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“We used to have lice ... ” interethnic imagery in post-war upland Laos

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses interethnic dynamics in a multi-ethnic Khmu and Akha village in the uplands of Phongsali Province, far-north Laos. It offers an intimate vignette on how local Khmu people’s patronizing disposition towards their Akha neighbors – and Sino-Tibetan highlanders more broadly – has been shaped by Laos’ recent history of war, revolution, and development. In particular, it shows how essentializing images of Akha as backward bumpkins in need of civilizing tutelage have provided local Khmu with a foil and platform for their pursuit of a culturally specific sense of modernity. In so doing, this paper refocuses the analysis of interethnic relations in Laos away from state-centered, lowland-upland, majority-minority frameworks, and towards localized, micro-regional and, most significantly, intra-upland dynamics. Concomitant to this refocus, this paper offers novel insights into the localized impact of Laos’ watershed civil war and its lingering aftermath. It also speaks to broader issues, including the applicability of the scholarly trope of “internal Orientalism” across scales, as well as the ethics and politics of researching inter-ethnic relations in a society still marked by the trauma of war.

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“Don’t write anything that could divide the ethnicities!”

(A local administrator)

Introduction

It is mid-July, the height of the rice-growing season in Sanjing, an ethnic Khmu village with Akha in-migration in Phongsali Province, far-north Laos.¹ At the dusk of another arduous day in the fields, brother Wan, brother Aen, and I are at the village water tap, showering. As he lathers on soap, Aen starts pondering: “Why do we Khmu waste our time bathing every day? The *Lao Soung* [highland Lao] on a nearby ridge bathe once a week!”

“Once a month!” quips Wan, squatting underneath the tap beside Aen. The two start vying with each other in jest.

“Once a year!”

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¹Local names are pseudonyms.

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“Only above the waist!”

Aen and Wan break out laughing. I permit myself a subdued chuckle; next to us, young Borsae, herself Akha, is waiting her turn, buckets-in-hand. Sensing my discomfort, Aen seeks to reassure me: “You know, when the *Lao Soung* first came to stay with us, they didn’t know how to bathe ... we taught them ... before, we Khmu were dirty too ... we used to have lice!”

“But then we gave them to the *Lao Soung*!” adds Wan. Again, the two break out laughing.

To be sure, this exchange was made in the spirit of light-hearted village banter. Nevertheless, or precisely therefore, it succinctly captures how Sanjing’s Khmu view their new Akha neighbors. In joking about passing on their lice, Aen and Wan painted a picture of the Akha – and, by their own extension, Sino-Tibetan highlanders or *Lao Soung* more broadly – as living windows on their past: backward bumpkins in need of civilizing tutelage and, concomitantly, gauges of their progress in becoming good, modern Khmu.

This paper discusses interethnic imagery in Sanjing, an upland village in contemporary Laos. Laos – officially the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) – is a landlocked, mountainous, and ethnically-diverse nation-state located at the heart of the Southeast Asian massif, an area of immense cultural and linguistic diversity. Its population of roughly 7.5 million comprises fifty officially recognized ethnicities (*sonphao*). The politically and socio-culturally dominant Tai-Lao generally occupy the valleys and plains along the Mekong and its main tributaries.² They account for roughly sixty percent of the population. The remaining forty percent comprises a diverse array of Sino-Tibetan and Mon-Khmer speaking uplanders.

Laos’ ethnolinguistic groups are often divided into three broad categories. The lowland-dwelling national majority Lao and most Tai speakers are referred to as *Lao Loum* (lowland Lao), Khmu and other autochthonous Mon-Khmer speakers as *Lao Terng* (upland Lao), and more recently arrived Sino-Tibetan speaking highlanders (including Akha) as *Lao Soung* (highland Lao). During Laos’ civil war (roughly from 1950 until 1975) and early post-war years, this trifold classification was a cornerstone of rhetoric on interethnic solidarity and common national belonging (see below). Abandoned by the state in the early 1980s in favor of a more strictly ethnolinguistic categorization, the trinity remains ubiquitous throughout Laos: a politically correct means to articulate ethnic difference while (re)affirming joint allegiance to the multi-ethnic nation-state.³ As my opening vignette shows, the terms *Lao Loum*, *Lao Terng* and *Lao Soung* are still commonly used in Sanjing.

In reality, however, there may be over 200 distinct ethnolinguistic groups in Laos today.⁴ Laos thus provides a proverbial lab for investigating interethnic relations. Yet scholarship on ethnicity in Laos has long focused almost exclusively on lowland-upland relations – the classic dichotomy in research on Southeast Asia since Edmund Leach’s 1964 study of Kachin-Shan relations in Burma.⁵ To be sure, there is a burgeoning body of research highlighting the salience and complexity of local/micro-regional contexts and, concomitantly, the fluidity and fuzziness of the upland-lowland distinction

²“Tai-Lao” refers to the national majority Lao and seven smaller Tai-speaking groups.

³Zuckermann 2012; Pholsena 2002

⁴E.g. Michaud 2009.

⁵Leach 1964; see also Robinne and Sadan 2007

itself. So far, though, these accounts also remain overwhelmingly emboxed in well-worn juxtapositions: center–periphery, majority–minority, Tai–*Khaa* (see below), and/or state–society.⁶

Yet what about settings in which there is no clear majority and/or the locally dominant group is itself an upland minority? What about settings in which it is not only lowlanders who constitute a significant other through and against which upland selves are defined and enacted, but also other uplanders? What about settings in which ostensibly marginalized uplanders are themselves state agents? Research on Laos has yet to engage substantively with these questions – a striking lacuna for a country in which there is no clear majority in approximately eighty percent of the territory and, concurrently, where relations between non-majority uplanders are integral to numerous everyday settings.⁷

When scholars have touched on relations between uplanders, they have focused on situations in which aspirational migration and/or state-driven resettlement have caused uplanders to converge in multi-ethnic towns. In these quasi-urban settings, increasing social differentiation, ritual-cosmological change, market-oriented production, wage labor and general transition to urban lifestyles have fundamentally altered livelihoods and, concomitantly, notions of community.⁸ However, and while increasingly prevalent, such settings represent only part of the situations in which people recognized as others live together. What about the many multi-ethnic villages that have developed in micro-regional upland contexts? How do interethnic relations play out within rural upland settings where a common sense of shared peasant livelihood remains largely intact?

This paper contributes to filling these gaps. In so doing, it makes two key contributions. First, in rigorously working “up” from fieldwork conducted in a hitherto unstudied upland village, I refocus the analytic lens on interethnic dynamics in Laos: away from state-centered, majority–minority, upland–lowland tropes, and towards local, micro-regional and, most significantly, intra-upland dynamics.⁹ Second, I contribute to the burgeoning scholarship on localized histories and impacts of Laos’ civil war and its aftermath.¹⁰ While previous studies have focused on how the war and subsequent revolution have affected lowlander–uplander relations, I showcase their effect on relations between uplanders. Highlighting the salience of recent history, I show that while interethnic relations in contemporary Laos remain charged with long-durée lowland–upland dynamics, they are ultimately grounded in locally and historically specific, intra-upland conjunctures.

My overarching argument is as follows: in contemporary Sanjing, Akha/*Lao Soung* constitute the primary, most immediately significant Other through and against which Khmu senses of self are constituted. Local Khmu people’s patronizing dispositions

⁶Much of this research has been provoked by James Scott’s productive but ultimately oversimplifying synopsis of Southeast Asian uplanders as anarchic state-evaders (Scott 2009). See, for example, Evans 2000; Cohen 2000; Culas and Robb 2010; Badenoch and Tomita 2013; Jonsson 2014; Sevenig 2015; Bouté 2018; Bouté 2018; Évrard 2007, 2019; Tappe and Badenoch 2021; Tappe 2018, 2021; Stolz and Tappe 2021. For my use of Tai, see Tappe and Badenoch 2021, 3–5.

⁷In a rare exception, Tappe and Badenoch (2021) allude to the significance of Khmu in Phong self-identification.

⁸Petit 2006, 2012; Pholsena 2020; Bouté 2017, 2021. For partial exceptions, see Évrard 2007, 139–140; Sevenig 2015.

⁹I conducted twelve months of fieldwork between May 2017 and January 2020.

¹⁰Pholsena and Tappe 2013; Dwyer 2012; Pholsena 2018; High 2021; Pholsena 2006; Lutz 2021a; Pholsena and Promphaking 2021; High 2021.

towards Akha – and *Lao Soung* more broadly – have been crucially inflected by war, revolution, and development. Essentialized images of Akha/*Lao Soung* as backward bumpkins in need of civilizing tutelage provide Sanjing’s Khmu with a foil and platform to negotiate the ambivalences of their own pursuit of a culturally specific sense of modernity. Spawned in a historically and locally contingent post-war conjuncture, the assertion of Khmu superiority implied in the notion of passing on one’s lice is riddled with complexities, caveats, and the implications of intimacy. As rapid socio-economic development and demographic change divest Laos from its post-war past, Sanjing’s Khmu images of Akha/*Lao Soung* backwardness persist with increasing precarity, not despite but because of the distorting, self-congratulatory simplifications they engender.

