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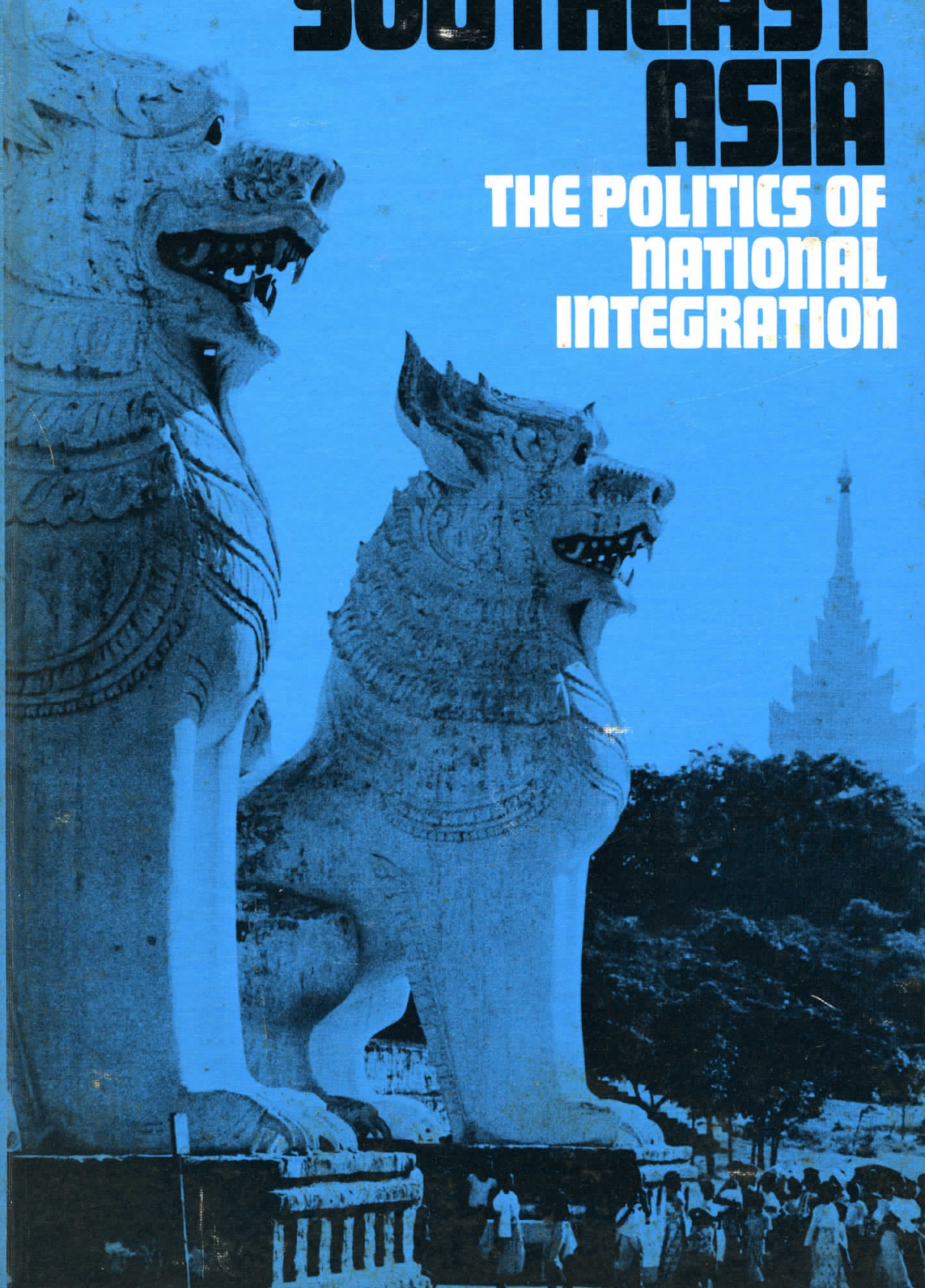


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edited by John T. McAlister, Jr.

SOUTHEAST ASIA

**THE POLITICS OF
NATIONAL
INTEGRATION**



SOUTHEAST ASIA THE POLITICS OF NATIONAL INTEGRATION

Edited by John T. McAlister, Jr.
Stanford University

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THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS IN LAOS

Joel M. Halpern

Obviously Buddhism is one of the more important components of Lao culture, but its significance is easy to misunderstand, particularly on the contemporary scene. During the 1960-61 civil war in Laos, American newspapers tirelessly repeated the platitude that the Royal Lao army refused to fight because the Buddhist beliefs of the soldiers went against killing. Another theme was that the Lao were not likely to become Communists because of their strong Buddhist beliefs. The latter point has been stressed by a number of high Lao officials, usually for its favorable propaganda influence in the West. At best these attitudes are exaggerations. The actual position of Buddhism and the role of religious beliefs themselves are much more subtle and diffuse.

