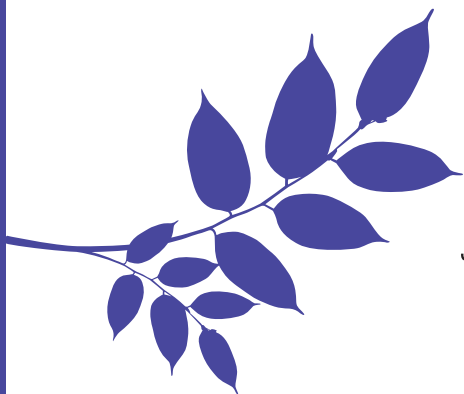


“Neither Kha, Tai, nor Lao”: Language, Myth, Histories, and the Position of the Phong in Houaphan

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Japan-ASEAN Transdisciplinary Studies Working Paper Series No.12
July 2021

Neither Kha, Tai, nor Lao: Language, Myth, Histories, and the Position of the Phong in Houaphan

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Abstract

In this paper we explore the intersections between oral and colonial history to re-examine the formation and interethnic relations in the uplands of Northern Laos. We unpack the historical and contemporary dynamics between “majority” Tai, “minority” Kha groups and the imagined cultural influence of “Lao” to draw out a more nuanced set of narratives about ethnicity, linguistic diversity, cultural contact, historical intimacy, and regional imaginings to inform our understanding of upland society. The paper brings together fieldwork and archival research, drawing on previous theoretical and areal analysis of both authors.

1. Introduction

The Phong of Laos are a small group of 30,000 people with historical strongholds in the Sam Neua and Houamuang districts of Houaphan province (northeastern Laos). They stand out among the various members of the Austroasiatic language family – which encompass 33 out of the 50 ethnic groups in Laos – as one of the few completely Buddhized groups. Unlike their animist Khmu neighbours, they have been Buddhist since precolonial times (see Bouté 2018 for the related example of the Phunoy, a Tibeto-Burman speaking group in Phongsaly Province).

In contrast to the Khmu (Évrard, Stolz), Rmeet (Sprenger), Katu (Goudineau, High), Hmong (Lemoine, Tapp), Phunoy (Bouté), and other ethnic groups in Laos, the Phong still lack a thorough ethnographic study. Joachim Schliesinger (2003: 236) even called them “an obscure people”. This working paper is intended as first step towards exploring the history, language, and culture of this less known group. We hope to encourage other researchers to follow this initiative and take a closer look at the Phong and their specific position within the multi-ethnic setting of Houaphan.

This paper is inspired by a rare archival find: A Phong-French dictionary compiled by the colonial administrator Antoine Lagrèze in 1925 (Archives nationales d’outre-mer, Aix-en-Provence; ANOM RSL/Z). Besides offering a unique chance to study language change and pragmatics, the unpublished manuscript includes an insightful ethnographic study that calls for closer ethnohistorical scrutiny (sample text in Appendix I). Our working paper thus focuses on the linguistic and historical aspects of this specific ethnic category. It includes an in-depth

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study of the key origin myth of the Phong – the story of the culture hero Hat Ang. In addition to contributing to anthropological knowledge production on the Phong, we aim to investigate the interethnic dynamics that shape local lifeworlds in culturally diverse contexts like Houaphan (see Badenoch and Tomita (2013) for the related example of Luang Namtha in northwestern Laos). Our discussion includes material from archival research and fieldwork conducted with the Phong in Houaphan and communities of Phong in the Vientiane area.

Our work with the Phong has raised many fascinating questions about the history and identity within the multiethnic landscapes of Houaphan. Our understanding of the region has been informed by insightful work on the Tai and their socio-political systems. The Tai-Kha relationship continues to be a productive, but frustrating framework for unpacking local histories, cultural identifications, and ethnic formations. Recent work by Pierre Petit (2020) has added to the existing body of knowledge about Tai political structures, but the position of Austroasiatic groups remains woefully understudied. Grant Evans (2000) has brought some attention to the recent cultural history of the Ksingmul, but still within the framework of Tai-ization, the process by which non-Tai groups assimilated to the stronger political-economic structures and dominant cultural practices (see as well Évrard 2019). Georges Condominas (1990), drawing on the work of Vietnamese scholars, as well as his own fieldwork, has synthesized and theorized how the interethnic relations of these upland areas define a social space. The Phong further complicate these questions because of the number of self-identification terms they use, variation in their languages and accounts of a history of interactions that do not fit with the received wisdom. Research focusing on non-Tai populations from a multidisciplinary perspective is needed if the social complexity of these localities is to be appreciated. Importantly, it is this perspective that is missing from regional histories. In this paper, we bring together analysis from anthropology, history, linguistics and folklore to explore the formation of ethnic worlds in the uplands of northern Laos.

Within this perspective, language is critical. Among the very few detailed studies of Phong language and history published to date is Bui Khanh The's *The Phong Language of the Ethnic Phong Which Lived Near the Melhir (sic) Muong Pon Megalith in Laos (Field Work Notes): An Introduction of data and description* (1973). This 1,200-word list and description of Phong phonology, morphology and syntax includes some ethnographic commentary from their fieldwork. Data from this study is included, referenced as Bui. The title of the study refers to the megaliths in Houamuang district studied by the archaeologists Madeleine Colani in the 1930s and Anna Källén more recently (see Colani 1935; Källén 2016). Since the megaliths of “Sao Hintang” (‘twenty standing stones’) were located in the Phong settlement area, local oral traditions falsely identify the Phong as the original creators of the mysterious stones (dating back three millennia like the famous stone jars of Xieng Khouang province). Given the fact that the Phong insist on having migrated from the upper Nam Ou a few centuries ago, we can only speculate about the autochthonous population of yore who created the megaliths. Interestingly, the megaliths are mentioned in the Phong origin myth of the culture hero Hat Ang (see the detailed discussion below). Further information on ethnography, linguistics and mythology are provided by only a few colonial sources. Besides Lagrèze's manuscript, another vocabulary was compiled by Macey (1905). Further ethnographic information on the Phong was provided by the prolific travel writer Alfred Raquez (1905) and the colonial administrator Adolphe Plunian (1905).

2. Tai society as an ethnolinguistic mosaic

This paper is an exploration of the Tai/Kha relationship from the perspective of the Phong, who, as Austroasiatic people living among various Tai groups, “should” fall under the Kha category. The Tai/Kha framework has been useful, and efforts to continuously unpack the diversity and dynamism of the Kha category have produced more nuanced understandings of the uplands. But it is necessary to step back to recognize that the entire relationship is an abstracted and idealized one, not only from the Kha perspective, but from the Tai as well. The cultural and linguistic differences between various Tai groups may be downplayed, and subsumed under a locally hegemonic understanding of Tai political, economic and social systems. This can be observed in frequent references to historical processes of Taiization and more recently Laoization (Évrard 2019). Granted, in the case of the Khmu, one of the better understood Austroasiatic groups in the region, internal diversity is partially the product of their interaction with different Tai groups. Nonetheless, the category Tai lacks nuance in many streams of historical and anthropological research. The field of historical linguistics, however, utilizes analytical tools that use linguistic characteristics in sound systems, grammatical structures and pragmatics, to discern different types of influence on Austroasiatic languages. A good example of this is the 2014 Kammu Yüan Dictionary by Svantesson et al., which makes specific efforts to distinguish between Lao and Lue sources in the significant body of words borrowed from Tai languages.

As we discuss the position of the Phong within the Tai cultural landscapes of Houaphan, it is necessary to recognize the cultural and linguistic diversity of the Tai groups in the region. The divide between Buddhist and non-Buddhist groups is an obvious and important factor that contributes to social dynamics and inter-ethnic relations. There are significant linguistic differences as well, and these should be considered and utilized in a systematic way. As always, ethnonyms can be confusing, and while they are important data for historical and social analysis, they should also be treated with respect for the complex linguistic nuances that underpin them. Chamberlain’s work on Tai historical linguistics offers insights into the diversity of these groups, and are essential reading for anyone interested in the uplands of Mainland Southeast Asia.

The word *tai* can be used in three ways: to refer to the linguistic family or a sub-group, as part of an ethnonym of many of these groups, and in reference to these languages or their speakers. The old form of this word is the Proto-Tai **day*. One important distinction to be made is whether the /t/ sound in the *tai* element of the ethnonym is aspirated /t^h/ or unaspirated /t/. This phonological development, in which Proto-Tai **d* changed to /t/ in some languages (such as Tai Dam and Tai Daeng) and /t^h/ in others (such as Phuan, Lao and Thay Neua), is part of a larger criteria in the historical classification of Tai languages. The use of this aspiration criteria has been discussed as the P/PH divide, which represents two historical trajectories of the Proto-Tai initial voiced consonants (Chamberlain 1991). We follow Chamberlain’s suggestion of referring to the /tay/ groups as Tai and the /t^hay/ groups as Thay. In the Tai category we find isoglosses between Thay Vat and Tai Dam in the northern area of the province, and between Thay Neua varieties and Tai Daeng in the rest of the province.

The term Lao is also complex and confusing (Chamberlain 2019). The entire area of Houaphan was part of a geographical region referred to historically as Ai-Lao, but aside from recent arrivals of government staff in the cities, people of the Lao ethnolinguistic group have not been part of the ethnic landscape of the region; in other words, one does not find ethnic Lao villages in this region. Tai dialectology takes the structure of the tone system to be a key

identifying criteria, and the Lao language and its varieties are characterized by a specific pattern of historical tone mergers that are not present in the Tai languages of Houaphan. Therefore, linguistically the languages spoken by the Tai peoples in Houaphan are most accurately identified by the term *Tai-Thai*, which does not include Lao, and importantly avoids confusion with the term *Thai* and its association with Thailand. To make this situation more complex, the term *Lao* /laaw/ is also used as part of ethnonyms, meaning ‘people’, much in the same way as *tai* and *thay*. In Houaphan, one finds the term *Thay Phut*, and more recently *Lao Phut*, which is often understood as “the Buddhist Lao”, but in fact should be taken to mean “Thay people who have adopted Buddhism”. Matters are confused further, because *Lao* is used under the modern Lao nation state as a politically inclusive “people term”; the most pertinent example being *Lao Phong*, which is indexical of an ideology that seeks proximity to discourses of a Lao political and civilizational center.

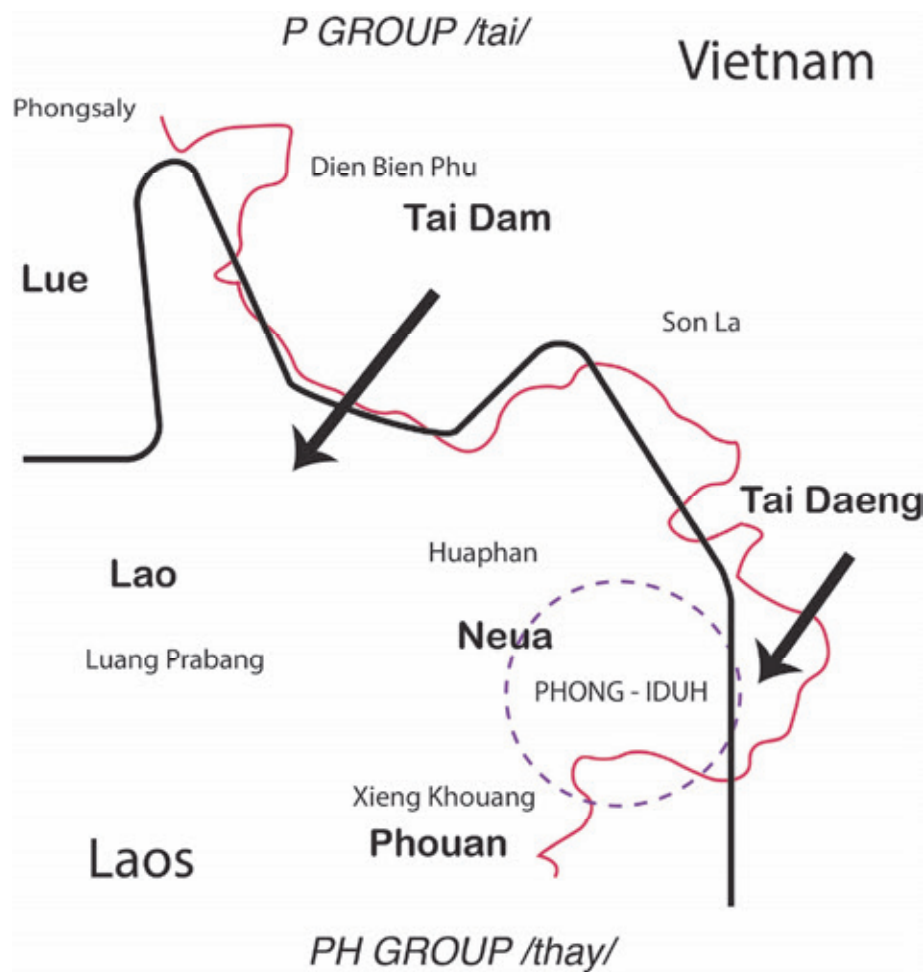


Fig. 1: P/PH Isogloss in Houaphan

As is shown on this thematic map of the P/PH isogloss (Figure 1), the area of Houaphan is historically a “PH area”, where the Neua-Phuan languages were spoken, but in the 19th and 20th centuries P-speaking groups such as *Tai Dam* and *Tai Daeng* have migrated into the area, giving the more textured landscape of language variation within the Tai population. This would show that the *Phong* would have only encountered the P-speaking groups after these migrations, and importantly for the following discussion, means that they were not traditionally part of the political structures of the *Tai Dam* or *Tai Daeng*. The primary point of linguistic contact with Tai languages would be the Neua-Phuan languages, of which it is difficult to set clear borders

(Chamberlain 1971). Thus, it is worth proposing that in the context of Huaphanh, we are speaking of a Thai/Kha relationship, in terms of the local linguistic ecology.³

This linguistic Thai-Thai distinction is an important frame for understanding the social dynamics of the region. For example, oral tradition holds that the Thai Xoy are a group of animist, Thai-speaking people who have lived in Muang Xoy since migrating to Houaphanh from the Thai Daeng areas adjacent on the east (Boutin 1937). Some of them even ended up in the Nam Et area and partially converted to Buddhism while keeping the toponym Thai Xoy (Petit 2020: 78). However, it is also likely that those Buddhist Thai Xoy communities were actually Thai Neua from Muang Xoy who in the 1980s were displaced by joint Ho Chinese and Thai Daeng forces (Mironneau 1968). In Muang Xoy, the longstanding conflict between Buddhist Thai Neua and animist Thai Daeng simmered until the 1930s. French missionaries took advantage of this antagonism and converted some Thai Daeng communities in Houaphan (see Degeorge 1924 on the Catholic Mission in Houaphan). This was successful to a considerable degree because it arguably was a form of resistance to Thai Neua dominance and the pressure to become Buddhist.

In response, some Thai Daeng groups scattered around the province from their center at Muang Xoy, which had been a Thai Daeng stronghold. Thai people from Muang Xoy refused to call themselves Thai Daeng, adopting the ethnonym Thai Xoy instead. According to local elders, Thai Neua and Thai Daeng relations had been strained in the past in Houaphanh, and one still hears jokes about the Thai Daeng saying *hua pen keew, ?eew pen laaw* “Their heads are Vietnamese, their waists are Lao”, pointing towards their foreign origins and resistance to integration into the local Buddhist landscape. The intertwining of ethnicity, inter-ethnic relations and cultural difference “produces” many types of ethnogenesis among the Thai as well⁴. It is possible that the Phong were caught in this tension and decided to “take sides”, thereby solidifying the “memory” of their self-identification with the Thai Neua. With the involvement of the King of Luang Prabang, a historical affiliation with the “Lao” is also possible. At this point, we offer the above as an entry-point into a more nuanced view on local history, ethnogenesis and cultural influence.

Thus, it is critical that these terms be kept clear when speaking of historical relations, multilingualism, and cultural contact. In this paper, we refer to Thai as a general term referring to groups of people that speak Thai-Thai languages, often in terms of the framework of interactions between Austroasiatic peoples like the Phong and the Thai-Thai groups around them. The term Lao is limited to references to the modern nation state and its ethnic classifications, or Buddhist Thai peoples who influenced the Phong in the past. This reference also requires unpacking, for if the historical Phong narratives have geographic veracity, they would have been in contact with the Lao of Luang Prabang, as well as the Lue of the mountains west of the Nam Ou river. In this paper, when we discuss the relationship between Thai and Kha, this refers to the multiple relationships that obtain between groups of people speaking Thai-Thai languages and those speaking Austroasiatic languages.

3. Phong across ethnicity and governance in Houaphan

In 1953, the French missionary Père Jean Mironneau encouraged the EFEO director Henri Deydier to visit a peculiar ethnic group: The “Kha Phong” (Deydier 1954: 19; cf. Macey 1907:

³ Sincere thanks to Jim Chamberlain for on-going discussions that led to this section and the map, which draws on his previous work.

⁴ Personal communication, Sisomphone Soukhavongsa and Jim Chamberlain.

1411). This small group had attracted his attention as they had Buddhist monks and temples – uncommon for the so-called “Kha,” the Austroasiatic speaking groups that were considered ‘uncivilized’ by the French colonial administrators. His surprising observation reflects the one by Antoine Lagrèze three decades earlier, who even hesitated to include the Phong in the disrespectful “kha” (serf) category. Already at the turn of the 20th century, Alfred Raquez noted that from the Lao “[the Phong] learned the Buddhist religion” including festivals and calendar, and ironically remarked: “But try telling these semi-civilized people they are Kha in origin!” (Raquez 1905; English translation available online⁵). We should flag Raquez’s comment about the Lao origins of Phong Buddhism, as we are not sure if the Phong lived in an area where they would have come into direct contact with Lao.

Interestingly, Lagrèze divided his dictionary into “Phong” and “Kha” by which he referred to the Khmu (whose language is different from the Phong, even if they share the Austroasiatic language family; see Foropon 1927: 8; Boutin 1937: 95). However, the Phong indeed form part of the “Tai vs. Kha” complex as famously studied by Georges Condominas: a hierarchical (ritual and political) relationship between an autochthonous, Austroasiatic speaking population, and the dominant Tai/Lao groups in the diverse *meuang* of the Tai-speaking world (Condominas 1990; see Evans 2002). The relationship between people categorized as “Kha” and their dominant neighbours was marked by relations of tribute and *corvée* obligations, and by annual rituals reproducing the sociopolitical hierarchy of the respective *meuang*. Even if neither Austroasiatic nor any other group claim autochthony in Houaphan, the Tai/Kha scheme structures local sociopolitical organization. As colonial sources reflect, there is some confusion between the categories “Lao” and “Tai Neua”/ “northern Tai” (more accurately Thay Neua, the group unrelated to the Tai Neua of Luang Namtha) and – to a lesser degree – the Tai Daeng and Tai Dam. The French considered the Tai as a ‘civilized race’ with a class of notables, while Phong, Khmu, Hmong and Yao are represented as half-civilized or even “savages”, politically and culturally subordinated to the Tai/Lao groups (who were trusted with key positions in local administration). However, the Phong remain an ambiguous category, “neither Lao, Tai, nor Kha” (Raquez 1905: 1398), with their local elites considered useful intermediaries to administer certain peripheral regions as our discussion of Lagrèze’s dictionary will demonstrate.

Common to many Austroasiatic speaking people is the idea of being dispersed and dispossessed by Tai invaders in bygone times. Like other origin myths of Tai and Austroasiatic people, Phong oral traditions assume an early conflictive relationship between the Phong and Tai people. Lagrèze notes that four to five centuries ago (in the 15th century), the “northern Tai” chased the Phong from the rich river valleys, echoing contemporary accounts of the expulsion of autochthonous “Kha” by immigrant Tai peoples (Evans 2002; Turton 2000). Phong mythology (see below) addresses the precarious Tai/Kha relationship and provides interesting ethnohistorical explanations for Phong perceptions of past and present marginality.

