

BOOK REVIEWS

Bouté, Vanina. *En miroir du pouvoir. Les Phounoy du Nord Laos: ethnogenèse et dynamiques d'intégration*. Paris, École française d'Extrême-Orient, Monographie no. 194, 2011. 328 pp. + 23 illustrations + 5 schémas + 9 cartes.

Reviewed By

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Until recently, few foreigners had succeeded in getting long-term access to Laos' countryside following the communist victory in 1975. In the mid- to late 1990s, the situation began (very gradually) to improve as the country opened up to foreign investors, tourists, NGOs, and, on a smaller scale, scholars. Though it was no longer near-impossible to obtain research authorization, political surveillance, mixed with suspicion bordering on paranoia in some villages, was still very much prevalent when Vanina Bouté began her doctoral fieldwork in Phongsaly (Laos' northernmost province) in 1999. Her highly readable and fascinating study of the Phunoy, a Tibeto-Burmese group inhabiting the upland district also named Phongsaly, draws on 32 months of field research conducted over six years (including one year in a village) and covering over a hundred villages. This is an impressive feat.

In strong disagreement with studies that have portrayed an antagonistic and rigid representation of the relationship between, on the one hand, a 'predatory' state and, on the other, "marginalized" or "distant" ethnic groups, Bouté argues on the contrary that the construction and transformation of Phunoy identities are intimately linked with the interactions the Phunoy-speaking populations have had with the successive dominant powers in the region: the Lao-Tai kingdom of Luang Prabang (in the eighteenth-nineteenth century), then the French colonial administration (from the late nineteenth century until 1954), and finally, the Lao revolutionary movement (1954-1975) that took power nationwide in 1975. In other words, in pursuit of its own survival over the past two centuries, the Phunoy group has constantly adapted to the dominant power's rule – to the point of mirroring (to some extent) the latter's cultural and political system.

Bouté develops her argument in three parts, applying a dual approach that combines historical investigation and synchronic analysis: the first section traces back the ethnogenesis of the Phunoy group to the pre-colonial times leading up to the French period; the middle part discusses the changes in Phunoy religious beliefs and practices, partly as a consequence of the communist administration in Phongsaly Province from 1954 onwards; the final section focuses on today's impacts on Phunoy society and identity as a result of a rural development policy engineered by the current regime, that is, the resettlement of upland populations to lowland areas, particularly from the early

1990s. In each section, three fundamental and intertwined aspects of the Phunoy society are examined – its socio-political structure, religious organization, and territorial configuration – for all three have changed under the actions of successive dominant powers and the concomitant responses of the Phunoy to these actions.

The Phunoy officially numbered about 40, 000 individuals in 2005. On the ground, however, the ethnic boundaries of the Phunoy population are not clear-cut; for instance, several smaller neighboring groups, though linguistically and culturally similar to them, bear another name. In the first three chapters, Bouté deftly shows the political and territorial dynamics behind the creation of the Phunoy as a distinct ethnic group in the late nineteenth century. Until the mid-nineteenth century, Phunoy-speaking groups, who had settled in the uplands of today's Phongsaly Province around the eighteenth century, did not form a homogenous population; rather, a person identified himself or herself with a clan or a village. What initiated the first process of differentiation among the scattered Phunoy-speaking groups was the act of an external power, i.e. the king of Luang Prabang. The latter bequeathed the status of border guards to some members of these groups in the second half of the nineteenth century. They received a "Book of Land" (*peum kongdin*) and the title of "Master of the Land" (*Chao ti din*), as well as political and land rights in return for defending the kingdom's realm; they were also named after *Phay* or *Kha Pay* (meaning "free man", therefore stressing their special status distinct from the other upland peoples in the vicinity). A second factor of differentiation occurred among these *Phay*: those located on the right bank of the River Ou (one of the main rivers in northern Laos) enjoyed relative autonomy compared to the other border guards settled on the left bank of the river, who were more dependent upon their Lao neighbors. Most importantly, their political system and territorial organization resembled those of their Tai neighbors (i.e. bounded, hierarchical and led by ennobled leaders) to such an extent that their domain acquired the name (among the Tai) of *Muang Phunoy* ("the territory of small (or low-status) people" in Lao). The French colonial administration later heightened the Tai-like features of the *Muang Phunoy* by strengthening its hierarchical and centralized structure and by keeping the Phunoy in their privileged role of intermediary between the ruling authority and the other upland populations (Akha, Khmu, etc.). Progressively, the *Phay* on the right bank of the river adopted the name Phunoy, which originally referred to a social status and a territory. The descendants of the Phunoy-speaking border guards on the left bank of the river, however, despite claiming to be Phunoy as well, are only known today as *Phay* by the rest of the population in the Phongsaly district.

The second part of the book focuses on the continuing changes in the Phunoy religious system, which are explained, in part, as the Phunoy's adaptation to the dominant power's policies and as a consequence of the group's own internal political and territorial transformations. Among the upland peoples that were targeted by the Pathet Lao's religious purges in the 1960s (spirit cults, practiced by Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, were deemed "superstitious" and "wasteful" by the Lao revolutionary movement), the Phunoy – who are Buddhists – were the most responsive of all to the Communists' cleansing campaign, and, as such, kept in line with their close (or closer) relationship with the dominant power while aiming to project an image of a "modern" ethnic group distinct from the other "backward" highland populations. However, Bouté

shows that the weakening of spirit cults (or ancestor cults) among the Phunoy was already taking place before the 1960s, and, as such, it was a trend that the communist purges only succeeded in hastening. Indeed, the possession of a Book of Land among the Phunoy, especially those living on the right bank of the River Ou, led to a process of political consolidation and territorialization that gradually ascribed to the Master of the Land – ruling over a supra-village domain – greater prominence than that ascribed to members of the villages’ founding clans (whose traditional authority subsequently diminished). The further the Phunoy’s political (and ritual) territory expanded, the weaker the ritual legitimacy of the ancestral figure of one village’s founding clan became.