Basic to an understanding of the role of Buddhism and the Sangha (Buddhist clergy) in politics and government is a knowledge of its structure and functions. The close relationship between government and clergy is formally defined. According to Article 7 of the Lao Constitution, Buddhism is declared the state religion and the king its Grand Protector. A royal ordinance of May 25, 1959 set forth this relationship in great detail. Although it appears to have been promulgated in response to mounting unrest among the Sangha, still it gives a picture of church-state relationships of more than momentary value.

The clergy is headed by a Phra sang kharath who resides in the royal capital. The other grades parallel the administrative hierarchy, with a Chao khana khoueng for the province, a Chao khana muong

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for the district, a Chao khana tasseng for each sub-district, and a Chao athikane wat for each pagoda.

Legally a new abbot is chosen by the local monks, the *nai ban*, and the village elders. The choice must be approved by the Chao khana khoueng in consultation with the Chao khoueng, who has authority to reject it and order a new election. This procedure continues up the scale with the government participating at all stages and implicitly having the right of veto. The Phra sang kharath is chosen by a meeting of the Chao khana khouengs from a list of candidates approved by the cabinet and presented by the Minister of Cults. Another important provision of these regulations is that all correspondence between the various administrative levels of the Sangha must pass through official secular government channels.

At each level tribunals to enforce discipline were set up, consisting of the ranking religious and secular officials plus additional members of the laity and priesthood. For infractions of religious and civil codes a bonze can be defrocked and punished with from six months to two years in jail. Specifically mentioned in the law is prohibition of the use of opium or alcohol. An additional provision is that government permission be required for the construction of a new pagoda. Not all of these provisions are new but they indicate a continued government desire to exercise administrative control over the priesthood.

Unlike the Christian clergy, the Buddhist bonzes do not necessarily take their vows for life. One's entry and exit from the Sangha is completely at the discretion of the individual. There is a minimum of restrictions. This attitude accords well with the emphasis on individual ethical responsibility, an important concept in Hinayana Buddhism.

The history of Europe is replete with examples of the political role of the clergy who at times concentrated political power in their own hands and at others shared it with the secular state. An analogous role has been impossible for the Buddhist clergy in Southeast Asia for at least two basic reasons. First, the Buddhist church possesses no properties of its own outside of the wat compound and, second, the composition of the Sangha constantly changes.

The clergy is supported entirely by the voluntary donations of the laity. This includes food, which is contributed ritually every day at sunrise, as well as garments and other needs. In addition, it is the laity who are responsible for keeping the wat buildings in repair, although the monks occasionally participate in this work. Contrary to the usual Western phrase the bonzes do not beg for contributions or charity; rather, it is considered a privilege to have the opportunity to give, since in this way *boun* or merit for a better rebirth is acquired.

Before considering the question of the political role of the priesthood in the light of current events in Laos, it is important to see how religion

shapes the Laos ethos. Hinayana Buddhism is the formal religion of less than half the population of Laos, limited to the ethnic Lao, several tribal Thai groups (some, like the Lu, still said to be in the process of missionization), and a few indigenous tribal groups who have adopted Buddhism to a certain extent as a result of efforts by the valley Lao. Important groups such as the Meo, Yao, and Tai Dam are not Buddhist.

Primarily in the rural areas but also persisting in the towns is a complex of beliefs involving the *phi*, spirits associated with various natural phenomena, one's home, one's village, and manifestations of the deceased. There are also strong Brahministic influences interwoven with the monarchy and the practice of Buddhism as it has developed in Laos. The Naga beliefs, for example, associated with the spirits of the river, are obviously part of an imported complex fused with traditional beliefs which themselves have been modified through time.

Although there are certain important differences between rural and urban manifestations of Buddhism (which will subsequently be explored), basic to both is a common set of shared principles which have been summed up as: "To refrain from all evil, to do what is good, to purify the mind."