According to Phong oral history collected in the Phong stronghold Ban Saleuy⁶ (Sam Neua district, Houaphan province) and in a Phong neighborhood in Sam Neua town, the Phong migrated from the upper Nam Ou to Houaphan (via Luang Prabang province) in the 18th century. As the myth of Hat Ang indicated, the Phong original settlement by the Nam Ou (an important trade route; see Bouté 2018) was already marked by a close relationship between the

⁵ <https://missionraquez.wordpress.com/2020/05/16/dispatch-six/>

⁶ Although there is no local narrative to elaborate on the etymology of the name of this important village, we note that /saləy/ means ‘prisoner’ in local Tai languages. Moreover, there is an old Austroasiatic word with the meaning ‘prisoner of war’ reconstructed as *ɰəy (Shorto 2006).

Phong and the Lao court. These oral accounts roughly match with Raquez's account of Phong notables from Ban Saleuy who held that "their race originated at the source of the Nam Ou, which they left to settle in the kingdom of Vientiane, and then moved on to Hua Phan territory exactly 183 years ago" (Raquez 1905: 1401). This could mean around 1720, i.e. shortly after the division of Lan Sang into the competing kingdoms of Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Xieng Khouang and Champasak, a time of political upheaval and uncertainty.

Since the Phunoy moved down the Nam Ou in the late 18th century, according to Vanina Bouté (2018), it is not unlikely that they occupied fields left by the Phong before. This speculation would raise question about the links between the Phong and groups in the regions of Luang Namtha, for which the ethnolinguistic section below aims to offer some ideas. According to their oral traditions, the Phong crossed the mountains of northern Luang Prabang province and the watershed between the Nam Ou (and, thus, the Mekong) and the eastward running rivers of Houaphan (Nam Ma, Nam Et, Nam Sam, Nam Neun, to name a few). After their migration to Houaphan, the Phong settled in upland valleys and plateaus of present-day Sam Neua and Houamuang districts.

Traditional livelihoods of the Phong villages include upland swidden cultivation and only little wet rice cultivation. Besides rice and corn, the Phong cultivate cotton and tobacco. They keep buffaloes, cows, pigs, and goats. Chicken raising is considered a female task. Fishing forms an important component of local subsistence. Collecting non-timber forest products is another traditional livelihood strategy. Ban Saleuy is famous for the trade of butterflies and other insects. Phong women in Ban Saleuy demonstrate elaborate weaving skills which are clearly inspired by their Lao and Tai neighbors (in Lagrèze's days, the art of silk weaving was still unknown among the Phong).

Phong livelihoods are determined by terrain, similar to those of other ethnic groups in mountainous Houaphan. The Tai groups practice more wet rice, but also swidden cultivation, while the Hmong and Yao often lack the little wet rice fields that Phong and Khmu cultivate along small rivers and creeks. Like other upland groups, the Phong have been subject to resettlement programs so that small upland villages have been relocated to larger settlements such as Ban Saleuy at the Road No. 6 (see Appendix 3). The houses resemble the Tai model (stilt houses) and today show concrete foundations and metal roofs, and other markers of modernity.

Houaphan, historically a confederation of several upland *meuang* or *kong*, is an ethnically heterogeneous province with a dozen ethnic groups – with the Thay Neua/Lao Phut only one ethnic minority (albeit an economically and politically powerful one) among others. In 1895, commissar Monpeyrat counted 2,474 Phong and Ksingmul *inscrits* from a total of 32,990. The Lao constituted less than half of the population (15,602 out of 32,990 *inscrits*; Tai Deng 10,443, Tai Dam 745, Khmu 2,422, Hmong 1,284; "Monographie du territoire des Ua phan thang hoc"; ANOM INDO GGI 26509). Notably, the Phong concentrated in Houamuang and Muang Ven (including the Phong stronghold Ban Saleuy, today Sam Neua district) with 980 and 1,275 *inscrits*, respectively (while the Ksingmul only settled in Xieng Kho further north). In Houamuang, they constituted almost half of the population, a significant demographic factor until the present day.

The general demographic ratio remained stable up to the 1920s when commissar Foropon (1927: 10) counted 2,000 Phong out of roughly 40,000. Here and in other sources, the Buddhist Tai/Lao (numbering 17,500) were categorized as "Tai Neua", the group we refer to

as Thay Neua, indicating linguistic and cultural difference from the Lao of the Mekong basin; see Tappe 2018). During the Indochina Wars and after the communist revolution of 1975, however, a considerable part of the Thay population (and most Christian Tai communities) either migrated to the lowlands or abroad. According to a recent census of Houaphan that uses the official ethnic categories (Lao National Statistics Centre 2007), the Lao Phut constitute only 26.7% of the population (75,012 out of 280,938), less than the Tai category (80,782, including Tai Deng, Tai Dam, Tai Khao) and only slightly more than the Hmong (68,289; the numbers of the Austroasiatic groups: Khmu 28,879, Phong 13,517, and Ksingmul 8,140).

In Houaphan, all ethnic groups share a history of migration, and none claims autochthony in the region. However, the Phong are sometimes associated with the megaliths in Houamuang district, as mentioned above. When French archaeologist Madeleine Colani explored the archaeological site in the 1930s, she mentioned an ancient giant race named Phong that – according to local Tai mythology – had assembled the stone circles. Even if numerous myths – including the Phong origin myth of the culture hero Hat Ang – hint at a connection between the Phong and the megaliths, the autochthonous population does not ‘match’ with present-day Phong as historically more recent immigrants. This historical fact notwithstanding, Tai people might conceptualize the Phong as autochthonous because it is part and parcel of the Tai vs. Kha logic. This view requires an ethnic Other as linkage between *meuang* and *pa*, capable of harnessing the non-human potency of the wilderness including wild animals and spirits (see Kleinod 2020). The Phong perhaps refer to generic non-Tai Others within the *meuang* structure as the following discussion of the ethnonym “Phong” suggests.

4. Phong: An ambiguous ethnonym in the “Tai-Kha” complex

Ethnonymy in multilingual landscapes is notoriously complex, as people are known by autonyms and exonyms. Autonyms give form to the ethnic imaginations of community, while exonyms often reflect negative connotations. In the event that a group’s autonym means ‘person’, such as with the Khmu, the term can be flexible and accommodating of internal diversity (Proschan 1997). Other native terms can be used to encode feelings of intimacy and inclusion, such as the Khmu *tmooy*, meaning ‘guest’ and providing a tool for distinguishing internal subgroupings based on lexical differences, geography and other distinguishing features (Évrard 2007).

The ethnonym Phong is highly problematic, from both the social and linguistic points of view. First, there is confusion, often reflected in official data as well as research, created by the existence of three groups of Austroasiatic people living in relative proximity to each other. Two groups of Phong (or Pong) speak Kri-Mol languages (Chamberlain 2020), while the other group is included in the Khmuic branch. The languages, history, livelihoods, and cultural practices of these two should be treated separately. Furthermore, when collecting ethnographic, historical or linguistics data among the Phong in Houaphan, one comes across many different ethnonyms, at several different levels of social organization: Phong Laan, Phong Piat, Phong Phaen, Phong Khami, Phong Cepuang/Tapuang, Phong Pung and Phong Saleuy, to name the most frequently heard when discussing Phong sub-groupings.

Historically, the name Kha Phong and Pou Kanieng/K’nieng are mentioned in colonial era documents (Macey 1905). In official LPDR documents the term Kaniang has been used with increasing frequency. In a recent survey of Phong languages (Kato 2013), all five Phong villages surveyed in Houaphan gave /kniəŋ/ as the autonym. In the relocated villages surveyed in the Vientiane area, this term is less frequently encountered. In more formal settings, the

ethnonym *Lao Phong* is increasingly used to highlight Lao citizenship and belonging to the so-called “Lao multi-ethnic people” (*pasaason laaw bandaa phaw*) according to official state rhetoric in Lao PDR (see Pholsena 2006, Schlemmer 2017, Tappe 2017).

In the introduction to the *Dictionnaire Kha Phong*, Lagrèze refers to the Phong as “Les Pong ou Pou-pay”⁷. Unlike the Kha, by which he means Khmu, the Phong are limited to the *tasseng* of Muong-Peun and Song-Khao. The Kha, or Khmu, are referred to as “Les Kha ou Phou Theng”. As is often the case in the uplands, ethnonyms must be interpreted within the context of local histories. Attention to linguistic detail is also important, because the interplay of exonyms and autonyms can provide hints about internal socio-political dynamics, as well as larger inter-group relations.

It seems clear that /phoŋ/ and its variants, such as /puəŋ/ and /puŋ/ are names that have been used by local Tai to refer to several groups of closely related Austroasiatic people. However, the current use of the /phoŋ/ term has a broader origin within the social structures of multiethnic Houaphan, upon which the political systems of the Tai Dam and Tai Daeng are overlaid. Taylor’s map (1983) of the protectorate of An Nam has Phong located upstream of the Giao, in the area between the Red and Black Rivers, probably extending to the Ma River as well (Figure 2).

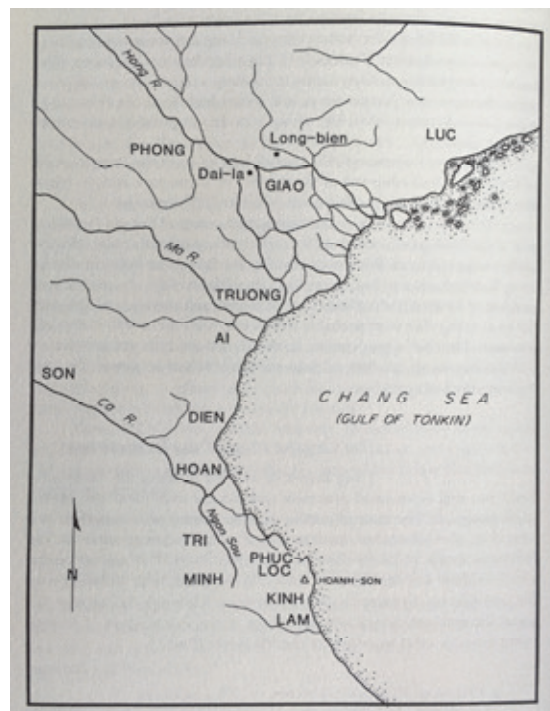


Fig. 2: Taylor’s Protectorate of An Nam showing Phong

This corresponds to the area of the Sip Song Chu Tai and the cultural mosaics it framed. How did a broad geopolitical reference turn into an ethnonym? Chamberlain (1991) discusses the rendering of Tai terms “bông” and “bôn” in Chinese characters in an inscription, located in Nghe An province of Vietnam, in his analysis of the linguistic ethnohistory of the Tai and surrounding people of the area. He suggests that these correspond to Phong and Phuan, the

⁷ French colonial sources can be confusing, as the notation of local names and words often does not make a distinction between aspirated and unaspirated sounds, such as t/th and p/ph.

latter being the Tai people historically centered in the adjacent area of Xieng Khouang. In this same analysis, Chamberlain supports the hypothesis that this phong is the same phong in the name of Souvanna Khamphong, the grandfather of Fa Ngum, the first king of the Lan Xang kingdom. In the poetic register of storytelling among the Phong Laan people, who are located on the border of Houaphan and Xieng Khouang, they make poetic reference to themselves as /thay phoṅ thay phuṅ/. It is unlikely that this is an assertion of Phuan ethnicity or origin, but it does suggest the perception that they were people historically associated with or located between these political systems.

As described above, historically the Phong interaction with Tai groups probably centered on Neua-Phuan types. This means that they were not integrated into the ethno-social system of the Tai Dam. Nonetheless, since the Tai Dam system has been taken as a model for understanding ethnic relationships in the area in terms of Tai/Kha relationships, we discuss the possible implications of an alternative model in the Phong context. The hierarchy of social relations in the Tai Dam polities has been described and summarized by Condominas (1990), adapted below for reference (Table 1).

Table 1: Condominas' Tai Ethno-political Hierarchy

ethnic group	status		collective decision-making, military functions and share of rice-fields	manpower	myth of origin	
tay	tao		take part in it	manpower takers	lineage issues from Great Thên	
	pay	mo notables			gourd	clean exit
		others				
		kuong ñők		manpower givers		
sa’	puă’ pai		excluded from it			blackened exit

The system consists of structural relations oriented towards a clear Tai/Kha opposition but is more complex. The problematic *sa'* category (*sa'* is local cognate of the Tai term *kha*) is made up of two groups of “serfs,” one of which is predominantly Tai (*kuong ñōk*) while the other is predominantly Austroasiatic (*puǎ' pai*). In this region, the *sa'* category would have been populated by the Ksingmul, Khmu, as well as other smaller groups such as Laha and Khang, both of which have undergone significant Tai-ization.

The Austroasiatic origins of the Phong would suggest that they were treated in the Tai world as *sa'*. References such as “Kha Phong” and “Sa Phong” would support this. Colonial commentators such as Lagrèze noted that the Phong differed from other Kha in “dress, language and physique”, offering that they were “neither Tai nor Kha” (see as well Raquez 1905). As will be discussed more below, the Phong view on their cultural affiliations within the local cultural-political system shines a different light on the simplistic Tai-Kha divide. So, while the term Kha Phong could simply mean “the vassals of the Phong leader”, it seems that at some point the term came to be used specifically for this group of people speaking a set of closely related languages that was not Khmu or Ksingmul, yet not Tai. Furthermore, as Condominas suggests, the cultural importance of the Gourd Myth (see also Proschan 1997 and Dang 1993), through which many groups explain the origin of the many different ethnic groups and their languages, is another interesting point – in the Phong oral tradition, Gourd origins are not mentioned. It is worth noting also that the *pua'* status has become an (derogatory) ethnonym for the Ksingmul who have lived within the Tai Vat and Thay Ay cultural zones for as long as memory holds. Because the framework includes other socio-economic and cultural factors, there are several useful angles that an ethnographic-archive approach can take.

There are many contemporary place names in the Tai-Lao landscape that include a /phɔŋ/ element, suggesting that the geographical scale of a previous *phong* political, or at least social, unit was reduced over time. Indeed, Khammanh (2004) mentions that in the Tai Daeng political system, *phong* is a level of administration between the village (*baan*) and the district (*meuang*), usually consisting of 3-5 villages, and led by a *kwaan phɔŋ* (or *taaw phɔŋ* in the Tai Dam system.) The term is found also in Diguët’s 1895 description of Tai Daeng. Moreover, Petit (2020) discusses the role of the “*phya phông*” (with the short /o/ vowel, in contrast to the long /ɔŋ/ vowel) in Muang Aet, a leader of a “second-level polity” responsible for organizing corvée labor under the French. Similarly, Pan (ms. 1975) mentions *phong/fong* as a local leader under the *phia* in Tai Dam Chu San. In the modern Lao language, the word *phɔŋ* (ພ້ອງ) ‘group, company; relatives’ indicates a shift the sense of the word to the people, rather than the political unit. In the Austroasiatic Bit language, now spoken in Phongsaly, Oudomxay and Luang Namtha but originating in the upper Black River area, the elaborate phrase *luuk nɔŋ pɔŋ pay* [Bit pronunciation of /phɔŋ pay/], refers to those loyal to the *chao meuang* and available for military mobilization, but without ethnic specification (Badenoch 2019). In this parallel phrase, *luuk nɔŋ* “subordinates, followers” (literally “children and younger siblings” is collocated with *pɔŋ pay*. In Condominas’ system *pay* (/pay/ - short /a/ vowel)⁸ is contrasted with *pua' pai* (/puəʔ pay/ – long vowel /aa/ vowel). Bit contrasts vowel length, so a literal translation of *pɔŋ pay* (short vowel in *pay*) could put them in the Tai category. Alternatively, *pɔŋ* could be an assimilated non-Tai group, like *kuong ñōk*. Proschan (1997) suggests that from the Khmu ethnohistorical perspective, Phong meant “a region without a chief” or “inhabitants of remote area.”

⁸ The term /pay/ from the Proto-Tai form ***bray** B4 probably referred to people who had been serfs but were released from their serfdom (Jim Chamberlain, p.c. referencing William Gedney p.c.)

Into the mix of ethnicity, social status, and language in Houaphan, we must bring the O-du/Iduh/Tai Hat. Their language is closely related to Phong, and they share the /pram/ word for ‘person’. Unlike the Phong, they live on both sides of the Laos-Vietnam border. In Vietnam, they have mixed intensively with the local Tai and Khmu, and their language is in critical decline (Ito 2013). The Iduh language in Laos is intact, and basic vocabulary was collected in the the Austroasiatics linguistics project of the 1980s mentioned below.

Cross-linguistic, cross-ethnic references to people groupings can be as frustrating as ethnonyms but should be given full consideration as alternative sources of social history. The following sections explore this question from various perspectives within a Phong frame of cultural and historical reference, drawing on data from folk ethnography, language, and myth. Our explorations follow the intersections between linguistics, folklore, and colonial narratives. What seems most important here is the fact that the Phong remained outside of the social structures of the Tai and maintained more contact with speakers of Thai languages.

5. The Phong view on multiethnic landscape

The Phong see themselves as in the middle of a four-tiered social system shared with the Tai and Khmu. In the Tai system exemplified by the Tai Dam, the Austroasiatic speaking groups are considered *kha/saa* or *puak/pua?* Austroasiatic cultures are taken in opposition to Tai, including livelihoods (upland vs lowland agriculture), literacy, belief systems, residence patterns and roles in tax and labor mobilization. The Phong system sets them apart from these other Austroasiatic-speaking people, whom they refer to as *takaw* or *kakaw*.

Three civilizational criteria color the Phong discussion of this social hierarchy: weaving, irrigated rice cultivation and Buddhism (Table 2).

Table 2: Ethnic Categories in Phong Landscapes

Phong category		weaving	irrigated rice	Buddhism
<i>rii</i>	Thay Nua, Phuan, Lao	●	●	●
<i>phɔɔŋ</i>	Phong groups	●	●	●
<i>thay</i>	Tai Dam, Tai Daeng, Tai Khao	●	●	
<i>takaw/kakaw</i>	Khmu			

The Phong add a level of complexity to the familiar Tai/Kha framework. Importantly, the Phong consider themselves to be part of the Lao Buddhist tradition, which sets them apart from the local Tai groups that hold the status of power in local political systems. The *rii* category is interesting because it combines Thai, with whom the Phong have had intense contact, and Lao, which whom they do not encounter directly in Houaphan. This “Lao” claim may refer more to an idealized Buddhist identity. It should be pointed out that the Phong *thay* means the people we refer to here as Tay. This may seem confusing when looked at from the outside, but is consistent internally, because the “Thai” groups are called *rii*, and in the Phong use the aspirated *thay* because their main influence is from a PH language.

The self-identification forms such as *thay ɔay* ‘our group’, suggest that when speaking of ethnic identity associated with the in-group, the boundaries are more rigid, but the broader social categories are more flexible. Reconstruction of their historical movements from the Phong oral tradition seems to put Phong in the realm of the Buddhist Thai, rather than other

non-Buddhist Tai groups, which may explain their views on the social hierarchy in Houaphan. The Tai groups' lack of Buddhism puts the Phong in an interesting position in their own system, in which they are in some sense above the politically and economically more powerful. Like most Buddhist groups, Buddhism of the Phong retains many animistic practices that are specific to their own cultural traditions.

The Phong are certainly more oriented towards the Buddhist Lao/Thay Neua than to the animist Tai Daeng who form important settlements in Sam Tai and Viengxai districts. While colonial and missionary sources (Boutin 1937; Mironneau 1968) have documented the tense relationship between the Lao/Thay Neua – privileged by the French residents to guarantee the loyalty of the Luang Prabang royal house – and the Tai Daeng – backed by Catholic missionaries – who had occupied deserted fields after the Ho and Cheuang troubles of the late-19th century. The Phong appear as mere bystanders of this conflict that was settled through relocation programs in the 1930s. In colonial times, there was hardly any overlap of the Phong and Tai Daeng regions of settlement (the watershed between Nam Sam and Nam Neun forming a natural boundary). How the Buddhist Phong perceive the non-Buddhist Tai Daeng (who consider themselves as Lao Lum) today remains an open question that deserves scholarly attention.

