CHAPTER 4

Religious Place Making: Civilized Modernity and the Spread of Buddhism among the Cheng, a Mon-Khmer Minority in Southern Laos

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Introduction

Since the introduction of the reform process in 1986, and more openly in the recent decade, Laos has been undergoing an increasing process of ‘re-Buddhification,’ as Grant Evans (1998: 67) has aptly remarked. On a general level one could say that under the rule of the Lao Communist Party certain elements of Buddhism—and with that of ethnic Lao culture—are now again promoted as national culture. While the status of non-Buddhist ethnic minorities was temporarily upgraded, and Buddhism was abolished as a state religion after the revolution in 1975, a long standing alliance between the Lao monastic order (Pali: saṅgha) and the Lao communist movement (the Pathet Lao) secured Buddhism’s survival and influence (Ladwig, 2009). This ‘return’ of Buddhism, its civilizing potential and ethnic Lao hegemony is not only linked to the political sphere and state rituals, but increasingly also pervades everyday morality, expected standards of behavior and etiquette. After the decline of the new socialist man, and the shift from communist rhetoric to nationalism, state agents now use a form of rationalized, nationalist Buddhism to cover up the debris of the socialist project. Although Buddhism was attacked by communist propaganda, this critique and the associated institutional restructurings also produced a stronger link between politics and Buddhism. Vatthana Pholsena (2006: 70) describes this state sponsored Buddhism as “a secularized image of Buddhism in order to reconcile the official ideology and the religion.” In order to maintain its power structure, the Lao government now promotes a ‘national’ Buddhism on a variety of levels, starting from the center, Vientiane, where communist party officials emulate Buddhist kings through the worship of national Buddhist relic shrines and statues of deceased Buddhist kings (Ladwig, 2015) trickling down in various forms to remote provinces such as Attapeu, the most southern province of Laos where I carried out the main part of my research.

The ethno-religious configuration in Attapeu is marked by a pattern in which a long established, but relatively small group of Buddhist ethnic Lao living in
the valleys of the Sekhaman and the Sekong rivers, is surrounded by a variety of Mon-Khmer groups. Most, but by no means all of these mostly non-Buddhist groups live in the mountainous regions that surround the valley where the provincial capital, Attapeu, is located. According to Volker Grabowsky (1995: 113), Attapeu “is considered to be the heartland of the Mon-Khmer speaking groups” and the eleven officially recognized Mon-Khmer groups outnumber the ethnic Lao. Ethnic minorities in this rather remote province of Laos have endured various forms of internal and external colonialisms (Baird, 2003: 25–26) that positioned them spatially and culturally at the margins of what is still today considered by most Lao as the cradle of ‘civilization,’ namely Buddhist lowland society. The communist revolution in 1975 was supposed to radically alter their former social status as kha (slave, subject, person from an ethnic minority) and introduced an ambivalent politics of recognition, rewarding them for their participation in the war against the US. The Lao multi-ethnic people (pasason banda pau) were supposed to be united and the new socialist man was imagined to transcend ethnic and religious affiliations (Tappe, 2008: 49–50).

This essay explores processes of Buddhification in southern Laos and analyzes the slow, but constant spread of Buddhism among Mon-Khmer groups in Attapeu. I focus here especially on the Cheng, a Mon-Khmer minority of about 8000. Some villages of this group are located in the lowlands, and have a long-standing relationship with certain monasteries, whereas others have only recently come into contact with Buddhism as practiced by the ethnic Lao. I specifically examine how this hegemonic process spatializes Buddhism, its teachings (Pali: dhamma) and rituals. This spatialization—in this essay, understood as “to locate both physically and conceptually, social relations and social practice in social space” (Low, 2005: 111)—draws the Cheng and other minorities increasingly into the religious and social life-worlds of the ethnic lowland Lao. Although processes of religious and ethnic shifting have been an inherent feature of many regions of mainland Theravāda Southeast Asia (Leach, 1954; Sadan and Robinne, 2007), I propose that with the increased reach of the nation state this process is now accelerated and takes on new forms. Through

1 Grabowsky also cites Becket’s report, in which, at the time of the establishment of the French colonial regime in the province in 1893, he remarked that “in the productive province of Attopue alone there is a population of 36000 Khas and 6000 Lao” (Grabowsky, 1995). The situation today is somewhat different, but according to the latest census around 63% of the population (approx. 115,000 inhabitants) belong to the eleven recognized Mon-Khmer groups, whereas about only 36% are classified as ethnic ‘lowland’ Lao (NSC, 2007: 17–18).

2 Houtman (1999: 137) defines Buddhification for the case of Burma as an attempt to convert others. Buddhicisation is defined as an “inclination towards interpreting through Buddhism” (1999: 137–138). I think that these usually go hand in hand and will in this essay use Buddhification to describe both processes.