My foregrounding of localized, intra-upland dynamics is reflected in this paper’s structure. I begin with introductory remarks on Phongsali and the Khmu. I then recount Akha migration into Sanjing and briefly sketch their place in village society. This is followed by a detailed exposition of how the local dynamics of war, revolution, and development have instilled among Sanjing’s Khmu a proclaimed prerogative to civilize the allegedly backward Akha/*Lao Soung*. I show how this impetus is motivated by Khmu desires to reconcile and, ideally, streamline continuing commitments to both custom and state. I then show how this desire is inflected by – without being reduced to – wider lowland-upland dynamics. With my argument thus grounded, I bring my ethnography into conversation with broader discussions on interethnic imagery and assess the applicability to Sanjing of the scholarly trope of “internal Orientalism.”¹¹ I suggest the trope is a helpful but ultimately oversimplifying analytic for a micro-level setting characterized by hierarchical solidarity, patronizing warmth, and the intimacies afforded by continued grounding in shared peasant life. Following a brief reiteration of the historical contingency of Khmu images of *Lao Soung* backwardness, I conclude with some remarks on the ethics and politics of researching interethnic relations in a society still marked by the trauma of war.

Sanjing’s Khmu and Akha

Sanjing is a village of two dozen households with a population of roughly 120, perched atop a ridge in the uplands of Phongsali Province in northernmost Laos. Phongsali is a mountainous area; less than ten percent of the province is suitable for wet-rice cultivation. Long considered one of Laos’ most remote and underdeveloped regions, Phongsali has experienced intensifying socio-economic transformation in recent years as Vietnam and China invest in agribusiness, infrastructure, and the resource sector.¹²

Sixteen of Laos’ officially recognized ethnicities live in Phongsali. Roughly half of the province’s 180,000 inhabitants are Sino-Tibetan speaking *Lao Soung* (mainly Akha). The national majority Tai-Lao make up less than twenty percent of the population.

Before Akha in-migration, Sanjing was a mono-ethnic Khmu village. Most prominent among the *Lao Terng*, the Khmu are Laos’ second largest ethnolinguistic group after the Tai-Lao. They comprise eleven percent of the national population.¹³ There are

¹¹Schein 1997.

¹²Lutz 2021a; 23–26

¹³LSB 2015, 37.

approximately 36,000 Khmu in Phongsali today. In the district where Sanjing is located, nearly half of all villages are completely or predominantly Khmu.

Customarily, Sanjing's Khmu have been semi-nomadic; hunting, fishing, foraging, and practicing swidden agriculture. With its low population and abundant land, Sanjing enjoys fallow periods of twelve to fifteen years – an increasing rarity in Laos. Local forests and rivers remain relatively abundant. At the time of writing, Sanjing still lacks grid electricity and all-weather road access.¹⁴

Like Khmu elsewhere, Sanjing's Khmu share their lifeworlds with a plethora of spirits called *hróoy*. Notwithstanding decades of modernist development, villagers continue to consider well-being, prosperity, and life itself to be intimately intertwined with the fecund forces of their locality, as mediated through ritualized relationships with *hróoy*.¹⁵

Since the mid-2000s, ethnic Akha have been settling in Sanjing. Akha are Sino-Tibetan highlanders, also referred to as *Lao Kor* or *Lao Soung Kor*. Migrating south from present-day Yunnan, they entered northern Laos within the last two centuries. Today, Akha make up two percent of Laos' population.¹⁶ In Phongsali, Akha are the largest ethnic group, comprising almost thirty percent of the province's population. Like Khmu, Akha lifeworlds customarily revolve around relationships with spirits.¹⁷

Sanjing's four dozen Akha residents self-identify as members of the *Loma* subgroup. They hail from Phukor, a sprawling village several miles upridge from Sanjing. As a result of rapid population growth, Phukor fallow periods are down to less than five years.

Seeking land, Phukor's Akha have been spreading across the ridge. In the early 2000s, one group approached Sanjing's village leaders with a request to settle. Initially – and for reasons discussed below – Khmu villagers were reluctant to let them in. They eventually agreed mainly due to the severe outmigration Sanjing was experiencing. At that time, more than half of Sanjing's population had left for the lowlands, with consequences including labor shortage, loss of cultivated land, and threat of resettlement.¹⁸ As brother Kam recalled:

In the end, we agreed: this is the era of development! We don't lack land, we lack people! Without people, how can we live, how can we eat? How can we have face with [the government]!?

Following a promise to follow *Lao Terng* customs, six Akha families eventually settled in Sanjing. Having arrived with little more than the clothes on their backs, Sanjing's Akha have long since replaced their initial makeshift dwellings with houses bought from departing Khmu. Just as Khmu outmigration continues, so does Akha in-migration. Buoyed by higher birth rates, Akha now make up over one-third of Sanjing's population.

Despite their rising numbers, Sanjing's Akha occupy an ambivalently subordinate place in village society. Virtually all Sanjing Akha speak Khmu, but no Khmu speaks more than a few words of Akha. As the locally autochthonous population, Khmu unequivocally keep the best land for themselves. At the same time, Akha crucially contribute to filling the labor shortages triggered by Khmu outmigration. Using cash crop revenues

¹⁴To be sure, and not notwithstanding their valuation of self-reliance, Sanjing's Khmu have long engaged with wider economies. See Lutz 2021b.

¹⁵Lutz 2021a

¹⁶LSB 2015; 37.

¹⁷Cf. Tooker 2012.

¹⁸Lutz 2021a, 183–184, 398–405

and/or remittances from lowland relatives, Khmu routinely hire Akha to weed their rice fields. In a mutually reinforcing cycle, doing so allows Khmu to focus on cash crops.¹⁹ More fundamentally, the Akha's very presence helps keep Sanjing in place. This provides Khmu emigrants – aspiring and accomplished – with both a fall-back option and source of independent smallholder cash, judiciously invested into building viable off-farm futures.²⁰

While grateful for the benefits brought by their presence, Sanjing's Khmu also express unease at the Akha's alleged disloyalty and rapaciousness. Many still label their new neighbors the "Phukor mob." Father Gle routinely grew nostalgic over the many quails and pheasants once found in Sanjing's forests, complaining, "but then the *Lao Soung* came and ate them all! Everything's depleted because of them!" Hearing rumors that several Sanjing Akha had joined their Phukor kin in scouting for new places to settle, mother Vae hissed, "the *Lao Soung* are like cows, eating one place and moving to the next!"²¹

In short, Sanjing has become a multi-ethnic village through a micro-regional, intra-upland marriage of convenience; people needing land have joined people needing people. Ongoing Akha migration into Sanjing is an instance of upland peasants moving from a resource-depleted area to a nearby upland area with surplus land without having to retool their livelihood practices. This long-standing practice differs both from state-driven resettlement of uplanders into unfamiliar lowland milieu, and from aspirational movements by uplanders into off-farm occupations in urban or semi-urban settings.²² On one hand, Sanjing's Khmu admit that without Akha immigrants, their village wouldn't exist today. On the other, many insist that if they had had sufficient numbers of their own, they would not have let the Akha in. At the same time, and sitting awkwardly alongside their ongoing outmigration, Khmu also express concern over what they fear is a creeping Akha takeover. With a hint of gallows humor, several predicted that soon, Sanjing will be a *Lao Soung* village.

In the following sections, I address my main concern: what motivates Sanjing's Khmu to posit their new Akha neighbours – and *Lao Soung* more broadly – as backward bumpkins in need of civilizing tutelage?

The impetus to civilize

The Khmu's reluctance to let Akha settle in their village was based on two concerns. First, they worried about an incongruence of customs, particularly regarding funerary rites. According to Sanjing's Khmu, Akha keep their deceased lying in repose for ten days, thus posing a threat to public health. I will return to this issue later. Their second concern relates to Laos' civil war. Running from roughly 1950 to 1975, the war pitched a French (and later US-backed) royal Lao government (RLG) against a leftist movement backed by North Vietnam (and, at different stages, China and/or the Soviet Union), commonly known as the *Pathet Lao* ("Lao Country," hereafter PL). While the

¹⁹Even here, many hire Akha. Cf. Cohen 2000; 191 ff.

²⁰Lutz 2021b.

²¹These rumors quickly dissipated. As I write this, none of Sanjing's Akha have moved elsewhere.

²²Cf. High 2008; High et al. 2009; Petit 2020; Bouté 2017, 2021. As I discuss below, the fact that Sanjing's Khmu and Akha remain upland peasants impacts interethnic relations in Sanjing today.