The Phong have a long tradition of weaving on upright looms, producing both Tai patterns and their own variations. Phong language for weaving related materials and concepts is a mix of borrowed and native terminology. They do not weave on the small back loom; in their conception, this is a lower form of weaving that is associated with the Khmu. The Phong generally do not live near the Khmu, a fact of which they are acutely aware. This is related to the fact that they prefer cultivating irrigated rice, which means they live in the foothills near rivers, landscapes that are conducive to water management. The Phong have several derogatory names for Khmu: *phteŋ* 'people of the mountain tops' (< T *phuu theŋ*), *ruuc* and *phreʔ/preʔ* are all explained as implying "backwards." The fact that there are multiple names with different social connotations suggests that there was contact in the past. Interestingly, there is not a high awareness or understanding of the Ksingmul who live in Xiengkho district on the Lao-Vietnam border.

In Ban Saleuy, people keep their language and ritual practices – even though Lao language, Buddhism, and weaving skills (arguably borrowed from Lao) constitute key markers of Phong "civilization" in contrast to the Khmu and other minorities. The Phong Piat subgroup living in Ban Saleuy reveals certain self-confidence and cultural pride – arguably a rare find among most Austroasiatic speaking groups in Laos. They explicitly refuse the Lao Thoeng category that is usually reserved for such groups. Instead, they consider themselves Lao Lum or at least Lao Phong to stress the difference from Khmu and Ksingmul.

Wet rice fields are conspicuously large even if the villagers also practice swidden cultivation as all village communities (also Lao ones) do in mountainous Houaphan. Other Phong settlements have fewer wet rice fields. However, the mere existence of such fields apparently suffices to claim Lao Lum status. According to the *nai baan* of Ban Saleuy, the yield from the rice fields does not last for the whole year (which is only rarely the case in upland villages in Laos, anyway) and that the households often rely on remittances from relatives in Vientiane to buy food. Moreover, traditional stories frequently use motifs of swidden agriculture (Phong Laan *pleeŋ leeŋ* and Phong Khami *ʔiəm leŋ*) as their basic setting, providing an interesting contrast with the lowland discourse of irrigated farming. Further confusing these cultural categories is the fact that collectivization of lowland agriculture in

Houaphan was significant enough to rearrange many groups farming practices and realign their ideas about what is traditional in their livelihoods.

As other communities in northern Laos during the civil war, the Phong of Ban Saleuy experienced division and conflict (see Lee 2018 for the prominent example of the Hmong; Évrard 2007 for the Khmu; see as well Pholsena 2013). This comes as no surprise as the Phong stronghold of Houamuang formed part of the northern front of Vang Pao's forces against the Lao communist base in Sam Neua (Ahern 2006: 234). When in 2019 we inquired about the – apparently expensive – construction of a new Buddhist temple, the vice headman flatly mentioned that the brother of a former village head had sponsored the project – from his exile in the USA. Apparently, two brothers of a local elite family found themselves on opposing sides in a fierce civil war. Such hidden histories often remain a bone of contestation in local memory discourses. Interestingly, the vice headman also mentioned the first visit of the 'lost brother' with his Phong-American family a few years after the inauguration of the temple, a big festival depicted as healing the wounds of the war. Large numbers of Phong were moved during the war to Sam Thong, and then to other places including Vientiane province, where some of the fieldwork for this paper was conducted.

6. Phong Linguistic Ethnology

The social identity of those known as Phong is ambiguous, as introduced above. The cultural identity of this group is also difficult to pin down, as there is no centralized source of authority, and the language has never been written down. In this sense, the Phong are a good example of the cultural and social fluid upland group. That said, sub-groups of the Phong have a strong sense of self-identification, of which language is a key element. Discussions of about the Phong language frequently include discussions about how other groups say things differently, and how that makes them closer or farther from other groups. Phong is spoken in an area of Houaphan that has a high diversity of languages spoken, so variation among Phong languages must be considered within a larger context of linguistic diversity, multilingualism, and cultural contact. In this section we look at linguistic evidence to help understand the complexity within the general Phong grouping.

The map below was prepared in the Austroasiatic linguistics project of 1996-1998, entitled "Languages and Verbal Arts of Ethnic Groups in Laos and Vietnam speaking Northern Mon-Khmer Languages", funded by the National Science Foundation⁹. The Phong area is illustrated by the P on the map, living now in the west-bank uplands of the Ma River and the headwaters of the Ca river, between Xam Nua and Xieng Khouang (Figure 3).

⁹ Many thanks to Gérard Diffloth for sharing this map, and for on-going discussions about these languages.

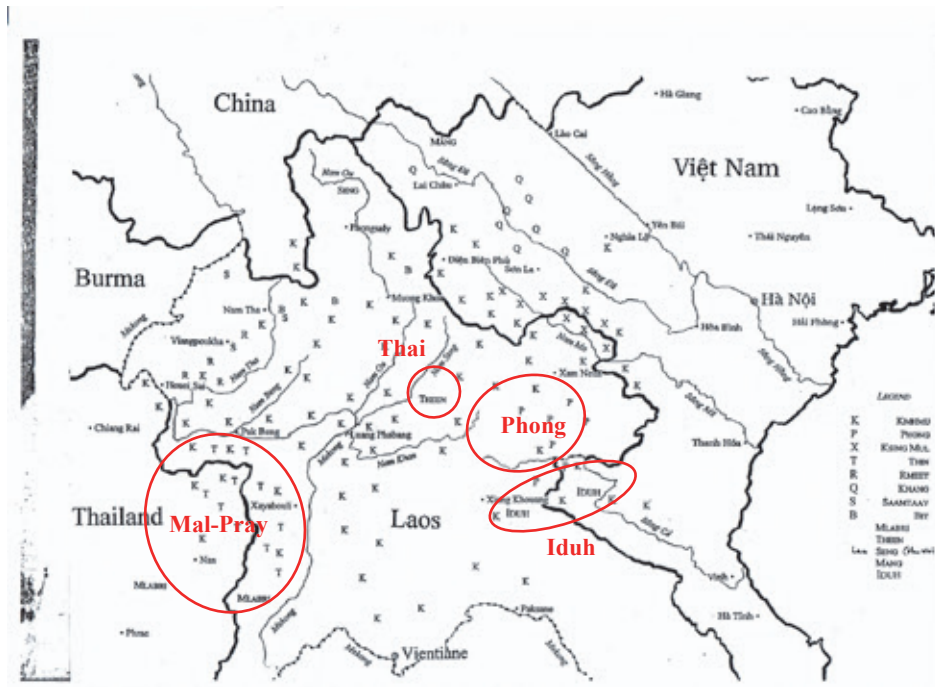


Fig. 3: Distribution of Austroasiatic-speaking groups using *pram* ‘person’

Other *pram* groups include the Iduh in the upper Ca River basin on both sides of the Vietnam-Lao border, Thai Then living in the mountains between the Song River and Khan River in Luang Prabang Province, and the Lua’ (Thin) people living on both sides of the Thai-Lao border, speaking varieties of Mal-Pray. These languages are all closely related, and it is hard to overlook the similarity of the Then/Thin names (See Badenoch, forthcoming). The *pram* groups form a loose band of distribution from Houaphan/Xiengkhouang, across Luang Prabang, Xainyabuli and into Nan province of Thailand. The Ksingmul, represented by X, are the people of the upper Ma River, and the Khang living in the Upper Black River. The Bit, who are distributed across the area from Dien Bien Phu to Luang Namtha, share cognate non-/pram/ethnonyms (See Badenoch 2019) with Ksingmul (*psiinj/ksiinj*) and Khang (*tnraaj/khaaj*). Bit and Khang languages are closely related, and Ksingmul shares some distinctive and important characteristics with both (see Edmondson 2010). Mlabri live near the Thin on the Thai-Lao border and speak a language that has a particularly complicated history of close contact with Thin and Khmu, as well as being historically related to both further back in history (Rischel 1995). These groups live on the edges of a Khmu area that is centered around Luang Prabang, but extends through Phongsaly into China, northwestern Vietnam, and northern Thailand. The Mlabri ethnonym includes *m̥laʔ* ‘person’, which may be cognate with *mal*, the first element of the Mal-Pray, which is also found as an element in Phong Khami third person pronouns.

In the ethnically complex Houphanh area, we have a Pram group, a Psing group, and a Mal group, as well as Khmu. But as is often the case, the most common Phong reference to the Self is a form of the pronominal construction meaning ‘us’, or ‘our group’, using the borrowed Thai word *thay* ‘group of people’ and the Phong first person plural inclusive pronoun (Table 2).

Table 2: Phong First Person Plural Inclusive Pronouns

Phong Laan	thay ʔay	we inclusive
Phong Khami	thay ʔiə	we inclusive
Cepuang	thay ʔiə	we inclusive
Tapuang	thay ʔee	we inclusive

This normally refers to the members of the specific dialect group, for example *maay thay ʔiə* ‘Phong language as spoken by a Phong Khami person’, or *panmaay thay ʔay* ‘Phong language as spoken by a Phong Laan person’. Because the pronoun is an inclusive form, it is not used with people from outside of the group, and therefore could never be used as an ethnonym more broadly.

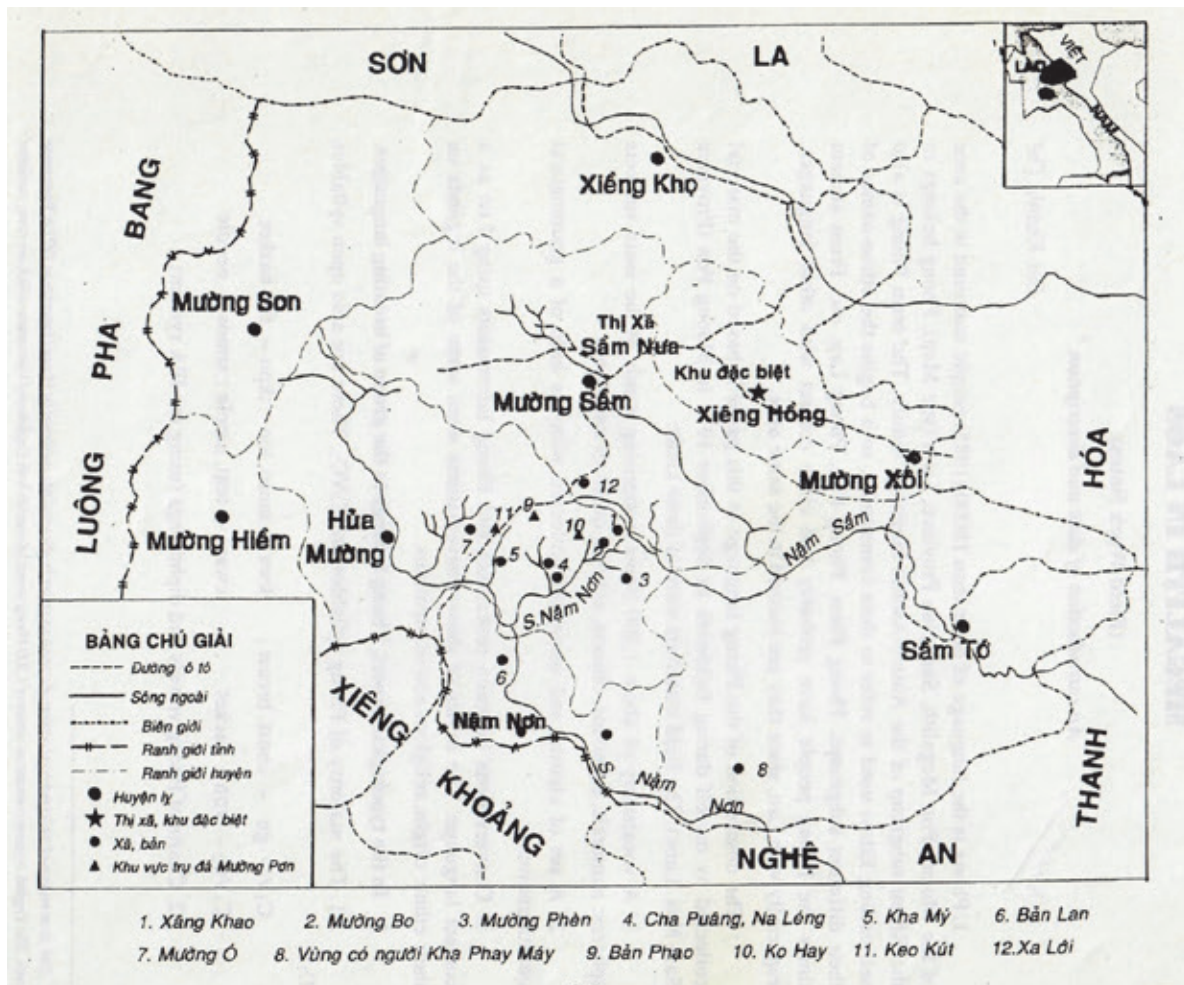


Fig. 4: Bui's map of Phong groups

Bui's map (Figure 4) shows Phong villages clustered mainly in the upper tributaries of the Nam Noen, to the east of Hua Muang and south of Muang Sam. Several village names that correspond with Phong linguistic varieties that are also used as ethnonyms identifying Phong sub-groups: 3 Muong Phên (*phēen*), 4 Cha Puang (*cəpuəŋ* or *təpuəŋ*), 5 Kha Mỹ (*khamii*), 6 Ban Lan (*laan*) and 12 Xa Lối (*sələəy*). We can see Phong villages clustered along the tributaries of the Nam Noen River. According to the 2015 national census, there are 30,000 Phong living in the area. Bui's fieldwork was carried out in “Muong Pôn”, in Lao Muang Peun.

Among Phong people there is an awareness of a larger ethnic identification above the dialect or village group. Reference at this level is made with *thay phɔɔŋ* or *thay pɔɔŋ thay pheən*. The latter is a typical elaborate phrase, where two similar words are paired with a common head to create an abstract or poetic sense. This gives the impression that there are two main subgroups in the Phong ethnic group. Folk ethnology collect supports this idea. Through discussion with people speaking different varieties of the language, there seems to be a general consensus that the large Phong group includes two main groups: one including Piat and Khami, and another including Phaen, Laan and Saleuy.

Sidwell (2014) proposes a four-way split within a grouping called “Pramic”, including Tai Hat, a cluster of Laan-Phaen-Tapouang, a cluster of Kaniang, Piat and Saloey, and Tai Then. The Lua’ (or Mal-Pray languages) are not included in this subgroup, as they do not share the same vowel development. As mentioned above, they do share the *pram* word for ‘person’.

Looking at the Phong data summarized in Appendix II (including data from Kato 2014, Badenoch fieldnotes, Bui 1973 and Lagrèze 1925), there are two basic criteria that can be used for comparison to understand the internal diversity of the larger group: phonology (when the varieties share words, but they differ slightly in pronunciation, which varieties share the different forms?) and lexicon (how do different words for the same concept map to each other?). Table 3 presents data for ‘head’ and ‘hair’ in Phong varieties.

Table 3: ‘head’ and ‘hair’ in Phong varieties

	‘head’	‘hair’
Piat	klii	ksək klii
Tapuang	ʔɔʔ	ksɔʔ klii
Pung	kluu	ksɔʔ kluu
Phaen	ʔɔʔ	ksɔʔ ʔɔʔ
Laan1	ʔɔɔʔ	ksɔʔ ʔɔɔʔ
Laan2	ʔɔɔʔ	ksɔʔ ʔɔɔʔ
Khami	klii	ksək klii
BKT	ʔɔʔ	ksɔʔ kluu

Looking at ‘head’, there seem to be three groups: *kluu*, *klii* and ʔɔɔʔ. Phonologically, because /ii/ and /uu/ are produced in that same place in the mouth, but with rounded lips /uu/ and unrounded lips /ii/, we can say hypothesize a /klV/ Piat-Khami /ii/ group, a Pung group /uu/, and then a group with an entirely different word /ʔɔɔʔ/. We get additional phonological information from ‘hair’, which is a compound formed from ‘hair’+‘head’ and see that BKT is also in the /uu/ group, while Tapuang is in the /ii/ group. We see that the Phaen, Laan1 and Laan2 varieties do not have the /klV/¹⁰ word for ‘head’. In fact, from other data we know that Laan2 does have the word in the /kluu/ form, in the word for ‘top’: *kluu bloon* ‘top of the village’ and *kluu leen* ‘top of an upland field’. We would hypothesize that ʔɔɔʔ replaced *kluu* in Laan2 in the main usage ‘head (of the body)’ but was retained in more idiomatic usages.

Depending upon Piat, we could possibly group them into two. Several other forms confirm this basic two-way distinction for the data we have (Table 4):

¹⁰ Here /V/ indicates a vowel.

Table 4: Comparison of Phong data

	‘to drink’	‘to cough’	‘village’	‘name’	‘long’	‘to have’
Piat	siəŋ	tuur	duəŋ	pnii	liəŋ	ʔuui
Tapuang	siəŋ	toor	duəŋ	pnii	leen	ʔuui
Pung	siin	tgɔʔ	blooŋ	pnnuu	looŋ	ʔii
Phaen	siin	tgɔʔ	blooŋ	prnuu	looŋ	ʔii
Laan1	siin	dɔʔ	blooŋ	rnuu	looŋ	ʔii
Laan2	siin	dəɔʔ	blooŋ	parnuu	looŋ	ʔii
Khami	siəŋ	toor	duəŋ	pnii	leen	ʔuuy
(Bui)	sən	tgɔʔ	?	?	lon	ʔi

The Pung variety lines up on the other side, however. Pronouns (Table 5) also provide both phonological and lexical support.

Table 5: Comparison of Phong Pronouns

	‘I’	‘you’
Piat	ɲɔ	mii
Tapuang	ɲee	mə
Pung	ʔaŋ	mɔ
Phaen	ʔaŋ	mɔ
Laan1	ʔeŋ	mɔ
Laan2	ʔaŋ	mɔ
Khami	ɲɔ	mii
(Bui)	ʔeŋ	mɔ

Thus, we can observe the clustering of Piat, Tapuang and Khami in terms of shared lexical and phonological characteristics distinguishing this group from the Pung, Phaen, Laan and Bui varieties.

Phong Piat	Piat, Tapuang and Khami
Phong Phaen	Pung, Phaen, Laan, BTK

Discussions with members of these groups produce further subgroupings and theories about branching; for example, one Cepuang elder mentioned another group called *kdεεŋ* that broke off from the Cepuang. The name Cepuang/Tapuang is worth a brief discussion. The variation here is in the first syllable /tə-/ or /cə-/. These are may be reductions of the words /thay/ ‘person’ and /caa/ ‘subject’ (cognate with “kha” in the local varieties), in combination with a local variant of /phɔŋ/. If the /cə-/ can be traced back to the word /caa/, then this suggests contact with Tai, rather than Thai groups. (But see further discussion in section 7 with reference to Khmu.) Given the diversity of the Phong languages included here, it is likely that there is even more variation that could be studied at the interface of synchronic and diachronic analysis.

It is interesting to note that in the terminology used by speakers of these varieties, there is often an opposition including Phong and another of the varieties, where the speaker identifies their own speech generally as Phong, while the others are specified at Piat or Phaen. One exception is Laan, in which informants tend to identify primarily as Laan, and the rest are

Phong. It is possible that the term Phong has the sense of being the most legitimate variety, perhaps because of its social proximity to centers of administration. Nonetheless, the common *thay phɔ̌ɔŋ thay phɛ̌n* framework suggests a social center-periphery with relation to the local administrative structures.

The name Saleuy is important in the meta-discourse of ethnicity and language among the Phong. A large road-side village called Ban Saleuy speaks a variety of Piat. The Saleuy are often referred to as a marginal group of Phong, but the reason is not clear. One Cepuang elder living in Vientiane, who first referred to himself as *thay sələəy*, but then provided data on the *cəpuəŋ* variety, said that Saleuy is the name of a larger group that includes Cepuang and other closely related groups, in line with the proposed Piat subgroup. As mentioned above, the Tai term *sələəy sək* ‘captive, prisoner of war’ seems like a feasible link. If this group overlaps with the Phong (as opposed to Phaen) then it is possible that *thay phong* could mean those people that were brought to live in or under the leader of the Phong, while the others remained further outside of the Tai political system. Returning to the colonial records, Lagrèze also commented that there were two groups of Phong; one group living around Sam Neua and one around Sam Tai. According to his records, the Phong group living around Sam Neua paid tribute to Vientiane, while the Sam Tai group were revolting against both, although we have not heard any verification of this.

