

The Socio-political and Administrative Organisation of *Müang* in the Light of Lao Historical Manuscripts

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Jana Raendchen

Introduction

The use of the word *müang* is of special historic interest for the Lao; in particular for their traditional socio-political and administrative organisation, and the formation of their early (power) states. If we investigate Lao history, then we can divide it into two broad areas: the history of the Lao that the French amalgamated into Laos (political history of Laos), and the history of the Lao as an ethnic group (socio-cultural history of the Lao). Up to date, historians have concentrated more attention on the first area. Thus we have a number of works on the history of Laos, whereas there is no comprehensive work concerning the history of the Lao as an ethnic group that continuously had formed its own political entities which at times stretched from today's north-eastern Laos far into northern and north-eastern Thailand, and northern Cambodia as well as central western Vietnam.

In his penetrating study of the Lao in Northeast Thailand, Tambiah stressed that the Lao communities were organised on the pattern of the Indian *mandala*, a hypothesis that was supported by many other Western researchers. The *mandala* was described as a circle-like, centralised small state or city-state having interdependencies with other small states or political units of whatever form or constitution. The organisation of peoples over a more or less wide area around one city that is the political, administrative, religious and often also the economic center may properly be described as a *mandala* that, theoretically, is mainly based on the principles of Dharmasastra (law; Lao: *thammasaat*) and Arthasastra (politics; Lao: *atthasaat*), and the terms *mandala* or sometimes “city-state” generally were so applied to the early states of Southeast Asia.

According to Wolters, *mandala* means a “circle of king.” At the center of the *mandala* there is a king who is identified with divine and universal authority, claiming personal hegemony over the other rulers in his *mandala* who, theoretically, were his obedient allies and vassals. In recent research it has been stressed that – besides or together with a certain influence of Indian concepts – the traditional Lao/Tai concept of *müang* was an

important factor that led to the constitution of the early Lao states and kingdoms in northern mainland Southeast Asia, which probably were the first states practically controlling a larger territory than the former Mon-Khmer city-states, which are supposed to be stronger based on the *mandala* concept. We have a fairly accurate description of how the political system of Lao *müang* functioned – or did not function – on the eve of the French conquest of Indochina. Though these descriptions were written from a colonial perspective, it is obvious that at the mid to end of the 19th century the Lao *müang* were rather scattered political entities due to Siamese hegemony and destruction. It would therefore be more useful to investigate original Lao sources in order to get insight into the indigenous Lao concept of *müang*.

In this paper, I describe some aspects of the indigenous Lao concept of *müang* and its characteristics according to Lao manuscripts, which trace the beginnings of Lao history back to the mythical past, and which also give rather detailed information from about the middle of the sixteenth century or even earlier. The focus of my research is on the socio-political, administrative, legal, and religious aspects of the concept of *müang*. For this purpose, selected original sources have been used extensively. The main resources analysed are:

Phongsaawadaan Müang Laan Saang (PSMLS), a palm leaf manuscript in *Lao buhaan* script consisting of 77 *laan*, which was written in 1932 by an unknown author. It is probably a transcript of an older manuscript, which was written in *Lao tham* script. Its composition partially reminds us of the Jinakalamali, and besides the reigns of Müang Swa Laan Saang and its relationships with neighbouring *müang*, it gives an extended description of the history of Buddhism in Ceylon (Müang Langkaa) and its introduction in mainland Southeast Asia, especially in the Thai and Lao *müang* and Burma as well.

Phongsaawadaan Müang Luang Phabaang (PSMLP), a machine written manuscript in modern Lao script consisting of 42 pages, written in 1969 by an unknown author who was affiliated with the National Library of Laos. It is probably a transcript from an older document. It is a chronicle of Luang Prabang, which gives detailed information on the relationships of Luang Prabang with neighbouring polities.

Phüün Müang Luang Phabaang (PMLP), a palm leaf manuscript in two parts (12 and 14 *laan*), written in *Lao buhaan* script. The manuscript was written by at least two authors, probably more. This probably is also a transcript from an older document, but no year of composition is given. The manuscript tells the story of the foundation of Müang Luang Prabang and it gives the reigns of the polity as well as the relationships with other polities.

Lamdap nithaan müa Phla Putthachao dai khao ma yiap nai din Müang Luang Laan Saang (PPMLLS) is a handwritten paper manuscript in *Lao buhaan* script, which was copied in 1900 from another manuscript that was composed on demand of the King of Siam in 1870. The authors of the manuscript and the copy are unknown. It tells the legendary history of Müang Luang Prabang, and begins with the myth of Puu Nyoe Nyaa Nyoe and the foundation of the *müang*. The manuscript contains facts about important political and religious historical events and a genealogy of Lao kings.

Sia kho busaa pii mai (SKBPM) is a palmleaf manuscript in *Lao tham* script consisting of 5 *phuuk* with 52, 28, 17, 25 and 14 *laan*. The year of composition and the author are not known. It is a ritual text that is of special importance in the royal New Year celebration, namely the remembrance and prediction of the fate of the *müang*.

Khun Burom (KBSK) is the Siang Khwang version of the Khun Borom (also Khun Burom or Khun Bulom) legend. Date of composition and author of the handwritten manuscript in *Lao buhaan* script are not known. The manuscript describes the legendary background of the foundation of the first seven Tai polities in Southeast Asia by the sons of Khun Borom.