RLG controlled the Lao-dominated lowlands along the Mekong for most of the war, the PL quickly established itself in the ethnically diverse uplands of northern and eastern Laos. The PL won the war and, in 1975, proclaimed the Lao People's Democratic Republic: a socialist state under the sole auspices of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP). Notwithstanding nearly five decades of LPRP rule and over twenty years of fast-paced "market-Leninist" development, the after-effects of war linger in landscapes, bodies, policies, and interethnic relations.²³

Nestled between North Vietnam and China, Phongsali was an early PL stronghold. Nevertheless, the province was not unequivocally controlled by the PL. For much of the war, its mountainous terrain sustained a medley of other belligerents, including a faction of so-called "Patriotic Neutralists" and at least two US-backed (and nominally pro-RLG) *Lao Soung* militias.²⁴

In Phongsali, as elsewhere, Mon-Khmer speaking *Lao Terng* formed the backbone of PL forces. Sanjing's Khmu claim to have overwhelmingly fought for the PL. Skilfully translating their asserted wartime allegiance into political capital, they were among the winners of the 1975 Revolution, and have enjoyed greater social mobility, representation, and influence than they had under the old royalist regime. Sanjing has been routinely prioritized for donor-funded development projects and government campaigns. Local Khmu have relatives at various levels of the state. Pictures of this prominent kin adorn house walls, alongside villagers' awards and certificates. Over ten percent of Sanjing's adult Khmu are LPRP members, well above the national average of three percent. In short, Sanjing's Khmu generally identify as stakeholders in and agents of Laos' current regime.

Sanjing's Akha, on the other hand, had a different wartime experience. By all accounts, their native village of Phukor was a hotbed of one of Phongsali's US-backed militias. Sanjing's Khmu implicate this militia in attacks on neighboring Khmu/pro-PL villages and, most egregiously, in a deadly 1960s RLG air raid on Sanjing itself.²⁵ "During the war, we feared the *Lao Soung*" widow Gam recalled, "I used to cry and run whenever I saw one ... so first, no way we wanted them staying with us!"

"It was them!" father Gle whispered, gesturing towards the house of his Akha neighbor Chergoh, "the *Lao Soung* called the planes to bomb us ... they were with the enemy!"

In short, with Akha migration into Sanjing, allegedly erstwhile adversaries have become neighbors. Viewing themselves as victors in the war and guardians of LPRP power, Sanjing's Khmu consider it their duty and prerogative to usher the misguided Akha into becoming good, modern citizens of *their* Lao PDR. One area where they assert this prerogative is socialist-style teamwork. As aspiring Marxist moderns, Sanjing's Khmu portray themselves as selfless cooperators, in contrast to the "selfish" and "too independent" Akha.²⁶ As uncle Man proclaimed, "before [coming to Sanjing], the *Lao Soung* lacked solidarity ... we taught them how to work together!"

²³High 2021; 86 cf. Pholsena 2006; Pholsena and Tappe 2013 Pholsena and Promphakping 2021; Dwyer 2012; London 2012. To be sure, Laos' civil war cannot be reduced to interethnic conflict. In many places, Khmu fought for US-backed royalists, just as Akha fought with the leftist PL. What I describe in this paper is a micro-regional dynamic that likely owes as much to how things are remembered as to what actually happened during the war.

²⁴Lutz 2021a; 379–383 cf. Dwyer 2012; 45–64.

²⁵Lutz 2021a; 132–134.

²⁶High 2006, 2021; 39.

This same self-congratulatory identification with the state's civilizing mission can be heard in Khmu talk of Akha men's alleged treatment of women. Sanjing's Khmu claim to have thoroughly imbibed their government's stance on gender equality. "The party-state is right" brother Jit proclaimed, "men and women should be equal, we say it all the time, but not all *Lao Soung* understand yet!" Grossly lopsided workloads, the alleged practice of "stealing wives," and (to be sure, exceedingly rare) cases of domestic violence among Akha prompt Sanjing's Khmu to proclaim, "that would never happen with us" and affirm the Akha's continuing need for tutelage.

The local Khmu impetus to civilize the Akha is also inflected by the PL's long-standing stance on customary spirituality. During the war, PL cadres skillfully maneuvered between co-opting, reforming, and suppressing what they viewed as "backward" customs in the name of national liberation and, later, socialist development.²⁷ Especially in the early years of the revolution, "spirit cults" were labeled wasteful superstitions – to be eradicated in the process of leapfrogging into socialist modernity.²⁸ Since the early 1980s, this stance has been progressively relaxed. While most spirit-related practices are still officially frowned upon by the state, they are rarely repressed with any rigor. Some are even promoted as signposts of national heritage and ethnic diversity – albeit in modernized, folkloric, and/or Lao-icized forms. Nevertheless, opposing superstition in the name of scientific materialism remains a cornerstone of Lao PDR rhetoric, and a sure way for people to affirm their allegiance to the modernizing state.

Sanjing's Khmu overwhelmingly express pride in using their state's revolutionary drive against superstition to reform and/or abandon their "too difficult" customs. "Before, we were so ignorant, so credulous!" father Jai proclaimed, echoing a widespread sentiment, "yes, the state instigated, but *we* eradicated ... we wanted to be modern, many of our customs *were* cumbersome and we happily abolished them!" Most Khmu insist that it is both right and necessary to go with the times, keeping only those customs that, in uncle Sit's words, "don't interfere with development."

Here too, Sanjing's Akha provide a welcome sounding board. This was evident when, at the height of the dry season, villagers arranged a "solidarity picnic" down by the local river. On the day of the planned outing, Sanjing's Akha collectively refused to leave their houses. "We're afraid!" Chergoh explained, "last night, in an upridge Akha village, a child was born with a tail!"²⁹

"Did you see it yourself?" Kam challenged Chergoh, "did the parents go to the hospital?"

"No," Chergoh replied.

"Lies!" Kam laughed, "Without evidence, I won't believe it!"

To summarize, Sanjing's Akha provide their Khmu neighbors with more than cheap labor and the numbers needed to stay in place. They also provide them with a contrasting foil to define themselves. As evinced in Wan and Aen's banter on passing on their lice, images of Akha backwardness serve as windows on the Khmu's past. Patronizing their highland neighbors, Sanjing's Khmu affirm and enact their progress in becoming

²⁷Pholsena and Promphakping 2021; High 2021; 39ff.

²⁸Holt 2009, 129ff; Petit 2020, 167–169.

²⁹Somewhat ironically, news of the birth reached Sanjing via mobile phone.

modern vanguards of their Lao PDR.³⁰ However, Khmu efforts to guide the Akha do not end there. They also relate to matters of custom.

State, spirits, and the quest for congruence

Uncle Sit is the out-of-wedlock son of a Khmu mother and an ethnic Phunoi royalist who had been stationed near Sanjing during the early years of Laos' civil war. Abandoned by his "enemy" father, Sit joined the Lao People's Army at a young age, not long after the 1975 revolution. In the army, Sit received education and volunteered for literacy campaigns (he proudly recounts snippets of Akha picked up while touring the uplands to "educate the *Lao Soung*").³¹ Returning to Sanjing, Sit became a party member, teacher, and village headman, before rising through the ranks of local government. Today, Sit is a senior administrator in the district center. On weekends, he returns to Sanjing and joins his wife Deng in their gardens and fields. Sit proudly showed me his many certificates and medals, his eyes beaming as he proclaimed, "I've always gone with the revolution, I'm not just a villager; I am the government!"³²

As a self-proclaimed member of the vanguard of the modernizing state, Sit routinely posited himself as the local agent of interethnic solidarity. Besides raising their two children, Sit and Deng are sponsoring an Akha orphan from an upridge village. "He's a good student," Sit explained, "we want him to enter civil service." Their self-assigned burden to raise and ultimately gift this boy to their government enables Sit and Deng to invoke state power and assert moral superiority vis-à-vis both Akha and other Khmu.

Yet Sit is not only a state agent. He is also Sanjing's most prolific Khmu spirit healer. Sit insists he can *bpua hróoy* (propitiate spirits) to cure various ailments and lists senior district officials among his many clients. At times, Sit was forced to choose – quite literally – between his commitments to spirits and the state. One such instance occurred when, shortly before the harvest, lightning struck the fields of Chuekor, his young Akha neighbor. According to local Khmu custom, such an event necessitates *bpua hróoy chndrahs* (propitiation of lightning spirits). In Sanjing, only Sit can do this. Custom further prescribed, however, that the ritual should take place on the very day Sit was to co-host an important government meeting in the district center.

On that day, Khmu and Akha villagers spent the morning anxiously waiting for Sit. Shortly after noon, he came speeding through the village gate on his government-plated motorbike. "I lied!" he exclaimed, "I said my granddaughter is sick and I must *suu kwan* [do a Lao wrist-tying ceremony to call back her soul/vitality] ... oh if they knew I left to *bpua hróoy*, they'd kill me! Why doesn't our government approve/allow/recognize this?"³³

Within the hour, our *bpua hróoy* party was at Chuekor's field. While he was preparing the ritual at the lightning-charred tree, Sit and I started chatting. "Development isn't easy," he lamented:

... but in Laos, it's especially difficult ... we have too many ethnicities! *Lao Terng*, *Lao Soung*, *Lao Loum* ... the *Lao Soung* alone, there are thirty [groups] of them! For example, the

³⁰On vanguards see below and High 2021; 12ff.