The 1949 *Carte ethnolinguistique* shows this reality in spatial terms, and provides additional information on the larger linguistic ecology of the region. First, both Phong groups are labelled Thai Phong, as expected in the colonial record. Again, the use of Thai does not necessarily denote ethnic Tai/Thay, but can be a “people marking” word. However, they are colored coded as Tai/Thay in the scheme of the map, in yellow: this equates them with the others in this category such as “Thai Noir”, “Thai Rouge” and “Thai Neua.” The northern group of Thai Phong, around Houamuang, are completely surrounded by Mon-Khmer “Mou” (Khmu?) and “Phouteng,” but within a ring of Thai Neua beyond which are the Tai Daeng and Tai Dam. The southern group of Thai Phong, are bordered by an area of “Meo” to the east, but are surrounded mostly by the “Thai Neua.” From this map one would hypothesize that the Phong of Houamuang would have been in contact with the Khmu and Thai Neua, while the more southern group would have most intense contact with Thai Neua, and possibly “Thai Phouen” (Phuan) and possibly Tai Daeng, depending upon the nature of settlement to their east (Figure 5).



Fig. 5: “Thai Phong” shown in *Carte ethnolinguistique*

The geographic distribution of the Phong indicates different cultural contact scenarios at the time the map was drawn, suggesting the need for further work on linguistic contact, folklore and others oral traditions. The basic bifurcation of “Thai Phong” speakers provides a useful point of departure for a deeper probe of the internal diversity of the Phong.

7. Linguistic contact: Language in overlapping cultural worlds

Phong are known for being particularly flexible in terms of cultural identity, and are quick to “become Lao”, hiding their backgrounds and abandoning the language. Evans (2000) has reported Taiization of the Ksingmul in Houaphan, claiming that they are in the last stages of becoming Tai Dam. Dress, housing, and language are common indicators of cultural shift. Many Phong healing rituals are conducted in Thai (*maay rii*), and some forms of singing have been borrowed wholesale, including styles and Thai language. Naturally, the modern Lao language has contributed to the lexicon of Phong and other languages in the areas of politics, socioeconomics, and popular culture (see Badenoch 2017 for contemporary “official” register of minority languages), but the time depth of cultural interaction between the Phong and the Tai/Thai is evident in the language.

Like many other Austroasiatic languages in Laos and Vietnam, the Phong have been under the linguistic influence of Tai groups for centuries. Their languages contain many borrowings from neighboring Thai languages. We can tell the length of time since borrowing, because they preserve the /r/ sound in borrowings from Tai that have since changed to /l/ or /h/ (Downer 1989-1990). Words like *rɛɛŋ* ‘strong’, *riə* ‘sweat’, *riə* ‘to drop things’ and *riit* ‘customs’ will be recognized in their /h/ form in Lao and other local Tai languages. The influence is often uneven as well, for example ‘knife’ is found as some form of *kriiŋ* in Phong Laan and Phong Pung, *raa* in Tapuang, Piat and Khami, but we find the Tai borrowing *miit* in Phaen and another Laan variety.

Borrowing of adjectives shows different patterns that hold systematically throughout the Phong varieties. Adjectives are interesting because they can be compared in terms of pairs of opposite meaning. The pairs are presented for Khami in Table 6.

Table 6: Borrowing of Adjectives

Native Austroasiatic pairs		Borrowed Tai pairs	
thick	<i>ban</i>	high	<i>suuŋ</i>
thin	<i>kadaa</i>	low	<i>tam</i>
new	<i>thmiə</i>	wide	<i>kwaan</i>
old	<i>phrom</i>	narrow	<i>khɛɛp</i>
heavy	<i>kayəəl</i>	deep	<i>lək</i>
lightweight	<i>kayih</i>	shallow	<i>tiin</i>

Even when there is variation in the native terms, they tend to maintain the consistency of borrowing/retention across pairs. For example, among the Phong varieties we find three etyma (*ban*, *tmiił* and *ktən/ktən*) for ‘thick’, and two (*kdaa/gdaa* and *ŋnaa*) for ‘thin.’ All are native Austroasiatic words.

The semantic area of TASTE offers similar patterns. In all Phong varieties recorded, there are borrowed Tai words for ‘delicious’ *jεɛp* and ‘salty’ *khem*, while the other taste words are of native etymology: ‘sweet’ *siəw*, ‘sour’ *sat*, and ‘spicy’ *tih/pray*. Again, it is interesting to note the variation in forms within the native lexicon. However, these large patterns hold across Phong varieties. When the correspondence patterns are this clear, and this regular, it can be hypothesized that the borrowing happened at the stage of the proto-language, in other words, before the varieties began to change.

Although there is not much clear evidence of linguistic borrowing from Khmu, cultural contact must have been common within the region. The Phong call the Khmu *təkaw/kəkaw*. This word is used to keep social distance from the Khmu, even in the face of geographic proximity. Knowledge of the Khmu is not lacking, as we have heard Phong explain that the Khmu refer to the Phong with derogatory terms; for Phong Laan *jεʔ trʔaŋ* and Phong Phaen *jεʔ trʔiʔ*. The word *jεʔ* is a general Khmu word meaning ‘stranger, guest’, used to refer to “Other” non-Khmu groups, including Lao and Tai, Hmong, Yao, Chinese, Vietnamese and even Westerners. The meaning of *trʔaŋ* may refer to the fact that the Phong Laan first person singular is *ʔaŋ*. As for *trʔiʔ*, Suksavang gives two English definitions, ‘not yet ripe or inhabited by insects (for pumpkins) and ‘not quite all together (people). The Lao definition given translates as ‘immature, unripe’ or ‘half-and-half, neither one thing or the other’. Moreover, some Khmu refer to the Phong and the Ksingmul as *jεʔ puəŋ* (Suksavang et al. 1994), presumably a general reference to non-Khmu Austroasiatic groups of the Huapanh-Xiengkhouang area. As mentioned above, there is also phonetic similarity to the Phong subgroup Cepuang, which is another possible etymology and would suggest that this group was in closer contact with Khmu. The existence of two Khmu terms for the Phong is interesting, as it could reinforce the basic Phong-Phaen divide. However, this information was given by Phong people, and warrants detailed exploration with Khmu from Houaphan. It is worth reiterating that these binary constructions are extremely common, highly poetic in local languages and regional features shared across language families.

There is interesting evidence of the Phong sense of disadvantage within the trading system in Phong evasive ways of counting. It is common for Austroasiatic groups living in this region to replace their native numerals above three with Tai-Lao forms (Sidwell 1999). Some Phong groups have also devised an evasive counting system that is based on punning and other word play enabled by their fluency in Tai languages (Table 7).

Table 7: Evasive Counting Systems

	Ban Saleuy	Diffloth data	Phaen
1	baʔan	boʔan	baʔan
2	baarʔan	baarʔan	baarʔan
3	piəʔan	piaʔan	piaʔan
4	ksuut [bəksuut]	phon	ksuut
5	bəbiəŋ tiəy	buaŋ tuay	bobiəŋ
6	bətiəy plaay baʔan	boʔ pʔua	tɨm baniw
7	jiət	giat	tɨm baar niw
8	bətæk	tit	tɨm pia niw
9	phrom	prom	prom
10	baar biəŋ tiəy	buʔvuar	baar biəŋ

In the Ban Saleuy system, the first three numerals have Austroasiatic etymologies, followed by the general classifier *ʔan*. Other forms are descriptive constructions, such as ‘5’ which means ‘one hand’, and ‘6’ ‘one hand plus one’. In the Phaen system, ‘5’ is simply ‘one side’, and even though the word ‘side’ *biəŋ* is a Tai borrowing, its meaning is obscured using the Phong element *bo-* (or *ba-*) meaning ‘one, single’. Some numerals are puns that play on the fact that speakers of non-tonal Austroasiatic languages often ignore the tones of Lao, or at least find this area of ambiguity as productive for a funny innovation; for example, ‘4’ *ksuut* means ‘iron poker’, because the Lao words for ‘four’ and ‘iron poker’ are homophones if the tone is ignored. The same holds for numeral ‘9’ *prom* ‘old’ in Phong, where the Lao words for ‘9’ and ‘old’ are differentiated only by the tone. In the system recorded by Diffloth (pc.), which retains the old numerals from one to five, ‘6’ is a play on the Lao word *hok* meaning both the number and a type of bamboo, in Phong *pʔua*. The differences between local versions of the system are minimal, but interesting, and show how linguistic resources are manipulated to create difference. Esoterogeny, the deliberate production of unintelligibility, may play a significant role in shaping language change as an indicator of shifting expressions of identity.

As secret number systems show, Phong play with the uncomfortable realities of multilingualism in an area where tonal and non-tonal languages are spoken near to each other, something done by other Austroasiatic groups as well. In doing this they put themselves down, recognizing the disadvantage of not speaking Lao natively. At the same time, they turn it around to create a means of communication that excludes the Tai and other groups. So far, this type of system is not known in Laan. If these numerals were devised as a way of enhancing their bargaining position, it might follow that the need was not so strong in Laan areas that were more distant from the centers of trading. A Cepuang elder once commented that the Laan were *preʔ*, the pejorative term used for Khmu, because of their backwardness. This shows the complexity of self-other distinctions in a world of overlapping cultural spheres and conflicting social aspirations. The number systems identify play, and particularly within language and inter-ethnic communication, as an important strategy for coexistence and survival.

7.1 *The Languages of the French-Phong-Kha Dictionary*

The local languages recorded in the dictionary are Phong and Kha. The system for representing Phong and Kha draws on spelling conventions of *Quốc Ngữ* orthography and is applied in a reasonably systematic way. As shown above, there is significant linguistic diversity within the Phong group. Kha is a reference in this case to the Khmu, another group that is quite diverse across Laos, Vietnam, China, and Thailand. The Khmu spoken in Houaphan and Xiengkouang are believed to make up one variety. The Khmu variety spoken in Xieng Khouang and Houaphan today is conservative phonologically, characterized by a retention of voiced stops /b, d, g, j/, where in other areas these have changed to /p, t, k, c/ together with the development of pitch contrast. These sounds are recorded in the Kha (Khmu) data: *buit* ‘alcohol’ /buuc/, *dạ* ‘at’ /daʔ/ and *gay* ‘to come’ /gaay/. The Khmu variety maps reasonably well to the language that Suksavang et al (1994) call Khmu Cuang /kmhmuʔ ciəŋ/, spoken in the area.

The question of the Phong variety used in the dictionary is more interesting. This variety clearly has a sesquisyllabic word structure, onset clusters, voiced and unvoiced stops, and finals /-l, -r, -y, -s, -h, -ʔ/. Vowel length is indicated less regularly, short vowels marked with the *nặng* tone. Most of the basic vocabulary is shared with other Phong varieties. Using the diagnostic list introduced above, with Piat and Phaen as representatives of the two main varieties respectively, we can get a general idea of the Phong variety (PHONG) recorded in this document (Table 8).

Table 8: Lagrèze PHONG with Piat and Phaen

	Piat	Phaen	PHONG
head	klii	kluu	cli /kli/
drink	siəŋ	siin	sieng /siəŋ/
cough	toor	tgɔʔ	tuar' /tuər/
village	duəŋ	blooŋ	duang /duəŋ/
name	pni	pnuu	purn ni /pnni/
long	liəŋ	looŋ	lieng /liəŋ/
to have	ʔuu	ʔii	uy /ʔuy/
I	ŋɔɔ	ʔaŋ	nhia /ɲiə/

In this comparison, the PHONG data lines up with Piat. We can even get more specific, because within the Phong group, the vowel reflex for ‘long’ is Piat /iə/ and Khami /ee/, both contrasting with Phaen /oo/, indicating that this is indeed a type of Piat. There are some minor differences that blur the general boundaries; for example, ‘soil, earth’ Piat *ptiə*, Tapuang *tpii*, PHONG *th'pê* /tpe/. PHONG has reversed the initial ***pt-** to **tp-**, an innovation shown in only Tapuang and Pung (interestingly, in Badenoch fieldnotes Cepuang data it is **pt-**). The vowel shows some variation across dialects, further blurring that picture. A few other words are problematic: ‘urine’ *pro om* /prʔəm/ is the common word across varieties, but in Kato’s Tapuang and Badenoch’s Khami it is recorded as /nom/, a word of solid Austroasiatic etymology ***nuum** ‘urine’ (Shorto 2006) shared by Khmu and others. This type of diversity is expected for small groups living in upland villages. However, it is also possible that there are multiple informants for the Phong-Kha dictionary.

From this analysis, it seems clear that the Phong of this dictionary is a Piat-type, rather than Phaen-type, with very close similarities to Kato’s Piat, Badenoch’s Khami and Kato’s Pung. This finding provides some support to the working hypothesis that the Phong group was closer to the center of the Tai social system. If the French were planning to engage in some program of language development, it would make sense that they chose a variety with high prestige; perhaps it was geographic considerations, which would mean that a variety near to a center of administration was chosen.

7.2 The Phong dictionary in context: Planning for an alternative social space?

The Phong dictionary seems extensive for an apparently marginal group. According to Antoine Lagrèze, the French administrator who compiled the dictionary, the Phong “have neither script nor monuments”, only a few legends such as the ones discussed below. Like their ‘Kha’/Khmu neighbors, the Phong were considered on the way to progressive extinction (as argued by archaeologist Madeleine Colani a decade later, too; see Colani 1935).

In 1925, “Lao” was well established as the lingua franca in Houaphan but given that there were historical no speakers of Lao proper in this region, it is likely that “Lao” meant a Thai language, or perhaps in more generally the Tai-Thai languages that are spoken there. Thus, the French appeared to feel no need to communicate in Phong or Khmu languages. So why did Lagrèze started the project of a Phong dictionary in the first place? One trace could be the general trend of colonial knowledge production of that time. As Oscar Salemink points out in his seminal study on the ethnohistory of the Central Vietnamese Highlands (Salemink 2003; see as well Pels and Salemink 1999), the identification and description of distinct “races”

and their significance or challenge for colonial administration, was a main concern for colonial administrators.

The *Dictionnaire Kha Phong* by Antoine Lagrèze, *administrateur des services civils*, was in 1925 presented to Monsieur Dauplay, the Résident Supérieur in Laos. Lagrèze mentions that the Kha and Phong know the Lao language, and their own languages are not particularly important for economic relations among groups. Lagrèze also describes the origin of these people as a mystery, particularly given the megaliths that exist in the Phong area. Because they have no writing, their own language is an important tool in understanding their history. Even at the time, the Phong were undergoing cultural change, including linguistic, as a result of contact with other groups. The adoption of Buddhism played an important role in this as well. Lagrèze was well aware that the Phong were part of a larger group of Kha that stretched far beyond the outer areas of Province of Sam-Neua. There is genuine academic interest in documenting a small and changing language, clearly related, but in an opaque way, to a larger indigenous language.

It is remarkable for a dictionary that includes a non-Tai/Thay language like Phong to emerge in such a substantial form from the French colonial archives. The colonial researchers in Vietnam produced much more information on minority languages, such as the comparative wordlists and ethnographic backgrounds published in the *Journal Asiatique*. Work in the Central Highlands of Vietnam first initiated by missionaries was integrated into the colonial administration in a way that was never seen in Laos. Although the context of this dictionary remains unclear, it does offer some insights on governance and social relations in colonial Houaphan. The choice of languages for the dictionary – French, Phong and Kha – raises a fundamental question about the motivations for the project. The lack of Lao language material could be interpreted as an indicator that Lao was marginal to the social setting in which this colonial administrator was working, or it could indicate an academic interest on his part, given that the origins and relationships of the upland languages were mysterious at those times (and continue to be in some cases).

The names of the languages are also interesting. In times when the puzzling and uncomfortable diversity of the uplands led to very conveniently general and ambiguous classifications such as Kha and Meo, this dictionary presents a Phong language and a Kha language. The Phong would have been known commonly as Kha Phong, putting them in the same broad social category as the Khmu. The Khmu, however, as a large group in the northern areas of Laos, were relatively well known, including some knowledge about Khmu subgroups. Why the Khmu would be called Kha in this otherwise detailed description is somewhat puzzling and suggests that politics may be a large force in the production of this dictionary.

In most colonial sources, the Phong are categorized as Kha for linguistic and physiognomic reasons. However, whereas the Khmu are depicted as miserable creatures, backward and uncivilized, Lagrèze describes the Phong in a more positive light: “They appear bright, intelligent, with regular traits and generally marked by great finesse.” Lagrèze emphasizes that their villages are well maintained and that the Phong have almost abandoned the “backward” practice of lacquering teeth, which is a cultural trait found in many Tai groups. They wear clothes and hairstyle similar to the Thay Neua. This indicates an ongoing process of mimetic appropriation. Tai/Lao titles (such as *phya*) granted to Phong notables constitute another example of this interplay.

Two factors might explain the interest of the French administration in the Phong. 1) The Phong are a demographic and economic factor in Houamuang district (e.g. as provider of forest products such as benzoin), and 2) they appear more civilized than other upland groups (“Leur degré de civilisation est plus élevé.”), even holding politically influent positions as *tasseng* (subdistrict) chiefs in Houamuang (Song Khao village; see “Rapport general sur la situation de la province 1912-1913” by Commissar Lambert, 12 July 1913; ANOM RSL/D2). In addition, as Lagrèze notes in another report to the Résident Supérieur (1 March 1925; ANOM RSL/E4), Houamuang was plagued by poor local governance since the Lao/Tai notables were unreliable opium addicts – unlike the Phong (see Boutin 1937: 94 for an explicit reference to Phong abstinence). Given the French concerns with local budget, the Phong occupied a key position for economic and political reasons. Apparently, their discipline and reasonable administration, as well as their economic significance, made the Phong good colonial subjects in the eyes of the French.

The 143 pages of the dictionary are composed of two main sections – a general lexicon with alphabetized French headwords followed by Phong and Khmu glosses, and a large section organized by semantic fields. The second section also has words organized by parts of speech – commonly used verbs and adjectives, as well as grammatical notes and examples sentences. The material covered in the dictionary is wide-ranging, including basic vocabulary, culturally specific terminology, and administrative language. Sections such as Body, Disease, Family, House, Food, Vegetation and Animals are rich sources of native Phong words, with only minimal borrowings. These borrowings for the most part can be considered old Tai borrowings and are often shared among Austroasiatic languages across the region, as they reflect the general contours of cultural contact between upland and lowland groups. Other semantic areas, such as Administration, Industry and Commerce, Monks and Religion and Jobs and Professions, are almost entirely “Lao” borrowings, as they represent a much newer layer of cultural contact and borrowing.

The dictionary has separate sections covering French Administration and Indigenous administration. One impression is that the author was creating a resource to use in the integration of Phong and Khmu communities into the colonial structures. This could include local-language education, general awareness of administration and recruitment of local leaders for actual governance work. The dictionary can be seen as the first step in a program of ‘language modernization’, in which decision makers try to make a language more suitable for new roles in society. One strategy in language modernization is to coin new terms to fill gaps in the lexicon. There is very little of this done in the dictionary; the strategy is rather to borrow words from Lao and French. Because the Phong and Khmu have a long history of contact with Tai political and socio-economic systems, there is a tradition of linguistic borrowing. This is further facilitated by the fact that the Phong and Khmu phonological systems are not incompatible. Intense interactions between speakers of different languages can bring about the gradual harmonization of sound systems and grammars, creating a “linguistic area”, where languages share many structural traits (Vittrant and Watkins 2019).