Sithikaan cha kaa sawaai thewadaa (SKST) is a handwritten paper manuscript in *Lao buhaan* script. Author and date of composition are not known; this ritual text probably was written down on demand of Charles Archambault. It is the ritual text which is to be recited during the buffalo sacrifice in Müang Khuun, the former capital of Müang Siang Khwaang (Müang Phuan). It gives insight into the mythological background of the buffalo sacrifice which was a ritual of the whole *müang*.

Hiit sipsoong khoong sipsii (HK), a palmleaf manuscript in *Lao tham* script, presenting the commonly known part of the traditional law of Lao *müang* that concerns the twelve annual rites and the fourteen rules for interpersonal communication and behaviour in *baan* and *müang* communities. The manuscript consists of 19 *laan*. The year of composition and author are not known. Similar texts were transcribed into modern Lao by Khampang Chaninyavong and by Samlit Buasisavat.

In addition, transcripts of original Lao sources were explored and analysed, most especially the works of Sila Viravong and Samlit Buasisavat. For a better understanding of the socio-cultural context of the sources explored, secondary literature written by Laotian as well as Western researchers was used.

Historical Overview

The earliest politically important settlements of the Lao, as known so far, probably were in the regions of the Plain of Jars (Xieng Khouang) and Luang Prabang, along the rivers Nam Khan, Nam Ngüm and Nam Khoong (Mekong). Traditionally, these people called themselves according to the place of their settlement, combining the term “Tai” (man) with the place name, as for example Tai Müang Phuan, Tai Müang Swa (Luang Phabang). Though it is sure that the name “Lao” is the short form of Tai Lao, the very origin of the name “Lao” is not clear. The term is ubiquitous and can refer to place, language or dialect, and people. Linguistically, it refers to the Lao branch of the Tai language family, which is spoken by at least 20 million native speakers in Laos, Northern and North-eastern Thailand (Isan), Vietnam and Cambodia. It is also possible that originally it is a short form of “Tai Müang Lao”, which probably could mean “Tai (in the) lands (of the) L’wa.” The L’wa are an ethnic group belonging to the Austro-Asiatic language family, and are supposed to have been settled in the region around Luang Prabang before the Lao migrated into that area. According to their legends of origin, the Lao were descendants of King Khun Borom (also spelled Khun Bulom), who sent his seven sons to rule seven different Tai *müang* as follows:

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|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Müang Swaa Laan Saang | ruled by Khun Lo |
| 2. Müang Ho | ruled by Khun Njiphaalaan |
| 3. Müang Chulanii or Plakan | ruled by Khun Chu Song |
| 4. Müang Yôônok | ruled by Khun Saiphong |
| 5. Müang Lawôô Ayutthayaa | ruled by Khun Kham In |
| 6. Müang Phuan | ruled by Khun Chet Chüang |
| 7. Müang Maan or Hongsoo | ruled by Khun Lok Don |

These are, in fact, the first main Tai polities of which we have historical evidence from Tai and non-Tai sources, as for example Chinese and Vietnamese annals, records and chronicles.

The languages spoken in these territories (Lao, Lü, Dai, Black/White/Red Tai, Tai Yuan, Thai, Phuan, Shan) belong to the Tai-Kadai language family and are closely related. Similarities of these languages are accepted by most scholars who have studied Tai languages. These linguistic similarities, without doubt, were standing as a bridge between these polities and peoples, and ensured a well functioning communication despite the existence of many obstacles, such as geographical remoteness of each group because of their settlement in river valleys which are surrounded by high mountain ranges, or the use of different scripts. Early speakers of Tai languages, in seeking preferred sites of habitation in river valleys, probably lived in relative isolation until population increase and/or wars drove them to occupy more and more space and to extend their communities, or to migrate to other places. Also, natural catastrophes and epidemics could have lead to migrations. Too little is yet known about these movements, but the essential unity of Tai cultures may well have had

a base in a common proto-Tai culture.

Concerning the relationships – political/tributary as well as social – between some of these Tai polities, see my research on “*Traditional concepts of community rights and social values of the Lao*,” in which I investigate the historical background of the Lao ethnic groups in present Laos and Thailand, and their historical relationships with Tai and non-Tai groups which were mainly based on the political structure of their *müang*.

The expansion of the Lao *müang*, which dates back to the 14th to 16th centuries, was no doubt linked to their complex administrative organisation, which included political, religious and ritual as well as economic/agrarian affairs, but also to their position at the crossroads of mainland Southeast Asian trade routes. The myths and legends of the Lao suggest that their political system and customs were already well established before the 14th century, and there is evidence that by the 15th century the Lao *müang* had become important powers in the region.

At the moment, it is impossible to determine the extent of the Lao *müang* exactly at any particular period before 1893, when Laos was declared part of French Indochina. The history of the Lao is one of alternating periods of territorial expansion and contraction in accordance with the degree of power and authority at the political centres of the *müang*. According to several Lao manuscripts, the 15th and 16th centuries were apparently the period of greatest expansion, external influence and stability of political administration.