Buddhism was effectively introduced into Laos in the fourteenth century by Khmer monks, who brought with them the Prabang statue of Buddha (subsequently a most important symbol of Lao Buddhism). Under Chao Setthatirath, who ruled the Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang (1548-71) from his capital at Vieng Chan (Vientiane), Buddhism prospered, and under Souligna Vongsa the first Buddhist schools were established. In 1778 the Thai captured Vientiane and took with them to Bangkok the sacred Emerald Buddha (reportedly obtained by the Lao earlier from Chiang Mai).

The basis of the religious literature of Laos is the *Tripitaka* or "Three Baskets," one of which, the *Vinaya*, sets forth the rules of monastic life. Others give the list of daily obligations, illustrated by examples from the life of Buddha. The *Jatakas*, or collection of tales about the former lives of Buddha, is an important part of this literature. These combine moral and satirical tales and parables in which Buddha appears in turn as ascetic, king, scholar, courtier, brahman, merchant, landlord, slave, potter, woodcutter, thief, actor, student, or sometimes as an animal such as serpent, lizard, bull, pig, or dog. The purpose is to show how, in all aspects of creation, one can realize perfection in oneself and serve the collective interests of the universe.

Thao Nhouty Abhay depicts in somewhat romantic although sincere terms the impact of Buddhist doctrine on the Lao of his youth, presented below in slightly condensed form:

We heard our fathers repeating all day long that life is suffering, that nothing belongs to us, that this present existence is only one among a thousand others,

that we were reaping the fruit of our past actions in former lives, that death could overtake us unexpectedly at any moment and that our salvation depended on ourselves alone. And then our fathers enjoined us to be humble and gentle, kind, just and charitable.

"To do charity" is *hed boun* . . . and the best of good deeds is a religious act . . .

Since childhood we were taught to walk around the temples, with flowers and candles in hand; as soon as we were able to talk, we, as well as our sisters and friends, pledged ourselves to offer our hair, our bones, our body and our hearts; following the tradition of our elders and mothers, we never dared to soil the floor of the temples, nor even dig the smallest hole in it.

By constantly hearing and repeating the Precepts in Pali, we would come to know them by ear, keenly impatient to hear our mothers repeating them to us as soon as we became monks, since we were told that such action was a source of great merit . . .

As with the Roman Catholic Church's festivals which are accompanied by profane rejoicings . . . so are our ceremonies celebrated in temples preceded or followed by demonstrations of our attachment to life: songs and Courts of Love, musical performances and sometimes banquets.

Whoever sees only one aspect of such festivals is making a mistake: the deep devotion of the Lao people dominates both the most profane rejoicings and the loftiest of religious ceremonies.

The Lao has given himself heart and soul to Good Law.

To be convinced of this fact, it is only necessary to observe the imperviousness of the population to any new religious doctrine.

[But] the Lao is tolerant, a tolerance sometimes verging on indifference . . .

As an image of the Buddha, the monk is respected and revered; everyone prostrates before him and no one doubts his good faith. No one dares accuse or even criticize him, since none of us has any idea of the extent of his knowledge . . .

In this country a gentleman is one who "listens to the monk's advice." Every Lao grows up under the supervision of a monk, his *khru*, who even after leaving the pagoda will remain his guide and friend, his counsellor and sometimes his confidant. Blessed is the Lao who has a male child; he can then organize a ceremony of ordination and offer him as a disciple to Buddha.

In the autumn of life, every Lao seeks refuge [in the pagoda]. Every Lao tries to find solace in the atonement for his past mistakes. Through meditation everyone prepares himself for his death to come.

These have been the idealized traditional patterns sanctified in the yearly cycle of Buddhist festivals. On the rural level the annual cycle of festivals serves to reinforce the reciprocal relationships between the villagers and the monks and maintains Buddhism as one of the central foci of Lao culture. It lends both variety and meaning to villagers' lives.

In urban areas Buddhism continues to have some of the same functions but also takes on a number of qualitatively different roles related to the nature of the towns themselves. Vientiane and Luang

Prabang have historically functioned mainly as the administrative and religious centers, respectively, or, to state the situation from another point of view, as the foci of administrative ritual and religious administration.

The relationship between Buddhism and the state is stressed on almost all public occasions, one of the most important of these being the That Luang festival in Vientiane during the twelfth month of the Lao calendar (approximately November). Originally this was a ceremony oriented toward the Kingdom of Vientiane as reflected in the oath taken by the officials following prayers recited by the monks:

We, Chao Muongs, Mandarins, Tassengs and Nai Bans of Vientiane, Borkihane, Tura-khom, and Vang-Vieng Districts, take the solemn oath of loyalty to His Majesty our August Sovereign. We swear to perform our duties and services loyally and to the best of our abilities . . .

