

Empowerment through acculturation Forgetting and contesting the past among the Phunoy in northern Laos

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Abstract: This article uncovers the legend of Senpongsimun, a Phunoy hero, as narrated by members of the Tibeto–Burmese-speaking group living in northern Laos. By highlighting the story of the highland hero, the article seeks to disclose these people’s vision of the past, and more significantly, their unorthodox strategy to maintain a distinctive identity from the ethnic majority in contemporary Laos.

Keywords: narrative; kingship; Laos; Phunoy

The Phunoy are a Tibeto–Burmese ethnolinguistic group living in northern Laos; this study deals with their present-day vision of the past. Although the Phunoy have denied their past, the story of Senpongsimun, a Phunoy hero with extraordinary powers, endures. By referring to this story, I wish to shed light upon the nature of the relationship between the Phunoy highlanders and the Tai civilization to which both the country’s Lowland Lao majority and the Phunoy’s Tai Leu neighbours belong. The story also illustrates how the Phunoy want themselves to be defined, a self-definition based on a paradox: they maintain and perpetuate their distinctive identity through a kind of acculturation process. In portraying themselves as similar to the Tai, they actually strengthen the identity of their group instead of undermining it. More than just a wish to integrate, this relationship to Others is based on the notion of power as being necessarily external in origin, meaning that it is something that the Phunoy have to acquire from those Others. To do so, they need to participate as actively as possible in the dominant Tai political model so as to assimilate its tools and means of operation.

Silencing the past

The Phunoy have a population of approximately 35,000. They live pre-

dominantly in the mountainous district of Phongsaly province, where they practise swidden cultivation. Since the 1960s, some of them have also been living in the neighbouring lowlands as wet-rice farmers. When I began my field research, I was struck by the stark difference between Phunoy society as it was described in early-twentieth-century French sources and as it is today.¹ Nowadays, young people are ignorant of their clan membership, and the traditional belief in local spirits is denied and described as superstitious and foolish. Villagers even denigrate their own way of life and aspire to the Lao way of living. Last but not least, the past (meaning events before the 1960s) is either ignored or repressed.

In response to my questions about their society in the past, the Phunoy would either reply ‘we don’t know’ or else try to change the subject. What appeared to me as a conspiracy of silence on their past can be linked with the takeover of Phongsaly by the Pathet Lao revolutionary movement in 1954; their control of the province was formalized by the Geneva Accords. A policy of modernization was then launched: by resettling swidden cultivators in the lowlands, Party authorities wanted to achieve self-sufficiency in rice and to purge the peasants of their ‘superstitious’ beliefs as well as their past linked to the Lao king. The Phunoy were among those most affected. Some were resettled in the lowlands, while their territorial, political and administrative structures – similar to those of the Tai principalities – were swept aside, and their religious structures were considerably altered. For at least two centuries the Phunoy had been practising a Buddhism similar to that of the Leu, but by this time their Buddhism was viewed as decadent. Lao monks were therefore sent to their villages to eradicate spirit cults, destroy their altars and exchange Leu Buddhist texts for Lao ones. Consequently, and also because of the disappearance of the political and territorial organization to which ritual structures were linked, the Phunoy apparently adopted the Lao way of practising Buddhism.

The imposition of Pathet Lao ideology was so efficient that today when Phunoy people talk about their past, they merely repeat the Party’s

¹ See, for example, Guillemet, E., and O’Kelly, K. (1916–17), ‘En colonne dans le Haut-Laos’, *Revue Indochinoise*, Nos 9–10, pp 169–228; Nos 11–12, pp 329–405; (1917), Nos 1–2, pp 9–86; Nos 3–4, pp 187–276; Georges Aymé (1930), *Monographie du V^e Territoire Militaire*, Imprimerie d’Extrême-Orient, Hanoi. See also Henri Roux (1924), ‘Les Phou-Noi’, *Bulletin de l’École Française d’Extrême-Orient*, Vol 24, pp 445–500. This article was reprinted in *France-Asie*, Vol 10, Nos 92–93 (1954), pp 235–295.

vision of what constitutes a ‘good’ people or a ‘good’ culture. They present a collection of politically correct elements selected with much caution from their actual plethora of traditions. As a result, any practice that the Lao state has officially labelled as archaic is concealed or denied. The Phunoy’s efforts in distorting the past can thus be said to be a mere observance of the values and discourses of the communist regime.