Socio-Political and Administrative Organisation

Forms of community

The concept of community was at the heart of the life of traditional Lao society. Life was (and still is) organised not round the individual, but within an effective community, in which the life of the individual belonging to this community is protected. In trying to define the community, it is usual to stress ethnicity and kinship. Thus a community, at its lowest level, might comprise essentially an extended family or clan (both terms can be expressed in Lao by *baan*, which also means village) claiming descent from a common ancestor, speaking the same language or dialect, worshipping the same deities or guardian spirits, and sharing the same cultural values and identity. Besides that, diverse historical factors such as migration, conquest and assimilation within a limited territory might have been important aspects of common community culture.

Whatever its roots, the community, among the Lao, operated on the basis of group solidarity, shared interest, common loyalty to inherited values, cultural coherence and ideological consensus. This was based on communal involvement in the management of essential means of livelihood, mainly wet-rice cultivation, but also animal husbandry, silk

production, or other handicrafts in which families or individuals of one community cooperated. Therefore, those communities were close societies of interdependent members whose every action - even accidental and unintended actions - could affect the well-being of all other members of the community. Social, economic, religious and political interaction was therefore intense. Participation in the life of the society and culture was both a right and a religious duty.

The basic form of community among the Lao above the family level is the *baan*, which in most research is interpreted as village. But, as a matter of fact, *baan* also means “house” or it could refer to the living place of a clan, at least if we have very early Tai societies in mind. The institution of the *baan* also reflects the importance of kinship. The members of a *baan*, in the sense of village or house as well, are believed to be descendants of one and the same ancestor that is called “*phii baan*.” This is a form of guardian spirit (the spirit of the common ancestor) that takes care of the well-being of his descendants, but also controls the right following of the *hiit baan*. What has come to be called *hiit baan* or rules/traditions of the *baan*, would appear to be of ancient origin, but the system may very well have attained its highest development when the *Lan Sang* period had reached its climax, during the 15th to 17th centuries. Tradition and what still remains of the ancient system, however, proves that the *hiit baan* was an important part of the entire social, political, and economic organisation of the Tai-Lao. The *baan* might be only part of a rather small *müang* (here in the sense of a federation of several *baan*) or even part of an extensive kingdom like *Müang Laan Saang*.

The *baan* settlement is one basic political unit of the *müang*. Therefore the *baan*, as well as the *hiit baan*, must be viewed in the context of *müang*. The *hiit baan*, for example, never stands alone, but always is combined with *khoong müang*, rules/governance of *müang*. *Hiit baan khoong müang* is a dualistic concept, and one element of the whole does not exist without the other. It is the dualistic legal foundation of *müang* to ensure a stable administration.

Lao communities, be it *baan* or *müang*, were socially well-structured. Social groups existed, though most people had avenues for social mobility through marriage or adoption, Buddhist education or monkhood, professional specialisation or accumulation of wealth. Obviously, material wealth was highly appreciated. In the PMSLS we find large descriptions of the wealth and therefore greatness of *Müang Langkaa*, but also of *Müang Laan Saang*. Also the possession of many *baan* and minor *müang*, and “slaves” (*khooy*) as well, proves the wealth and greatness of a (major) *müang*.

The highest social group in Lao *müang* was that of the *chao/chao müang* or *chao phanyaa*. Almost every *müang* was (formally) ruled by a *chao*. Strictly speaking, a *chao* was the paramount “chief,” and normally only one person could occupy the position at any given time. Mostly the *chao* received some kind of tributes from his community and the *baan*

belonging to his *müang*, at least for ritual purposes like offerings to the *phii müang* or merit-making rituals at the main Buddhist monastery (*wat luang*). The institution of the *chao*, though in theory appearing as a centralised institution, proves the Lao notion of leadership and authority characterised by relative high local autonomy (of the *müang*) and considerable status mobility in practice.

Besides the title of *chao* for the head of a community, there were titles for male and female persons as well. Male persons of the nobility held the title of *thao* or *thao phanyaa*; *naang* was the title for female persons of the ruling families of a community or the nobility. “Nobility” here simply means that there existed some kinship bond, also through marriage, between a family and the *chao* of the community. *Naay* was a title for male members of the ruling families and the elite of a community. “Elite” was determined by various parameters, which could be economic, educational, religious or socio-cultural. Craftsmen and artists, for example, often bore this title.

At the “bottom” of the social ladder were the *Khooy* or *Khaa*, of various classifications. Generally, they were acquired outsiders, having been captured, purchased or forced to resettle within a *müang* of the Lao, or they voluntarily moved into *müang* communities and became part of them. Members of the Mon-Khmer ethnic groups generally were designated as *Khaa* by the Lao, but also ethnic Lao could become *Khooy* or *Khaa*, for example due to orphanage, or when they were sold into another family, or owing to debts. It was also possible that a whole family became *Khooy* or *Khaa* of a Lao family. Their most common disability was their limited access to resources. Farmland was owned by the ethnic Lao members of the community, and none was owned by the *Khooy* or *Khaa*. They could not easily marry into the Tai Lao families, unless they were set free and then made to undergo a rigorous process of acculturation and assimilation. Apart from these major restrictions, most *Khooy* or *Khaa* were allowed to lead unmolested lives, provided they observed all taboos and performed the usual tasks demanded by their owners. It was quite common that Lao families owned one or several *Khooy* or *Khaa*, or the whole *müang* owned a number of them. They were regarded as kinless dependents whose daily activities did not differ very significantly from those performed by the members of the host communities. One can therefore make clear distinctions between Tai Lao and *Khooy* or *Khaa* in *müang* communities. The Tai Lao claimed origin from the founding ancestors of the community, whereas *Khooy* or *Khaa* were adopted outsiders. There were also pawns, debtors or their representatives who pledged to work for their creditors until the debt was discharged. The labour they rendered was the customary substitute for interest. They were treated as collateral for the sum of money they owed, and regained their freedom immediately after their debt was repaid.