³¹Cf. Creak 2018.

³²Cf. Lutz 2022, 115

³³Approve/allow/recognize: *habhəŋ*

government campaign “turning small villages into big villages and big villages into small towns” ...³⁴ our government does it for development ... I went to implement the campaign with the *Lao Soung* on [a nearby ridge].³⁵ We cleared a nice, wide space for them [to resettle], right by the river ... we guided them there, but they refused! You know why?! Ock eck! [Sit imitates frog noises] The *Lao Soung* said “we can’t stay by the river, when frogs call our elders die”! How foolish and unruly of them!

Overhearing us, Phetsamone, another of Sit’s Akha neighbors, broke into laughter. “Is that so?” I asked, seeking to involve him in our conversation. Phetsamone attempted to reply, but was nipped in the bud by Sit:

He doesn’t know ... *our Lao Soung* understand, they’ve awoken, they’re grateful when we teach them ... but those *Lao Soung* over there: difficult! They respect their customs too much. Why? Because they don’t have education ... because of the Americans!

Our talk turned to the war. According to Sit, ignorant *Lao Soung* in Phukor and elsewhere were tricked into fighting on the wrong side: “they knew nothing, so the Americans came and said: “we’ll give you 1,000 *man* [French piaster coins] if you kill your mother”, and they did! And look where it got them! Oh, if only I could *b’ɔɔr* [engage in witchcraft], I would make the Americans die!”

Having thoroughly chastised *Lao Soung* credulity, Sit proceeded to guide Chuekor through the spirit ritual.

“Can I speak Akha to *hróoy chndrahs*?” Chuekor asked.

“Better speak Lao!” Sit replied.

Chuekor nodded, squatted at the altar, folded his hands, and proceeded to speak, in Akha (Figure 1).

This vignette succinctly captures the entanglement of state and custom in Khmu efforts to guide the Akha. Comparing Sanjing’s gratefully awoken Akha with the “foolish and unruly” *Lao Soung* on a nearby ridge, Sit affirmed the civilizing efforts of modernizing state agents like himself. Just minutes later, however, Sit seamlessly switched from revolutionary vanguard to customary healer. When Khmu guide Akha to “follow *Lao Terng* custom,” they do so less to assimilate their neighbors than to affirm – not least to themselves – the continuing efficacy of their rituals.³⁶ Here too, contemporary dispositions are ambivalently inflected by local history.

While proudly proclaiming their proactive role in eliminating “superstition,” Sanjing’s Khmu also concede that their revolutionary zeal may, at times, have made them throw out the proverbial baby with the bathwater. Elders in particular lament that in the course of development, much customary prowess has been lost. As father Gle sighed, “with all the machines and medicine around, our *hróoy* have gone into hiding, *bpua hróoy* just doesn’t work like it used to ...”

Yet, Sanjing’s Khmu continue to propitiate spirits on an almost daily basis. Performing today’s rituals, they invoke not only *hróoy* associated with ancestors, elements, places, and Tai-Lao lords, but also the PL. Souphanouvong and Kaysone Phomvihane, late founding fathers of the Lao PDR, are routinely addressed as “new masters of the land.” In short, and not withstanding their rhetoric, Sanjing’s Khmu

³⁴Sit is referring to the Lao state’s focal site development campaign. See Noonan 2015 on the “Three Builds.”

³⁵This was the same ridge mentioned by Wan and Aen in this paper’s opening vignette.

³⁶Cf. Évrard 2019.



Figure 1. Sit (right) guides Chuekor (left) to *bpua hróoy chndrahs*, Credit: Paul-David Lutz.

have engaged their state’s civilizing mission without conceding that their customary commitments are patently false. In Sanjing, the modernizing state has provided a welcome opportunity to reconfigure the spiritual relationships that continue to shape local lives. Driven by desires for the best of both worlds, state and custom, Sanjing’s Khmu insist they have abandoned certain practices for practical reasons: because they were cumbersome, “no longer necessary,” or “just don’t work anymore.”³⁷ As brother Jit noted, with a hint of chagrin, “we want to live and eat, so we can’t just abandon all our *hróoy!*”

It is here, in their anxiously aspirational pursuit of a place for their spiritual commitments within Lao PDR modernity (and vice versa), that local Khmu draw impetus to also guide their Akha neighbors in matters of custom. Several Sanjing Khmu are government nurses in upridge Akha villages, including Phukor. When Akha fall ill, Khmu routinely insist they see both spirit healers like Sit and “science healers” like these nurses. Simultaneously guiding the Akha on matters of state and spirits (as Sit did, almost literally, in the same breath at Chuekor’s field) Khmu seek to reconcile and, ideally, combine their customary and state-derived prowess. This quest for congruence between state and spirit power is further charged with Khmu’s own historically ambivalent relationship to the Tai-Lao.

Looking up, looking down

As mentioned above, the Khmu are Laos’ second largest ethnolinguistic group, outnumbered only by the national majority Tai-Lao. Autochthonous to northern Laos, Khmu likely once occupied river valleys and lowland areas, dominating the region both demographically and politically. By the fourteenth century CE, however, Khmu had been

³⁷Lutz 2021a; 2022 cf. Stolz 2021; High 2021, 59ff.

subjugated and displaced to the uplands by in-migrating Tai-Lao.³⁸ Reduced to the status of lowly *Khaa* (“serfs”/“wild/forest people”) Khmu were subjected to bondage, corvée labor, and taxation by Tai-Lao lords. Concomitantly, Tai-Lao portrayed the upland ethno-space of the Khmu as a realm of savagery and backwardness, in direct contrast to the civilized lowlands.³⁹

Nevertheless, it would be a distorting simplification to reduce historical relations between Khmu and Tai-Lao to displacement and domination. In some areas, Tai-Lao remained numerically inferior and/or economically dependent on Khmu. In other areas, Khmu were integrated into Tai-Lao polities as frontier guardians, and/or revolted.⁴⁰ Moreover, in a historical context in which labor power was dearth, the impetus for integration was great. Largely unburdened by rigid modern notions of ethnicity, boundaries between Khmu and Tai-Lao remained porous.⁴¹ Tai-Lao acknowledged Khmu as ancient masters of the land, better acquainted with the spiritual forces of a given locality. In return, Khmu ritually allocated their primordial territorial rights to “usurping” Tai-Lao rulers. Participating in such rites, Khmu simultaneously ratified their autochthony, ritual prowess, and political subordination.⁴²

Pursuing a common sense of national belonging, Laos’ late colonial and early post-independence governments sought to replace the Tai–*Khaa* dichotomy with the aforementioned pseudo-ethnic categories of *Lao Loum*, *Lao Terng*, and *Lao Soung*. During the civil war and early post-war period, this tripartite system was heavily promoted by the PL and Lao PDR government: a cornerstone of revolutionary rhetoric on overcoming Tai–*Khaa* “feudalism.” As mentioned, despite having long been officially abandoned, the trinity remains a salient vector for politically correct articulations of ethnic difference in Laos today.⁴³

While acknowledging circumstantial factors, Sanjing’s Khmu attribute their wartime allegiances above all to the appeal of the PL’s promise to replace Tai–*Khaa* hierarchies with an egalitarian multi-ethnic state based on civic nationalism. To be sure, here too the local past is told not least for present purposes.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, local Khmu’s continuing embrace of the *Lao Loum*, *Lao Terng*, and *Lao Soung* trinity amounts to more than inertia; it also reflects a conscious effort to reaffirm their allegiance to the multi-ethnic nation-state. Unlike Khmu elsewhere, Sanjing’s Khmu take pride in referring to themselves as *Lao Terng*.⁴⁵

However, and while Sanjing’s Khmu and other erstwhile *Khaa* have undoubtedly been among its key beneficiaries, the 1975 revolution never fully abolished deeply engrained tropes of lowland civility and upland savagery. Ambiguous images of Khmu as dirty, backward, yet spiritually potent bumpkins went into hiatus, but survived. With the

³⁸Khmu lore abounds with self-deprecating tales of losing literacy, knowledge, and lowland kingdoms to the more clever and cunning Tai-Lao. See Lutz 2021a, 103–108; Proschan 2001. To be sure, Sanjing’s Khmu do not articulate an overarching discourse of Indigeneity, not least because Indigeneity is an unrecognized – and controversial – category in contemporary Laos.

³⁹Turton 2000.

⁴⁰Lutz 2021a, Évrard 2007, 2019; Proschan 1998.

⁴¹Cf. Proschan 2001.

⁴²Aijmer 1979; Evans 1998; 142–145.

⁴³Zuckermann 2012; Tappe and Badenoch 2021.