One area where the dictionary writers do intervene is in the creation of some abstract nouns. Austroasiatic languages typically have several ways of forming nouns from verbs, using prefixes and infixes. The meanings association with nominalization are specific, including instrumental and agent, for example. For example, Phong *prsak* ‘thread’ is formed by infixing -r- in the word *psak* ‘cotton’, while *trnɔɔk* ‘rope’ is derived from *tɔɔk* ‘to tie’ with an -rn- infix. Similarly, ‘firewood’ is formed by prefixing pn- to *ɔos* ‘fire’, to give *pnɔos*, ‘language’ is *pnmaay*, derived from *maay* ‘to speak’ and the same pn- prefix, and ‘downward slope’ *harjuur*

is *juur* ‘to descend’ with a nominalizing *har-* prefix. Affixes of this type are common, but they are usually not completely productive, which means that a speaker does not have free license to create new terms. To compensate for the perceived need to create more abstract nouns, the authors, or perhaps more accurately, their informants, have borrowed a nominalizing construction from Tai. The noun *khwaam* ‘word, matter’ can be used quite productively to create an abstract noun from an adjective, for example *khwaam suun* ‘height’ < *khwaam* + *suun* ‘tall’. In the implementation of this strategy, the Phong equivalent *maay* ‘speech, language’ is used; *maay saw* ‘sickness’ is created from *saw* ‘to hurt, to be ill’, *maay kaan dee* ‘protection’ from *maay* + *kaan dee* ‘to protect’. This can be done on Tai borrowings as well *maay muan* ‘enjoyment’ < Tai *muan* ‘fun, enjoyable’. In the dictionary, these forms occur together with an equivalent Khmu construction involving the word *hrlɔʔ*, having the same meaning as *khwaam* and *maay*. It is possible that the Phong forms are motivated by the Khmu, as Khmu has been in historically deeper contact with Tai-Thay groups. This practice is continued today in the Khmu language of government radio broadcasting and is one of the markers of an ‘official register’ that is developing as means of communication of policy to the people in minority languages (Badenoch 2017).

Besides the relevance of the linguistic data for understanding subgroup identification, interethnic dynamics, and language change, Lagrèze’s manuscript also provides interesting examples of historical ethnography as the following sections will elaborate.

8. Historical Phong ethnography in colonial sources

The *Dictionnaire Kha-Pong* includes an ethnographic part that is unmatched in its detail. Neither Antoine Lagrèze’s colonial contemporaries nor present-day anthropologists have ever achieved to produce such a thorough account of Phong livelihoods and culture. Due to this lacuna, the ethnic category Phong largely remained obscure until the present day. Besides a few linguistic studies (Bui, Kato, Ferlus) we find only superficial notes in the works of Colani (1935), Källén (2015) and Tappe (2019). The entries in Jean Michaud’s dictionary (2006) and Schliesinger’s survey (2003: 236) remain sketchy and imprecise (sometimes even confusing the Phong from Houaphan with Vietic-speaking groups further south in the Lao-Vietnamese borderlands).

We have already speculated about Lagrèze’s interest in this particular group (or the stance of the French administration more generally). It seems very likely, that this was an issue of local governance. The ‘half-civilized’ Phong seemed to be trustworthy subjects in an upland region marked by lucrative forest products such as benzoin and stick lac, and by the emergent opium business. Given the French concerns with questions of local budget, an efficient governance of upland resources was arguably key for Houaphan’s economic sector. Yet the ethnographic part of the dictionary does not only focus on economic and political issues but gives an insightful account of cultural practices and social life such as religion and kinship relations – colonial knowledge production par excellence.

Interestingly, Pierre Petit (2020: 112) argues that this kind of ethnographic knowledge was largely irrelevant for the French administration who “(..) did not interfere much with the intimate aspects of the local society: law and order had to be respected, taxes had to be paid and labor provided, but the administrators were not interested in the other dimensions of the villagers’ lives, or did not report them in the archives.” Lagrèze’s detailed account is an exception among the vast archival material stored in the colonial archives in Aix-en-Provence. This only confirms our assumption, that the French administration had a specific

gouvernemental purpose for the Phong (or specific Phong groups) in mind, for example as reliable intermediaries between the Lao elite in Sam Neua and the scattered upland populations further south.

The following ethnographic vignettes are all taken from Lagrèze's *Dictionnaire*. As an in-depth ethnographic field study has been beyond the scope of our respective research projects so far, these passages aim to provide an ethnohistorical background and inspiration for future researchers on Phong sociocultural lifeworlds. Unfortunately, Lagrèze did not leave any information about data collection and (with a few exceptions) specific localities. Thus, the question remains if the cultural practices observed were valid for all Phong subgroups. Not surprisingly, comparing these ethnographic accounts with present-day sociality and ritual practice will remain a considerable methodological and epistemological challenge.

Only recently, we have sent a translation of Lagrèze's account via whatsapp to acquaintances from Ban Saleuy.¹¹ Unfortunately, we received only a few bits of related information on the present ritual practice. Spirit ceremonies seem to remain an essential part of lifecycle rituals such as birth, wedding and death rituals. Our informants stress that by and large the ceremonies are held according to Lao 'traditions'. Perhaps most importantly, the 'sorcières' mentioned by Lagrèze have been replaced by *mo phon*, former Buddhist monks acting as ritual experts as in lowland Lao religious practice. In consequence, we use the past tense in the following historical-ethnographic account from almost one hundred years ago, with the caveat that it remains difficult to clearly identify this Phong group or groups.

8.1 Religion: Buddhist Kha and Resistance to Taiization

Lagrèze speculated that the Phong (like all Kha) showed "a tendency to leave their customs and even their religion". By this he probably meant certain animist ritual practices – "leurs antiques croyances". Only ten years later, French archaeologist Madeleine Colani (1935: 27) described the Phong as "a race close to extinction". Conversion to Buddhism and a lack of significant local material culture appeared as key markers for this tendency. Indeed, the Phong constitute a good test case for a process of sociocultural transformation that Grant Evans (2000) and Olivier Évrard (2019) discuss as Taiization or Laoization. Besides conversion to Buddhism – which already happened in precolonial times – the (mimetic) appropriation of Tai-Thay material culture, loanwords and sociopolitical structures exemplify this process (see Tappe 2018; Ladwig and Roque 2020; Jonsson 2010).

However, the Phong know specific cosmologies and ritual practices that until today distinguishes them from their Buddhist ("Lao Phut") neighbors. As in the case of Austroasiatic speaking groups on the Bolaven plateau (Sprenger 2018), conversion to Buddhism produces shifts concerning the temporality and spatiality of the ritual cycle but does not completely transform these original systems. Conversion to Buddhism did not lead to cultural assimilation, neither did the adoption of silk weaving from the Phong's Tai and Thay neighbors. Such cultural borrowings have been vernacularized and constitute key markers of Phong local identity today (see Tappe 2021; Évrard 2006, 2019; Bouté 2018).

Today as in the colonial past, the Phong have only a limited number of monks and novices. In Lagrèze's time the "sorcerers" were certainly more relevant for Phong ritual life (*mo phi* and *mo mun* in Lao/Tai languages; the dictionary does not include the terms sorcerer

¹¹ Thanks to Kaiphet Thipphavong (Sam Neua) for his unfailing assistance.

or diviner, though). For the present, a thorough ethnographic study of Phong ritual life is still pending. Thus, we will avoid too much historical comparison. However, some parallels can be drawn from simple observation: As in the past, the temples are the sites of the major village rituals such as the ones dedicated to the protective village spirit (*phi ban*). Ritual experts communicate with the spirit world, epitomizing the animist dimension in both Buddhist and non-Buddhist religious life in past and present Laos (see Sprenger 2016; Holt 2010; Ladwig 2015). Lagrèze called this syncretism an “*éclectisme religieux*”.

Lagrèze wrote that every Phong village had a protective spirit who demanded an annual sacrifice on the occasion of New Year at the beginning of the rainy season (analogous to Lao *pi mai*). For three days the village was declared *khalam* (taboo) and no one was allowed to enter or leave the village. If a stranger entered the village, he was required to appease the angry spirits by offering pigs and rice wine. Lagrèze described the spirits as “assez capricieux”, as ambiguous beings (cf. Århem and Sprenger 2016). For example, the spirits prohibited the Phong women to use treadmills. Therefore, they only used rice mortars by hand.

Lagrèze mentioned two kinds of sorcerers who took care of all spiritual issues: a ‘big’ sorcerer and a ‘small’ one. The latter was the first to consult in case of an illness which was considered as the agency of malevolent spirits (*mo* means doctor in Tai languages and refers to the close linkage between illness and dysfunctional sociocosmological relations; see Sprenger 2016; Stolz 2021). He sung himself into trance and asked the spirits who caused the illness what they demanded for leaving the patient’s body. Usually, the sacrifice of a pig or chicken was required. If this did not work, the ‘big’ sorcerer came into play. He basically followed the same procedure but usually demanded a larger animal (e.g. buffalo). Sorcerers were highly respected notables and sometimes became village chief. They appointed and trained their successors.

Like their Tai and “Meo” (Lagrèze used this pejorative term for the Hmong) neighbors, the Phong believed in evil witches, called *phi pok* (perhaps a typo, meaning *phi pop* instead?). People feared them and usually chased them from the villages. They were not allowed to marry, as their children would become *phi pok* as well.

8.2 Life cycle rituals: Interface with Lao-Tai daily practices

According to Lagrèze’s account, Phong religious life was marked by a ritual cycle from birth to death. The most important life cycle rituals were certainly birth, marriage, and burial. ‘Sorcerers’ assumed key roles in all rituals of Phong village life. Like Khmu ritual practice, rattan symbols (*taleo* in Tai languages) marked houses or even whole villages as taboo/*khalam* to visitors. This was particularly the case for houses where a woman was expected to give birth. Here, sorcerers invited benevolent spirits to protect the house against the invasion of evil ones. The good spirits were served rice liquor during the whole pregnancy (one bamboo tube every fifteen days). After birth, the umbilical cord was cut with a sharp bamboo spatula, the child was washed and wrapped in cloth. At once, the mother ritually fed her child with rice porridge. This reminds of the practice of many other Austroasiatic groups such as the Khmu and Rmeet (see Sprenger 2006a; Stolz 2021). The placenta was placed in a bamboo tube and buried, followed by a big feast including the burning of incense by the sorcerer for the spirits. Only after fifteen days, the young mother was allowed to leave the house.

As other colonial observers remarked on people in Laos more generally (see Ivarsson 2008), Lagrèze good-humouredly noted the *laissez-faire* attitude and easygoing morals of the

Phong. He described the premarital relations as ‘liberal’: girls of 14-15 years and boys of 20-25 years arranged rendez-vous – in fact through a secret opening in the thin bamboo walls by the girl’s bedstead – that were usually tolerated by the parents. However, the boy was expected to offer a pig to the protective spirit of the house (“génie tutélaire de la maison”). If the boy had convinced his parents of proposing marriage, a complex ritual exchange cycle would be initiated: The parents sent two elders with rhetoric talent (*talent oratoire*; see Petit 2020 for the Tai Dam context; Lissour 2017) to the house of the future bride in order to start negotiation. As token of respect, they presented following initial gifts: Two silver bars, two small knives, one set of betel, and some tobacco. Tradition demanded two or three rejections before the bride parents accepted the gift and offered a jar of rice wine (*law hai*) – essential component of any ritual exchange in Houaphan – in exchange. Sharing the alcohol, the two elders and the parents agreed on the marriage and fixed a date for the ceremony.

On the appointed wedding day, the groom sacrificed a chicken for his bride’s house spirit. His parents sacrificed a buffalo or a pig – according to their wealth – and gave half of it to his future parents-in-law. Interestingly, the latter did the same in a kind of direct reciprocal way (yet also hierarchical if the sacrifices differed in kind or size). Thus, both parents contributed to the big feast where all village notables and commoners shared the food – a veritable community event. The groom brought a mattress/bed to his parents-in-law. The couple’s wrists were tied together with thin thread reminding of the *basi* ceremonies of Tai/Lao ritual life (a common practice even today as confirmed by our Phong informants). After the meal, they were considered married. The couple spent the night in the bride’s house before they moved to the groom’s house on the next day.

The brideprice was fixed between 25 and 30 piasters (according to Foropon 1927: 48, a pig cost 15-20, a cow 25, and a buffalo 30 piaster). If the groom was too poor and could afford neither brideprice nor sacrificial animals, he had to stay with his parents-in-law and was expected to work on their fields until the final payment. If a girl was married against her will, she might have committed suicide with the poison of a specific liana. In case of premarital pregnancy, the boy had to either marry the girl or was expected to pay the equivalent of a wedding ceremony and the brideprice, and to supply for mother and child until the latter was able to walk. Polygamy was rare and only occurred among very rich notables.

Death constituted another occasion of ritual exchange. The deceased was bedded up in the house with a cotton thread tied around his wrist (resembling *basi* ceremonies) and covered with best cloth. All jewelry was removed but a piece of silver was placed in the deceased’s mouth. A coffin was made from a big trunk of a tree growing near the village. After the deceased had been put inside, a large feast started with all relatives, neighbors, and village notables (that is, the village community plus the extended family network; an activation of all relevant social relations). Unfortunately, Lagrèze did not give any information about eventual gift exchanges here.

For two days before the burial, Buddhist monks prayed for the deceased’s soul. The sorcerer determined the location of the grave by dropping an egg. If it did not break, the place was not good. The coffin was placed in the grave with the head pointing towards the village. A small straw hut marked the grave similar to Tai burial practices (see Robert 1941 for the Tai Deng; today the Phong cremate the dead like the Lao do). Three days later, the family offered a plate with food for the deceased soul/spirit, afterward they did not visit the grave anymore. The wife/husband of the deceased inherited everything, or the heritage was divided among the sons (daughters only received food and were supplied by their brothers until marriage).

The soul/spirit of the deceased was said to move either to heaven or hell according to Buddhist cosmology. After two years in heaven (and longer if in hell in case of bad karma) the spirit returned and became a *phi heuan* (house spirit). House spirits were located in specific shrines with a wooden ladder (as in the case of the Tai/Lao *ho phi*). The fact that Lagrèze used the Tai term for spirit (*phi*), instead of the Phong expression *ruôy* (as mentioned in the dictionary), indicates that he probably did his interviews in Lao language and/or the Phong had harmonized their animist representations with the Tai ones.

8.3 House construction: Family, spirits and sivilai

Lagrèze noted that the Phong houses were built on piles like the Lao and Tai did (as the case today), albeit smaller and darker. In a village, all houses shared the same orientation. Building material (wood, bamboo) was collected in advance, as a house had to be built in one day starting with the first cockcrow. Choosing an auspicious location was a sensitive issue: People dug a hole and added two rice seeds that stuck together. If they still adhered to each other the following day, the location was acceptable. The Phong also chose an auspicious day for the date of house building, otherwise the inhabitants would face calamities.

When the house was finished, a selected friend from the village elders stood guard on the threshold. The owner of the house devoutly begged for entrance. The guard asked: “What do you want here?” “I come from the high mountains and bring blessing and wealth for this house.” Only after some negotiations, the recalcitrant guard allowed the landlord to enter his house. He lit a fire and prepared tea which he shared among all family members after having taken the first sip. A few days later, he organised a big feast for the spirits (Lagrèze did not specify which ones; possibly the ancestor spirits) in order to invite them to stay in the house (as protective spirits). After that, the villagers divided up the meal.

A visitor had to follow a few rules in order to not annoy the spirits of a house and their hosts. He or she had to ask the landlord for an exact place to sleep (where the visitor must orient his or her head towards the outer wall). A Phong house had two spirit shrines: One dedicated to Buddha by the entrance, the other one for the protective ancestor spirits located by the landlord’s chamber. To honor the host, visitors placed two candles (in pairs according to Lao Buddhist convention) on the first shrine. Luggage was not permitted to be placed next to the shrines and not permitted to be carried with poles (as this was reserved for transporting coffins). Raw meat was forbidden to be carried over the front stairs (reserved to men) but only over the back stairs reserved to women by the kitchen. Only the landlord was allowed to touch the shrines.

8.4 Mining and metallurgy: Extraction and sacrifice in the spiritual landscape

Colonial sources like Raquez (1905) and Lagrèze (1925) described the complex mining traditions of the Phong. The ritual and cosmological aspects deserve particular attention (for a rare study of mining and metallurgy in upland Laos see Évrard et al. 2016). As classic studies of the anthropology of mining suggest (see Nash 1979), mining activities are not only dangerous for questions of work security but also for the intervention of malevolent spirits. Miners penetrate the subterranean world and either disturb certain spiritual beings or enter a precarious relationship with them (through sacrificial gifts in exchange for the exploited mineral). Phong mining was a case in point (we could not trace any traditional mining practices for the present, though).

Near Sop-Poueng (location unclear) the Phong villagers practiced iron mining on a nearby hillside. According to tradition, mining activities were restricted to only nine days in the fourth Lao lunar months (cf. Raquez 1905). Large sacrifices (not specified here; probably buffaloes?) to the powerful local spirit were required, and the village was declared *khalam* for the mining period (besides, sexual intercourse is forbidden). Each family member was allowed to take two charges of iron ore per day (one charge was as much as one can carry; very young and very old people could not partake). The ore was taken to the village and buried in the ground for further procession.

Every three years, a particularly important ceremony for the spirit of the mine took place: Twelve piglets, twenty-four chicken, twelve ducks and twelve jars of rice wine were offered to the spirit (note the number twelve, an auspicious number in the Lao Buddhist calendar). The *khalam* period lasted for three months. Lagrèze's informants even stated that in the past human sacrifices happened, namely a young man and a young woman abducted from another village. However, Lagrèze reassured his readers that today the spirit was "less blood-thirsty" even if still so much feared that the Phong would not accept strangers in the vicinity of the mine. Permission from the spirit was required and visitors were not allowed to take away any mineral.

9. Focus on Mythology: Ethnogenesis and interethnic dynamics

The historical relationship between the Tai people and Austroasiatic speaking groups such as the Phong and the Khmu is addressed in numerous origin myths and legends. In Lagrèze's manuscript, the expression 'Tai invasion' is crossed out and replaced with 'struggle'. Indeed, using 'invasion' would be misleading as the Tai migration into mainland Southeast Asia entailed more complex interethnic dynamics than the idea of a conquest suggests. Historically, we can identify Tai vs. Kha conflict and competition as well as a 'symbiotic relationship based on both ritual and economic exchanges' between Tai and neighboring non-Tai communities (Grabowsky and Wichasin 2008: 11), and the uplanders' important socioeconomic position in specific localities (see Sprenger 2006b; Badenoch and Tomita 2013; Évrard 2019).

In the Phong sociocultural context, perhaps the most important and complex myth is the legend of the culture hero Hat Ang (Tappe 2021). One leitmotif of this myth is the close relation – exchange as well as conflict – between Phong and Tai, indeed emblematic for the ambiguous and dynamic Tai/Kha relation (for example see Proschan and Chamberlain (1992, 1986) for analysis of the Cheuang myth) This key myth of the Phong will be discussed in more detail below. Before we give all our attention to Hat Ang, other telling stories about Phong ethnogenesis and sociocosmological relations deserve closer scrutiny.

One story noted by Lagrèze goes as follows: There was once a "Pong country" (*pays Pong*) under the domination of Vientiane which demanded an annual tribute from the Phong (that is, the Phong being integrated into the *meuang* system). All Phong chiefs were required to bring the tribute to the court of Vientiane. One of them even received the Tai title *chao meuang* as token of respect and loyalty. This status was fixed with a large deed (Fr. *brevet*)

stored in a bamboo tube. The Phong *chao meuang* returned to Houaphan full of joy about the Vientiane king's benevolence. On the way he found the cadaver of a deer killed by a tiger. He decided to pick up the cadaver and transport it by using the bamboo tube as a pole. This idea turned out to be disastrous as the royal certificate slipped from the swaying pole (due to the sacrilegious use – to carry a cadaver – of the pole?).

Two Tai brothers who had accompanied the Phong entourage (perhaps also vassals but without *chao meuang* status?), took the document. When the Phong chief realized his loss, he was sad but also too careless to retrieve the document. Later, the Lao king passed away. His son was not familiar with all his subjects and demanded to see the respective royal patents as proof of privileged status. When the Phong chief arrived to bring the annual tribute, he could not meet the new king's demand. Instead, the Tai brothers produced the royal certificate and became the rulers of the “pays Pong”. The disenfranchized Phong retreated into the mountains.