Owners were advised to treat their *Khooy* or *Khaa* humanely and, in fact, customary laws demanded it. *Khooy* and *Khaa* also realised that they owed their entire existence to their patrons and that since they owned no separate farmlands, their own life depended on the success of their owners. The ethnic Tai Lao members of the community encouraged the

acculturation of outsiders. Outsiders, on their part, recognised that a swift acculturation accelerated their movement from the margins of society toward a greater incorporation into the host community. Acculturation first of all meant the adoption of Theravada Buddhism (“*sasanaa luang*” – the main or great religion).

Administration and its religious background

Lao culture was (and still is) a religious culture; life outside this culture was unthinkable since it was the basis of their identity. Their religion – a syncretism of ancestor/spirit cult and Theravada Buddhism – was the hub of their entire being. To remain faithful to their religion was to lead a worthy life, to admire the Buddha and his teachings (Dhamma), and at the same time to live in peace with the ancestors, deities and other spiritual powers, to enjoy good health, to live in peace with their neighbours, to have children who would continue their lineage, and to have good harvests as the basis of their life. Most of the rituals were dedicated to these aims.

The administrative effectiveness of *müang* communities was due in large measure to the cohesiveness of their social organisation, which was strongly built on their traditional beliefs and values. One important basis of this organisation was kinship in its broadest sense, meaning descent from one and the same ancestor, namely Khun Borom (Khun Bulom) and his seven sons. Therefore it is believed that, in general, all members of Tai ethnic groups are related to each other by kinship, but the relationship is specially close between members of one and the same group, and even more between members of one and the same *müang*. According to the chronicles, the foundation of *müang* polities mostly is related to one important ruler who is seen as a common ancestor of the population of that particular *müang*. The belief is that the spiritual essences of the ancestor(s) continue to exist after the person’s death and may benevolently or malevolently influence the fate of the community. Ancestor worship among the Tai-Lao often induces the living to perform religious rites (as for example *suu khwan*), including Buddhist rites as well as sacrifices of pre-Buddhist origin, in order to gain the ancestor’s help and protection for the well-being of the *müang*. One of the most important ancestor worship rituals that concerns the whole *müang* is the New Year celebration. The Ms. SKBPM shows the importance of the New Year rituals, especially that of forecasting the future fate of the *müang* by calling the ancestral spirits. The remembrance and worship of common ancestors are factors that strongly contribute to stabilising lineages, clans, and *müang* communities.

Ancestor worship and the traditional beliefs connected with it were the nexus of Lao community life, culture and politics. It was not only a belief and conformity to their ways of life, but it was a moving spirit of community life and political stability. Politics and administration were part of a whole that was community life itself. The Lao have a political culture that embodies the peculiar political characteristics of the Lao themselves, which has

not always been to their own advantage. Their ancestor belief determined their conception of beings in their world-view which strongly influenced their administrative organisation and political action. Of particular importance was the belief that the ancestors have direct influence on the activities of the living. They were seen as having all powers while men on earth only held and exercised some in trust for them. Most of the administrative institutions were seen as belonging to the ancestors who instituted them. The occupants had to appropriate those characters and qualities of the ancestors if their tenures were to receive the ancestor's blessings. The political units were seen as rather sacred entities anchored on religious postulations which legitimised them. Modes of selection and the governance of Lao traditional *müang* communities were highly religion based. This also explains the success of Buddhism or Buddhist rituals, which during the 15th to 17th centuries became an integral part of Lao *müang* administration and politics. Buddhism was understood as a powerful political instrument, which even was supported by the ancestor belief. Political values were believed to be enunciated and supervised by spiritual beings who rewarded compliance and conformity while punishing infractions by recalcitrant members of the community. Rituals which surrounded Lao administrative institutions, personnel, values and laws gave substantive forms to otherwise abstract ideas and made for effectiveness and legitimacy through the mystical forces that were evoked on them. This supernatural supervision of Lao political life enhanced its acceptability, and the respect accorded to its operators.