Nonetheless, spirit cults have not completely disappeared from the Phunoy religious system and its associated practices. In Chapter Four, Bouté describes in minute detail the ways Buddhist monks, lay heads of pagodas, and officiants in charge of spirit cults conjointly perform different rites in order to fend off misfortune of all kinds (poor harvest, illness, natural disasters, accidents, mental disorder, etc.). Though Buddhist officiants have been playing a more visible role in these rites in recent years, their power is insufficient to communicate with spirits; therefore, non-Buddhist spirit specialists are still called upon, mainly to prevent or to eliminate disorders. The next chapter further demonstrates the continuing complementarity between Buddhism and spirit cults both in doctrine and practice in today’s Phunoy religious system. Following the 1960s religious purges, it is said that spirits (including villagers’ ancestors) have not been eliminated but displaced to the forest, i.e. non-human space. However, as Bouté demonstrates, both spaces – the village and the forest – overlap on some occasions, such as during the New Year’s celebrations, when the village is “open” to outer spirits and ancestors (who also receive offerings from villagers in the forest and the fields) in order to foster land fertility and, more generally, to improve the village’s wealth.

The third and last section examines the latest systemic transformations that Phunoy society and identity have endured. These changes were initially government-induced. In the 1990s, the Lao authorities introduced a relocation policy throughout the country that has moved thousands of shifting cultivator households, mostly of ethnic minority origins, from upland to lowland areas over the past two decades. Resettlement has been promoted as a means for rural development and is also used (though not acknowledged) as a mechanism for the control of politically suspect minority groups. There is thus a general characterization of the highlands by the Lao government as areas embodying a range of “problems” that can be solved by encouraging (with variable degrees of coercion) upland peoples to relocate to lowland areas and by engendering drastic changes in these populations’ livelihoods. This rural development policy has hit the Phunoy hard: in the mid-1990s, 350 households were resettled (i.e. 20% of the total population of the district of Phongsaly); another 135 families were relocated between 1998 and 2004; entire Phunoy villages have disappeared, etc. These displacements have had serious effects on the Phunoy’s social, territorial, and kinship organization. It has, for instance, become increasingly difficult for remaining villagers to rely on the collective support of one’s lineage or village community for agricultural or household works following the departure of (the often younger) members of the village, or to perform rituals that require the presence of one’s lineage’s members, many of whom have left. And yet, in the last decade or so, an important number of Phunoy have

voluntarily settled in lowland areas and growing urban centers, turning a seemingly authoritarian policy of forced relocation into a strategy of social mobility and integration by sending their children to schools and, for the adults, by entering the state administration or the army in town. In Bouté's words, "since their appointment as border guards, to be Phunoy means, in their view, serving the State. And now serving the State is to be a civil servant" (p. 240). At the present time, the Phunoy dominate Phongsaly Capital's administration (80% of the local officials are Phunoy) and represent the largest ethnic group in the capital, where Phunoy language is the lingua franca.

The Phounoy's privileged position (as far as Phongsaly Province is concerned) between the ruling power and neighboring upland populations is not unique and can be found among other upland groups, such as (formerly) the Kasak in Luang Prabang Province or the Khouen in Nan principality (today a Thai province). As Bouté points out in her conclusion, all these groups came about and developed because of their relationship with a regional political power. In arguing this, she acknowledges her intellectual debt to classic anthropological works, such as those of Edmund R. Leach or Georges Condominas¹, who pioneered studies of the peripheral regions of Mainland Southeast Asia from the perspective of their populations and the latter's relations with lowland (Tai) regional powers. What is, however, remarkable about the Phunoy, and persuasively shown by Bouté, is the *longue durée* of their status as the state's servants: from pre-colonial times to post-socialist era they have complied with and adapted to (albeit more or less consciously) the ruling authority's policies and ideology. But their ability to negotiate change and, more extraordinarily, to use it for their own ends may come at the expense of their own ethnic identity in a context of ever-accelerating economic development in Laos and the region. No longer territorially bound and cut off from their lineages, Phunoy individuals and families, who are now scattered all over northern Laos, may be gradually losing their ethnic markers. Bouté rightly leaves the question of the future of the Phunoy society and identity open, as any answers to it for now would be highly speculative. Her fine book, rich in its ethnographic materials, sophisticated in its claims, and compelling in its arguments, is essential reading for anyone interested in the ethno-history of the peoples of northern Laos, the political and religious anthropology of hill societies, and socio-cultural change in upland Southeast Asia.

¹ Edmund R. Leach, *Les systèmes politiques des hautes terres de Birmanie*, Paris : Maspero, 1972. [*Political Systems of Highland Burma: a Study of Kachin Social Structure*, London: Bell & sons, 1954]; Georges Condominas, *L'espace social. A propos de l'Asie du Sud Est*, Paris : Flammarion, 1980.