To carry out research in this context was very difficult. People often took me for a government spy, and some even threw me out of their villages. Yet, having managed to stay several months in some Phunoy villages, I realized that the people do in fact continue to perform the rituals that they verbally deny or condemn. Moreover, despite the absence of genealogical memory and traces suggesting the structure of the old social and political organization, there remains one story that the Phunoy people recount enthusiastically: the extraordinary adventures of Senpongsimun, or Senpong. Everywhere I went, the Phunoy unanimously dubbed Senpong as ‘the famous Phunoy’.

The legend of Senpong

Thirty years ago, linguist Michel Ferlus noticed that ‘one of [the Phunoy] heroes, Senpongsimun, who was probably a historical leader, is always present in [their] stories ...Senpongsimun lived four or five generations before, meaning probably during the second half of the nineteenth century’.² Senpong is not famous among the Phunoy alone, however; other groups as far away as Oudomxay or Namtha provinces know his story quite well, as do the Phunoy’s Tai Leu neighbours.

One of the legends of Senpong told in Phongsaly villages is as follows:

Senpongsimun was born in Ban Senpong in the Phunoy land two hundred years ago. At the age of fourteen or fifteen, he became a Buddhist novice monk. He later left the monkhood and went to learn more about magic powers in Chiang Mai. When he had finished his apprenticeship, he was very powerful, and people in Thailand [at the time, the Northern Thai kingdom of Lanna Tai] began to fear him. When Senpong was on the road home, they placed along his way a kind of door with a vagina on it, thinking that this would cause him to lose his powers

² Michel Ferlus (1971), ‘Notes ethnographiques sur les Phou Noi’, unpublished article, p 2.

when he passed by. But Senpong sensed the trick and wrote all his knowledge in a book, which he hung on a rocket and then sent it to his village. Then he passed by the door and did indeed lose his magic powers. Upon arrival in his village, he found the book and relearned and recovered his powers.

In the neighbouring kingdom of the Sipsong Panna [Xishuang Banna in the present-day Chinese province of Yunnan], the Tai Leu got wind of Senpong's powers. They also began to fear him and decided to get rid of him, so they invited him to a single combat. Senpong accepted and set out on his journey with a novice. At the same time, the Lord of Sipsong Panna dispatched an envoy to see him. The envoy met Senpong and the novice on the road but did not feel that the poorly dressed man he saw could be Senpong, and the latter was careful not to clarify his identity. While the novice was cooking, Senpong was cutting wood with his bare hands. The envoy was terrified; he came back to the court and told the Lord, 'We cannot defeat Senpong; even some poor men from his group are very strong'. So the Lord looked for the strongest Leu among all of those who had powers.

When Senpong reached the Leu kingdom, the Lord invited him to a meeting in the main temple, then twelve men joined him inside. Other men were told to kill Senpong if he were to escape, and these men surrounded the pagoda with knives. Inside the pagoda, the twelve men were dancing faster than the wind while they were hitting Senpong. The latter, walking slowly, just ignored them. Then the twelve men caught him and sank him into the ground up to his chest. So Senpong reacted, got out, and sank six men into the ground up to their hair. Then he threw the six others out; the people waiting outside believed they were Senpong and killed them. The Lord was furious; he wanted to arrange another fight, but Senpong just put the novice on his shoulders and started for home. So the Lord sent some of his best soldiers to chase and kill him, but the soldiers all failed, and Senpong killed them with a golden knife which he always carried with him. When he reached his village, he was spattered with blood. He then went back to Thailand, later returning to his village, where he died in the temple.

When Senpong was alive, all the Phunoy enjoyed a good life. He never taught anybody his knowledge. What a pity! Nevertheless, the Leu still fear the Phunoy in Phongsaly as they think we still have the same powers as Senpong did.