A summary of the correspondence between religion and administrative culture will be that belief or religion established political units, defined their members, assigned institutions and roles, rights and obligations, provided values, dictated orientations and finally sat over to supervise the entire system. The ancestor belief defined authority in society and politics, and this authority also was represented in certain communal rituals like the *hiit sipsoong*. The following list shows the main administrative or political institutions according to the Ms. HK:

huu müang (transl. "ear of the *müang*") - head of foreign affairs, diplomat

taa müang (transl. "eye of the *müang*") - scholar, wise person, advisor

kään müang (transl. "seed of the *müang*") - religious head, head of cultural affairs

patuu müang (transl. "gate of the *müang*") - border protection institution

haak müang (transl. "root of the *müang*") - astrologer, head of computation of time and forecast

ngau müang (transl. "trunk of the *müang*") - advisor, elder of the *seena* council

khüü müang (transl. “roof timbering of the *müang*”) - administrators of minor political units, state officials

faa müang (transl. “wall of the *müang*”) - military, head of defence

pää müang (transl. “roof of the *müang*”) - members of the nobility, leading administrators, also *thaa phanjaa* including the *chao müang*

kheet müang (transl. “ground of the *müang*”) - area, territory; also geographer

sati müang (transl. “consciousness of the *müang*”) - economic affairs

tjai müang (transl. “heart of the *müang*”) - healer, head of ritual affairs

khaa müang (transl. “value of the *müang*”) - inhabitants, population

meek müang (transl. “clouds of the *müang*”) - ancestral and guardian spirits

Though there existed a hierarchical structure within *müang* communities, there obviously was no absolute authority. This gave Lao *müang* certain attributes of “democracy” which culminated in consensus government. Traditional political authority depended on consensus of the institutions mentioned above. The premise of participatory and consensus politics of the Lao is a hand-down from their world-view which posited a world in which life is a bargain like in a market place. One haggles with contending alternatives until purchase is made. In consensus politics, the individual is entitled to express dissent on any issue, while the leaders must explain the problems raised so that all can go along together. And, as we have seen, in Lao consensus politics, communal rituals played an important role too, probably as a means of indirect, but standardised communication between the administrative institutions or individuals.

The political or administrative institutions and their authoritative character are mostly determined through the ancestor belief. It was an accredited belief that the ancestors were part and parcel of their human families or communities. There were personal or communal memories of them. Of all other metaphysical or supernatural powers, the ancestors were the closest and most benevolent to their human relatives. Here again, we see the importance of kinship bounds. It was believed that the ancestors knew and had interest in what was happening to their relatives; families/clans, villages and whole *müang* communities as well, and that they had the power to protect their relatives.

One important aspect of the ancestor belief was that an ancestor could retain his place as an ancestor; be the incarnation of the ancestor in one living person, or hope to be re-incarnated in one yet unborn person. This unique position of an ancestor made him/her very

important in the social, political and religious life of the Lao. Thus, the cult of ancestors engendered social harmony and moral rectitude and fostered communal spirit.

Kingship

Concerning the socio-political and administrative organisation of *müang* we have evidence from original Lao manuscripts of the 19th and 20th centuries, which are copies, or copies of copies of earlier manuscripts that probably were composed during the late *Lan Sang* period. From these sources we can see that *müang* were complex, but well-structured polities with monarchy-like characteristics. The king or ruler (*chao müang* or *phanya müang*, often also *pha raasaa*) had powers, which may be described as constitutional or “customary” rather than absolute. He (or sometimes she) was the first among the chiefs or rulers of all the *baan* together forming one *müang*, or of the rulers of several minor *müang* that formed one major *müang*. Each ruler (*chao*), after appointment by the members of the council of elders (*senaa* or *senaa muntri*) of his *baan* or *müang*, had to obtain the king’s commission in a public ceremony of investiture at the *sanaam luang*, a public square mostly in front of the king’s palace or near the *thaat luang*, the main *stupa* of the *müang*. The *chao* then could become a member of the king’s council.

Though the position of a king was believed to be determined by “heavenly powers” (*phii faa*) or the gods (*thewadaa*; mostly *Pha In – Indra* – is mentioned in this context), and though in practice the position of a king often was inherited, the king *de facto* was authorised on the decision of the council of the *chao müang* or *chao baan*. During communal rituals the king was reminded by the *moo müang* (or later the *phaam*) that his power was dependent on the good will of the ancestors and that he could not afford to defy or to ignore the ritual and ceremonial necessities as well as the wishes of his people, who also were offspring of the same ancestors. His reliance on the kinship network for running his kingdom effectively checked his powers.

The king had to follow certain rules which are described in detail in the *Khamphii Lookanithii*. According to this source, the king was only one element among five elements necessary for the existence and well-being of a state (*patheet*): the rich (*khon mii ngön*), the wise (*nak baat*), the king (*phra raasaa*), the rivers or lords of water (*mää nam*) and the pharmacist or healer (*moo yaa*). If the king is not good and behaves not in the right way, the state may be in danger. The king is the power of the people, such as the wind is the power of the birds, the water is the power of the fish, and the crying is the power of the small child. The characteristics of a good leader are: patience (*khwaam ot-thon*), wisdom/conscience (*khwaam mii sati*), diligence (*khwaam du-man*), generosity (*kaan chääk chaay*), mercy (*khwaam met-ta paanii*) and concern about his subjects (*böng njääng phuu üün*). The ruler must speak carefully and consciously, and shall not change his mind after he has made a decision. The king is responsible for the activities and deeds of his people, and faults of the people will affect the king as well as the faults of the king will affect the people. The king is

a patron, not a fellow or a friend, and therefore shall be respected as an authority.

Due to formal hierarchy, the king was raised above all his subjects including his council members, but also was constrained to consult with his council and religious leaders (*pha sangkhachao*, the highest person of the Buddhist *Sangha*) in important matters like war, legal matters and heavy punishment (namely capital punishment), tributary missions and official relationships with other states. The dependence of the king on the people of his *müang* was qualified in several ways. The *chao* of minor *müang* were required to pay their respects to the king regularly, to pay tribute (mostly in the form of contributions to communal rituals) to raise an army in any case of emergency and to deal with any situation that was likely to undermine the territorial integrity and sovereignty.