Should one of us not keep this oath, let him be punished and may the following curses be cast upon him . . .

But should we, on the contrary, remain loyal, faithful and devoted, our happiness will increase and all misfortunes shall be spared us. May we then become rich so that we can give alms without restraint.

Today the That Luang festival lasts six days and includes a boun for the Simuong pagoda as well as a large trade fair. In addition to monks, the King and officials of the army, youth groups, and the diplomatic corps also take part. This festival combines ceremonially all the various levels of government—the monarchy, the hereditary prince of the south, the elected representatives, the army—and the civilian bureaucracy. Besides visiting the pagodas the King also gives his official sanction to commerce by inspecting the exposition booths. At the conclusion of the festival the Minister of Economy awards medals to certain exhibitors. This is followed by a final procession of the monks and then fireworks.

The Lao New Year celebration in Luang Prabang in April serves a similar function. Here the emphasis is again local, with ceremonies focusing around the statue of the Prabang. Royalty, members of the Assembly, civil servants, the army, and the diplomatic corps again participate. There is a small exposition of local crafts. The Buddhist nature of the government is again strongly affirmed. Not only the King but members of the National Assembly and high officials as well take turns anointing the Prabang with holy water.

Tribute is paid to the ancestral dieties of Luang Prabang with the ritual dance of the Phou Gneu Gna Gneu, representing the mythical first Lao man and woman and their son the Lion. This ceremony, held at Wat Visoun, is concluded when all three dancers bow to the King, to present him with the best wishes of all Lao past, present, and future. The close ties between the monarchy and the clergy are further

emphasized during this festival when the bonzes go in procession to the royal palace to partake of a meal provided by the King and Queen.

The interplay of sacred Buddhist influences, traditional governmental organization, and Western-derived ideas are thus clearly seen in Lao ceremonial life. Also indicative of this relationship was the elaborate celebration of the 2500th anniversary of Buddhism in Luang Prabang in 1957. The population of the town generously contributed time and money to build a monument to surround a Bodhi tree sent for the occasion from India. The celebration itself, however, was organized by the government, with the elite and representatives of Asian Buddhist countries participating extensively. In all these celebrations the key role is played by the King (or, as had been the case for several years prior to the late King's death, the Crown Prince). The monks were distinct but secondary. In essence these have been sacred ceremonials emphasizing the piety of the royal family.

National Independence Day (July 19th) and Constitution Day (May 11th) as celebrated in Luang Prabang provide examples of secular holidays in which a representative of the royal family participates symbolically but the active role is taken by the governor. The clergy lend support by offering prayers, and sometimes the ceremonies take place on the grounds of a pagoda. By contrast, completely secular ceremonies in which the clergy does not participate include occasions such as school graduations, youth conferences, United Nations Day, or World Health Day. It often appears that the King or his official representative participated formally only on those occasions sanctified by the presence of the priesthood. Important exceptions would be reviewing the army or other national secularly organized groups, such as the scouts. (On some occasions the monks bless the troops by offering prayers and sprinkling water on them, but this is not a frequent practice and there is no equivalent of a military chaplain.) Organizations such as the local Cercle social clubs, the Junior Chamber of Commerce, the Rotary Club, the Lao Red Cross, the League of Lao Women, and the major political parties appear to be largely if not entirely secular in outlook. Unlike Burma there has not been a formal Buddhist layman's association in Laos; perhaps this is because the former is officially a secular state.

In the past few years and particularly during crucial periods of the civil war, many Western news correspondents recorded bemusedly the strong emphasis by the Royal Lao government on holidays and ceremonies such as Lao Army Day, New Year's, and the cremation of the late King. The latter, particularly, was emphasized, supposedly as a means of bringing hostile factions together.

In European cultures in times of war there is a tendency to minimize elaborate ceremonial display and to concentrate on the pursuit of victory. It does seem possible that implicitly if not explicitly ceremonial

occasions in Laos have been given increased symbolic value by the Lao. In the face of uncertain Western allies and an enemy supported by the feared Vietnamese and explicitly but not actively by the vast country of China, the futility of a realistically pursued struggle may seem obvious. Therefore, there is much psychological comfort to be derived from emphasis on traditions, and while many of the implicit functions of these traditions have largely disappeared a potent symbolic value remains.