⁴⁴In all likelihood, Sanjing Khmu were involved in both the colonial-era and royalist administration of their area. See Lutz 2021, 88–95, 202–208. The allegiances of Phukor’s Akha likely owed more to circumstantial factors than ideological commitment.

⁴⁵Cf. Tappe and Badenoch 2021, 4. In other parts of northern Laos, Khmu have disowned the label *Lao Terng* (Nathan Badenoch, pers. Commun.).



Figure 2. A Khmu nurse marks an Akha boy as vaccinated against polio (left), brother Rao prepares to *bpua hróoy* for Dosaa's wife (right). Credit: Paul-David Lutz.

post-Cold War retreat of the socialist metanarrative, Tai-Lao cultural norms – and Buddhism in particular – have made a comeback in both official and popular Lao PDR nationalism.⁴⁶ In many parts of northern Laos it is still – or is once again – Khmu who are considered backward and in need of civilizing tutelage.⁴⁷ When Sanjing's Khmu guide Akha on matters of state and custom, they seek not least to pass on the proverbial buck of backwardness. “No, not us anymore,” Aen and Wan's banter on passing on their lice unwittingly proclaimed, “now the *Lao Soung* are the dirty, backward *Khaa*.”

Similar dynamics were at work when Sit ditched a government meeting to *bpua hróoy chndrahs* for his Akha neighbor Chuekor. Citing fear of sanction, Sit felt compelled to tell his work colleagues he had to leave for a wrist-tying ceremony. Tying wrists with cotton strings to fasten “souls” is a Buddhicized – though essentially animist – Tai-Lao practice.⁴⁸ It has long been permitted, encouraged, and performed by LPRP leaders. Khmu and Akha in Sanjing and elsewhere have adopted the practice, often as a “progressive” replacement for rituals now considered backward, unclean superstitions.⁴⁹ Of course, Sit didn't risk being killed for skipping a government meeting to propitiate lightning spirits – certainly not by his colleagues, several of whom are, as mentioned, themselves among his spirit healing clients. Prompting Sit's lie was fear of sanction by abstract state power conjured up – somewhat ironically – by people like himself.⁵⁰ Once in Sanjing, however, Sit's spiritual prowess was transformed from a liability into an asset. Applied locally to the Akha, the same rituals that in the broader context of the modernizing nation-state mark Khmu backwardness become markers of superiority (Figure 2).

To summarize, patronizing the Akha in matters of both state and custom, Sanjing's Khmu negotiate and, ideally, reconcile the ambivalences of their role as harbingers and recipients of revolution and development. Self-referential images of *Lao Soung* backwardness offer local Khmu a contrasting foil in their ongoing quest for a culturally

⁴⁶Evans 1998, 2000, 285; Pholsena 2006, 58ff; 2020 1872–1873; 1880. But see High 2021 on the continuing salience of socialism.

⁴⁷Lutz 2021a, 242; Évrard 2019, 238–239; Petit 2008, 131; Tappe and Badenoch 2021, 12–13; Pholsena 2006, 180ff; Petit 2020; 1879.

⁴⁸Holt 2009, 271–275.

⁴⁹In Sanjing, wrist-tying has replaced the erstwhile practice of strengthening souls/life-force by smearing sacrificial blood on kneecaps. Cf. Sprenger 2009.

⁵⁰Lutz 2021a; 175–176.

specific sense of Lao PDR modernity. This quest is charged with both post-colonial and long-standing dynamics.⁵¹ Amplified by crude ingestions of Marxist evolutionism, Sanjing's Khmu routinely place their village on a spatiotemporal civilizational scale in which lowland Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, China, Japan and the West are gradients of a desired future, while the highland ethno-space of the *Lao Soung* – locally represented by Sanjing's Akha – stands for a disavowed past.⁵² Having a readily available Other who is in ostensibly greater need of “catching up” provides Sanjing's Khmu with reassuring comfort, purpose, and affirmation. Canvassed in a modernist frame, Sanjing's civilizing mission for the “backward” Akha/*Lao Soung* has an altitudinal hue that echoes customary tropes of civility and savagery – only to displace these, quite literally, further uphill.

Local orientalism?

Of course, Sanjing is not the only place where impulses to improve an Other interplay with desires for a certain sense of self. Similar dynamics have been observed and discussed at various levels, times, and places throughout Asia and beyond.⁵³ Loosely drawing on Edward Said's classic exegesis on the interplay of European colonialism and self-referential, essentializing images of the backward East, Louisa Schein coined the term “internal Orientalism” to describe national majority Han/Communist Party images of ethnic minorities in post-Mao China. Like Said's Orientalism, Schein's internal Orientalism describes a set of power-laden, self-referential, and more-or-less hegemonic representations of others, at once oppositional and incorporating, and routinely used to assert superiority and justify “civilizing” interventions.⁵⁴ The key difference is that while Said's Orientalism emanates from the West on a global scale, internal Orientalism is implicated in axes of domination ambiguously internal to their society. In the case of China, this involves millennia-old tropes of peripheral “barbarians” as ambiguous targets for civilizing projects being recast in a modernist, Marxist-evolutionist mode – thus providing implicit (re)affirmation of Han/Communist Party superiority.⁵⁵ At the same time, Schein highlights the ambiguities engendered as ethnic minority women, in particular, became both a yardstick for self-congratulatory measurements of the distance traveled from an uncivilized past and a site of nostalgia for what has been lost in the very course of progress.⁵⁶

Like subjects of internal Orientalist discourse, Sanjing's Akha are framed by a historically power-laden gaze that is overwhelmingly unidirectional, self-referential, and essentializing; a conceptual foil responsive more to the demands of its producers than its putative object.⁵⁷ This is evinced not least in local Khmu's persistent propensities to conflate Akha and other Sino-Tibetan highlanders under the common heading *Lao Soung*. Sanjing's Khmu are, of course, entirely aware that *Lao Loum*, *Lao Terng*, and *Lao Soung* are pseudo-ethnic ensembles based on generalized tendencies. They are

⁵¹Lutz 2021a, 43; High 2008; Thongchai 2000, 57.

⁵²China's rise is engendering a seismic shift to this compass of global civility. See Lutz 2022; 118–124.

⁵³Turton 2000; Culas and Robbina 2010; Evans 2012, 74–78; Duncan 2004; Li 2014, 30–57; Fiskesjö 1999, 2015, 515; Petit 2006.

⁵⁴Schein 1997, 2012; Said 1978.

⁵⁵Schein 2012, 129; Fiskesjö 1999.

⁵⁶Schein 2012, 120 see also Fiskesjö 2014.

⁵⁷Said 1978, 22.

readily able to disaggregate each category, with a level of nuance far exceeding the state's fifty officially recognized ethnicities.⁵⁸ However, they routinely eschew this nuance in favor of self-referential generalizations. When Wan, Aen, and Sit compared Sanjing's clean and gratefully "awoken" *Lao Soung* with the dirty, foolish, and "unruly" *Lao Soung* on a nearby ridge, they knew full-well that they were comparing Loma and Eupa – two Akha subgroups. However, their objective was not to offer a detailed description of their highland neighbors but to define themselves as civilizing agents of a modernizing state by distinguishing between their very own "raw" and "cooked" barbarians.⁵⁹ In the context of *this* pursuit, ethnolinguistic details are secondary at best. Here too, Sanjing's Khmu invoke the trinity not despite its distorting simplifications, but because doing so works for them.⁶⁰

Like ethnic minorities in China, Akha/*Lao Soung* provide Sanjing's Khmu with an internal Other on whom to carry out civilizing projects, thus mitigating an ambivalent sense of backwardness. Like internal Orientalism and its cousin, internal colonialism, the local Khmu impetus to civilize the Akha invokes a self-congratulating sense of mission. Khmu concerns for the welfare of Akha women, for instance, resonate eerily with the gendered patronage of European colonial discourse: Khmu men saving Akha women from Akha men – to paraphrase Gayatri Spivak.⁶¹ At the same time, and again echoing the ambiguities of internal Orientalism, these concerns sit ambivalently alongside titillating images of the sexually loose *Lao Soung*. For Sanjing's Khmu men, Akha women evoke conflicting sentiments of empathy, baseness, and allure.⁶² As evinced in Wan and Aen's banter about *Lao Soung* washing only "above the waist," such sentiments routinely pop up in lewd jokes and everyday conversations. Here too, gendered exoticization mingles with eroticization.⁶³

In a further case of resonance with Orientalist discourse, Khmu denials of *Lao Soung* coevality are palpably pregnant with repressed nostalgia.⁶⁴ On the backstage of Sanjing's civilizing mission lies a longing for the ostensibly more carefree life afforded the Akha by their very backwardness. For instance, while berating an alleged Akha lack of entrepreneurship, Sanjing's Khmu routinely lament how their involvement in successive cash crop crazes has left them heavily indebted, unlike the "smart *Lao Soung*" who (allegedly) never borrow money. Similarly, while loudly ridiculing Akha credulity, Sanjing's Khmu quietly, and often enviously, confess that "the *Lao Soung* have better kept their customs." Sitting uneasily alongside Khmu banter over the ritually inept *Lao Soung* is a suppressed awe – even fear – of their highland neighbors' spiritual prowess.⁶⁵ The same *Lao Soung* ridiculed for "bathing once a month" and resisting resettlement due to frog noises are considered masters of *b'ɔ̃r* (witchcraft). Sanjing's Khmu tell hushed tales of people struck ill or dead by powerful *Lao Soung* witches. As a visibly nervous uncle Hak exclaimed, when it comes to witchcraft, neither Khmu spirit healers nor modern "science doctors" could "outdo the *Lao Soung*!"

