

Ethnographic Notes on the “Ordination” of Novices in Mueang Sing (Northern Laos)

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Introduction

According to official statistics, 67% of the population of Laos is Buddhist¹; every young man is supposed to be “ordained”² during his life for a fixed period. In Laos, novices are young boys, usually between 10 and 20 years old. They have several names according to different regions and dialects. The Thais call them “*nen*” or “*samanen*” (Pali. *sāmaṇera*) while the Lao more commonly call them “*chua*”. The Lue generally call novices “*pha*” while the Lao use this term to designate monks. The Lue also distinguish recently “ordained” novices, called *pha noi*, from older novices, called *pha long*. Traditionally, at the end of the novitiate, if a boy decides to leave the monastery, the title of *mai* is added to his name.

The monastic community distinguishes novices from monks (Pali. *bhikkhu*; Lue. *tu*; Lao. *khuba*). There are therefore two degrees in the rite of entry into religion. The first phase of the rite is called *pabbajjā* (Lao. *banphasa*). It corresponds to admission to monastic life as a novice. The rite continues for individuals aged at least 20 who want to be admitted as a monk. This second phase is named *upasampadā* (acceptance). For validating the *upasampadā*, it is necessary to have validated the *pabbajjā*. Unlike monks, novices do not receive “ordination” within a space limited by ritual boundaries (Pali. *sima*). Young boys who have been admitted as novices have to follow ten rules while individuals who have been “ordained” as monks follow two hundred and twenty-seven rules.

From the beginning of the 20th century until the 1950s, the monastic institution was the main organization to dispense the learning of writing and reading in Laos (Condominas, 1968; Pathammavong, 1954). In recent decades, the school has gradually become the most popular educational institution in Laos. There were 883,938 students gathered on primary school benches in 2012 and there were 510,940 students in secondary school for the same year³. Preferring to follow public schooling, there are fewer and fewer young Laotians entering monasteries. However, the majority of young boys from Tai Lue villages - a Tai speaking group living in northern Laos - continue to be “ordained”. While the new generation of boys can choose to solely study at public schools,

¹ Lao Front for National Construction, Religions in Lao PDR, Vientiane, Department of Religions, 2008.

² I write here the word “order” and further “ordination” in quotation marks because it imperfectly translates the term *buat* used by the Tai. For the sake of accuracy and not use, I should use only “*buat*” as proposed by Louis Gabaude (2010). The word “ordination” obviously comes from a Western lexicon heir to multi-secular Christian usages. More than “ordination”, the term “*buat*” must be understood as a departure, an exit from the world, to leave one's family voluntarily to take the habit of religion for good or bad reasons. It can also be understood as “to be consecrated”, “to devote oneself to religious life” or “to consecrate an object”. Thus prevails the idea of distinguishing oneself from the common and of setting aside worldly life. However, the common use of the word “ordination” is widely accepted in all research on Buddhism. For these reasons, I keep the term “ordination” to translate the word *buat*.

³ Source: Ministry of Education and Sports Center for Education Statistics and Information Technology.

the young boys from these villages prefer to attend training in the monastery and at school. Why does this young generation continue to enter the monastery, and what does the rite of *pabbajjā* represent for these communities in Northern Laos? The purpose of this paper is essentially ethnographic. It is a question of describing a ceremony specific to this community - the rite of *pabbajjā* - which has been little studied. Indeed, if the ordination rite of Tai Lue monks in Mueang Sing (Bizot, 2000) or the ordination ceremony of Tai Lue Buddhist dignitaries (Lafont and Bitard, 1957) have been well described, an ethnographic study on the admission of young Tai Lue boys to monastic life remains to be done in Laos. The entry into the religious life of Tai Lue monasteries is marked by five phases. Each of these phases will be studied successively. In the first part dealing with the preparation for the novitiate, I will give some contextual information background information, in particular to explain the importance still placed on the rite of ordination in Tai Lue villages. The second part will present the essential role of the lay people who sponsor the ordination ceremony. The interest of this part is also to emphasize the social function of the “ordination” of the novices to Mueang Sing. The third part will deal with the preliminary rites of the rite of “ordination” of the novices. In the