There are many versions of the legend of Senpong, but they all share

some common features: he was a very strong man, a chief of the Phunoy and a Buddhist monk who had special powers that made him invincible. Some claim that he learned magic from his tutelary spirit who chose and protected him, while others follow the above-mentioned view that he went as a monk to Lanna, where he acquired magical knowledge that he noted down in a book and brought back to his village. The Tai Leu were afraid of him and tried to diminish his power, but he was very clever and managed to thwart all their ploys. Many stories describe the fights between Senpong and the Leu or Ho³ people, as well as his conflicts with some Lao monks, from which, as one would expect, he always emerged the winner.

Two especially significant elements of Senpong's legend

Some recurring elements are especially significant in the stories about Senpong. Here, I shall analyse the two foremost ones: first, his origins and cultural manners and, second, the impact of his actions on the nature and evolution of the relations between the Phunoy and their neighbours. Senpong is often portrayed as a triumphant warrior; the aggressors are always the Phunoy's neighbours, except for Lao monks who were supposedly sent by the King of Luang Prabang in the nineteenth century to fight him. Because he won the fight, the King gave the Phunoy the right to stay and cultivate the land they were then occupying. Thanks to Senpong, the Phunoy believe they are seen as a powerful people, inspiring fear but also respect in their neighbours.⁴ Thanks to him, they continue to enjoy prestige among other ethnic groups. Thus a Phunoy explained: 'The Ho and Leu still believe that Senpong is alive. They fear him and therefore, they respect us' – even if it is not actually true. Other people told me that despite the fact that Senpong died a long time ago, he still acts as the protector of the country: 'When we go to China, some people still ask us if Senpong is still alive. "Yes, he is still alive", we answer. If we don't give such a response, the Chinese and Vietnamese will come to control our area.'

³ Originally in northern Laos, the term 'Ho' referred to Chinese traders; today it refers to Chinese people in general. However, Lao people make a distinction between recent Chinese immigrants and descendants of Han migrants from Yunnan who settled in northern Laos at the end of the nineteenth century. In this article, 'Ho' refers the latter group.

⁴ 'A long time ago was the war. Three countries – China, Vietnam and Burma – asked Senpong to help them. If he had not been here, everybody would have died.'

Senpong is presented as the ancestor of all Phunoy; it was also he who brought them to Phongsaly. At the same time, various versions imply that he could be a Lao man married to a Phunoy woman: ‘Senpong was a Lao guy from Luang Prabang; he went to study magic powers in Thailand and then came here and married a Phunoy woman. There is still a book telling this story in Luang Prabang but nobody knows about it.’⁵ In some of those stories, he is even a member of the royal family of Luang Prabang. At the very least, even if he was not ethnically Lao, his education corresponds to that of a young man from a Tai cultural milieu in former times: he studied in royal cities such as Vientiane, Luang Prabang or Xieng Hung (present-day Jinghong, Yunnan) in Sipsong Panna, where his skills surpassed those of the local people. He then became a very famous monk and a great proponent of the Buddhist religion in many Lao regions.

Not only did Senpong study in places associated with the Lao or other parts of the Tai world, he also returned to these same sites to build Buddhist stupas (*that*).⁶ He even fought against the local people in these places. Indeed, all of this boils down to the encounter between our Phunoy hero and the outside world that is represented by the Tai. The stories about Senpong thus carry double messages: while they recount the Phunoy’s struggles for glory and domination, they also narrate the group’s integration into Lao civilization. The point is clearly to show that the Phunoy ‘measure up to’ the Lao, that they are as much a part of Lao civilization as are the Tai-speaking groups themselves. How are we to understand the Phunoy’s aspiration to become part of the Lao civilization while they appear to be fighting against some of its members at the same time? What is the meaning of this ambiguous relationship between Senpong and the three major components of the Lao civilization – Lao people, Buddhism and kingship? I would like to propose an interpretation of the above scenario by returning to the history of the Phunoy and examining their relationship with external political authority.