Both Buddhism and the monarchy have become progressively less important forces in Lao culture, and instead of supporting each other they have become, to a certain extent, mutually antagonistic. All the more reason, implicitly, to maintain the symbolic facade of unity. The monarchy and the associated elite seek the formal ceremonial sanctions of the clergy. The power base of the traditional elite is in the process of being destroyed; a rational solution to the dilemma is not possible and therefore, in desperation (in terms of Lao culture), attempts are made to emphasize the traditions of the past as well as to incorporate new elements into the old ceremonial pattern. Should the Communists assume complete control, it would appear unlikely that they would have the priesthood participating in, for example, a May Day parade.

Returning at this point to a discussion of the possibility of the Sangha assuming an active political role, it is important to recognize that a close symbiotic relationship between church and state can exist and at the same time that too direct participation in politics would tend to secularize the priesthood. If an individual wishes to assume secular power he leaves the priesthood. If an official wishes to increase his stature or retire temporarily from the political arena, he becomes a bonze for a time. Both types of behavior are common. Examples of the first are provided by the Santiphab candidates in the 1958 elections, some of whom had served as monks for as long as twenty years and in a few cases attained the rank of Maha. After leaving the priesthood a number became merchants. On the other hand, it is not at all unusual for Lao officials to become monks for brief periods. During the 2500th anniversary of Buddhism the normal operations of the royal capital practically came to a halt because so many officials decided at that time to become monks. These included, among others, the local chief of police and the army commander. Another example is provided by the late Viceroy, who became a monk and retired to a forest cave to meditate after he returned from his education in France. One point seems clear, however: although some Lao officials may temporarily enter the priesthood, no long-term monks have come to play an important role in Lao politics either among the Pathet Lao or the royal government. Characteristically, ex-monks in the Santiphab have occupied a marginal position in Lao politics.

This does not mean that the Sangha has no important political potential, as has become increasingly evident within the past few years. Underlying tensions came into the open in February 1960 when a group of monks demonstrated in Vientiane against the government, evidently in protest against the transfer of a teacher "for administrative reasons"—i.e. antigovernment activity. The progovernment newspaper *L'Independent*, representing the traditional elite, expressed chagrin and shock at this development. Hundreds of bonzes carrying placards and streamers "for the first time in the history of the kingdom, vigorously called for the complete autonomy of the clergy in all fields." Stressing its upper-class prejudices the paper referred to the gathering as a workers' type of demonstration and emphasized that such behavior went against the admonition of Buddha on the use of gestures and language. The article declared that the meeting was a result of Communist infiltration among the young bonzes and concluded with the observation that the superior Buddhist clergy had been derelict in its duties and should in the future look after the bonzes more carefully. The necessity of firm government intervention was also stressed.

The Pathet Lao newspaper *Lao Hak Xat* came to the defense of the monks and accused the royal government of being "ring-leaders of the pro-American clique of reactionaries" and of misusing Buddhists to make propaganda for their reactionary policy:

[The bonzes] have always been fervent believers. They are also patriots and peace-loving people anxious to see the country in peace so that Buddhism, the national religion, may flourish, and Buddhists may worship freely. The customs and constitution of Laos have always considered Buddhism as the national religion and the Buddhist monks as virtuous, patriotic, and peace-loving people who care for the moral life of the people. In the history of Laos, the Buddhist community has always kept its own internal organization managed by monks. Never have we seen such arbitrary measures as arresting and dismissing monks and setting up special "courts" run by the administration to try monks.

Subsequently, this theme of "United States imperialists and their henchmen" as the true enemy of the Laotian people, Buddhism, peace, and morality has been further developed. Bonzes and religious people have been called upon to safeguard "Buddhism and peace."

The attitude of the Pathet Lao toward Buddhism, as broadcast from North Vietnam and reflected in their newspaper in Laos, is obviously expedient. Yet it has undoubtedly been successful, despite the fact that directly across the border in Yunnan and North Vietnam, and even in the long-time centers of Pathet Lao power within Laos, monks have been persecuted, driven from their pagodas, and in some cases forced to work in the fields.

At the same time, there is no doubt that the royal government has taken suppressive measures against individuals in the clergy. This situation seems the more surprising in view of the great degree of participation by the King and many high Lao officials in Buddhist ceremonies. But in this case a distinction must be made between bonzes and the Buddhist doctrine.