However, power was not necessarily centralised in the person of the king, but to a certain degree power was diffuse with the council of elders, the *phaam* (Brahmanic ritual masters and advisors of the king), *chao* of minor *müang* or of *baan* which were constituting the *müang*. A king hardly could be an absolute authority deciding on matters concerning peace and war alone, or the allocation of land and other economic resources, regulating festivals and other religious matters etc. The king always had to consider the elders of the *müang* and his advisors in any decision that had to be made concerning the community.

Tact and good performance stood a king in good stead, for in addition to the *chao* of the capital town (the capital town itself mostly was formed by several smaller *müang* which were ruled not directly by the king but by their own *chao müang*) he had to keep regular contacts to the lesser *chao* of the subordinate *müang*. The latter, in return, had to pay respect to the king in form of personal visits or sending tribute to the king.

The king or *chao* was the focus of both the political and religious or spiritual life of the *müang*, participating in an incredible number of elaborate rituals, considering that he also had to govern an increasingly more powerful state or empire. Generally, it was believed that a *chao* could be the re-incarnation of a former heroic king or powerful ancestor. Therefore, the *chao* played a most important role in the ancestor worshipping rituals of the *müang* or the whole kingdom. It can be supposed that in pre-Buddhist times, an annual ceremony was held by the king to worship the *müang* ancestors and guardian spirits (*phii müang*). It is quite probable that the central element of that ceremony was a sacrifice ritual, in which, besides a number of other things, a buffalo was offered to the ancestor and guardian spirits.

Some chronicles stress the martial aspects of the king or any *chao müang*. The king was the key figure in the prosecution of any war. After the customary consultations with the other *chao* of his council and the religious head of the *müang*, the declaration of war or peace was done in the king's name. Often also the triple gem – Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha – was mentioned. He was also commander-in-chief and was expected to lead an attack in person. A king who died in a war became a figure of “national” pride - a “national hero” of

that particular *müang*. He also was believed to become a guardian spirit of the *müang*. It was not possible to delegate this duty: such action would be tantamount to abdicating his position as head of the state. Of course, his subordinate *chao* would also command, in person, one or more war troops manned by members of their respective *müang* or *baan*. The *chao* of the allied *müang*, of course, could wage their own private wars. But it seems that they never did this without the assent or permission of the king since these private wars could seriously affect the security of the major *müang*.

The king had to fulfil a number of duties as mentioned above, but he also had privileges, such as the services of his subjects, the possession of royal properties (ground, the royal palace, animals, gold and silver etc.) and regalia (the royal umbrella and the throne, crowns and costumes which were made of gold and silver brocades, flags, white elephants and war elephants, royal howdahs, royal betel boxes and offering bowls, elephant tusks, manuscripts, royal swords, royal military dresses made of silk with symbolic sacred diagrams for protection against dangers, the royal boat and chariot). The royal umbrella and the sword were important insignia and symbolised the king's holiness and his power.

When a king died, the *mahasangkharat*, the highest member of the Buddhist *Sangha*, together with the *phaam* (Brahmins, the ritual masters) took a large share in conducting affairs. All inhabitants of the *müang* exerted themselves to show their respect to the late king, and to participate in and contribute to the cremation ceremony.

The social and political organisation of the Lao *müang* shows certain factors that are very different from what has been described as "absolute monarchies" or "despotism" in some early research. The *chao baan* and *chao müang* had to be appointed by vote of all council members, say elders of the *baan* or the *müang*. Though in practice and according to the principles of ancestor belief the position of a *chao* often was inherited, this position was not automatically guaranteed by inheritance. After appointment the *chao* could rule harshly, but then individual members, whole families or parts of the community could move away to other polities to seek the protection of more powerful and just rulers. This always was a great loss for a *müang*, since the human labour force was the main basis for the wealth of a *müang*. Besides this, such disaffection ultimately weakened the ruler's standing in the society and acted as a restraint. He could also be indirectly or symbolically attacked by the elders, as for example during the *süa kho busaa pii mai* ritual when possible punishments for negative actions could be mentioned.

The position of authority thus carried with it much social prestige. However, the palace of the king represented an office for organising a consensus on public and political affairs (*wiak baan kaan müang*) rather than one of a despotic exercise of authority. He was hedged round with elders who could speak as the elected representatives of sections of the community, and advisers (*phaam* and *moo*) who even fulfilled the function of mediums being able to communicate with the ancestors, and guardian and heavenly spirits, and

therefore had a strong influence on the decision making of the king. Tact and a spirit of wise political compromise became important attributes.

Law and order

Traditional law in *müang* communities was flexible, unformalised and popular in the sense that it sprang from the people. It avoided fragmentation and accorded primacy to the concrete, and it was rather a combination of rules of behaviour which were contained in the flow of life. However, traditional Lao law was positive and not negative and its whole object was to maintain an equilibrium. Therefore, the penalties were directed first of all not against specific infractions, but to the restoration of this equilibrium. This process not only took place in the community of the living, but also in a constant communication between the living and the ancestors.

