities

- 42 To carry out their projects, French Lao also rely on villagers who perform specific tasks. Among them, the village chiefs, and sometimes their deputies, are obviously essential.

The school principals are also very present in the organization of the work sites. The representatives of “mass” organizations often collaborate with the associations, particularly in organizing inaugurations. All these contacts are usually party members and, as such, they are supposed to be attentive to all the particular events that take place in the village.

- 43 When projects are carried out in or near the president’s home village, family members are also key. They are more trusted than other collaborators and are often given the responsibility of monitoring the progress of the projects and managing the purchase of materials.
- 44 Finally, there are a few other people involved who are neither party members nor family members. These are mostly teaching staff although I also saw a monk very active in one school project and a nun in another, in a village populated by ethnic minorities converted to Catholicism.
- 45 These particularly active villagers are not officially compensated for the time they spend on projects. The French Lao consider that the time spent by a village chief to request project authorization from the district is a normal prerogative of his duties and an effort to be made for a new school. However, things are not always perceived in this way by those concerned. Let’s take the example of Chanh’s village. One day, I accompanied the teacher (mentioned above) to the village chief. I attended a discussion during which he complained that even though he had spent a lot of time doing the administrative work necessary to implement the project, he had received nothing from Chanh. He did not ask for money but for material compensation, without which he threatened to stop collaborating. It should be noted that this chief had already collaborated with the association on several building projects (nursery and primary schools) and that he had been asked several times to manage deliveries of containers of material that the association was planning to distribute in his village or in surrounding villages. The chief’s reaction was therefore the result of an increasing number of requests made by the association over the years. After the construction of the school buildings, the village had obtained the famous “developed village” (*ban patthana*) label, which gave it greater prestige. It is likely that the involvement of the village chief was partly motivated by this objective and that he was then less enthusiastic about giving his time, especially when he had to manage containers of materials to be distributed to other villages.
- 46 In another discussion I had with the teacher, this time at her home, she explained, in a disappointed tone, that Chanh had paid a colleague to teach English to the children during the summer, but that she never received anything. This woman, in addition to being one of the association’s contacts, also helped prepare the inaugurations for new buildings (notably by having young girls rehearse the dance choreographies presented on these occasions), whether they were held in her village or in other surrounding villages. She said she was tired of giving time to the association when the president did not even recognize it. She went on to say, “he doesn’t see everything I do” and that “he never thanks me.” She did not necessarily expect material compensation, but rather that he would show her recognition for her work. Once, for example, when he promised to come and see the youth dance rehearsal for the opening, he never appeared, later apologizing for having to spend time with a village chief. I had seen her hurt by this prioritization that had placed her at the bottom of the list and so asked her why she

continued to perform these tasks. She replied that she had no choice because without her the association could not carry out its projects.

- 47 I saw this woman several times over a period of more than four years. During these years, I observed progressive changes in her life. On the one hand, she had managed to become a member of the party, which delighted her. In a discussion, she explained to me that to join the party, one had to be “chosen” by people who were already members and that their choice was for those who gave their time to improve the life of the village. I thought that her participation in the association’s projects might have helped her to join the party. It gave her a sense of pride and would certainly facilitate her professional advancement and that of her daughter. Then, her curiosity towards the Westerners, members of the association who passed through the village, led her to learn English from them and, little by little, to establish relationships that eventually resulted in them offering her many small gifts from France: clothes, jewelry, and beauty products. Over the years, her position within the collaboration with the association had become more central and Chanh now entrusted her with the accommodation of certain French youth who came to work on the sites. The financial participation paid by these young people for their accommodation had enabled her to make many improvements to her house. Her appearance had also changed. She wore more make-up and western style dresses. All of this contributed to her successful social image, which she increasingly displayed on Facebook.
- 48 These two examples highlight certain aspects of the relationship between the French Lao and the beneficiaries of the projects. First, there is once again a discrepancy between the perceptions of the two. The French Lao hope to be able to count on the unconditional involvement of their interlocutors. Yet, the collaboration of the latter, although they are sensitive to the associations’ objectives, is also based on hopes of compensation for the time given to the projects. As we have seen, these compensations can take the form of prestige or material comfort. The motivations of village collaborators thus go beyond the associations’ own objectives.
- 49 These examples also show that the individual villagers’ involvement is part of an interpersonal relationship with one or more French Lao and not with an “association.” Indeed, the expectations of compensation for the work done and the disappointments expressed by the teacher and the village chief are aimed at Chanh, not at the “association” or the other villagers. I observed that during official speeches, this same village chief refers to the “association” (*samakhom*) as a partner although during the discussions I mentioned above, he mentioned only Chanh. From the perspective of these villagers, the time they give to the association’s projects is in fact time they give to Chanh, not to the collective community behind the project.
- 50 In turn, when association presidents talk about their relationships with their village counterparts, some collaborators are mentioned with particular enthusiasm. They describe a village chief as “very motivated” and praise a villager “who gives all his time and who can be counted on,” etc. For them, these villagers show a strong enthusiasm for collaboration above all other forms of interest and are the people with whom they experience the least disconnect in perception and from whom they gain the most recognition of their own efforts. The French Lao feel these dedicated villagers share the same vision of what needs to be done: to give of their time to improve the future of children. However, from what we have seen, it is reasonable to think that they are also