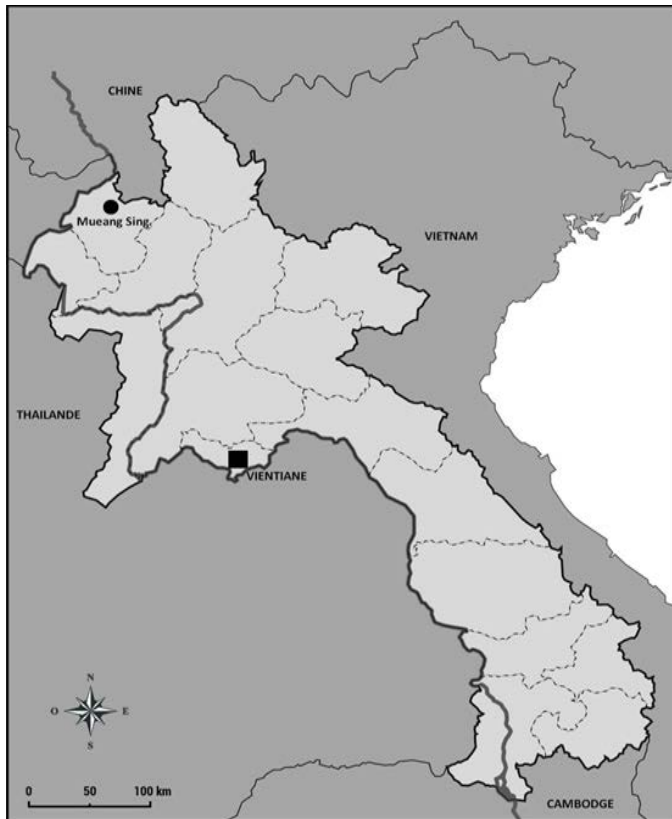


Figure1: Mueang Sing in northern Laos

fourth part, I will describe the ceremony of admission to monastic life as I observed it in a monastery of Mueang Sing in 2010. Finally, this article will discuss the phase of validation of the ordination rite. In order to validate the rite of the *pabbajjā*, the novices must follow a special program called “*kam sam mue*” (acts of three days).

This survey was conducted in Mueang Sing in northern Laos (Fig. 1) over two consecutive years and in two monasteries in the district⁴. Apart from the Lue, whose total number is about 14,000 (figures from the Mueang Sing Planning Bureau)⁵, the population of the Mueang Sing Plain is made up of several ethnic groups, mainly the Tai Neua, the Phounoy, Lao, Tai Dam and some Chinese Yunnan. The inhabitants of the mountain villages

⁴ All the data was collected during my field work for my thesis on didactic practices in Tai Lue monasteries. For that, I carried out two five-month survey visits in northern Laos, the first in 2010 and the second in 2011. As part of a postdoctoral fellowship, I conducted a third survey in 2014 on the social mobility strategies of novices and monks from Mueang Sing.

⁵ According to P-B. Lafont (1973), they were 4519 in 1960 out of the 7000 recorded in the province of Luang Namtha.

are mainly Yao, Hmong and Akha, who belong to the Tibetan-Burmese ethno-linguistic family.

Before presenting some ethnographic notes on the rite of *pabbajjā* to Mueang Sing, it is necessary to first describe the period of preparation of the boy for monastic life. This period is considered by the Lue as important since it determines if the candidate is fit to pass the rite of *pabbajjā*. This phase is particularly marked by the learning of *tham* (the traditional scripture of the Lue), the recitation of formulas and the constituent actions of the rite of *pabbajjā*.

I. The period of preparation for the novitiate

Before passing the rite of the *pabbajjā* (Lao. *banphasa*) that consecrates novices, young boys, often seven to twelve years old, adopt the status of *kha ñom* (monastery boy, candidate for novitiate). Living in the monastery, one of their main tasks is to serve monks and novices. In addition, they have routine activities to perform such as watering plants or cleaning, considered as exercises to practice discipline and create merit. The *kha ñom* learn to read and to write the *tham*⁶ script which is considered a prerequisite for entering religion as a novice. At the same time, they learn the basic principles of Buddhism, such as the five precepts⁷.

The learning of the *tham* is an important factor to pass from the first period (preparation for entry into religion) to the second (the novitiate). The *tham*, the writing used to compose religious or secular texts, is a symbol of Tai Lue identity because they possess their own script, which was used for writing Buddhist texts, legal texts, local chronicles, etc. Learning to read *tham* enables the boys to read manuscripts including Jātaka⁸ or recitations (*sut*) used for rites. For the Lao and the Lue, the acquisition of reading and writing has always allowed the individual to become a literate villager. Often, when a monk decided to leave the monastery, he became an influential person in the village by performing duties as a lay leader of the monastery (*achan vat*)⁹. In this regard, Georges Condominas noted:

“Whether they are *salavat*, *achan* or the master of the *Phi khoun vat* ceremony, their functions are always entrusted to prominent personalities of the village, men of experience enjoying relative ease, and renowned for their honesty, their piety, and, especially for the *achan*, endowed with a good memory (these appear a little, at the village level, as scholars in religious matters); this supposes that they have had long stays under the frock” (1968: 109).

The former monks who are called *nan* in Lue or *thit* in Lao very often became various specialists of the village because they were the only ones who knew how to read and write in *tham*. According to Stanley J. Tambiah, they could also be officiants of non-Buddhist rites such as the *sukhuan* (calling back the souls) or invitation to vital spirits to join the body, specialists in medicinal plants (*mo ya*) or astrologers (*mo du*). Stanley J.

⁶ The term *tham* comes from the Pali word *Dhamma*, which means the law or the teaching of the Buddha.

⁷ Do not kill, do not steal, do not have sex, do not lie, do not drink alcohol.

⁸ Collection of stories of the past lives of Gautama Buddha. The most popular is the Vessantarajātaka.

⁹ The *achan vat* is the one who leads the ritual for the villagers in the presence of the monks.

Tambiah (1968) took a close interest in what a culture of literacy represents in a Buddhist village:

“Except in the case of a few persons, monkhood is of temporary duration. Some of the ex-monks who have reached the level of knowledge and practice of ritual expertise. Buddhism and Buddhist rites are allied to the *mau khwan* (and the art of the physician) because they are rites of auspicious ‘charging’ and do not traffic with malevolent spirits (*phi*). The monk does not practice *khwan* rites; but he is not opposed to them and can himself be the client or patient” (1968: 92).

The culture of literacy acquired in a monastery not only serves Buddhist rites but is also used by the former monks to ensure certain non-Buddhist rites of the village. Finally, the knowledge of the *tham* script makes it possible to copy manuscripts and to partially ensure the preservation of local texts. By reproducing manuscripts, the texts are preserved and are then transmitted to the youngest, the novices, through the monks who essentially teach the art of reading them (Figure 2). The ability to read these texts is thus decisive for the reproduction of rituals.