⁵⁸Recall Sit noting there are "thirty [groups]" of *Lao Soung*.

⁵⁹Fiskesjö 1999.

⁶⁰Zuckermann 2012; Culas and Robbine 2010.

⁶¹Ortner 1995, 178; Lyttleton 2011, 171; Evans 2012; 74–78.

⁶²Lyttleton 2011; Schein 1997; 87.

⁶³Schein 2012; 123.

⁶⁴Fiskesjö 2015; Thongchai 2000, 51; Petit 2006, 30–31.

⁶⁵This is a fear that again, and somewhat ironically, mirrors and displaces Tai-Lao images of the backward yet spiritually potent Khmu.

Here we return to the other Khmu concern voiced when the Akha first came asking to settle in Sanjing: worries over incongruent customs, particularly funerary rites. As discussed above, villagers continue to consider well-being, prosperity, and life to be intimately dependent on ritualized relationships with *hróoy*. Of particular importance here are chthonic-ancestral spirits (*hróoy gaang*) of deceased and *properly buried* ancestors.⁶⁶ Articulated in politically correct concerns over public health, Khmu anxieties over Akha burial practices primarily reflect their concerns over safeguarding this vital rituo-cosmological domain.⁶⁷ When Sanjing's Khmu admonish their Akha neighbors to follow *Lao Terng* customs, they also seek to domesticate Akha spiritual prowess.

Finally, Sanjing's Akha struggled to make their voices heard, both to their Khmu hosts and me. Observing Sanjing's Khmu talk over and about the Akha, I was reminded of the Karl Marx quote used by Edward Said to open his treatise on Orientalism: "They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented."⁶⁸ From the outset of my fieldwork in Sanjing, Khmu strove to gatekeep my interactions with Akha. Akha chances to speak to me directly and/or in private were rare. Faced with either forcing the issue or treating my lack of access as an ethnographic fact worthy of investigation in its own right, I opted for the latter. Consequently, Sanjing's Akha taught me – in their very silence – more about their Khmu hosts than about themselves.⁶⁹

Sanjing's subalterns speak

However, Sanjing's Akha were more than mute objects of Khmu discourse. As alluded to when Chuekor spoke Akha to *hróoy chndrahs* in subtle defiance of Sit, a dense Akha hidden transcript lies beneath power-laden Khmu images of the backward *Lao Soung*.⁷⁰ Notwithstanding his stifled attempt to join my conversation with Sit at Chuekor's field, it was Phetsamone who provided my greatest source of Akha vantage. Not coincidentally, he is also a key collaborator in the local Khmu civilizing mission. As Sanjing's sole Akha LPRP member and deputy leader of the local Lao Patriotic Youth Union, Phetsamone is the only non-Khmu on Sanjing's village leadership committee. Khmu routinely invoke him as an "awoken" Akha: a valuable ally and role model in their efforts to guide the "foolish and unruly" *Lao Soung*. For Phetsamone himself, this positionality provided opportunities to both advocate for Sanjing's Akha and demonstrate his civilizing prowess. At the same time, he was routinely slighted for his political ambition. When Khmu expressed fears that Sanjing will "soon be an Akha village" many hastened to add, "with Phetsamone as headman!" By contrast, Dosaa – head of Sanjing's economically most successful Akha household – was hailed for his achievements. These divergent evaluations highlight the unwritten boundaries assigned to Sanjing's Akha. While hailing Akha economic success as confirmation of their correct guidance, Sanjing's Khmu jealously guard their privileged access to state, spirits, and, by their own extension, clumsily inept yet mysteriously resourceful ethnographers.

⁶⁶When Sanjing's Khmu note "we can't just abandon all our *hróoy*!" they refer primarily to *hróoy gaang*. See also Stolz 2021; 121–157.

⁶⁷Lutz 2021a, cf. Bouté 2021; 755–756.

⁶⁸Said 1978, 21.

⁶⁹Indeed, I repeatedly found myself appropriating Khmu positional superiority. See Lutz 2021a; 248.

⁷⁰Scott 1990; Evans 2000, 272.

It was only with some surreption that I was able to speak directly to Akha and, twice, join Akha rituals. On both occasions, Akha felt compelled to cite necessity and offer contrite reference to the Khmu. As Phetsamone whispered, “when it comes to local/territorial spirits, we yield to the *Lao Terng* [!], it’s their land, but for our household/ancestral spirits, we *must* use *our* customs!”

It was with similar surreption that I caught snippets of the Akha’s take on their role in Laos’ civil war. One such instance occurred when, on a sticky monsoon day, I bumped into Vandee, alone in his field. Seizing a rare opportunity for an unsupervised chat with a Sanjing Akha, I joined him for lunch in his field hut. Over rice, salt, and ginger, Vandee mentioned that his late father had been a soldier during the war, “but then he got shot in the legs and couldn’t walk anymore.”

“Who did he fight for?” I asked.

“The Americans!” Vandee replied, “he was *satu* [an enemy]!”⁷¹

A few weeks later, Vandee was among those joining Sit when he appropriated lightening spirits in Chuekor’s field (see above). Overhearing Sit angrily proclaim that the Americans should be struck dead for tricking the *Lao Soung* into fighting, Vandee chimed in: “Yes! I hate the Americans too! They shot my father! He was just a villager!”

“Yes, I remember your father,” Sit nodded in dismayed approval, “he couldn’t walk!”

Just days before the end of my stay in Sanjing, Vandee and I were again alone, this time in his kitchen. Sensing a last chance to resolve my confusion, I cautiously broached the subject of his father’s wartime allegiance. “Indeed, he was a soldier!” Vandee confirmed, “he fought for the *aai-n.ɲ* [PL], he was with the revolution!”⁷²

Over the course of my fieldwork, I thus heard three conflicting statements from Vandee about his father’s role in Laos’ civil war: US-backed “enemy,” innocent villager, and PL revolutionary. Which one is factually true? I don’t know. Why did Vandee change his story? Perhaps he simply wasn’t sure. Perhaps he came to trust me more, or less.⁷³ Perhaps Vandee told me what he thought I wanted to hear on each occasion, just as he told Sit what he thought Sit wanted to hear. Vandee’s accounts thus echo the adage that history is told for the purposes of the present. Having found themselves (partially) on the wrong side of the civil war, Sanjing’s Akha seemed acutely attuned to the value of knowing when and how to remember. Here, too, my positionality likely played a role. It seems less than coincidental that in the course of my stay, Vandee’s father went from being “with the Americans” to being an innocent villager and then a PL soldier. During my early weeks in Sanjing, swarms of Akha children followed me around with timid tenacity, giggling as they shrieked “Ameligaa! Ameligaa!” By the end of my fieldwork, it was clear to all that I was German, and “with the Khmu.”

To summarize, there is clear resonance between the dynamics discussed by Schein and others under the trope of “internal Orientalism” and Sanjing’s Khmu images of the Akha/*Lao Soung*. Both are simultaneously inflected with broader, post-colonial and local, culturally specific dynamics. Both are implicated in self-congratulatory efforts to improve an Other posited as deserving of domination. Both involve essentialism, exoticization, and selective nostalgia. In both cases, those subjected to and by the discourse struggled to

⁷¹Note here Vandee’s appropriation of PL vantage.

⁷²*aai-n.ɲ* is the Lao term for relatives/kin. It is used in Sanjing and elsewhere as polite slang for the PL.

⁷³Cf. High et al. 2009; 617.

represent themselves. In short, ethnic relations in Sanjing confirm that self-referential images of backward Others are not the sole prerogative of Europeans, Americans, or government elites in developmentalist states. Notwithstanding wider forces, Orientalizing dynamics can be generated, sustained, and negotiated at local levels – including between ostensibly subaltern uplanders.

Nevertheless, it would be an oversimplification to reduce interethnic dynamics in Sanjing to a localized case of internal Orientalism. As I have noted, Akha positionality intertwined with mine to create a distinct vantage that must be accounted for in both its epistemic and ethical implications. Further complicating the trope of internal Orientalism are several inconvenient facts – including the implications of living together in an upland peasant village.