This story explains the hierarchical relationship between Phong (and Khmu) and the politically more powerful Lao/Tai people. It is not that important if the Tai brothers in the story are Tai (Daeng) or Lao/Thay Neua since both occupied dominant positions in different *meuang* of Houaphan in different times. It is also possible that the story dates to the times of Phong settlement in the Nam Ou region (with the court of Luang Prabang instead of Vientiane, and perhaps Tai Lü as the cunning brothers taking advantage of ‘Kha’ naivité). A key motif of this myth is the fact that the Kha originally enjoyed a privileged relationship with the court of Vientiane but lost this status due to ignorance. As we will see in the case of the Hat Ang myth, the opposition between careless Kha and cunning Tai/Lao is central to understanding this specific Tai/Kha setting.

Another telling myth is the “cycle of Sam Teu” (Sam Tai; in local dialect the ‘ai’ vowel /ai/ is realized as /əə/) as noted by Lagrèze and – three decades later – Deydier (1954: 5). The region of Sam Tai was once a vast forest. One day a prince from Vientiane (named Mun-Sam-Phan-Sam) went hunting in the area. He was enchanted by the beauty of the place and decided to establish a village (this refers to the first Buddhist settlement in Houaphan in the 16th century; see Lorrillard 2008). His father, the king of Vientiane, agreed and appointed him *chao meuang* of the new settlement. He also ordered that the prince collected tribute from the Phong who settled in the vicinity. His rule was harmonious until he passed away and his children took over. The Phong refused allegiance (as succession to the throne is always a critical time for ruling elites) and the payment of tribute; they also started a rebellion against Sam Tai.

Vientiane sent troop and the Phong withdrew to the citadel of Vien-Keo. The fortress was invincible as the Phong dropped rocks on any invader. When attack after attack went fruitless, general Chao Youn used cunning: He gathered 300 goats, attached candles at their horns and send them on the way up to the citadel. The Phong held them for the Vientiane army and wasted all rocks and arrows on them. Then Chao Youn easily conquered the citadel and the Phong surrendered. Due to the intervention of the *chao meuang* of Sam Tai, some Phong escaped captivity and were permitted to settle in the *meuang* of the Lao (as Lagrèze explicitly states). Since then, Lao and Phong entertained a friendly relationship.

As the previous story, the hierarchical Tai/Kha relation is addressed and explained. Moreover, a harmonious relation between Phong and Lao/Thay Neua in the *meuang* of Houaphan is maintained (in Lagrèze's time as well as in the present). The fact that the *chao meuang* of Sam Tai had pity with the Phong and allowed them to settle in the *meuang* hints at the significance of the Kha for the dominant Tai/Lao. It has been suggested that not only were

Kha well integrated into the *meuang* (Badenoch and Tomita 2013), their role in the economy of the *meuang* in fact contributed to its prosperity (Grabowsky 2009). Deydier (1954: 6) adds that the fallen Phong soldiers are now the protective spirits of the *meuang*, also indicating a necessary socio-cosmological relationship.

9.1 *The myth of the sacred deer*

This story noted by Lagrèze begins in Muang Lan, historical Phong stronghold and perhaps an early settlement of the Phong in Houaphan. Once upon a time, an evil ghost molested the Phong *meuang* (sic!) and killed everyone who crossed the ghost's path. When neither prayers nor sacrifices were of any help, the Phong decided to move away. For many days, 8,000 families sneaked through dark caverns ("entrailles de la terre") before seeing daylight again. By the exit of the caverns, a widow dropped a kitchen utensil which turned into a huge rock blocking the way. Those who were caught within the mountain had to die from suffocation. The remaining families collected water from all sources in the vicinity to cook rice. Then they poured out the water which produced the creek Hoay Chao.

The Phong built a bamboo raft and rode down the creek until the confluence with the Hoay Vek (a river in Houamuang District). They decided to establish a village. While clearing the area they discovered iron ore underneath. The Phong built furnaces and produced sickles and machetes. Since land for wet rice cultivation was limited, land distribution was a bone of contention. Within a fierce debate an albino deer emerged among the Phong. The deer did not resist captivity but, with a knife at his throat, pleaded in Phong language ("apparemment un génie"): "Don't kill me, I am here for your good luck, follow me and I will show you the best place to establish a village." The Phong, afraid of the spirit (called *phi-cerf* in Raquez' version; Raquez 1905: 1481-3), obeyed and left their furnaces behind. In addition, the deer demanded that the Phong would never kill deer again if they achieve plentiful land.

Deer and Phong followed the Hoay Vek and reached Ban Na-San by the Nam Et River (no Phong settlement today). When the Phong suggested staying in beautiful Muang Aet with wealth of fish, the deer told them to move on. They passed Muang Ham and followed the Hoay Soy up to its source, while the Phong grew tired and begged the deer to stop. However, the deer persuaded them to move on. Many days later, having almost lost courage, the Phong reached the fertile plain of Muang Peun (interestingly, circle movement!). "It's here", goth the deer and repeated the agreement that the Phong were not supposed to kill and eat deer anymore. Then the sacred deer disappeared under the Phong's cheers. The Phong established villages, remained independent for a while before they fell under Tai/Lao rule. Until the present day, the deer is considered a sacred animal, a food taboo (not confirmed by our informants today, though).

The myth of the albino deer mentions mining and metallurgy as practiced in the first settlement in Houaphan. Interestingly, this group of Phong left the potential source of wealth behind when the deer promised to take them to richer rice fields. The myth seems to privilege wet rice 'civilization' to other livelihoods. Indeed, traditional mining is a forgotten practice among most Phong communities today – and was perhaps only a marginal phenomenon in colonial times. Even if both Raquez (1905) and Lagrèze (1925) describe metallurgy practices in some Phong (and Khmu) villages in Houaphan, it is not unlikely that this craft remained unknown among other Phong groups (which would indicate different origins or at least historical trajectories of migration and ethnogenesis).

Deer also make an appearance in the Hat Ang myth, yet only in Plunian's (1905) version. The version from Lagrèze's manuscript omits this detail. Plunian notes that Hat Ang used a magical awl to produce human beings from the ground (Plunian 1905: 128). However, at first a flock of deer appeared when Hat Ang drove the awl into the ground. This mythical element suggests a common origin of humans and deers since both were produced from the ground through Hat Ang's magical tools. According to Plunian, this is the reason for a kind of 'totemic' relationship between the Phong and the deer that is marked by the hunting taboo mentioned above (ibid.: 130).

Many of the key elements in these myths appear in the legend of Hat Ang. This myth is a particularly detailed account of the ambiguous Tai/Kha relation and functions as explanatory model of present-day power asymmetries. Not surprisingly, the story of Hat Ang seems to be the most popular Phong tale as it was noted by different sources in different times.

9.2 *The myth of Hat Ang*

An analysis of the myth of Phong culture hero Hat Ang adds fresh perspectives on upland ethnogenesis and sociopolitics in upland Laos (see Tappe 2021). Local mythology can be used as tool to explore the history of the Tai/Kha relationship and to investigate the role of upland people in shaping this relationship. Besides functioning as an explanatory model for the present-day marginality of upland peoples (cf. the myth of the money tree of the Austroasiatic-speaking Rmeet; Sprenger 2006a/b), the myth of Hat Ang offers a host of interesting detail and ethnographic information: historical origins, pioneering mobility, kinship, exchange, ethnic stereotypes, cosmology etc.

Different versions of the myth of Hat Ang have been noted down by Alfred Raquez (1905), the colonial administrators Adolphe Plunian (1905) and Antoine Lagrèze (1925), archaeologists Madeleine Colani (1935) and Anna Källén (2016), and former EFEO director Henri Deydier (1954). At present, the myth still forms part of local oral traditions in some Phong villages (Tappe 2021).

The following version was included in Lagrèze's *Dictionnaire* – an almost verbatim reproduction of Raquez's (1905) version. It suggests a close yet ambivalent Tai/Kha relationship: A Lao princess from Vientiane found an enchanted fruit (*mak san*) in the Mekong, ate it, became pregnant, and finally gave birth to a boy – Hat Ang – who cried day and night. Neither the midwives nor the doctors nor the diviners were able to find out the reason. One day, a Phong man travelled down the Nam Ou and the Mekong to visit Vientiane (Luang Prabang in other versions, indicating contested Lao sovereignty since the early 18th century; it is also not unlikely that the Phong's counterpart is Tai Lü given the historical origins of the Phong in the Nam Ou valley where the Tai Lü held local political sovereignty). When he gave a *mak san* to the boy, the royal offspring stopped crying. The king took this as heavenly sign and offered his daughter's hand to the Phong man.

The young couple moved to Don Chan (a sand bank near Vientiane), where they tried in vain to establish swidden fields (*hai*) in the nearby hills. Each time the Phong man cut the trees, they reappeared by the following morning. The Lao king blamed the Phong for the couple's misfortune and accused him of being a malevolent spirit. He forced the couple into exile, up to Houaphan. Here the present-day settlement of the Phong in Houaphan is clearly the result of a failed 'Tai/Kha' relationship, with Hat Ang's father being a kind of outcast, associated with malevolent spirits.

Even if the myth articulates the upland-lowland divide between the upper Nam Ou and Luang Prabang/Vientiane, relations, and interactions at first suggest a common Tai/Kha social space, a “space determined by the set of the systems of relations characteristic of the group concerned” (Condominas 1990: 1). The myth describes an early alliance between Lao and Phong through the story of the Lao princess eating an enchanted fruit coming from the uplands (Plunian’s version even suggests that the Phong man himself had enchanted the fruit; Plunian 1905: 126). The princess’s marriage with Hat Ang’s “Kha” father remained an ambiguous one, though. The different versions of the myth indicate more or less forced exile instead of a shared Lao/Phong space – a disruption of the affinal relationship across ethnic differences, here between Hat Ang’s father and his Lao affinal relatives.

The Raquez/Lagrèze version fast-forwards and describes the grown-up Hat Ang as an ambitious leader of a veritable upland *meuang* – the “royaume des Pong” according to Lagrèze. Hat Ang received “instruments bizarres” (Raquez 1905: 1399) from a powerful spirit: A double-faced gong, a hoe with a diamond blade, and an iron awl. With the help of the awl, Hat Ang could produce a water source from sheer rock and make fire (a clear reference to upland swidden cultivation; see as well Badenoch 2020). With the hoe, he could break rocks. By hitting the gong, he was able to summon protective spirits.

Holding powerful magic tools, Hat Ang was at the top of his authority. After having accepted the rule of the lowland Lao king for a long time, the Phong now saw the chance to throw off the yoke of Lao rule and withdrew their allegiance. The Lao king sent an army but was beaten by the Phong, thanks to their spiritual support. The Phong kingdom flourished, and Hat Ang became a king recognized by “heaven” (Raquez 1905: 1400).

In the heat of one summer day, people were resting in the shade when a hawk (ibid.) or marten (Lagrèze’s version) invaded a henhouse, provoking quite some uproar. The Phong confused the turmoil with an armed attack from the Lao and, in a panic, hit the gong. The troops went to arms but saw nothing but the escaping animal with a chicken in its fangs. The spirit resented this sacrilege and demanded back the misused gong. Hat Ang obeyed and his people lost confidence due to the divine anger (even if they were able to keep the remaining instruments, but had no support from the deities anymore, this was a disruption of a critical cosmological relationship).

Hat Ang, although being of mixed Tai/Kha origin, is clearly categorized as an uplander, as the offspring of an exiled couple and as the founder of an upland kingdom. Through emulating the Lao *meuang* with temples and a palace, he seems to challenge the authority of the lowland Lao – not least thanks to magic/sacred (Lao: *saksit*) tools granted by powerful spirits. The magical instruments are a key theme of the myth: the gong, the awl and the hoe refer to functioning cosmological relations, manpower and natural resources, all of them key to agricultural subsistence and social reproduction.

All versions agree that Hat Ang had created a prosperous Phong kingdom, a genuine mountain *meuang*. According to the Raquez/Lagrèze version, however, after the Lao king had learned about the loss of the gong, he decided to steal the remaining tools. He sent his son to win the heart of Hat Ang’s daughter. Hat Ang was very pleased about the charming prince’s proposal and accepted the marriage. Everything went well until the devious prince took the magic tools and threw them into a volcano. In addition, he talked Hat Ang into building a high wooden tower so that the Phong king and his entourage could watch the beautiful city of

Vientiane or Luang Prabang, respectively (according to different versions of the myth; see Tappe 2021). When Hat Ang and hundreds of Phong climbed the tower, the prince set fire to the wooden construction. As if this wasn't enough, the Lao prince chased the Phong people into ravines and streams; only a few of them – “Les débris de la race pong” (Raquez 1905: 1401) – made it to the mountains.

Here, in addition to the loss of divine support due to disruptions of sociocosmological relations (and, previously, the affinal relation to the Lao court), the element of lowland Lao cunning is introduced as an explanation for the decline and inferiority of the Phong civilisation. This contrasts with the Rmeet myth described by Guido Sprenger (2006a/b), where the people cut the tree of money so that the precious fruit ended up in the lowlands – necessarily so because the tree was overgrowing villages and fields. Even if both myths suggest an asymmetric ‘Tai/Kha’ relationship, aspects of upland agency and aspirations differ (see as well O'Morchoe 2020 on the ethnohistory of the Lahu).

In the Hat Ang myth, kinship remains a key issue. By the time he received the *saksit* tools in the Raquez/Lagrèze version, Hat Ang had become an established upland ruler and a potential candidate for lowland *meuang* patronage – e.g. as a border guard, as a provider of forest products, and indeed as a partner for marital exchange: as the history of Laos and Thailand reveals, kings used to assemble a large number of wives and concubines, many of them tokens of loyalty and respect from lower ranking notables or even other leaders (both Tai and non-Tai; cf. Condominas 1990; Grabowsky and Wichasin 2008).

The (asymmetric) interethnic relationship between Tai/Lao and Kha is the leitmotif of the myth: after Hat Ang – himself being of mixed Tai-Kha origin – established a kingdom in the uplands, the Lao king defeated him with cunning and left a scattered population. From the perspective of the Phong, this is a tragic story reflecting their bygone glory and traumatic decline. Contrary to James Scott's (2009; cf. Jonsson 2014, 2017; Tappe 2019) interpretation of purposefully stateless “Zomian” societies, the Phong interpret statelessness as loss and the result of lacking intelligence and over-ambitious aspirations. Hat Ang's magically supported political power notwithstanding, the cunning and intelligence of the lowlanders took advantage of Phong myopia and hubris, in order to defeat them.

Another short myth (Badenoch 2020), from the Phong Laan, describes the cultural interactions between the Thai and Kha worlds. In this story, humans betrayed the animals by cheating in a competition to demonstrate the special powers (*lit deet*) that each had. The power of the human was to cause fire. He set fire to the forest, which changed forever the relationship between humans and the animals. It also created ongoing antagonism with the Ngeuak, or spirit of the underworld. While the “natural” order was overturned by the human use of fire as a technology of livelihood, the moral implications of the story are asserted using Thai Buddhist terminology and motifs.

The perspective of Person is told using numerous poetic devices that are shared across languages in the region, as well as nuances that are transparent only within the Phong context. For example, the animals switch from using the intimate second person plural pronoun before the betrayal, but switch to the singular more distant form after the fire has been set. Although the main actors in this legend are Person, Animals and Ngeuak, there is a Thai/Kha understory running throughout, touching on topics such as *meuang-pa* (civilized and wild space), livelihoods (settled agriculture hunting-gathering and swidden agriculture), as well as interaction between local spirits and larger Indic spiritual references. This myth demonstrates

how the simple dichotomy of Thay/Kha is really a more dynamic cultural complex that involves language, morality, and ecology.

10. Cultural intimacy, language and the making of local hierarchies

Ethnolinguistics and (oral) ethnohistory constitute two approaches for investigating ethnogenesis, interethnic dynamics and processes of ethnic change. Venturing in the past of societies without script is a precarious task, though. Analyzing language and oral traditions in combination enables fresh perspectives on sociocultural dynamics in a multi-ethnic setting like Houaphan in NE Laos (see Petit 2020). Studying mythology and ethnolinguistic phenomena helps understanding the complex entanglements in multi-ethnic contexts. Both approaches highlight processes of linguistic and cultural borrowings, mutual mimetic appropriations, and a history of complex relationships beyond a simple Tai/Kha antagonistic binary. Therefore, this working paper aims to complement – or, rather, encourage in the first place – the indispensable ethnographic inquiry in present-day Phong communities to better understand cross-cultural dynamics in upland Laos.

In 2014, an old man told the story of Hat Ang – in a much shorter version than those discussed above, and amidst much discussion and laughter. The smiles of the other villagers in Ban Pa Cha shifted between enjoyment about sharing a good story – magic tools! – and embarrassment about telling a foreigner about the Phong's historical defeat and present-day marginalization. Characterizing the Lao as deceitful and morally corrupt was also a sensitive issue as indicated by the lowering of voices. The old Phong man briefly commented that Hat Ang once built a city that was destroyed by the jealous Lao, the debris now constituting the standing stones of Hintang (to the disagreement of the village headman). Indeed, unlike the colonial versions, most Phong today do not consider the Hintang megaliths as remnants of Hat Ang's palace. As archaeologist Anna Källén (2016) confirms, the Phong deny indigeneity or any connection to the prehistoric site. Instead, they stress the historical origin by the upper Nam Ou and the corresponding relationship with the Lao (or Tai Lue?) court. The Phong Laan people who were moved to the Vientiane area during the war claim that they originate from a place called Laan Xieng. The name of the last son of Tao Khun Lo, himself the son of the first Tai Dam ancestor to descend from the heaven, was Laan Cheuang (Chamberlain 1992). The historical sound changes needed to produce Xieng from Cheuang are not rare. This may be another Phong claim to elite descent, bridging the heavens and earth, as well as Tai and Kha, although such a Tai Dam link may be a counter-current to the proposal that the Phong were not in close contact with Tai Dam and Tai Daeng people.

Arguably, *meuang* relations are more significant for Phong identity than any “Zomian” exaggerations of difference. Phong ethnohistory and linguistic evidence force us to rethink schematic interpretations of the Tai/Kha binary. This relation is dynamic and contingent. It is further complicated by the internal cultural and linguistic diversity of the Phong ethnic category – as actually in the case of many other Austroasiatic groups such as the Khmu – that is very much linked to historical trajectories of migration, conflict, and exchange in the multicultural setting of upland Laos. Critical to this proposal is the recognition of the ethnolinguistic boundaries that exist within the world that is often referred to simply as “Tai.”

The internal linguistic diversity found within the Phong language is the norm, rather than an exception for ethnic groups in the uplands, from Houaphan to the upper Nam Ou. This challenges our simplistic ideas of clear and clean mappings of a language to an ethnic group. As we have seen with the Phong, neither has cut-and-dry boundaries or definitions when

examined from the inside out. Yet, looking seriously at this linguistic variation can give important hints about not only the history of an imagined community, but of a region that has multiple imaginings that sometimes overlap and sometimes contradict each other. But in the case of the Phong, there is a sense of group solidarity within the people that call themselves ‘we people’ and others known by different names. The term Phong, seems to have its origin in a toponym or level of governance, but provides a sense of political ethnicity, even as an exonym. The term K’niang, although heard in many places, does not present itself as the compelling “autonym”, and unlike the Khmu and others, they have not adopted a native form of the word ‘person’ as an ethnonym.

This must be related to the fact that the Phong do not “fit” into the local social structure as it has been understood to date. The Phong cannot be placed comfortably within the system abstracted by Condominas, and by the same token, the ethnoscape hierarchy as they explain it requires a view of history that has not made it, despite the efforts of people like Lagrèze, out of the oral realm into the accepted realm of “official” written history. Their history is wrapped up with a larger social history of Austroasiatic people and their movements around landscapes now dominated by Tai versions of history. The linguistic ideologies of these people are hidden by the fact that they often speak Tai languages well and are adept at participating in cultural norms. Their skill at “cultural shapeshifting” may account for the fact that the *Carte Linguistique* (1949) listed the “Thai Phong” as being Tai speakers (Chamberlain 1986). Nonetheless, they maintain “difference” from others as a way of being in these larger social structures. Even as they assert a higher civilizational rank because of their Lao-influenced Buddhist ways, their linguistic strategies to innovate counting systems to bolster their position in negotiations with other Tai peoples suggest that the power relations in these multiethnic mosaics are complex and dynamic. The closest identification within local society is with the “outsider” Thay people they call *rii*. In other words, the *rii* are the farthest from their Austroasiatic heritage, yet the closest in terms of their own image of their position in the local hierarchies. By extending this hierarchy to the local frame of interethnic relationships imposed by the neighboring Tai polities, they build a social ladder of identification to reorder their world. From a methodological point of view, working in multiple local languages is essential to piecing together these relationships. While the Phong Lao-language narratives tend to use the word “Lao” in speaking of the cultural influences they have taken on, in Phong languages such as Laan, the phrase *ʔarii-ʔalaaw*, which we can translate as ‘Thay and Lao’, shows a finer set of identifications and relationships within the Buddhist world they know.