Figure 2: Learning *tham* at Vat Chiang Chai (Mueang Sing, 2011)

In the first instance, the *kha ñom* must learn the rite of the *pabbajjā* that they have to pass. They have their heads shaved but wear ordinary clothes. They sometimes wear a white scarf over the left shoulder and tied on the right hip. This is a recognizable sign

indicating their status. According to Khuba Kham Ngoen, the head of Vat Doi Daeng in Bokeo Province, *kha ñom* retain this status until they know the formulas of the rite of *pabbajjā* by heart (fig. 3). Generally, they are *kha ñom* for less than a year. Learning the formulas of *pabbajjā* is not enough to pass the rite of admission. The *kha ñom* must also learn the actions accompanying the formulas pronounced during the rite. It is a matter of learning to coordinate bodily positions such as prostrating oneself, kneeling, standing up, with the recitation of appropriate formulas at the appropriate times.



Figure 3: The *kha ñom* of Vat Tin That practicing reciting the formulas of the rite of *pabbajjā* (Mueang Sing, 2011)

Entry into the novitiate must generally be subject to a consensus between parents and children. If the parents decide to “order” their child, he must agree otherwise it would be considered a demerit (*bap*) on their part. Conversely, if the child wants to be “ordained”, parents cannot oppose the “ordination”. If this were the case, it would also be experienced as a source of demerit. Indeed, “ordination” is always a source of merit for parents. The term “*buat thot thaen bun khun pho mae*” meaning “to be ordained to render benefits to the parents” expresses the first motivation of “ordination” among the Lue. Beyond bringing merit to his parents, a young boy who is “ordained” seeks both to live with his friends and to study more easily.

The transition between the status of *kha ñom* and that of *pha* (novice) is marked by the transitory status of *luk kaeo* (*luk*: child; *kaeo*: that which is precious, virtue, the divine)¹⁰. On the day of the ceremony, they adopt the status of *luk kaeo* before they dress for the ceremony. This status can be easily recognized by the dress code worn once in their lifetime. It is especially during this phase that we can observe the relationship that is established between the applicant and his sponsor.

¹⁰ This term refers to the boy who is about to enter religion.

II. Sponsorship of the ceremony of “ordination”

Admission to monastic life as a novice is an important event and the ritual procedure is three days long. The festivities begin the day before the *van sin*, day of the precepts, which takes place on the 8th and 15th days of the increasing and decreasing moons. The Lue, as well as the Yuan of northern Thailand, give as much if not more importance to the “ordination” of the novices as to that of the monks (Fig. 4). Stanley J. Tambiah (1976) advanced as an initial explanation the influence of Burmese monastic traditions. For the Lan Na region, Saeng Chandrangaam (1980) proposed a similar interpretation, “Influenced by the Burmese tradition, samanera (novice under the age of twenty) became more popular than bikkhu ordination (full monk ordination)” (1980: 96).



Figure 4: Rite of the *upasampadā* in the *bosot* of Vat Chiang Chai (Mueang Sing, 2011)

The day of “ordination” is chosen by the *pho ñok* and *mae ñok*¹¹ who sponsor the ceremony of admission of children who are not theirs. Parents do not finance the “ordination” of their own child but that of another child. It seems that the principle is related to the over-accumulation of the merits obtained. A father already acquires merit by allowing his son to enter religion. Moreover, if he sponsors another child to enter religion, he gets more merit. In a way, we can say that he “doubles” his capital of merit. The text *anisong buat* (“the benefits of entering religion”) states that by “ordering” one’s

¹¹ These two terms are equivalent to the Lao terms of *pho hak* and *mae hak* meaning the adoptive father and the adoptive mother.

son, the parent enjoys a life in paradise for four *kappa*¹². The other advantage of such a practice is for the villagers to reinforce self-help or the social bond. Thus, links are created or strengthened between families. The *pho ñok* and the new novice are bound forever. The boy will remain grateful to his donor and the donor will consider him as an adopted son who once allowed him to earn merit. The novice will even help his *pho ñok* work in the fields when necessary. A villager from Ban¹³ Chiang Chai told me, “It’s like a real son but he is not born from us. As soon as there is work to do, he comes to help us”. Through this system of exchange, families help each other in agricultural work as well as participation in marriage expenses.

To allow such a ceremony, the *pho ñok* must agree with the monks. It is also necessary that the donors have saved enough money to finance the ceremony and that the monks ensure that the *luk kaeo* knows the formulas and procedures of the rite well. The cost of “ordination” for a child is between 800 and 1200 dollars. With this sum, the *pho ñok* and *mae ñok* buy the novice’s affairs as well as the food to be offered to the guests. The food costs are the highest. This shows that the principle of village solidarity remains very important. In 2012, a *pho ñok* from Ban Donchai spent 7,000,000 kip (800 dollars) to buy a buffalo, 3,000,000 kip (400 dollars) for a pig, three piasters (one piastre equals 350,000 kip or 40 dollars) and 30 to 40 cases of beer (300 to 400 dollars). Finally, the novice’s affairs such as food, utensils and bicycle cost him about 1,000,000 kip (120 dollars). A part of these affairs is placed on a support symbolizing a tree. In the *vihan* (worship building), each *luk kaeo* receives two “trees” near the bed where he will sleep after being “ordained”. He receives the “tree” of his *pho ñok* but also a “tree” of his own father. The *pho ñok* of Ban Donchai has already financed three “ordinations”, the first in the 1980s, the second in the 1990s and another in 2010. The “ordinations” he has chosen to finance are quite spread out over time to allow him to save enough.