Back to the past: the Phunoy as a product of Lao kingship

The other ethnic groups of Phongsaly province provide different accounts of the origins and the history of the Phunoy. The Leu say that the Phunoy

⁵ These comments came from an official with the provincial Culture Department in Phongsaly.

⁶ ‘In Muang Houn [a famous Lao place in the north], there is a stupa that Senpong built. The origin of his name (Senpongsimun) is linked to the weight of the earth he carried to build it: *si* (four) *mun* (forty kilos)’.

came four centuries ago from Sipsong Panna, where they had been slaves of the Leu. According to the Ho, the Phunoy came from Yunnan just after they themselves had arrived from the same place. The Akha also recount that they and the Phunoy came from the same area – although exactly where this was varies from version to version – and moved together to Phongsaly at the end of the nineteenth century. In other words, each ethnic group tends to link the Phunoy's history with its own.

The Leu and Ho further explain the reasons for the Phunoy migration to Phongsaly. According to both groups, the Phunoy were slaves running away either from the King of Luang Prabang, who had become their master after they were taken as prisoners of war in China, or from the wars themselves; either way, the Phunoy are clearly depicted in an unfavourable light. This image of the Phunoy as slaves and their designation with the pejorative Lao term '*Kha*' is consistent in all Ho and Leu stories. After their arrival in Phongsaly, the Phunoy were slaves of the Lao or of the Leu – if not both – and they later became coolies for the French. Finally, the Leu and Ho use the etymology of the ethnonym *Phunoy*, which means 'little persons' in Lao, as further evidence of their original lowly social status. As for the title of 'border guards' that the Phunoy reportedly held, both the Leu and the Ho seem to ignore it. Some Leu even argue that they themselves were the border guards of Phongsaly.⁷

Even though the Phunoy do not deny this interpretation of their origins, they definitely do not favour this picture of themselves, and their own versions differ from those of the Leu and Ho. In some stories I collected, they present themselves as having been originally under a foreign yoke as servants of either the King of Burma or the French. If they sometimes admit to being servants of the King of Luang Prabang, his yoke is described as unfair, and the emphasis is always on their own resourcefulness in escaping it.⁸ For example, when they tell the stories of Phunoy escapes from their Lao masters, they describe themselves as cleverer than the Lao, whom they always manage to trick. They disguise themselves and fool the king's soldiers who, made to

⁷ It is interesting to note that in 1911, two French military officers recorded similar comments from the Leu: 'The Lu from Boun Tay are liars. They just wrote to the King of Luang Prabang [saying that] "we are those who care about the borders". This is wrong – it is the Kha Pounoy and not the Leu who are considered as border-guards by the king'; Guillemet and O'Kelly, *supra* note 1, Nos 1–2 at p 75. The recognition of the 'border guard' role is found in Roux and Chu, *supra* note 1, at p 242.

⁸ 'One day, the king of Burma and the king of Luang Prabang exchanged their people; those who were working for the king of Luang Prabang rebelled because their work was too hard. So they escaped.'

think that the runaways have gone on far ahead, give up their pursuit. In some versions, informants said that they were originally dressed as Akha people. Escaping from their 'enemies', the men cut their hair, burned their old clothes and dressed like Lao so that their enemies could not recognize them. In other words, what the story tells us is that the Phunoy could survive because of elements borrowed from Lao culture. Yet the main emphasis is on their capacity to break away from external authority through their ingenuity: they favour trickery as the best weapon of the dominated.

Stories about Phunoy escapes always mention the same places. One version of the tale is as follows. While the Phunoy were dissatisfied with their new rulers, they went to settle near Luang Prabang, where they took care of the royal pigeons. Unfortunately, the pigeons died, and the king banished the Phunoy, who then went to Phongsaly.⁹ That version was told during my field research. However, in the versions I collected, the main protagonists were not the Phunoy but the Lao.¹⁰ These versions of the story recount the Lao escape, explaining that they reached Phongsaly, met the Phunoy and gave them this name 'because we were collecting small crabs [*pu noy*]'. Thus, with regard to their own name, the Phunoy put forward an alternative etymology to that of 'little persons': either 'little mountain' (*phu noy*, that being their first habitat) or 'little crabs' (supposedly bestowed on them by the French, who often saw them collecting crabs).¹¹