Crucial caveats and the implications of intimacy

In an ironic twist, grid electricity and all-weather road access – both desperately coveted in Sanjing – have already reached Phukor and other *Lao Soung* villages. Driven by ambition and land scarcity, several upridge Akha have abandoned swidden agriculture and invested in the cheap-but-sturdy Chinese trucks now flooding Laos. Until very recently, Sanjing residents grudgingly relied on these truck-owning Akha for transporting their livestock and forest products, and for supplying commodities like beer and diesel-powered generators. Some have amassed wealth far beyond the reach of Sanjing's Khmu. Such wealth both visibly upsets Khmu assertions that the *Lao Soung* are in greater need of “catching up” and provides an unwelcome reminder that asserted wartime allegiances may not always, or no longer, convert into priority access to development.

Local Khmu efforts to Orientalize the Akha are further complicated by political caveats. Among the first things Sanjing's Khmu told me – in a revealing blend of pride and frustration – was the story of how, not long before the Akha's arrival, their village was selected as the site for a new district capital. Notwithstanding concerns over slighting powerful territorial *hróoy*, villagers were generally buoyant about being chosen as the local center of state power.⁷⁴ Many hoped that “becoming the district” would open avenues for personal development. Just as construction was about to commence, Sanjing's Khmu were told a “big man” would come up from the capital, Vientiane, to give the national government's blessing. This big man was Asang Laoly. An ethnic Akha from a nearby ridge, Asang had risen through the ranks of the Lao People's Army and LPRP to become a Politburo member, interior minister, and deputy prime minister. Allegedly, he spent less than five minutes in Sanjing before he shouted “cannot!” boarded his helicopter, and left. Construction of the new district capital was aborted soon thereafter. To this day, Sanjing's Khmu remain bitter at having missed a great opportunity. That their chance was ruined by an Akha who, as many claimed, “can't speak proper Lao” yet somehow, unfathomably, made it to the apex of *their* state, only adds insult to their injury.

The notion that interethnic dynamics in Sanjing constitute a local form of internal Orientalism is further tempered by the simple fact of living together. Notwithstanding

⁷⁴Lutz 2022; 116–118

the friction of distance afforded by its mountainous terrain, present-day Phongsali has for centuries been an area where peoples recognized as others have lived in close proximity and interaction (albeit with varying degrees of amicability). Compelled to negotiate differences on a regular, intimate basis, many locals are polyglots – arguably endowed with greater intercultural competence than those discussed and critiqued under the rubric of internal Orientalism. Sanjing, like upland Laos more generally, is not a place where interethnic know-how is “limited.”⁷⁵ Local Khmu and Akha insist that even at the height of the war, trade and friendships between households and villages of different ethnicities were maintained. Read against the grain, even accounts of the conflict itself allude to closeness.⁷⁶ The ease with which Sanjing’s two ethnicities translate, interpret, and transfer each other’s spiritual beliefs and customs certainly suggests long-standing communication.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, and somewhat ironically, Sanjing’s Khmu credit not deep history but the modernist PL/Lao PDR with enabling interethnic eclecticism. Father Gle, for instance, insisted that before the revolution it was impossible to conduct spirit healing rituals across ethnic boundaries:

But now our party-state has promoted solidarity amongst the ethnicities ... now we go to the army together ... look, we even live together! So we can *bpua* each other ... but truthfully, no *Lao Terng* would ask a *Lao Soung* to *bpua hróoy* for them ... the *Lao Soung* want us to take care of them.

Of course, here too local history is inflected by present purposes. Crediting the PL with building interethnic solidarity while denying that *Lao Soung* could ever *bpua hróoy* for them again allows Sanjing’s Khmu to simultaneously draw close to their government and assert their superiority in matters of spirits and state. Moreover, and contrary to Gle’s claim, Sanjing’s Khmu do call on Akha to perform spirit healing rituals. For example, when the rice in Aen’s swidden field failed to grow as desired, it was Chergoh who joined Aen’s wife Daa at the center of the ensuing propitiation of rice spirits. Initially confused by his prominent role in a Khmu agricultural ritual,⁷⁸ I later learned that Chergoh was invited not as an Akha but because he had, just days earlier, led his household in performing – “according to *Lao Soung* custom” – a ritual for his immediately adjacent and equally underperforming field.

As this example shows, ethnic otherness is not the only dynamic framing relations between Sanjing’s Khmu and Akha. At the village and micro-regional levels, locality may trump ethnicity.⁷⁹ Notwithstanding the growing significance of commodified production, daily life for both ethnicities remains grounded in a common peasant livelihood fundamentally dictated by the annual agricultural cycle. Sowing and harvesting, Khmu and Akha work side-by-side. Rice-related rituals are conducted jointly, albeit on

⁷⁵Cf. Pholsena 2020

⁷⁶Take, for instance, the RLG air raid on Sanjing during the war. As I have noted, Sanjing Khmu accuse Phukor-based “*Lao Soung* enemies” of calling in the raid. Those old enough to remember, however, hastened to add that it was all a tragic mistake. Just days before the raid, a group of Phukor Akha had attempted to enter the valley to barter for salt (by all accounts, a common occurrence during the war). Vexed at being turned back by the PL soldiers manning a checkpoint just downhill from Sanjing, the Akha asked their local militia head to call in an airstrike. Most unfortunately, the pilots mistook Sanjing for that checkpoint.

⁷⁷Asked if the spirit healing ritual he was performing for Dosaa’s ailing wife (Figure 2) was “according to Khmu or Akha custom,” brother Rao replied with revealing nonchalance, “both!” Such eclecticism may perhaps even allude to a shared cultural substratum. Cf. Mus, Mabbett, and Chandler 2010 [1933]; Holt 2009; High 2022.

⁷⁸Recall Phetsamone’s statement that “when it comes to local/territorial spirits, we yield to the *Lao Terng*.”

⁷⁹Pace Badenoch and Tomita 2013.

Khmu terms. In contrast to many forcibly amalgamated multi-ethnic villages in Laos, there are no ethnic neighborhoods in Sanjing. Having purchased their dwellings off departing Khmu, Sanjing's Akha live interspersed with their hosts and patrons, separated by nothing more than thin thatched bamboo, wooden planks, and a few short steps. To be sure, such intimacy has its challenges; in Sanjing as elsewhere there is no necessary correlation between closeness and conviviality. Moreover, and given ongoing Khmu out-migration and recurrent rumors of Akha plans to move on "like cows grazing" (see above), any common sense of shared destiny has a rather shallow temporal horizon. Nevertheless, interethnic friendships have grown from multiple sources, such as being neighbors, hunting companions, classmates, or simply finding out one gets along. Weddings, engagements, funerals, and vernacularized renditions of national festivals like Lao New Year provide regular occasions for interethnic revelry.

To be sure, none of this need contradict the patronizing essentialisms discussed in earlier sections of this paper. As I have shown, the Khmu trope of *Lao Soung* backwardness persists selectively; less despite than because of the self-referential distortions it enables.⁸⁰ Secondly, it is precisely the Akha's closeness that makes them such suitable foils for Khmu self-identification. Even proverbially, lice cannot be passed on at distance. Buoyed by an interplay of proximity and crude ingestions of Leninist elitism, the Khmu's civilizing mission for the backward Akha proclaims not a solidarity of equals but a hierarchical solidarity; between compassionately caring vanguards and gratefully acquiescing apprentices.⁸¹ By-and-large, local Khmu carry their self-ascribed burden of guiding the *Lao Soung* with sincere conviction. Mirroring the pride they take in referring to themselves as *Lao Terng*, they use *Lao Soung* not merely as a convenient ensemble, but also as an affirmation that despite all, their neighbors also belong to *their* multi-ethnic nation-state. Just as they skillfully fail to discern incongruity in their simultaneous efforts to guide Akha on matters of spirits and state, Sanjing's Khmu eschew any sense of contradiction between condescending patronage and genuine warmth. Their patronizing warmth was at work when Sit insisted on not charging Chuekor, whom he referred to as his "younger *Lao Soung* brother," for placating spirits in his lightning-struck field. It was at work whenever Sanjing's Khmu implored, firmly but gently, their sick Akha neighbors to both propitiate spirits and go to hospital. It was also at work whenever Sanjing's Khmu accommodated Akha efforts to "correctly" remember their role in Laos' civil war. Pouncing to affirm Vandee's claim that his father was just an innocent villager, Sit did more than parrot state prescriptions on how the war should be remembered: as the single-minded struggle of the multi-ethnic Lao people against foreign-induced aggression.⁸² He also drew his once-misguided neighbor back onto what he believed was the right side of history. Ceding questions of historical veracity to politically correct

⁸⁰Again echoing Orientalist discourse, Khmu conceptions about the Akha proved remarkably resilient to fact-checking. During a courtesy visit to a funeral in Phukor, Sanjing Khmu and I learned that the deceased would not lie in state for ten days as people claimed, but would in fact be buried the following day. Confronted with this information, Wan shrugged his shoulders, noting "we're still worried."

⁸¹High 2021; 12ff.