Before their formal admission, that is to say until reading the *suvanna pat*¹⁴ (fig 5) which gives them their new identity, the young boys are still called *luk kaeo*. In the following sections, we will see that several rites precede ordination itself.

¹² Kappa in Pali means “world cycle”. Nyanatiloka (1995: 100) says this: “inconceivably long time, one eon, the so-called eternity”. According to Mc Farland (1960: 88), a kappa equals 4 320 000 000 years.

¹³ The term “*ban*” means the village.

¹⁴ The *suvanna pat* (*suvanna*: gold, gold, yellow) is a golden silver leaf on which information about the new identity of the new novice or new monk has been engraved. He mentions in particular the new name of the novice or the monk. This is a Pali name chosen by a monk or *achan vat* using a *tamla* which is a manuscript with various formulas, treaty and memento. He is registered after the real name. Nevertheless, it is rarely used. The date and place of the ordination are also recorded on *suvanna pat*.



Figure 5: Engraving *suvanna pat* in Vat Chiang Chai (Mueang Sing, 2011)

III. Preliminary rites to “ordination”

The first day of the festival is devoted to offerings made at the site of the *ho khaotom*, an altar where offerings of rice cakes wrapped in banana leaf are placed, and the villagers in the monastery are provided with a meal. In the afternoon, the *abhisek* (Pali. *abhiseka*)¹⁵, the *pho ñok* and *mae ñok* wash the children in the courtyard of the monastery at the location of the ablution place (*ho song nam*) built for the occasion with banana trunks. The children will not be able to wash during the three days following the “ordination” so that they may meditate on the nature of the body. Once shaved and washed, the *luk kaeo* are made up and dressed. They are brought on the backs of some men in the *vihan* (cult building). The monks come to settle on the flank. A *sukhuan* ceremony (calling back the soul) is performed by a *mo khuan* (officiant and specialist of the *sukhuan* rite) which takes place in honor of the *luk kaeo*. Then a rite of homage is performed by the *luk kaeo* in three directions: the Buddha (*pha chao*, symbolized by the statue installed on the altar), the base representing the Dhamma (*pha tham*), and the monastic community¹⁶ (*pha sangha* or the monks sitting on the flank representing the *Sangha*). It is at this moment that the *pho ñok* asks the fathers of the novices for permission to “order” their children. Sitting face to face, the father and the *pho ñok* join hands.

¹⁵ The *abhisek* is a ritual bath preceding the “ordination” for a new novice or a new monk. In Mueang Sing, the *abhisek* occurs after the haircut and before the candidate wears the *luk kaeo* outfit. *Abhisek* also takes place in a promotion ceremony (Lao. *kong hot*) conferring a grade higher among the sangha’s hierarchy. The *abhisek* can be considered as a rite allowing the transmission of power. Thus, the *abhisek* was the main act of royal coronation in Laos, but also in Thailand (Zago, 1972: 65). *Abhisek* is also known as the sprinkling of statues in order to consecrate them (Zago, 1972: 108).

¹⁶ *Sangha* is the Pali term for the monastic community.



Figure 6: In Ban Donchai, *luk kaeo* are carried on the shoulders to the houses of *pho ñok* and *mae ñok* (Mueang Sing, 2011)

The *pho ñok* makes his request while the father answers him with a formula of blessing to give his agreement. Finally, the *luk kaeo* are carried on the shoulders of young men to the houses of the *pho ñok* and *mae ñok* (Fig. 6). Their parents accompany them. Lying on a bed in a corner of the main room, they will sleep in the house of their *pho ñok* and *mae ñok*. The next day, they will return to the monastery, carried once again on young men's shoulders, to perform the rite of *pabbajjā*.

The second day of festivities begins around eight o'clock. The drum is struck to warn the villagers of the event. At Ban Khuang Monastery in 2010, there were twelve boys, aged between ten and thirteen, who were carried on the shoulders of young men. In the past, *luk kaeo* were sometimes carried on horseback. Their height relative to others thus marks the preciousness of the "ordination" and the prestige of such an act in the Tai Lue society. This scene is comparable to that described by François Bizot (1993) about the procession leading the *nāga*, a term referring to the serpent-*nāga* and henceforth designating the young man who comes to receive the "ordination" of the *bhikkhu*:

"The young man is led in procession from the house of his parents to the monastery, dressed in princely clothes, in the image of Gautama riding his palace to become a wandering monk. However, on this staging is added a special ceremony during which the recipient must be called 'nāga' and dress accordingly. It seems the custom is based on the local interpretation of a story of the canon where the Buddha promises to a serpent-*nāga*, inadvertently ordered, that all future monks will first have to bear his name. (...) Considered a being on the verge of taking a seed, the 'nāga'

cannot walk: it is carried from the horse to the ‘sanctuary’ *vihāra* (= the matrix)” (1993: 52).

Applicants are followed by their families and villagers. During the procession, the *luk kaeo* can be seen waving scarves in circles (Fig. 6). This scene represents the episode of Prince Siddhartha's Great Departure for ascetic life. This episode follows the four meetings Prince Siddhartha has (the old man, the sick, the dead, the religious). It is said that the four guardians of the world (*lokapala*)¹⁷ would have supported the Kantaka horse's hooves to stifle their noise and thus not wake the guards.