⁹ See Roselyne Jouanneau and Jean-Richard Laffort (1994), *Analyse-diagnostic des systèmes agraires dans la province de Phongsaly*, Comité de Coopération avec le Laos, Vientiane, p 39. The story adds another reason for this banishment: the King called in a Phunoy servant and asked him to eat a pigeon. The servant ate it without cooking it; the king was shocked to see people eating raw meat and banished them. This version is interesting because it reflects a common perspective among the Tai-speaking population that, in contrast to the 'civilized' Buddhist Tai, the hill tribes are barbarous, uncivilized and cannibalistic – although in this specific case there is no actual cannibalism. These contrasts are discussed in Ronald D. Renard (2000), 'The differential integration of hill people into the Thai state'; Nicholas Tapp (2000), 'Ritual relations and identity: Hmong and others'; and Shigeharu Tanabe (2000), 'Autochthony and the Inthakhin cult of Chiang Mai', in Andrew Turton, ed, *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States*, Curzon Press, Richmond, pp 63–83, 84–103 and 294–319 respectively.

¹⁰ One can also draw a parallel between those stories and the story of King On Nok in the royal chronicles of Luang Prabang. The king was fond of hunting pigeons. One day while he was hunting, his rival Inthasom hastened to close the doors of the royal city. Thus King On Nok was banished from his kingdom and had to take refuge in a neighbouring Tai principality. See Michel Lorrillard (1992), 'Les chroniques royales du Laos. Introduction à l'histoire des royaumes de Vientiane et de Louang Prabang entre 1694 et 1885', *Mémoire de DEA*, École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris, pp 36–37.

¹¹ This pun does not work in Lao because 'pu' and 'phu' are pronounced differently, but the aspiration of the latter term is lost in the Phunoy language.

In any case, the Phunoy's history has always been closely linked to that of the dominant Tai people. My hypothesis is that the Phunoy actually emerged as a separate ethnic group as a result of the political decisions of the King of Luang Prabang. During the nineteenth century, several small, rebellious Tibeto–Burmese ethnolinguistic groups were living in the Phongsaly area, then situated at the crossroads of several Tai polities – Sipsong Panna, Sipsong Chau Tai and Luang Prabang. These groups spoke a similar language and were followers of Theravāda Buddhism (passed on by the neighbouring Leu), but were distinct entities fighting against each other. They formed periodic alliances with rivals of Luang Prabang.¹² Subsequently, towards the end of the century, Ho invaders poured into the latter kingdom, settling in the Nam Ou River area.

At Siam's instigation, the Luang Prabang ruler tried to reinforce his control over his kingdom's boundaries by securing the submission and cooperation of these small Tibeto–Burmese groups. He appointed them as border guards and gave them *kongdin* (books of the earth) showing the territorial limits of the responsibility of each group. Some decades later, most of these groups' territories were regrouped into five cantons (*tasseng*), which made up a single political and territorial unit: the 'müang of the little people' or 'Müang Phunoy'.¹³ The inhabitants of this new territory enjoyed a status different from the other groups, including other border guards. They were exempted from paying taxes and performing duties for the neighbouring Tai-speaking populations (mainly Leu). Local chiefs were ennobled by the King of Luang Prabang with the title of 'Panya' and posted to different *tasseng*. Their political and ritual systems thus evolved owing to the transition from a clan organization to a hierarchical territorial administration in which power and legitimacy ultimately depended on Lao royal authority.