⁸²Tappe 2013b. To be sure, Sanjing's Khmu also strive to fix and align their personal histories with the official history of the war (recall that Sit himself is the son of a royalist official). See Lutz 2021a, 115–143, 203–208; Cf. Pholsena 2006, 143–144; Petit 2020, 1884. Such eschewals suggest that while ostensibly subalterns are usually portrayed as using local memories to challenge dominant versions of the past, they may also conspire to do the opposite and use dominant versions of the past to subdue inconveniently multivocal memories. Cf. Tappe 2013a.

portrayals of their erstwhile “*Lao Soung* enemies” as hapless victims of US imperialism, Sanjing’s Khmu also – and sincerely – offer to let bygones be bygones.

To summarize, while confirming that Orientalizing dynamics can be generated, sustained, and negotiated at local levels, Sanjing’s case also shows that ostensible subalterns are quite capable of foisting their own distorting and simplifying synopses onto complex realities. Macro-level, state-centered, and majority-minority dynamics inflect, but do not determine, localized interethnic relations. Khmu-Akha relations in contemporary Sanjing are not simply adjuncts of broader forces. Scale has qualitative effects. Unfolding at a micro-regional, intra-upland level, Khmu pretenses to guiding the backward *Lao Soung* are riddled with ambivalence and caveats. Try as the Khmu may, Sanjing’s Akha are not reduced to foils. The self-congratulatory assertions of Khmu superiority so succinctly captured in Wan and Aen’s banter over passing on their lice are routinely contradicted in intimate deed. Here as elsewhere, self-referential stereotypes coexist with genuine care and conviviality.⁸³ However good to think and do with, neither the local Khmu trope of *Lao Soung* backwardness nor the scholarly trope of internal Orientalism do justice to the lived complexity of interethnic relations in this part of upland Laos today (Figure 3).

Before concluding, I offer a brief and tentative glance at the possible future. While resonant with long-standing tropes, the images discussed in this paper are ultimately the product of a locally and historically specific conjuncture.⁸⁴ Sustained in speech and act alone, their reproduction requires ongoing investment. Yet, and like Laos more broadly, Sanjing will not be a post-war society forever. The trope of *Lao Soung* backwardness is already increasingly brushing up against accelerated socio-economic development. As circumstances change, other tropes are emerging.⁸⁵

Concomitant to these changes are demographic factors. Over half of Sanjing’s residents, both Khmu and Akha, have been born since the 1990s, and thus have no direct experience of the civil war and its immediate aftermath. Driven by mutual desires to optimize their household consumer-worker ratios (not least in the context of ongoing outmigration), several Khmu have adopted Akha children.⁸⁶ In gait, appearance, and speech, these adoptees have become all but Khmu. Some have married Khmu in nearby villages. Sanjing itself has two interethnic couples. Shortly after arriving from Phukor, Vandee married sister Du. While Vandee has learned Khmu, Du speaks no Akha. Their three children speak Khmu and Lao fluently, but barely any Akha. This mirrors the wider village pattern: three-quarters of the pupils in Sanjing’s primary school are Akha, yet the schoolyard language is Khmu. Even amongst themselves, Akha children routinely speak Khmu. Echoing a widespread sentiment, aunt Baa insisted that, “yes, the *Lao Soung* kids still follow their parents, but really, they want to be like us.” Noting his children eat only glutinous rice, Phetsamone agreed: “Look, they’ve become *Lao Terng!*”

The ostensible Khmu-ization of Sanjing’s Akha is of course consistent with the power dynamics outlined in this paper. However, and once again, local forces are intertwined with wider contexts. For Sanjing’s Akha youth, Khmu-ization may yet prove little

⁸³Petit 2020; Petit 2008; 118–119.

⁸⁴Cf. Schein 2012, 17–21; Wilcox 2016.

⁸⁵Ambivalent images of Chinese hydropower, in particular, are becoming increasingly salient in local Khmu engagements with Lao PDR modernity. See Lutz 2022; 118–124.

⁸⁶Lutz 2021b.

more than a local waystation on a common path to Lao-ization and beyond.⁸⁷ Joint schooling, interethnic marriage, Buddhification, rural exodus, educational sojourns abroad, global consumer culture and, not least, social media are providing Sanjing youngsters with novel subjectivities, just as the war and post-war dynamics of their era did so for their grandparents and parents. Increasingly unburdened by their country's checkered past, youth of both ethnicities are embarking on their own quest for a culturally specific sense of modernity. In so doing, they are becoming increasingly divested from the trope of the "backward" *Lao Soung*. In early 2020, Sorn (the second son of brother Kam) became romantically entangled with Borsae, the Akha girl who had waited patiently, buckets-in-hand, at Sanjing's water tap while Wan and Aen joked about passing on their lice. In February 2021, Borsae gave birth to a healthy, half-Khmu boy. As I write this, Sanjing's Khmu and Akha are preparing Sorn and Borsae's wedding. Citing their promise to "follow *Lao Terng* custom," Borsae's parents have politely demanded bride price.⁸⁸ Like many of their peers, Sorn and Borsae hope to move to town one day.

Conclusion

In the multi-ethnic Khmu and Akha village of Sanjing in far-north Laos, it is not the lowland-dwelling national majority Tai-Lao who are the primary and most immediately significant Other through and against which local Khmu subjectivities are constituted, but immigrant Akha and – by local Khmu's own extension – Sino-Tibetan *Lao Soung* more broadly. Positing their Akha/*Lao Soung* neighbors as backward beneficiaries of their civilizing mission, Sanjing's Khmu have created a readily available foil and platform for their pursuit of a certain sense of self as modern, Khmu vanguards of their multi-ethnic republic. This pursuit is inflected by an interplay of long *durée* upland-lowland dynamics and historically more recent, localized factors, including those related to Laos' civil war. Showcasing the salience of these comparatively new intra-upland dynamics, this paper adds crucial nuance to the binary of majority/lowland/state/Tai vs. minority/upland/society/*Khaa* that has long framed scholarship on interethnic relations in Laos and Southeast Asia.

Concomitant to this refocusing effort, this paper provides ethnographic sustenance to the burgeoning scholarly interest in the locally specific dynamics of Laos' civil war and its aftermath. It also provides an ethnographically grounded commentary on the applicability of the analytic of "internal Orientalism" across scales. Having considered evidence for and against considering Sanjing's Akha as subjects of a localized form of Khmu Orientalism, I have posited "internal Orientalism" as a heuristically helpful but ultimately oversimplifying trope for a village-level setting crucially complicated by the implications of everyday intimacy. In short, this paper has shed ethnographic light on how and why stereotypes may persist in the face of lived complexity; not despite but because of the distortingly simplifying, self-referential generalizations they enable.

⁸⁷To be sure, distinct Khmu and Akha identities will remain salient for decades to come – even if in modernized, folklorized and/or Lao-icized forms. The ostensible Khmu-ization/Lao-ization of Sanjing's Akha is a topic beyond the scope of this paper. I hope to address this issue in future work. Cf. Évrard 2019; Petit 2020, 33ff.

⁸⁸Customarily, Phukor's Akha have married off their daughters without money changing hands.



Figure 3. Jabor (Akha) and Wan (Khmu) jointly consult chicken feet for omens following a spirit healing ritual (left), Akha traders deliver beer and crockery for a Khmu wedding (right). Credit: Paul-David Lutz.

In concluding, I offer some remarks on the ethics and politics of researching interethnic relations in contemporary Laos. Prefacing this paper is a statement from a local administrator, beseeching me not to write anything that could “divide the ethnicities.” While I have ultimately refused to fully sanitize Sanjing’s internal politics, I have labored to honor this plea. I have certainly refrained from revealing all. Rather, in giving as thick a description as ethically permissible, my aim has been to invite empathy. Acutely aware of the delicacy of the issues at hand, I am guided by a conviction that shedding nuanced light on power relations within ostensibly marginal societies is not only *not* incompatible with efforts to understand wider forces of domination, but is indispensable to such efforts.⁸⁹ At the same time, I am loath to undermine the LPRP’s perhaps most precious historical achievement: a solid modicum of interethnic accord. Compared to the bloodshed that engulfed Laos just a few decades ago, the state’s ideal of (hierarchical) solidarity among its multi-ethnic populace is, to a laudable degree, lived reality today – in Sanjing as elsewhere. Having thoroughly imbibed official rhetoric on the constant threat of outside sabotage, Sanjing’s Khmu had little reason to assume this ill-understood foreigner did not intend to, once again, divide the ethnicities. Given local histories, Khmu efforts to gatekeep my access to the Akha were utterly reasonable. Among many other things, I owe to Sanjing’s Khmu and Akha a greater appreciation for what has been achieved since Laos’ civil war, and greater understanding for the – to be sure, at times heavy-handed – suspicion with which this achievement is guarded. I hope this paper has shed light on interethnic dynamics in contemporary upland Laos while upholding the trust given to me by Sanjing’s people and their state. Besides, aren’t immigrants everywhere last in line, struggling to represent themselves? Who are we to judge?

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⁸⁹Ortner 1995.

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