The procession stops in the courtyard of the *vat*, in front of the *vihan* (cult building) (Fig. 7). The children are dressed as Prince Siddhartha. Their faces are made up and each is dressed in a ritual costume consisting of a sarong, a light-colored towel (pink or yellow) under a golden tiara, long-sleeved pink or red shirts (Fig. 8).



Figure 7: The procession enters the compound of Vat Khuang (Mueang Sing, 2010)

¹⁷ The four guardians of the world (*lokapala*) reside in the first paradise (there are six paradises). Indra (or Sakka) presides among the deities. Together, they affect the world of men and animals.

Saeng Chandrangaam (1980) makes a similar observation about the novice procession to Lan Na, a kingdom inherited from a Burmese tradition. “The Samanera ordination is usually performed in a special ceremony. The candidate is decorated as a prince (sometimes in the royal garb of a Prince Burmese) and seated on horseback in order to simulate the great renunciation of Prince Siddhattha. The candidate is living in a long procession full of merriment and din” (1980: 96)¹⁸.



Figure 8: The *luk kaeo* wait before entering the *vihan* to perform the rite of *pabbajjā*

They are barefoot. The twelve children cannot touch the ground so as not to crush insects while walking, and are therefore carried on their chairs for each displacement such as poses for photos taken with their parents. They only touch the ground when they enter the *vihan*, where the old chief of monastery is waiting. He is accompanied by eleven monks from neighboring monasteries (one monk for each novice). As soon as the *luk kaeo* descend from their chairs, they must take care to concentrate on their walk. They have the obligation to trample during the three days of the rites.

Throughout the morning, donations take place in the *vihan*, thus contributing to the prosperity of the monastery and its village. Donors come from surrounding areas, from nearby villages, from Chiang Hung to Yunnan, from Bokeo Province, Luang Namtha, Gnot Ou (Phongsali Province) and Chiang Kok (70 km from Mueang Sing, on the banks of the Mekong across from Myanmar). The donations made by each person are announced on the microphone by the head of the monastery. If daily offerings are not being made

¹⁸ Unlike the *luk kaeo*, we note that the transition from novice status to that of monk is achieved, among other things, by a simple change of dresses. In Mueang Sing, the reference to Prince Siddharta is thus marked only during the “ordination” of the novice.

because of a lack of regular practice of almsgiving, the villagers want the chance to give offerings during these great ceremonies.

The drums of the procession stop for a moment as everyone sits down at the tables. While men eat separately from women, other women continue to prepare food below the monastery. The path leading to the entrance of the *vihan* is left free. Circus tents are placed on each side of the aisle. On the one hand, young men are at the table eating, and on the other hand, older men and women have gathered at several tables. The *luk kaeo* wisely wait for their entry into the *vihan*. According to one host, when three or four children are “ordered”, their friends want to follow them to stay together¹⁹. According to the mother of a future novice, even if they all know each other, the children are not all close friends.

The second day is the “ordination” ceremony. It is divided into three parts, each announced by drummers. The first part of the rite is the *banphasa* (“exit of the world”). According to Tu Ñithone, the head of Chiang Chai Monastery in Mueang Sing, *banphasa* or *pabbajjā*, is the most important part of the rite because it is the *sangha*'s act of validating the “ordination”. The rite of the *pabbajjā* must take place in the presence of at least five monks. The main officiant is the head of the monastery where the ceremony takes place. He recites again the first part of the admission rite of the monk, called *upasampadā*. The second part is the offering made to the new members of the *sangha* (“*vila oen tan pha luang*”). The final part of the rite is the transfer of merits (“*yat nam*”).

In the next section, I will describe the ritual procedure I observed in 2010 in Vat Khuang (Mueang Sing District).

IV. Description of the rite of *pabbajjā* (Vat Khuang on May 13, 2010, Mueang Sing)

In the *vihan* (cult building) the monks are sitting on the bench²⁰ on the left side of the hall (*taeng san*) allowing the monks to be at a level above the *luk kaeo* and the assembly - this arrangement is among others signifying a mark of respect for their status. The villagers always try to position their bodies at a lower level than the monks. Applicants are placed in a line in front of the monks. The congregation is sat facing the altar and the entrance to the *vihan*, up to the first third of the length of the hall. The central axis, from the entrance to the altar, is left open.

Tu Ñithone, the chief of Vat Chiang Chai, helped me to describe the “ordination” ceremony and the use of the texts with the booklet entitled *pabbajjā kam* (act of *pabbajjā*). I give the incipits and some indications on the actions of the *luk kaeo* accompanying their formulas:

1. The *luk kaeo* prostrate themselves before the monks three times.

¹⁹ Louis Gabaude (2010) quotes Banchoy Bannaruchi who exposes several ambivalences of the term *buat*. He refers to the expression “*buat sanuk tam phuean*” meaning *buat* to do as friends.

²⁰ W. Korn, an architect based few years in Mueang Sing, gives a detailed description of the benches: “Benches for the novices and monks are not found in the older or simpler *vihans*, but in the newer or modernized ones. They are arranged parallel to the southern peripheral wall. They measure between one and a half to two meters in depth, between three and five meter in length and with a height between 20 and 40 centimeters. Generally, they are covered by glazed tile. At their western end we find a slightly elevated part for the highest monk or to the Mahakhachai” (2010: 35).