Thus the Phunoy emerged as a distinct ethnic group through their initial function as allies and servants of Lao rulers, sharing some Tai characteristics. Through their interaction with Lao culture and as a result of their compliance with the political authorities, their status evolved

¹² The chronicles mention that during the eighteenth century, Prince Inthasom tried to conquer Luang Prabang. To do so, he took some inhabitants of Muang La Muang Phong (an area where Phunoy were supposed to be living at the time) and some Kha Phae (or Xeua) as mercenaries (Lorrillard, *supra* note 10, at p 18). I would just add that when Pierre Lefèvre-Pontalis travelled around this region in the late nineteenth century, the only group called 'Phay' he mentioned was the Phunoy; Pierre Lefèvre-Pontalis (1898), *Voyages dans le Haut-Laos et sur les frontières de la Chine et Birmanie (Mission Pavié – Géographie et voyages – tome V)*, Ernest Leroux, Paris, p 230.

¹³ See Roux, *supra* note 1.

from that of escaped slaves or savages to a well respected, politically constituted group. Some Phunoy, telling me about the ancient authority of their ennobled chiefs (*Panya*), described it as even more influential at the local level than that of the royal representatives; the *Panya* seem to have been capable of influencing and even foiling royal decisions. (Supposedly, if the *Panya* wanted someone dead, for example, the King of Luang Prabang would issue an order to that end.) Moreover, the Phunoy like to describe themselves as being on the same level as the Lao and as interacting freely with Tai speakers. (They generally fail to mention other highlanders.) Typical remarks are that ‘all groups – Lao, Leu and Phunoy came together in Phongsaly’ or that ‘previously there were no inhabitants in Phongsaly; the Leu and Phunoy were friends and came together’.

When talking about their conflicts with the Leu or Lao, the Phunoy even say that they were able to frighten and fend them off, all because of their similarity to them. In other words, they create their distinctive identity through a kind of acculturation, that is, through a self-conscious re-appropriation of Tai cultural features. This enables us to understand why they are adamant about Senpong’s Lao origins – or at least why they put such an emphasis on his apprenticeship, experiences and battles in Tai territory. From the Phunoy point of view, power originates from Outside. Therefore, the acquisition of power demands maximum participation in the Lao political model so as to assimilate its tools and mechanisms. Senpong’s story reveals this fundamental process of empowerment.

Senpong and the Lao state

The specific relationship between the Phunoy and the dominant ethnic Lao is not only discernible in the former’s accounts of the past, it is also echoed in events that followed the arrival of the Pathet Lao in Phongsaly in 1954. As was mentioned above, the Phunoy’s old political administrative and territorial organization was subsequently eliminated, and their religious structures underwent profound changes. Significantly, it was Phunoy – some of whom were Party members as well as government officials at the provincial level – who instigated these changes. It was they who decided that the Phunoy would be the only group of the province to be resettled in the lowlands and that monks should be sent to Phunoy villages in order to eradicate spirit cults. Some of them explained to me that these actions were initiated

with the aim of ‘modernizing’ their own group, to change it into a ‘pilot group’, if not the dominant group in the Phongsaly area. Thus these were not changes imposed exclusively by an external authority, but were measures voluntarily advocated by the Phunoy elite. Therefore, communist policy is not sufficient to explain the Phunoy’s rejection of their past; other groups also suffered similar pressures but did not give way.

For the Phunoy, acceptance of all the newly imposed state measures meant once again complying with the dominant model in order to gain advantage from it. Indeed, the observer cannot fail to be struck by the extensive involvement of the Phunoy in all spheres of local administration under the communist regime – education, district government, the army and so on. Not all the Phunoy have benefited from this strategy, however. Since the 1960s and the first resettlement of families, there has been a continuous movement of migration to the lowlands, where an important part of the Phunoy population presently lives. Today, most of those who still remain in the mountainous villages see themselves as having been disadvantaged by the change of political regime from royal to communist authority. They feel that they have been removed from the political scene, that they have been denied the development and modernity that they had hoped for. This phenomenon is perhaps the key to understanding the persistence of the story of Senpong, who is symbolic of the Phunoy’s relationship to the dominant groups. In fact, not only does it live on, it takes on a new dimension that insinuates the ambivalent relationship between the Phunoy and the new Lao state – a state which, at the highest levels (provincial level and above), barely yields an ounce of its authority.