Neither Tai nor Kha, nor Lao, the Phong may have seemed a promising group through which they could govern the less accessible areas outside of Sam Neua. Currently, intimate knowledge of Khmu language seems minimal or non-existent among the Phong, and there is no record of their linguistic practices prior to the French. Their oral memories stress a “Lao” connection, which would keep them above the Khmu in the local social hierarchy. Yet their position between the animist Tai and the Buddhist Thay of the region upsets such a hierarchy. More research is needed on Phong culture as practiced today by the diverse sub-groups to understand the range and depth of influence from different Tai and Thay groups: What animistic elements of Buddhist practice exist and how do they reflect cultural contact? What patterns of multilingualism exist in the present and past? How might borrowed words and grammatical structures shine a light on multiple sources of linguistic influence? How do narratives of Self and Other index historical interethnic, and possibly intraethnic relations in the Phong world?

So, why the French-Phong-Kha dictionary? Aside from being an interesting work of ethnography and language documentation, did the French see a way of taking advantage of the Phong liminal position within the local landscape, which spoke to loftier conceptions of governance and local identity? Regardless of our interpretation of this possibility, the Phong present an alternative angle from which to question the regional structures of power, identification, and memory, while at the same time deepening our understanding of how language and legend shape ethnically diverse environments.

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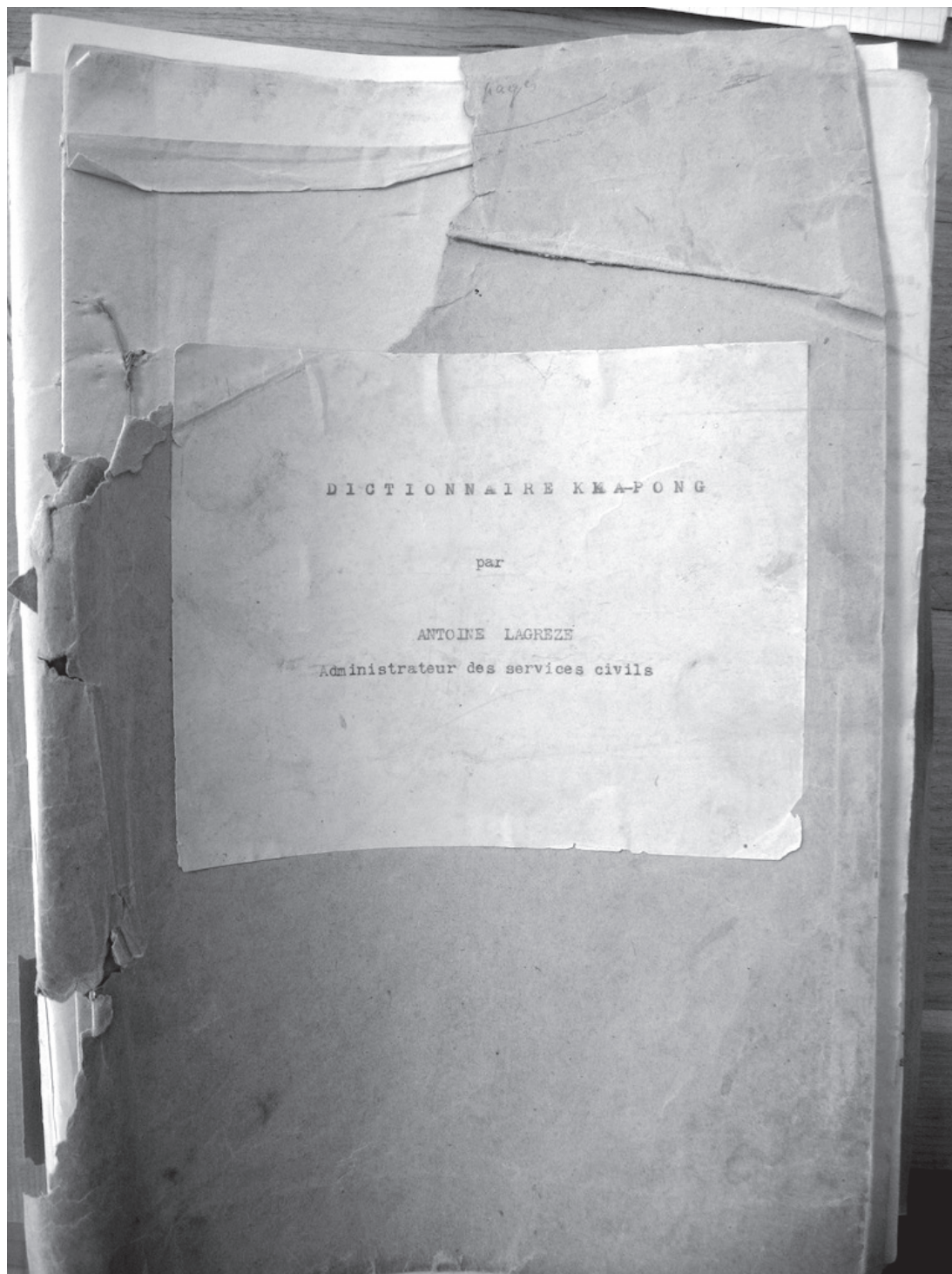
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Appendix I

Sample pages from the 1925 *Dictionnaire Kha - Pong* compiled by Antoine Lagrèze (Fonds de la Résidence supérieur au Laos, Série Z, Archives nationales d'outre-mer, Aix-en-Provence, FR ANOM RSL/Z)



Français

Phong

Khả

88

(A)

Abaissier	át loc ổng	anh r'yun	
Abandonner	vang dồ-kh'	pitch'	
Abaque	kuân khít	lúk khít	1.
Abeille	yêu bít	mạ ph'rông	
Abimer	tray i-ôm	tông pitch'	
Abondant	bun uy s'kun	a mark	
D'abord	tê kinl'	dôm, kôn	1.
Aboyer	trồ-h' (ou trồ-kh')	kuânl' (ou kuân'r')	
Abrégé	kết-ch'	nhe	
Abri public	sa la	1. sã la	1.
Abriter	cố kôn dốt	l'ngut	
Absent	tạ-kh' cộ	am yáp	
S'abstenir, se retenir	ót yam	ót r'nhuôm	
Accepter	ráp	láp, ráp, háp	
Accident	hết vang	hết rấy	
Accompagner	mún'r tru	yọ s'rông	
S'accorder	t'vau nê	lầu mên yọ	
Accoster	chốt	1. chốt	1.
Accoucher	lồ-kh' kuân	a con	
Accrocher	kọ dồ	vác unl'	
Accuser	fóng và, hã và, chốt và	1. fóng và, hã và, chốt và	1.
Acheter	lэк	vét	
Achever	tu-h' i-ôm	tông lồ-itch'	
achevé	tu-h'	môm (ou lồ-itch')	
Additionner	t'rôm lэк	ruóp lэк	
Adieu	chi mún'r day	sam barat kan	
Adjoint	phủ (ou mạ na) chôi	phủ suáy	1.
Administrateur	mạ na t'biên kan	phủ chat kan, phủ và -	
		hats' kan	1.

Ne fais pas	yac i-əm	kôn	
Négligent	lê bô	dôn lô lô	
N'est-ce pas	nô, mên bô, nô	1. nô, mên bô, nô	
Nettoyer	gút, phat	phat, sết	
Neuf, nouveau	túm mề	mồ	
Neuf (chiffre)	káo	1. káo	11.
Neveu	lân say	1. yê, chê	
Nez	mo-kh'	nu	
Nièce	lân sảo	1. yê cham kôn	
Nier	tạ-kh' rập	am lập	
Nirvana, paradis	ni phan, s'vank	1. ni phan, s'vank	1.
Noir	yam	hieng	
Nom, se nommer	pún ni oay	sủ, sủ và	1.
Nommer	g'ic pún ni oay	ôn sủ và	1.
Nombreux	yang	mark	
Nen	ta-kh'	am	
Nord (amont)	tang puân	dạ nung	
Notables, anciens	a-kh' rir'-kh'	tháo phya, tháo kê	1.
Notre, nos	krông	dê	
Nous	đ	đ	
Nouveau	túm mề	mồ	
Nouvelles	rào túm mề	khảo mề, khảo h'mề	
Novembre	diên sip sông	1. mông diên sip sông	
Se noyer	chôm pa ang bôn'	tôn ăm han	
Ku	cô vát	tam kông	
Ku pieds	yê vát	yđang piô, yđang tam kông	
Nuit	sang sô-ênh	tr'đip sấm	
Nuit et jour	sang sa ngay sang sô-ênh/	bạ bạ sấm sấm	
Minuit	tr'đai sô-ênh	thông tr'đip sấm	
Nuage	muác	put	
Numéro	lêk, lêk thì	1. lêk, lêk thì	1.
	(0)		
Obéir	ta yong mai	hâm nheng h'ro	

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Banc de sable

don cã-etch'

hát sa rồ

Sabre

ngáo, dap

1. ngáo, dap

Sac

sún dieng

r'ya

Sacré

pha, kh'lam

1. s'ri

Sage femme

a-cui la vac

cham kún vầy sr'nám

Saison pluvieuse

nham yanr'

nham ka mậ

Saison fraîche

nham yên

nham ngar'

Saison sèche

nham dat sa ngay

nham var'

Salade

nhir' húng g'uam (gũ)

nham h'ra tam bri

Salaire

s'siêng

khả cháng

Sale

sa rồ

yồ

Salé

khêm

1. g'êm (gũ)

Salir

i-êm sa rồ

tông yồ

Salle, hangar

hông, rông

1. hông, rông

Saluer

nếp, kham nấp

1. nếp, kham nấp 1.

Samedi

van sáo

van sáo 1.

Sampôt

noi

phên van vien

Sang

mim

mâm

Sanglier

sing lai

siông bri

Sans

ta-kh' uy

pồ

Sapotille

play la mut

rắ la mut

Sarcelle

sôm oap pa ang

sim păt ôm

Satisfait

lồ chỗ

lồ r'nhôm

Sauce

pa ang chèo

ôm ô, ôm nhóp

Saucisse

riêng uá

sái uá

Sauter

pa ang oạ

ôm oạ g'ôm (gu)

Sauterelle

sên nhóc

t'ênr'

Sauvages

sa ric

hôi

Savant

pram r'rôlông

câm mụ bri

Savoir

nák pat

1. câm mụ nông không

Savoir faire

diem

nông

Savon

i-êm pên

tông yanr'

Savoureux

s'bu

1. s'bu 1.

Thé	pa ang che	ôm che	
Café	ka fê	ka fê	
Sucre	pa ang kânł' ny	ôm tan	
Huile, graisse	ngar'	môł	
Vinaigre	pa ang sât	ôm chat	
Lait	nam nôm	ôm bu	
Miel	pa ang but	ôm phrông	
Sel	pa ing	mar"	
Poivre	mark phik noy	1. mark phik noy	1.
Piment	pray	plê blit	
Salé	sâm mecteh' <i>thêm</i>	g'ôm (gu)	
Poivré	tiss	pri	
Sucré	siaô	hi ir'	
Farine	kâu dur'	ma pêng	
Vin	puy lăo vang	buit lăo vang	
Sauce	pa ang chêt	ôm chêt	
Ail	play um	sung p'ir' p'ông	
Oignon	phak buâ	d° (phak buâ)	
Fruits acides	play sât	plê chêt	
Saucisse	uâ	rieng	
Padek	padek	ca nek	
Avoir faim	sâu sa pa	chủ bộ ma	
Avoir soif	sâu sieng pa	chủ uôc	
Rassasié	gông	bi	
Manger, boire	sa pa, sieng pa ang	ma, uôc	
Avaler	cluat	cam lôt	
Jeûner	ôt pa	ôt ma	
Frîre	châm su	châm, thôt	1.
Rotir	th'câp	karr' a	
Bouillir	tôm	tâm	1.
Faire cuire le riz	uanl' pa	rong ma	
Cuisiner	ta bien kông kin	têng ma	
Cuit	cun	sin'	
Cru	kou	brông	
Fade	chit	b'lô	

Appendix II: Comparative Phong Wordlist

Data sources:

Badenoch. N. 2006-2010. Field notes.

Bui K. T. 1973. *The Phong Language of the Ethnic Phong Which Live Near the Melhir Muong Pon Megalith in Laos*. Translation and condensed version of Vietnamese paper published by Hanoi University.

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Lagrèze, A. 1925. *Dictionnaire Kha Pong*. Fonds de la Résidence supérieur au Laos, Série Z, Archives nationales d'outre-mer, Aix-en-Provence, FR ANOM RSL/Z

1 body hair
2 skin
3 bone
4 blood
5 tears
6 sweat
7 head
7 head
8 hair
9 face
10 eyebrow
11 eyes
12 ear
13 nose
14 mouth
15 tongue
16 teeth
17 beard
18 neck
19 shoulder
20 hand
21 right hand
22 left hand
23 arm
24 elbow
25 palm
26 finger
27 fingernail
28 breast
29 nipple
30 waist
31 belly
32 navel
33 buttocks

KATO 2013					NB FIELD (2006-2010)		BUI 1973	Lagrezze 1925
Salui Samnua, HP	Naa Ngiu Hua Muang, HP	Pa Kha Tai Hua Muang, HP	That Hua Muang, HP	Huai Khun Hua Muang, HP				
PIAT	TAPUANG	PUNG	PHAEN	LAAN	KHAMI	LAAN		
kniəŋ	kniəŋ	kniəŋ	kniəŋ	kniəŋ	kneəŋ			
ksək	ksək	ksək	ksək	ksək	ksək	ksək	ksək	tou
ktəh	ktəh	ktəh	ktəh	ktəh	ktəh	ktəh	ktəh	kh'to-kh'
siŋiŋ	siŋiŋ	siŋiŋ	siŋiŋ	siŋiŋ	sŋiŋ	sŋiŋ	sŋiŋ	s'ing
miim	miim	miim	miim	miim	miim	miim	miim	mim
ʔaŋ mat	paʔaŋ mat	paʔaŋ mat	paʔaŋ mat	kmaa mat	ʔaŋ mat	khmaa mat		pa ang màt
trʔəh	srʔot	hiə	srʔot	riə	harʔəh	riə		puc
klii		kluu			klii	(kluu)		cli
ʔək	ʔək		ʔək	ʔək		ʔək	ʔək	
ksək klii	ksək klii	ksək kluu	ksək ʔək	ksək ʔək	ksək klii	ksək ʔək	ksək kluu	tou cli
ruup	roop	roop	roop	ruup	ruup	ruup		māt
kpir	tpir mat	kpir mat	gniŋ mat	ŋiniŋ mat	tpur mat	ŋniŋ	gnwŋ	kh'purn'
mat	mat	mat	mat	mat	mat	mat	māt	māt
kɤt	kət	kət	kɤt	kɤt	kət	kət	kət	kət
məh	məh	moh	moh	moh	məh	məh	məh	mo-kh'
paəŋ	paəŋ	paəŋ	paəŋ	paəŋ	paəŋ	paəŋ	paŋ	pang
taak	taaʔ	taaʔ	taaʔ	ntaaʔ	taak	ʔantaaʔ	taʔ	h'tac
riiŋ	riiŋ	riiŋ	riiŋ	riiŋ	riiŋ	riiŋ	hriŋ	ring
ksək paəŋ	ksək paəŋ	ksək paəŋ	ksək weŋ	ksək woŋ	nuət	ksək voŋ		kh'so-k pāŋ
kluul	kruu	kroʔ	ɤŋɤʔ	tkəh	klool	təkə	grək	
knaəŋ	waaʔ	waaʔ	waʔ	sowaʔ	knaəŋ	swaʔ	vaʔ	
tii	tii	tii	tii	tii	təy	tiiy	təj	thé
tii biŋ sam	biŋ sam	tii biəŋ khii	tan khii	biŋ sam	biəŋ khiy	biəŋ sam	təŋ k'əj	tang sām
tii biŋ duok	biŋ doʔ	tii biəŋ doʔ	tan wii	biŋ wii	biəŋ dook	biəŋ vii	təŋ vi	tang duār-kh'
waak	tliio	treeo	triio	khanaəŋ	vaak	k'anaəŋ	triew	
ktəŋ	toŋ tas	ktəŋ	khen sək	ken səʔ	kheen sək	kheen səʔ	ken səʔ	
tpəh tii	rpaəŋ tii	trpaəŋ tii	trpaəŋ tii	trpaəŋ tii	tliŋ təy	tarpaəŋ tiiy		
rmuəs	rmuus	rmuəs	rmoos	luh moih	niw təy	niw tiiy	rmos təj	ru mu es'
kir	kir	kiər	kiər	ŋkiər	kər	ʔaŋgər		
ʔək	tək	plək tuut	tuut	pe ʔuʔ	ʔək	pee ʔuʔ	plək tuut	u
	cək tək	coəŋ tuut	cək tuut	tnək ʔuʔ	cək ʔək	tnək ʔuʔ	cwan	
ʔək	ʔək	ʔək	ʔək	ndəp	ʔək	ʔandap	ʔək	
pul	pul	pil	pil	pil	pul	pil	pul	pūn'
srpuu	srpuu	srpuu	srpuu	srpuu	srpuu	tpuu	srpu	
luur	luu	plək luu	plək luu	duh	roor	duh	plək lu	

34 feces	ʔiək	ʔiəʔ	ʔiəʔ	ʔiəʔ	ʔɛʔ	ʔiək	ʔɛʔ	ʔiəʔ	irk
35 to defecate									
36 urine	nom	prdiim	prʔəəm	prʔiim	briiim	nom	briiim	prʔəəm	prɔʔ ɔm
37 to urinate									
38 to fart	pom	pom	pom	pom	pom	pom	pom		
39 to give birth	kiit kuən	kiit kuun	kiit koon	kiit koon	kiit koon	kəət kuan	kiit	kəət	kot
40 leg	pliio	pləəo	juŋ	juŋ	talaan	pleew	tlaan	yun	plou
41 foot	ksaŋ	rpaan	juŋ	juŋ	juŋ	kaŋ	juŋ	rpaŋ	hun yes
42 back	knduui	kndooi	kndooi	kndon	groon	kanduuy	groon		kun doi
43 to see	moh	moh	muh	muh	muh	moh	muh	muh	mô-kh
43 to look	biiŋ	kat	bəən		toon	bəən	toon	bəŋ	căt
44 to hear	diəm	buət	buət	boot	diəm	diəm	dəm		t'yon
44 to listen	tanjal	faŋ	faŋ		smoor	tanjal	smoor	făŋ	
45 to eat	saa	saa	saa	saa	saa	saa	saa		sa
46 to drink	siəŋ	siəŋ	siiin	siiin	siiin	siəŋ	siiin	sən	sieng
47 to bite	jah	jah	ras	jah	kiət	toyh	kiat	găt	ya'kh'
48 to hold in hand	raŋ	been, raŋ	cap	jup	sap	been	sap		
49 to put, to place	dii	waan	waan	waan	plaʔ	dee	plaʔ, doʔ	doʔ	
50 to push	juu	knjul	juu	juu	juu	juu	juu		nhú ờng
51 to pull	kndəŋ	kndom	kthoʔ	kthoʔ	kthok	roc	ktok	kt'oh	kun dēnh
52 to throw	doh	doh	dəəs	sgdiiim	ndiiim	doh	ʔandiim	dəs	dô-kh'
53 to pick up	ʔaat	ʔaat	ʔaat	roos	jup	ʔaat	jup		
54 to ladle	bat ʔaŋ	bat paʔaŋ		bat paʔaŋ	bat kmaa	bat	bat	păt păʔăŋ	
54 to ladle		taʔ paʔaŋ	tak paʔaŋ			tak ʔaŋ			
55 to run	pas	pas	pas	pas	son	payh	ʔangoc	pas	
56 to sit	jiik	jiiʔ	jiiʔ	jiʔ	jiiʔ	yəək	jiəʔ	yəʔ	yoc
57 to stand up	ʔon	liiʔ ʔon	ʔon	liʔ	sar	ʔon	sar	ʔon	luc
58 to cough	tuur	toor	tgoʔ	tgoʔ	dgoʔ	toor	dgoʔ	tgoʔ	tuar'
59 1	baʔ ʔan	ba ʔan	niiŋ	niiŋ		baʔ ʔan	baʔ ʔan	bo	môy
60 2	baar	saw	saw	saw	baar	baar	baar	bar	bar'
61 3	piə	saam	saam	saam		saam	paj	băj	săm
62 4	pon	sii	sii	sii		sii	sii	pon	pon
63 5	baʔ biəŋ tii	haa	haa	haa		haa	haa		hă
64 6	bopʔuə	hok	hok	hok		hok	hok		hōc
65 7	bəjiət	cet	cet	cet		cet	cet		chêt
66 8	bətet	pəet	pəet	pəet		pəet	pəet		pet
67 9	boprom	kao	kao	kao		kaw	kaw		káo
68 10	baar biəŋ tii	sip	sip	sip		sip	sip		sip
69 11		sip ʔet	sip ʔet	sip ʔet		sip ʔet	sip ʔet		
70 12		sip saw	sip saw	sip saw		sip saw	sip saw		
71 sky	rtuon	toon	ton	ton	ton	hartoon	ton	ton	tuang