2. Kneeling, the *luk kaeo* recite: *namāmi buddhaṃ* (I pay homage to the Buddha), *namāmi dhammaṃ* (I pay homage to the Dhamma), *namāmi saṅghaṃ* (I pay homage to the Sangha).
3. *Vandā noi* (little greeting)²¹: *vandāmi bhante, sabbaṃ aparādhaṃ khamadhame bhante sadhu sadhu anumodhami* (I venerate you Venerable, may you forgive me all my faults. Good, good, I'm glad about this).
4. *Khamāpana* (request for forgiveness).
5. Candidates get up and take off their costumes.
6. They recite the *vandā noi* (little greeting) again.
7. They squat.
8. *Ahaṃ bhante pabbajjaṃ yācāmi* (Venerable, I ask to be “ordained”).
9. They utter the formula *sakala* (whole, total, all) *noi* (small). This is the short recitation of a formula starting with *sakala dukkha ...* (All the suffering ...)
10. They take the orange robe. Kneeling, they clasp their hands, wearing the dresses on their biceps. Then they put them on their shoulders. At the same time, they recite the *patisaṅkha yoniso cīvaraṃ* three times. This is the beginning of a recitation on the four necessities or means of subsistence: the quest for food, monastic clothing, housing and natural medicines to heal.
11. Then the candidates recite *sakala* (whole, total, all) *long*, the long recitation of a formula beginning with "All suffering ..."
12. They get up and put on the dresses, each helped by a monk (one monk for each candidate).
13. They recite *vandā long* (great greeting): “*Okasa vandāmi bhante, sabbaṃ aparādhaṃ khamadhame bhante maya kataṃ puññaṃ samina anumotitabbaṃ samina kataṃ punnaṃ mayaṃ tathabbaṃ sadhu sadhu anumodhami.*” (I venerate you Venerable, may you forgive me all my faults. May the Master rejoice in the merits that I have done, may the Master convey to me the merits he has done. Well, well, I rejoice in this.)
14. They kneel.
15. They recite *sabbaṃ* (a formula included in *vandā long*) once.
16. They get up and recite *vandā long* again.
17. They get up and bend their heads (looking down).
18. They recite a formula that begins with *anuggahaṃ* three times.
19. They kneel again.
20. They pronounce the request of the refuges and precepts three times: “*Okasa karuna katua tisananena saha siranitetha nibbanti ahaṃ bhante saranaṃ silaṃ yaccami.*” (Please give me the triple refuge and the ten precepts.)
21. Candidates bring offerings of candles, flowers and silver to the monks.
22. The head of the monastery recites the five themes of meditation: *kesā* (hair), *lomā* (body hair), *nakhā* (nails), *dantā* (teeth), *taco* (skin).
23. The *luk kaeo* recite the formula of homage to the Buddha three times. “*Namo tassa baghavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa.*” (I give thanks to the wise, to the master, to the illuminated saint.), the taking of the Three Refuges (*saraṇa*) that are the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha then the taking of the ten precepts (*sin sip*

²¹ Abbreviation of the complete formula *okāsa vandāmi bhante* known as the *vandā long* (the great salutation).

in Lao or *desa sīla* in Pali). They repeat after the monks with one voice (each child is kneeling in front of a monk) the ten precepts of the novice.

24. The head of the monastery: “*Imāni dasa sikkhāpadāni samādiyāmi.*” (I pledge to follow these ten precepts.)

25. The candidates say: “*Āma bhante.*” (Yes Venerable.)

26. The monk and *luk kaeo* repeat this short dialogue three times.

27. The candidates repeat three times: “*Imāni dasa sikkhāpadāni samādiyāmi.*” (I pledge to follow these ten precepts.)

28. They stand up and then recite *vandā long* three times while tilting their heads down.

29. Then they recite three times: “*Anuggahaṃ katvā nissayaṃ detha me bhante anukampaṃ upādāya.*” (I ask you to accept me out of compassion for me.)

30. They crouch and repeat three times: “*Upajjhāyo me bhante hohi.*” (May you become my preceptor.)

31. The head of the monastery answers: “*Paṭirupaṃ.*” (It is appropriate.)

32. The *luk kaeo* answer three times: “*Sathu sampaṭicchāmi!*” (Well!)

33. They then kneel one last time and recite *vandā long* three times. The rite ends thus.

After this, the head of the monastery reads the *suvanna pat*²² informing the identity of new novices (where the “ordination” takes place, when, how, by whom...?). The *suvanna pat* is then wrapped around the thumb of the new novice. The final act, called *Nattichatutthakammavaca*, consists of a triple proclamation of motion and resolution. The second part comes after a break. This break is the moment when the head of the monastery calls the villagers to come and make offerings to the new members of the monastic community. The third part is a rite of transfer of merit through a libation of water (*yat nam*). It is preceded and accompanied by various recitations of *Metta sut* (*metta*: benevolence; *sut*: recitation) and *Mangkhala sut* (*mangkhala* in Pali or *mongkhun* in Lao: auspicious, festivity)²³.