the villagers who have managed to find a balance between the time they give to projects and the various forms of compensation that this time allows them to acquire.

Conclusion

- 51 By analyzing, within the humanitarian projects carried out by French Lao, the way in which the latter give and the reactions that this gift evokes from the Lao of Laos, this article tried to understand how the relations are built and negotiated between the two.
- 52 Decoding the intentions of French Lao shows that their involvement in humanitarian projects is based on a strong feeling of belonging to their native country. They also feel a moral obligation to give back a little of what they received during their life in France. This aid given to the children of Laos is altruistic, with no expectation of return. It is thought of as a unrequitable gift, but it is not meant to take the form of a handout, because one of the characteristics of the relationship that appears in the statements of intent of my interlocutors is the notion of equality between givers and receivers. It is to an extent, this equality which, for the French Lao, justifies a request of on-site participation to the villagers in Laos. Although it is a very common concept in development circles, participation is presented as a revelation of the proximity existing between the French Lao and the Lao of Laos; they understand each other and can therefore work together to achieve a common goal. Yet, in trying to impose this condition, they reveal the inequality of a relationship in which some decide, and others must accept. The Lao of Laos do not have the same perception as my interlocutors of what aid implies on their part. Although they generally consider the projects financed by the associations to be beneficial for their village, their participation in the projects is not self-evident. The contribution of villagers to the implementation of projects, whether collective or individual, often responds to constraints and interests that differ from those of the associations. As a result, local contribution is uncertain and sometimes more limited than promised. Moreover, some people hope for some form of compensation for the time given to the associations, all the more so when they have been involved in several successive projects. As we have shown above, we can see that there is a discrepancy in the terms of reciprocity, i.e., in what each person owes to the other.
- 53 It is then interesting to observe that participation, presented by the French Lao as a non-negotiable condition at the outset of the projects, finally becomes in some sense negotiable during their implementation. The benefactors have demonstrated their authority over the Lao of Laos by imposing this condition, but ultimately show the weakness of this authority, or their lack of desire to use it, by compensating for the lack of participation in various ways. Furthermore, associations sometimes continue their activities in such villages. These observations show that the success of the projects and the maintenance of relations with the villagers take precedence over the conditions initially imposed. Can it be said, then, that this donation “creates, nurtures or recreates the link between people” (Godbout 1992: 29)?
- 54 We have seen that the fact that villagers do not perceive their participation as a moral duty in the face of the efforts of the French Lao does not mean that they are indifferent to the aid provided. There are cases in which villagers, together or individually, show their enthusiasm for the projects and give their time freely. In others, they thank the French Lao through words and small gestures of generosity when they have the

opportunity. Although “expressions of gratitude” and “verbal thanks” are not considered by A. Testart as counterparts to the donation (2007: 26), French Lao recognize and appreciate them.