Traditional legal thought was based on the infinite quest for consensus in *müang* communities. The communal ethos necessarily placed a great value on solidarity, which in turn necessitated the pursuit of unanimity or consensus on all levels of legal decisions. In this context it is understandable that the rule of a king was not possible without the consent of the people of the whole *müang*.

Laws in traditional pre-Buddhist Lao society were not codified. Though firstly unwritten, they were nevertheless quite comprehensible, like all versions of the *hüt khoong* rules prove. Pre-Buddhist law was seen as divine law, and the breach of these laws was regarded as an offence not only against human society, but directly against the ancestors and the super-natural. The characteristic features of these divine laws were that they were not made by man; that their violation could carry heavy punishment of the individual or a whole community (by the super-natural); that to avoid heavy punishment a proprietary rite or sacrifice had to be performed; and that they were transmitted orally in form of ritual and ceremonial texts. The traditional laws were there to protect the lives of the individuals and families in the community and the community itself, but also to safeguard the moral principles of the people and to guide the society in its effort to maintain its link with the ancestors or the spirit world (*müang phii*). The most severe crimes according to the traditional law were murder, theft or robbery, maltreatment of other persons (including *Khaa* and *Khooy*), destruction of possessions of others, false witness against others, violations of the community hierarchy or the communal ritual order, offences against guardian spirits like the guardian spirit of the community (*phii müang*), the Lord of water (*Naga/Ngüak*), or the goddess of the earth (*Nang Thorani*) etc. In practical life, there must have been a conscious effort to avoid the violation of these laws not because of fear of any human institution but because they were believed to carry divine/ancestral sanction - a super-natural sanction. Moreover, the violation of these laws was not only regarded as a criminal offence, but was also considered irreligious. This religious aspect further stresses the divine nature of the

laws.

In the Lao pre-Buddhist legal system, the highest “court” of appeal was the supernatural or ancestral tribune. When all the recognised judicial institutions failed to resolve a dispute to the satisfaction of the injured party, the final option was to seek redress from the super-natural which alone could dispense absolute, pure and final justice. This might take the form of swearing an oath or consulting a spirit medium. In the widest sense, the traditional Lao law comprised all those laws, the violation of which was regarded as offence against all the powers that protect the *müang* community from danger, epidemic, destruction, catastrophes etc.

During the *Laan Saang* era, laws, proclamations, and enactments were made in the king’s name. He did not judge, save in council with the *chao* of the subordinate *müang*. The judicial system, however, was such that it allowed the king to exercise a strong influence. Offences against the king’s person were treated with greater severity than when they were committed against commoners. Adultery, committed with one of the king’s wives, for example, was officially viewed as a grave offence. The same was the case with homicide, robbery, insult or assault etc. Even an offence against the king’s slaves was regarded as a severe crime. During the *Laan Saang* period, the concept of moral law, understood as a law regulating human conduct, was strongly determined by Buddhist law. Therefore, an act was judged as “bad” either because it offended the ancestors/guardian spirits, or because it was contrary to the Buddhist *Dhamma*. The following of the *Dhamma* was of special importance for the king and the nobility since their socio-political status officially was legitimised by the *Dhamma*.

Positive laws were made on a wide range of subjects including economic, social and political matters. Though there was no permanent legislative body or specialised legal institution (except the *chao müang* with his advisors and the council) with powers to declare laws, laws were nevertheless made by an *ad hoc* general assembly, which was in fact an all purpose assembly. There were special laws for the *baan* only, and other laws for the whole political unit of *müang*, like laws concerning economic matters (use of *müang* market places or common natural resources etc.), social matters (use of public social facilities like roads, bridges, wells etc.), or political matters (councils, borderlines, relationship with external powers etc.).

The pre-Buddhist laws as well as the laws which emerged during the *Laan Saang* period strongly reflect the indigenous values of the Lao. The traditional laws were an effective instrument for achieving social and spiritual harmony, for promoting moral rectitude and maintaining sound political order. The positive laws were related to the immediate social needs and aspirations whereas the divine laws sought to guide man in his relationship with the ancestors and the guardian spirits that were believed to be a

determining force for the power, stability and wealth of *müang* communities.

Conclusion

In the Lao manuscript sources, the term *müang* is used synonymously with “town/city” (*nakhoon*, *kung*), and “kingdom” (*aanaachak*). The combination of the terms *baan* and *müang* into *baan-müang* is used to express the whole concept of *müang*, which besides the politico-religious superstructure includes the rural basis (*baan*) too. The term *müang* is ambivalent and can refer to:

- A municipality that is the political and ritual centre of a socio-political unit, e.g. communities of a group of *baan*
- A socio-political unit (“small-state” or “chiefdom”) being composed of a number of *baan* (village communities), with an economy based on wet-rice production by intensive use of the *müang-faai* (canal-weir) irrigation system,
- A larger political unit of a number of *müang* that integrated traditional forms of *müang* administration and the Indian *mandala* concept of the centralised state, such as Tai Buddhist Kingdoms and the modern nation states like Laos or Thailand
- The traditional Tai-Lao understanding of the universe that consists of numbers of *müang* being of worldly as well as supernatural/metaphysical or heavenly “nature”, and all underlying a special cosmic order or universal law, which determines human ritual life, customary law, the moral order and behaviour. In the context of Buddhism, the term *müang* is used synonymously with the term *look* (from Pali: *loka*)