On the third day, new festivities take place between the villagers. The number of people is three times smaller than the two previous days. The villagers eat and drink together from noon until the evening. The meal ends with a collection of money for the head of the monastery (Fig. 9). According to Tu Ñithone, the money will be donated to the head of the monastery to thank him for taking charge of new novices and teaching them his knowledge; this money can serve the interests of the village community at any time, and can be used for activities such as the construction or renovation of the monastery building. A group of women accompany a *mo khrap*²⁴ with drums and encouragement. By singing, a woman calls to the generosity of ten donors. Similarly, a troop of men is formed around their singer and also goes around the tables collecting donations. The *nai ban* (head of village) will put cigarettes and 50,000 kips (6 dollars) on the plate, a sum that shows his generosity.

²² See note 14.

²³ The recitations are: *metta*; *yatsa nophavato* (the rite of *yat nam* is performed at this time); *karani*; *atapama*; *ahan sukito homi*; *sabbe purati*; *buddho sapan*; *yo tañano*; *ili otapa*; *panchangel*; *buddho mangkhala*; *dhammo mangkhala*; *sangho mangkhala*.

²⁴ The *mo khrap* is a specialist of “*khrap*” which is a traditional Tai Lue song.



Figure 9: The collection of money in Vat Khuang (Mueang Sing, 2010)

For validating the rite of the *pabbajjā*, the novices must respect certain rules during these three days. I will now describe what the Tai Lue call *kam sam mue* or acts of three days.

V. Validation of the “ordination” rite of the novices: acts of three days (*kam sam mue*)

According to F. Bizot, who observed the ritual of “ordination” of a monk at Ban Tin That (Mueang Sing) in 2000, the recitation formulas follow the Pali rite. He also notes that the validation of “ordination” must be done over several days. “What is interesting is the program that takes place after their recitation [ritual formulas], under the name of “acts of three days” (t. *kamm sam mü*) or “acts of seven days” (t. *kamm cet mü*). To be valid, the ordination must extend over several days: four for the monasteries affiliated to the tradition of ‘Wat Suandok’, eight for those of ‘Vat Padeng’” (2000: 516).

It is also noted that these three-day acts (in the morning of the fourth day, novices no longer have to follow these particular rules) also apply to the new novices of Mueang Sing. New novices at Vat Khuang have to sleep in the *vihan* for three nights and are not allowed to wash during this period. According to Kuba Kham Ngoen, a monk from Tonpheung District (Bokeo Province), the aim is to make novices aware of the true nature of the body. This information can be found in François Bizot's observations about the monk's “ordination” in Mueang Sing. “(...) the ritual unity of these days is signified by the

obligation of the recipient to keep his clothes continuously for the required time, without even undoing them for a moment to wash" (ibid.).

An elder ensures that they respect these rules, including shuffling and the individual pronunciation of daily prayers (during these three days) using a rosary. Novices from their "ordination" must move by shuffling, which forces them to go slowly and fix their attention on their walk. According to the monk of Vat Chiang Chai, the goal is to develop attention (*sati*). Also, they use a rosary made of 108 pearls quite frequently with their left hand (the right hand remaining in the gesture of *nop* here signifying benevolence) in order to fix their attention on the recitation of formulas. To develop their concentration, they recite to each pearl taken between the thumb and forefinger of the left hand "*buddho*" (Buddha) and repeat this action 108 times. After finishing, they can continue in the same way by repeating the word "*dhammo*" (Dhamma). Then, they will continue using the Pali word "*Sangho*" (Sangha). We also note the repetition of short formulas which are intended to send merit to hisparents and the monk responsible for their education. This is what the Lue call by the term *khun* which must be understood as an act bringing merit to the other, to show him his gratitude. Thus, according to Tu Ñithone, the recurring recitation "*pita kunang*" (*khun pho*) is used firstly for his father "because he is a man", says the monk, meaning that he has authority and priority over the wife. After this, the novice can use the recitation "*mata kunang*" (*khun mae*) to each pearl, as a tribute to his mother. Finally, he will not forget to honor his master (*khuba achan*) using the formula "*acariya kunang*" (*khun achan*).

During these three-day acts, novices can only eat twice, once at eight o'clock and again at noon after the authorization given by a *pha long*²⁵. Their mothers come to bring them food. Unlike the new monks who have to collect alms in the morning, the novices receive their food in the *vihan*. Novices recite greetings (*sut phone*) to their mothers before taking the meal. Like the new monks, they cannot wash during the three days of ordination. They also retain the *pha pat* (piece of fabric worn on the dress and passed on the right shoulder and under the left armpit) and *pha khao* (piece of white fabric) worn the same way under the orange dress. Unlike the monks who have to pay tribute to the Three Jewels by recitation, the novices have not yet learned to do so. They will soon learn it from their new masters. They do not have to say a formulae to name their clothes (*athitthana*) as new monks do. After these three days of rites, the boys will return to the school benches with a new identity, that of *pha* (novice). From this moment, a new period of learning begins.

Conclusion

The "ordination" of the novices in the monasteries of Mueang Sing presents a number of specificities that do not exist or that have disappeared in Lao monasteries. Firstly, the period of preparation for the novitiate in the Tai Lue monasteries has become almost unique in Laos. To my knowledge, it no longer exists in Lao monasteries. This preparation for the novitiate may be destined to disappear in some monasteries located

²⁵ Unlike Lao monks and novices who cannot consume solid foods after noon, the novices and monks of Mueang Sing have the freedom to eat at any time of the day. Some take their evening meal at the monastery and others eat with their families before returning to sleep at the monastery.

in the province of Luang Prabang. In the Tai Lue monasteries of Nam Bak District (Luang Prabang Province), the time given to candidates for learning the rite of *pabbajjā* is becoming shorter and shorter, sometimes reduced to two or three weeks. According to an elder from Nayang Tai Village (Nam Bak District), the boys used to remain until they could read the *tham*, perform and recite the formulas of the rite of *pabbajjā*. From now, the novitiate's stay seems to be done more for the sole purpose of developing the necessary skills to validate the rite of *pabbajjā*. One of the reasons for this abandonment of learning to read and recite is the lack of monks in village monasteries. In a survey conducted in 2011, Ban Nayang Tai Monastery had none. The last monk had gone the year before to study in a monastery in Vientiane, and so there was no monk to train the youngest to learn *tham*²⁶.