There are several other explanations for this seeming paradox. When Nhouy Abhay wrote his article on Buddhism in Laos in 1956, he saw Lao Buddhism in urgent need of reform. He depicted the monks as largely ignorant of Pali, and in some cases illiterate in Lao as well. Prayers were poorly known and the bonzes were lax in observance of the monastic rules. He claimed that reform was made difficult because of the Buddhist emphasis on individual salvation. His article contained a plea for leadership in religious affairs, to be exercised by a small group of enlightened monks who would, supported by the laity, help to establish "a more learned, dignified, and austere clergy." Although it might be something of an overstatement to say that his warning, "we have made Buddhism a doctrine of apathy, which is leading us to our doom," has been fulfilled, yet it seems that the major forces in Laos—the traditional elite, the Pathet Lao, and the clergy themselves—have all contributed to a weakening of the moral influence of the Sangha.

It does not appear, however, that any simple explanation can suffice. In part the explanation may be historical. Buddhism has usually tended, as has been pointed out previously, to prosper when aligned with a dynamic state, and Lao Buddhism is said to have reached its height in the seventeenth century, during which period many famous temples were built and "the monks were respected and well looked after, their morals were of a high standard, and they strictly adhered to the rules of the Community." The devastation of the Kingdom of Vientiane, attacks from Yunnan, and finally French colonization, all contributed to the decline of Lao Buddhism as a national institution. The French appear not to have interfered with the Buddhist church, and they even restored many national shrines, such as the That Luang, but their strong secular views inevitably had an impact on the emerging generations of Lao elite. Thus the wat, which formerly enjoyed a complete educational monopoly, was transformed into a minor adjunct of the secular education system.

As with all aspects of Lao culture, Buddhism, too, is marginal to Thai culture. Those monks who have received any advanced training have had to secure it outside the country, largely in Thailand. Visitors from Thailand have remarked on the lack of sophistication of Lao monks.

Connected with this historically marginal position has been the extreme provincialism and low educational standards of the Lao

Buddhist monks. In conversations some naively inquired about the status of Buddhism in America, but generally there is no strong curiosity about other countries. There appears to be no felt link with Buddhists in other countries. Lao monks do not concern themselves with what is happening in China or Vietnam and, outside of a few abbots who were at the time following with interest the events in Tibet and appeared to realize the implications, there is no widespread concern about the situation in that country. Neither has there been much evidence, despite the claims of the Pathet Lao, of consciousness of national unity or patriotism in any comprehensive sense. Unlike certain institutionalized religious systems, Buddhism—at least as it has developed in Laos—does not appear to involve itself directly with any kind of nationalistic movement. Again, the strong Buddhist ethic of individual responsibility doubtless plays a role in this respect.

Although little specific documentary data is available there is considerable inferential evidence to suggest that to some extent the priesthood and particularly the novices are inversely class-structured. The free schooling and boarding facilities are attractive to young people from impoverished homes. Further, a pagoda in the town often provides a convenient living place for the poor country boy. Children of the elite and officials appear to be universally enrolled in the secular school system. It appears that not a few youths have consciously used the priesthood as a means of securing an inexpensive education. Much of their concern seems to focus on the ways in which they might be able to supplement their limited religion-oriented learning. For example, many of the young bonzes show a great desire to learn English since they feel it will open up government jobs to them. At the same time they maintain strongly anti-American attitudes and also oppose the policies of the royal government in a general way. One prominent government minister complained of how he had been besieged by young monks looking for jobs. They are not stimulated by their religious studies, lack strong discipline, and are keen on town life. It is not surprising that the Pathet Lao have seized upon these latent dissatisfactions.

The American aid program has also contributed to this situation. At one time being a bonze was a uniformly respected career for a young man. Under the American aid program the army and police were very much built up. These forces received good pay and smart uniforms plus, in certain cases, access to supplies and/or to graft, thus increasing the potential income from the job. It has become possible for even young officers to acquire cars and other luxuries. The standard of living of the elite themselves, who have controlled the aid program, has also risen, creating for the first time a significant gap in standards of living within the Lao population.

Strongly influenced by a French-type education and a general secular

background, many of the elite, particularly the younger ones, have become less devout Buddhists—so much so in fact that in 1959 the government issued an edict requiring officials to attend religious services at specified intervals. The Pathet Lao have entered this situation by professing their great piety and by regularly visiting wats and stressing the privations they have endured (while fighting the royal army). This approach has been well received by many of the monks, including some of the older ones. Sensing this development, the government has increased its formal restrictions on the priesthood, thereby intensifying the conflict situation.

An additional factor may have been the lack of Buddhist lay movements in Laos such as have existed in other countries of Southeast Asia. This type of organization might have provided a moderating bridge between the government and the clergy.

In different ways the royal government, unintentionally, and the Pathet Lao, subtly, have both been undermining the traditional religious system in attempting to use it for their respective political ends.

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