- 55 Moreover, they identify those who are the most involved or who offer them the most recognition, and it is with these few people that bonds are created and strengthened, particularly because they feel they share the same objective, which is to work for the good of the village. However, given the limited number of such people, one may wonder why the French Lao have continued their activities over the years. It is unlikely that the development of these relationships and the few demonstrations of gratitude are enough to fuel the effort they deploy to carry out their projects. Here the purpose of the gift may not be to “create relationships between people” as suggested in the definition of J. Godbout and A. Caillé. The French Lao say that they began their humanitarian activities out of duty to “their country,” a vast entity to which they feel they belong. Can we not then consider that their commitment is based more on the need to nourish or concretize a personal link with “their country,” than on the desire to create or maintain some interpersonal relationships?
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NOTES

1. In order to facilitate the reading and understanding of the text, I have chosen the term “French Lao” to name people of Lao origin living in France even though they have French nationality, and the term “French” for French people of French origin.
2. These address, among other things, the organization of associations and the characteristics of their actors (Opiniano 2005; Copeland-Carson 2007; Martiniello & Bousetta 2008, Delcroix & Bertaux 2012) as well as the economic, social, and political impact of these associations in the migrants’ country of origin (Orozco & Garcia-Zanello 2009; Fox & Bada 2008).
3. During this period, I organized meetings and participated in activities on a regular basis with associations in different French cities, and I made five stays of a total of eight months in Laos, in the provinces of Champassak, Savannakhet and Vientiane.
4. The members of the associations are the target population of my research, and I conducted the majority of the interviews with them in French. This explains why the terms used in their discourse are not translated into Lao.
5. This report is cited by Hassoun (1997: 14). At the same time, 47,356 Cambodian refugees and 45,495 Vietnamese refugees were also received by France.
6. Other authors have also analyzed the shock of the first return as the triggering event for the creation of humanitarian associations by migrants. We can refer, in particular, to Daum (1998) or Waldinger et al. (2008).
7. See for example Lacroix (2003), Copeland-Carson (2007), Trager (2001).
8. This term used by several of my interlocutors is similar to those of “moral obligation” (Martiniello & Bousetta [2008] for the case of the Chinese in Belgium) and “loyalty to the country of origin” (Fibbi & D’Amato [2008] in their study of Moroccans in Belgium and Turks in Switzerland).
9. On the subject of South-East Asian social hierarchization and the obligations it entails, see Doré (1972), Formoso (1990), Mariani (2008) and Scott (1985).
10. On the logics of the gift in Laos and its transformations, see Mariani (2012).

11. I will describe elsewhere the details of these impromptu interventions of the authorities which I witnessed. They never threatened the completion of the projects. On the other hand, they reminded the French Lao of their vulnerability on Lao territory.

12. On the notion of participation in international development, see Olivier de Sardan (1995), Mosse (2001), Stirrat & Henkel (1997) and Willis (2011).

13. These are the words from a Regional Council form used by one of the associations to apply for a grant.

14. H. High wanted to help the village where she had stayed during her research. The village authorities had asked her to help rebuild the school. However, while H. High thought she was thanking the village “community” for supporting her during her research, she encountered many difficulties within the village to implement the project. She explains this in detail in her article “Ethnographic Exposures: Motivations for Donations in the South of Laos (and Beyond)” (High 2010).

15. Si-Ambhaivan Sisombat-Souvannavong (2000) evokes these terms in her thesis and describes the disconnects observed during the reunions between French Lao and Lao of Laos in the 1990s. On this subject, one can also refer to the work of Catherine Choron-Baix (2000) in Laos or to the more recent work of Léo Mariani (2013) on the return to Cambodia of first- and second-generation Cambodians.

ABSTRACTS

Since the mid-1990s, some French Lao (exiled following the events of 1975), have been implementing projects that they describe as “humanitarian” in their country of origin. Most often organized in associations, they build schools and distribute clothing, medical equipment and computers, among other things. These projects can be seen as a form of transfer. Drawing on the literature on the gift, this article then proposes to analyze the characteristics of these transfers and what they say about the relationship between Lao from France and Lao from Laos within humanitarian projects implemented in Laotian villages.

Depuis le milieu des années 1990, des Lao de France (exilés à la suite des événements de 1975) mettent en œuvre des projets qu'ils qualifient d'« humanitaires » dans leur pays d'origine. Le plus souvent organisés en associations, ils y construisent, entre autres, des bâtiments scolaires, et y distribuent vêtements, matériel médical et ordinateurs. Ces projets peuvent être envisagés comme une forme de transfert. En s'appuyant sur la littérature sur le don, cet article propose alors d'analyser les caractéristiques de ces transferts et ce qu'elles disent des relations entre Lao de France et Lao du Laos au sein des projets humanitaires mis en œuvre dans les villages laotiens.

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Keywords: humanitarian associations, transnational relationships, Laos, gift, transnational activities, French Lao

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