Moreover, we have seen that the ordination rite in Mueang Sing is based on the sponsorship principle. Parents do not finance the ordination of their own child but that of another child. Villagers seek to educate their children at the monastery while gaining merit, and additionally, they maintain and reinforce the bonds of village solidarity through this system. Once ordained, one of the main learnings of the novice is the memorization and reading of texts. They will gradually adopt the *tham nong* (melody, style) or the vocalization of the senior monks of the monasteries of the region. Generally, they leave the monastic life definitively at the age of 25 years²⁷. Unlike the Lao, a new ordination as a novice or monk is rare in the Tai Lue monasteries. In general, villagers consider that individuals who return to the Buddhist clergy seek above all a solution to improve their socio-economic conditions of existence.

If these few ethnographic notes on the admission of young boys in Mueang Sing to the monastic life show a number of peculiarities of Tai Lue Buddhism in northern Laos, they also testify to the importance of ordination in the perpetuation of Buddhist practices in this region. To better understand this, I will give a brief overview of how Buddhism and Tham script participate in cross-border relations between the communities of Laos and China²⁸.

In the late 1970s in Laos, monks received political training to adhere to the communist ideas of the new regime. Due to political pressure, many monks left the country, fled to Thailand or settled in Vientiane. Mueang Sing monasteries did not have a single monk in the mid-1980s (Keyes 1992: 41). This period of repression was followed by the revival of Buddhism. The resurgence of religion in Mueang Sing was then encouraged by the renewal of Lue Buddhism in Sipsong Panna (Keyes, 1992; Cohen, 2000; Formoso, 2008)²⁹. In the aftermath of the Chinese cultural revolution, there were again numerous boys to be ordained in the monasteries of Sipsong Panna. As soon as

²⁶ This phenomenon is common in the Huai Hit region. According to data from the local administration of Neo Lao Sang Sat (Lao Front for National Construction), 77 monks were allowed that same year to leave their monasteries to study in the urban centers of Luang Prabang and Vientiane.

²⁷ The stay in the monastery is rarely definitive and the exit from the religious life does not lead to any blame. The duration of the stay depends essentially on the willingness of each person.

²⁸ In this regard, the anthropologist P. T. Cohen (2000) spoke of the existence of a transnational moral community between the Lue from Laos and China.

²⁹ In Sipsong Panna, the Chinese cultural revolution (1966-1976) banned all religious practices and the writing of *tham* was forbidden (Casas, 2011). Many monks left the monastery or fled to neighboring countries. Most Buddhist texts were burned and images of the Buddha and monasteries were destroyed or damaged.

Buddhist practices were allowed in the 1980s³⁰, boys preferred to study in monasteries by becoming novices rather than learning Chinese writing and language in state schools. Due to the absence of monks, the “ordination” ceremonies of the novices were conducted by the lay leaders of the monastery. These lay leaders also played the role of preceptors by teaching the texts to the novices. The monasteries of Mueang Sing have also become active centers and frequented by villagers. The Lao Front for National Construction of Mueang Sing registered 267 novices in 2011 and 291 novices in 2014. As for the monks, they were 20 monks in 2011 against 21 in 2014³¹.

Today, due to economic conditions, which are not the same between the Tai Lue families of Mueang Sing and those living in China, education strategies differ. Due to a relatively higher standard of living, the families living in Sipsong Panna favor public schooling. It is for this reason that several monasteries in China are currently lacking novices. To fill this void, several donors from Sipsong Panna regularly invite monks and novices of Mueang Sing to join their monasteries. Many novices from Mueang Sing take the opportunity to live in a Tai Lue monastery in the neighboring country for two or three years to learn Chinese. It is essentially informal learning since novices and young monks learn the language with the local population. Some learn it in primary schools, monastery schools in Mueang La and Chiang Hung or in private classes. When they come back from China, they are usually able to speak Chinese fluently. Some of them hope to find a job in a Chinese company or become an interpreter after leaving the monastic life.

These exchanges between the Tai Lue monasteries from China and Laos are very active nowadays and contribute to the maintenance of a Tai Lue cultural identity through the diaspora. The dynamism of the Buddhist traditions of the Lue of Laos and China as well as the education opportunities that the monastic stay provides to the younger generation are some of the reasons why the ordination rite continues to be practiced every year in the region of Mueang Sing.

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³⁰ According to a survey conducted by Hasegawa Kiyoshi (2000) in Sipsong Panna in 1990, the number of monks was about 740 and that of novices 5600 in the 1950s. In 1981, the number of novices was 655 and no monk was recorded. It is only from 1988 that the number of monks increases to 643 and that of novices to 4980 (Hasegawa Kiyoshi, 2000).

³¹ These numbers explain the fact that in monasteries that do not have monks, it is the *pha long* (older novices) or sometimes lay leaders of the monastery who take on the role of teacher.

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