Phunoy resentment of the state is manifested in their perception of their society during and after Senpong’s time. Even though they generally depict their ancient political system as unfair and inequitable, they are simultaneously nostalgic and proud of their ancient leaders, who are often referred to as sons or disciples of Senpong. ‘The Phunoy used to have powerful and feared leaders, the *Panya*’, they say. The *Panya* are indeed often evoked when the Phunoy refer to what they consider to be their present unfavourable political situation in Phongsaly, where they feel there are still too few important officials from their ethnic group above the district level. Typical remarks include ‘there has never been a Phunoy appointed as province chief’, ‘Phunoy always get lower positions and always have to assist’, and ‘Phunoy always get jobs to second and help [others], and they are never appointed as leaders –

only the [ethnic] Lao get to be the leaders'. In short, the *Panya*, although sometimes described as being involved in a corrupt and unfair system, are still recalled today because they allow the Phunoy to assert their claim to have been a powerful and respected people in the past whose ingenuity and shrewdness made them relatively less subject to external authority than is presently the case.

Some Phunoy explain the present situation in terms of the fear that they inspire in the Lao. Some of the small groups of Phunoy speakers, who were kept out of the Mūang Phunoy organization in the past and were therefore subject to *corvée* for the Leu or Lao, justify their position as follows: 'The Lao have never wanted us to be clever [this means independent] because they have always feared us'. Some Phunoy also interpret the disappearance of objects that had belonged to Senpong as the result of the fear or cowardice of the Luang Prabang ruler. They say that 'the King feared Senpong so much that he waited until Senpong died to take his golden book and sword'. The King is said to have 'feared that the followers of Senpong would have the same powers, so he seized Senpong's book and sword'. These events do not preclude Lao admiration for Senpong, however: 'After he died, we put his body in a special place, and now the government is looking for his remains to be unearthed so that tribute can be paid to them'.

Does the story of Senpong end with the government's tribute? For the Phunoy, his story remains unfinished because, as some of them explain, 'Senpong is still alive. He is going to come back to set up a great Phunoy nation'. Through the perpetuation of Senpong's legend, the Phunoy thus claim their legitimacy as a prospective political power. The potentially subversive nature of such an assertion is evident. Indeed, it comes as no surprise that official texts or information produced on the Phunoy contain no reference to Senpong. In all the texts produced by the government cultural departments, such as comic strips or the commemorative plaque on the top of Mount Phu Fa, Senpong is always omitted and replaced by insignificant figures – supposed leaders of their ethnic group during the sixteenth century, who are in fact unknown to them.¹⁴

¹⁴ Mount Phu Fa is one of the highest mountains in Phongsaly. The Phunoy village of Senpok first, and later the town of Phongsaly, were built at the foot of that mountain. Mount Phu Fa, covered with old trees, was originally the site of Phunoy rituals. In the 1960s, after the Pathet Lao had become established in the province, it led several campaigns against 'superstitious' beliefs (including animism). Phu Fa became a nature reserve and, years later, a tourist location where the Ho used to go for part of their New Year celebrations.

Conclusion

The Phunoy seem to define themselves according to their relationship with foreign authority: formerly Lao kingship, and presently the Vientiane government. Their use of the past also seems to be influenced by that relationship, though in an ambivalent way. In some cases, as we have seen, the Phunoy comply with official visions of the past and as a result ignore their own history. In other cases, they tell stories in which they appear to be perfectly integrated into the Lao world – integrated but not subjected, as they face all dominant groups on an equal footing. They withstand and intimidate the Tai-speaking groups because of their similarities to them. The swing from similarity to superiority is achieved through the legendary exploits of Senpong, in which Lao authority either ceases to exist (he upholds the law and fights oppressors) or is in a position of inferiority. External authority is portrayed as ignorant (the reason why the Lao did not fight against Senpong), cowardly (the King waited for Senpong's death to confiscate his tools), subjugated (the King begged him to stop beating Lao monks) and grateful (government officials want to pay tribute to him). Thus by fighting against the Lao people with their own weapons on their own soil, Senpong acts in essence like a true Phunoy and sheds his fictive identity as a Lao individual to reinstate the glory of his own people.

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