Baan, the basic element of *müang*, etymologically means a group of extended families, which often but not necessarily were bound together by kinship relations (clan). A *baan* occupied a certain territory (*din baan*) that traditionally included cultivated land, sacred and wild forests, and watercourses. However, being wet-rice growing societies, Tai *baan* could not have sustained themselves in isolation, but were dependent to a high degree on water irrigation that demands cooperation of several *baan* communities being situated in one and the same watershed area. The organisation of cooperation of a number of *baan* in irrigation works, historically, probably was the primary reason for founding *müang*, that is a group of several *baan* managing one common irrigation system (*müang-faai*), and generally worshipping the same territorial guardian spirit (*phii müang*) and ancestral spirits.

The inner structure of a *müang* was characterised by a decentralised administration and a hierarchical order, on the top of which was the *müang luang*, the municipality in

which the *chao müang* or *phanyaa müang* (“chief/lord of the *müang*”) resided. The *chao* fulfilled not only the function of a political leader, but also as the head of administration, and in time of war, he/she had to organise mutual defence. For this protection the *baan* rendered labour service or paid quantities of local produce in return. This was a mutually beneficial relationship, supported through the pre-supposition that the *chao* was provided with sacred power from the ancestors of the *müang*. However, the *chao* did not have the status of a *devaraja* (God-King), a concept that was introduced only with the process of indianisation, and his power was not that of an “absolute monarch.” Besides the *chao*, there existed a council of elders elected by the *baan* or the minor *müang*. This council had to make decisions in irrigation and administration, in legal and religious affairs, and the *moo müang*, the medium of the *phii müang*, was a very important person who probably had nearly the same political power as the *chao müang*. The *baan* had full autonomy in their communal affairs, and they were represented in the *müang* council by their village elders (*thao baan*).

The traditional Lao *müang* also integrated the non-Tai populace without significantly affecting their own traditional community-structure, and established diplomatic and tributary relationships with neighbouring polities (Khmer, Mon, Vietnamese, Chinese) to maintain inner stability as well as political balance with external powers. The Lao *chao müang* paid much attention to peaceful “ethnic management,” meaning that members of the non-Tai populace formally had to follow the *hiit-khoong* code (in *müang* affairs), but also shared certain rights according to the code. Non-Tai community leaders were also represented in the *müang* council, and often they were given a high function as ritual masters (*phaam*) in the *müang* administrative system.

Boundaries were hardly defined as geographical borderlines, though borders are described more or less clearly in some manuscripts like PSMLS. At any given period, each *müang* had territorial claims that it tried to sustain, but even these were not static. What existed were cultural frontiers, between linguistic groupings, with various other channels of communication and various solidarity contracts cutting across.

With their *baan-müang* system the Lao, like almost all Tai, had developed a special “technology of state building,” with great continuity in administration and external relations that could explain the sudden increase in power when additionally having taken over Indian concepts of the centralised state during the 13th/14th centuries CE. Besides, *müang* was an organisational instrument for the efficient use of manpower in a large region, which ensured economic stability. The economic surplus was mainly used for ritual purposes and the maintenance of friendly relationships with neighbouring powers, as well as investment in articles of value such as gold, silver, precious stones, and in the establishment of communal utilities. Surplus generally was not used for building of ritual-political prestige objects as was the case in the Khmer and Mon empires copying Indian examples of material interpretation of the conceptualisation of the cosmos. The sensible management and economical use of resources (both natural and human resources) was another factor ensuring

historical continuity of Tai polities.

Due to intensive contacts with the indianised Mon and Khmer rulers, the Lao *chao müang* adopted not only Buddhism but also learned about traditional Indian concepts of the state such as the *mandala* concept (from Sanskrit: circle, meaning a centralised political system) and methods of government as described in the *Khamphii Lookanithii*. They sought to make their *müang* into Buddhist Kingdoms (*raja-anachak*) by unifying a number of *müang* with which they had kinship or friendly relations, or by occupying and subjugating weaker *müang*. There is no doubt that the *mandala* concept of “state building” served that purpose very well. The strength of the early Lao and Tai Kingdoms, which appeared suddenly in the 13th/14th centuries CE in the whole of mainland Southeast Asia, probably lied in the integration of traditional decentralised administration practice (level of practice) and the originally Indian ideology of the centralised state (theoretical level). This means that the ruler formally had the status of a *devaraja* and theoretically the *müang* were seen as circles of power, but in practice the several *müang* forming a kingdom were relatively autonomous in inner affairs and in their relations to other *müang*. Only in exceptional cases did a *müang* have the shape of a circle, but most were formed according to the traditional *müang* pattern of a water serpent with its main elements *hua müang* (head of the *müang* = seat of the religious leader and main Buddhist monasteries), *tjai müang* (heart of the *müang* = seat of the guardian spirit *phii müang* and the *chao müang* as political leader), and *haang müang* (tail of the *müang* = main settlements of the population).

Out of *Ayudhya* and later Siam, where the *müang* administration system was radically transformed into the *Sakdina* system, the practice of integrating traditional *müang* administration and the *mandala* ideology of the centralised state was preserved and practised until the beginning of European colonisation.

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