72 sun	pasnee	snai	snai	snai	snai	pasia	snay	snāj	sa ngay
73 moon	pakikoj	kii	kii	kii	kii	pakii	kii	ki	ba ky
74 star	pakluc	kluc	kluc	smɛɲ	smɛɲ	kluc	smɛɲ	smeɲ	cl'uitch'
75 wind	wiir	wiir	wiir	wiir	ʔəmponɲ	vəər	ʔəmponɲ	vər	vər'
76 rain	jar	jar	jar	jar	jar	jar	jar	jar	yanr'
77 it rains	jar kmii	jar kmii	jar kmii	jar kmii	klɔh jar	jar khamee	jar	yar kmi	clo'kh' cami
78 lightning strikes	phii pdaa sah	phii bdaa sah	phii prdaa sah	thee wa daa sah	phii bdaa sah	hartoonɲ sah	phiivadaa psah		pip p'da sâ-kh'
79 it thunders	trɔɔɲ kiir	trɔɔɲ kiir	trɔɔɲ kiir	trɔɔɲ kmii	trɔɔɲ kmii	thrɔɔɲ kir	trɔɔɲ kʰmii	trɔɲ kmi	trôngkər'
80 soil, earth	ptiə	tpii	tpai	ptai	ptai	patia	ptay	ptej	th'pê
81 stone	kliiɲ	kliiɲ	kliiɲ	kliiɲ	kliiɲ	kliiɲ	kliiɲ	kon kliɲ	cling
82 hill, mountain	kniiɲ	guuɲ	rkoon	guuɲ	psəh	khanəəɲ	psəh	guɲ	g'ung
83 water	ʔaɲ	paʔaɲ	paʔaɲ	paʔaɲ mat	kmaa	ʔaɲ	kʰmaa	păʔăɲ	pa ang
84 lake	tmbonɲ	slɔɔɲ	paʔaɲ ruu	tmbonɲ	muur kmaa	slɔɲ	moor kʰmaa		tôm bông
85 river	rcɔɲ	rcɔɲ paʔaɲ	rcɔɲ paʔaɲ	paʔaɲ ruu	kpɔh meek	looc ʔaɲ	kʰmaa	yăw păʔăɲ	pa ang
86 fire	ʔɔs	ʔos	ʔɔs	ʔɔs	ʔoaih	ʔoyh	ʔoyh	ʔos	ôst
87 smoke	tiwɪl	ptuaʔ ʔos	ptuʔ ʔɔs	ptuʔ ʔɔs	ptoʔ ʔoeih	ptuak	ptaw ʔoyh		ph'tuâr'
88 house	jiɲ	jiiɲ	jiiɲ	jiiɲ	jiiɲ	jiɲ	jiiɲ	yɪɲ	yung
89 roof	kndɔh jiɲ	koonɲ jiiɲ	koonɲ	koonɲ	koonɲ jiiɲ	pɛɛ jiɲ	koonɲ jiiɲ	kɛn dɔɲ yɪɲ	kun dô-kh' yung
90 pillar	sraɲ	sraɲ	sraɲ	sraɲ	sraɲ	sanraɲ	sraɲ	kɛn	s'rang
91 mat	laat	laat	saat	saat	saat	saat	saat		
92 comforter	situk	ktuʔ	stuʔ	kɣiʔ	stuk	satuk	stuk	kyəʔ	s'rur num
93 pillow	tɲgiil	tɲgeel	tɲgool	kon kluu	gool kluu	tangeel	gol gluu	kon klu	tung g'ienr'
94 mosquito net	sut	sut	munɲ	munɲ	munɲ	sut	sut		
95 knife	raa	raa	kriii	miit	miit	raa	kriiyh	ʔara	crê
96 to cut	sikam	kap	kap	kap	kap	gat	kap	tăp	kap
97 tail	ktaa	raam	ktaa	ktaa	ktaa	ktaa	ktaa		rang
98 horn	ktuonɲ	ktoonɲ	ktorɲ	ktorɲ	ktorɲ	ktoonɲ	ktorɲ	ktɔɲ	tuang
99 tiger	rwaai	rwaai	rwaai	rwaai	rwaai	harvaay	ruay	rvaj	r'vay rông
100 elephant	tijaanɲ	djaanɲ	tjaanɲ	sajaanɲ	sajaanɲ	toyaanɲ	syaaɲ	syaj	t'yâng
101 mouse	knia	knii	khanai	knai	khanai	khania	kʰnay	knej	ca nê, k'nê
102 bird	som	som	som	som	som	som	som	som	sôm
103 to fly	par	banɲ	mbanɲ	par	mpar	par	ʔampar	par	hưm bang
104 egg	plee	plai	plɛɛ	plɛɛ	plee	plɛɛ	plee	plɛ	plây
105 crow	ʔaak	ʔaaʔ	ʔaaʔ	ʔaʔ	klʔaaʔ	ʔaak	galʔaaʔ	ʔaʔ	
106 buffalo	slɪio	sləəo	sləəo	traʔ	traaʔ	thriik	traaʔ	trăʔ	s'lo'u
107 cattle	sɲgoo	sɲgɔɔ	sɲgɔɔ	ʃləəo	jileeo	sleew	ʃliiw	yləw	sung go
108 pig	sɪɲ	sɪɲ	sɪɲ	sɪɲ	sɪɲ	sɪɲ	sɪɲ	sɪɲ	sĩng
109 horse	rmaa	rmaa	rmaa	rmaa	rmaa	harmaa	ʔarmaa	rma	r'má
110 dog	suə	soo	sɔɔ	sɔɔ	sɔɔ	suə	sɔɔ	sɔ	cho
111 cat	ɲeo	mɛɛo	mɛəo	mɛɛo	mɛəo	ɲɛew	mɛɛw	mɛw	ngao
112 chicken	ʔiər	ʔiər	ʔiər	ʔiər	ʔiər	ʔiər	ʔɛr	ʔir	h'ir'

113 duck	kaap	kaap	kaap	kaap	ʔaap	kaap	ʔaap	kap	câp
114 bee	buut	buut	buut	buut	buut	buut	buut	yăw but	yâu bût
115 fly	muəs	muəs	muəs	moos	muuih	miəyh	muayh	mos	mu-ès'
116 mosquito	ŋɔɔŋ	ŋɔɔŋ	ŋɔəŋ	ŋɔɔŋ	ʔiʔ ŋɔɔŋ	ŋɔɔŋ	ʔii ŋɔɔŋ	ŋɔŋ	ngong
117 ant	moc	moc	moc	mɛc	mɛc	mec	məc	mec	mô-èt
118 snake	mar	mar	mar	mar	mar	mar	mar	mar	manr'
119 fish	kaa	kaa	kaa	kaa	kaa	kaa	kaa	ka	çà
120 shrimp	kuŋ	kuŋ	kuŋ	kuŋ	kuŋ	kuŋ	kuŋ	pa kuŋ	cung
121 crab	baraap	raap	raap	raap	raap	raap	raap	hrap	râp
122 frog	kop	gdaʔ	krɔɔ	kdaʔ	gdaʔ	kadak	gdaʔ	kdaʔ	kr'lo
123 to fish with rod	ɔŋ tbas	ɔŋ dbas	ɔəŋ tbas	tik bet	thik bet	sit bet	tik bet		yong ta bas'
124 to kill	kmbiil	kmbiil	kmbəəl	kmbəəl	gmbiil	kmbəəl	ʔambiil	kbəl	cam bɔnl'
125 seed	kluəŋ	kluəŋ	klooŋ	klooŋ	klooŋ	kluəŋ	klooŋ	kloŋ	cluang
126 tree	lam sʔəŋ	kok suʔəŋ	lam sʔəŋ	lam sʔəŋ	lam sʔəŋ	lam saʔəŋ	lam sʔəŋ	lām sʔəŋ	ying s'ung
127 leaf	tʰə sʔəŋ	təə sʔəŋ	təə sʔəŋ	təə sʔəŋ	tiiu sʔəŋ	teew saʔəŋ	tiw sʔəŋ	təw	tou s'ung
128 flower	plaəŋ sʔəŋ	plaəŋ suʔəŋ	plaəŋ sʔəŋ	plaəŋ sooi	plaəŋ sʔəŋ	plaəŋ sooy	plaəŋ	pləŋ	plang suay
129 bean	taai	plai ʔam	plɛɛ ʔam	plɛɛ ʔam	plee doəih	plɛɛ ʔam	plee doayh	plɛ ʔām	pləy am
130 bamboo	mai phai	rmɨ	poʔoo	mai phai	mai phai	may phay	may phay		máy phài
131 paddy plant	lam paa	kok paa	ɔŋ paa	kok paa	lam paa	lam paa	lam paa	lam paa	
132 rice	paa	paa	paa	paa	paa	paa	paa	pa	pa
133 sesame	lŋaa	lŋaa	lŋaa	lŋaa	lŋaa	plɛɛ lŋaa	ʔalŋaa	lŋa	pləy nga
134 ginger	kɨŋ	kɨŋ	kɨŋ	kuŋ	kuŋ	kɨŋ	kuŋ	kuŋ	
135 banana	praat	praat	praat	praat	praat	phraat	praat	prak	pràt
136 sugar cane	klmii	klmii	klmii	glmii	sɔʔɔɔm	kharmii	sʔɔɔm	kəlmi	kun my
138 to plant	tʰiil	tʰiil	tʰiil	tʰiil	tʰiil	təəl	tʰiil	təl	tonl
139 plow	thai	sʰh naa	thai	thai	thai	thai	thay	tʰaj	thāi kh'ting
140 irrigated field	ktiŋ	naa	naa	naa	naa	na	naa	na	kh'ting
141 upland filed	leŋ	leŋ	leəŋ	leəŋ	leəŋ	leŋ	leəŋ	leŋ	lèng
142 oil	ŋaar	tkaal	ŋaar	skaal	skaal	ŋaar	skaal	skaal	ngar'
143 salt	ʔiŋ	piʔiŋ	piʔiŋ	pʔiŋ	peʔeŋ	ʔiŋ	ʔiŋ	pɛ ʔiŋ	pa ing
144 sugar	ʔəŋ klmii	paʔəŋ kmii	nam ʔɔɔi	nam ʔɔɔi	nam ʔɔɔi	namtaan	nam ʔɔɔy	nām tam	pa ang kunl' my
145 chilli	pree	prai	prai	prai	prai	panree	pray	praj	pləy pray
146 tea	saa		saa	saa	saa	saa	saa		
146 tea	cɛɛ		cɛɛ					cɛ	pa ang che
146 tea	miəŋ	miəŋ	miəŋ	miəŋ					
147 wine	puui	pui	pui	pui	braai	pooy	braay	pi	puy
148 cigarette	jaə duut	jaə duut	jaə duut	jaə duut	jaə duut	jaə duut	jaə duut		ya dut
149 to cook rice	ʔuul paa	ʔool paa	ʔool paa	gʔɔh paa	gɔʔɔh paa	ʔool pah	ʔɔh	gʔɔh pa	
150 firewood	pan ʔɔs	pan ʔɔs	pən ʔɔs	pən ʔɔs	pənʔəih	ʔoyh	pənʔuəyh	pən ʔɔs	pan ôst
151 pot	təluok	tlooʔ	tloʔ	tloʔ	tloʔ	tlook	tloʔk	tloh	
152 to boil	tom	tom	tom	tom	tom	tom	tom	tɔm	tóm kun

153 to roast	tkaap	tkaap	tkaap	piij	piij	tkaap	piij	tkap	th'kap
154 cloth	pheen pheē	pheen	pheen	pheen	pheən	pheen	pheen	p'hēn	pēn
155 to sew	swiis	swees	swiās	sweeh	sriŋ	soyh	sriŋ	svēh	s'viēss
156 needle	srnuui	smmos	srmos	srmos	srmeħ	sarmooy	sarmeh	srmos	sôm most
157 thread	pan swiis	prsa? swees	psa? sŋwiās	prsa?	sa? sriŋ	pharsak	psa? sriŋ	psā?	pr'sac
158 to wash clothes	poh	poh	puh	puh	sak	poh	puh	puh	
159 clothes	kriəŋ tək sat	ba? sat	ba? sat	ba? sat	ba? sat	khriəŋ	khriəŋ ba? sat	ba?	krùŋrəŋ nùŋg
160 to wear	ba?	ba?	ba?	ba?	ba?	tək	ba?		[sum]
160 to wear		sat	sat	sat	sat	sat	sat		sāt
161 to undress	wit	wit	wit	wit	bən	vic	bən	vit	vitch
161 to undress		tis	təs	təs	tēh	toyh	tēh		
162 road	krun	kruun	krun	kruun	krun	khrun	krun	krun	crung
163 village	duəŋ	duəŋ	blooŋ	blooŋ	blooŋ	duəŋ	blooŋ		duang
164 to buy	leək	lēē?	lēē?	lē?	lē?	le?	lē?	le?	lék
165 to sell	suok	soo?	soo?	so?	paaŋ	sook	paaŋ	so?	suárk
166 market	talaat	talaat	talaat	talaat	talaat	tlaat	talaat	talat	lát
167 money	ŋiin	ŋiin	ŋəən	ŋiin	ŋən	ŋiin	ŋəən	ŋən	ngon
167 to speak	maai	kee	maai	maai	maai	maay	maay	tmaj	cay
168 to speak			wao			wə			
169 to ask	tiin	saŋ	saŋ	saŋ	saŋ	təən	saŋ		tonl'
170 to answer	təp	təp	təp	təp	təp	təp	təp		top
171 to call	plduoŋ	gii?	gii?	truu	truu	plooŋ	truu	tru	g'i-ic
172 language	maai	maai	maai	maai	maai	maay	panmaay		pha sǎ
173 to write	khien	khien	khien	khien	khien	khien	khien	k'hien	khien
174 paper	ciə	ciə	ciə	ciə	ciə	ciə	ciə	ciə	chiá
175 to stick	patet	ptit	tit	tit	tit	tit	tit		tit
176 to play	kwaa	ʔeo	kan jir	kwaa	rhi	naay	riy	rəj	ta buam
177 song	khap	khaap	khap	khap	khap	khap	khap	k'hǎp	
178 to get tired	ʔit	so?	so?	so?	ʔit	miay	ʔit	ʔit	th'kien
179 to rest	phak phoon	phak	phak	sao ʔit	laao ʔit	saw məəy	phak		yuc ta kieu
180 to sleep	jhp	jhp	ta?	ta?	taa?	yeep	ta?	ta?	yop
181 to die	biil	biil	bəəl	bəəl	biil	bəəl	biil	bəl	bōnl
182 age	ʔənu?	ʔənuu	ʔənu?	ʔənu?	ʔənu?	ʔənu?	ʔənu?		a nhy
183 to be ill	pih	loh piih	loh poh	poh	so?	pih	poh	poh	poŋ
184 painful	soo	sao	sao	sao	sao	so	saw	sǎw	sâu
185 to hiccough	saʔək	lɔ?	ʔəl lɔ	sʔik	səŋgək	lɔk	səŋgək		s'q
186 to burp	kndir	gdir	kdir	ʔiam	knʔək	kandir	kanʔə?		
187 louse	see	sai	sai	sai	sai	see	say	sǎj	sây
188 medicine	rok mai	jaa	jaa	jaa	jaa	yaa rok may	hak may		khong ya
189 bow	snaa	snaa	snaa	snaa	snaa	snaa	snaa	snaħ	s'nà
190 arrow	kam	kam	kam	kam	kam	kam	kam	kǎm	câm

191 name	pnii	pnii	pnnuu	prnuu	rnuu	pnii	parnuu		purn ni
192 father	juonj	joonj	joonj	jənj	ʒonj	yoonj	ʒonj	yənj	yang
193 mother	nuu	ʒuu?	ʒuu?	ʒu?	ʒu	ʒu	ʒiəw	ʒu?	ba yău
194 husband	məh juonj	haʔ joonj	juj	juj	ʒah ʒonj	kuən yoonj	ʒah yunj	ʒah yunj	a hi yuang
195 wife	kuui	haʔ kuui	kii	kii	ʒah kii	kuən kuuy	ʒah kii	ʒaki	aquy
196 son	kuən knəh juonj	kuun knoh joonj	koon juj	kon juj	koon ʒah ʒonj	kuan kun yoonj	koon ʒah yunj		kuan sa ky
197 daughter	kuən knəh kuui	kuun knoh kuui	koon kii	kon kii	koon ʒah kii	kuən kun kuuy	koon ʒah kii		kuan ka mən
198 child	kuən	kuun	koon	koon	koon lik	kuən	koon lik	kon	kuan
199 male/man	knəh juonj	knoh joonj	koon juj	kon juj	koon ʒah ʒonj	kuən yoonj	kon ʒah yunj	kon ʒah yənj	cô-ônə
200 female/woman	knəh kuui	knoh kuui	koon kii	kon kii	koon ʒah kii	kuən kuuy	kon ʒah kii	kon ʒah ki	a-cuy
201 man / human	pram	pram	pram	pram	pram	phram	pram	prām	pram
202 people	thai	pram	thai	thai	thai	thai	thai		
203 to meet with	cuəp	moh	cuəp	cuəp	cuəp	cuəp	cuəp		túng g'əm
204 to wait for	kom	kom	kuum	kuum	kuum	kom	kuum	kum	kôm
205 to give to	maa	maa	maa	maa	maa	maa	maa		ma
206 to use	səh	raŋ	səəh	səə	sih	sih	parsuu		
207 to look for	səʔ biŋ	səʔ	səʔ	səʔ	səʔ	səʔ	səʔ	səʔ	
208 to laugh	kriis	kriis	kriis	kriih	kriih	khrih	krih	krih	cli
209 to love	hak	pheerj	hak	pheerj	pheerj	phærj	pheerj	pʰen	kan ào
210 to fear	tunj	tuunj	tunj	tuunj	tunj	tunj	tunj	tunj	túng
211 to be frightened	ktan	ktan	ktan	kndiirj	tələl	ktan	tləl		
212 to know	diəm	diəm	diəm	diəm	diəm	diəm	dəm	diəm	diem
213 to remember	cii	cii	cii	cii	cii	cii	cii		chư
214 to forget	jet	nit	jet	kelweel	kelweel	yokvaal	kelveel	kel vel	yot
215 cold	jen	jin	jen	jen	jen	yen	yen	yen	yên
216 hot	taat	taat	ʒao	taat	puu?	taat	puu?	tat	
217 hot		srʔot							
217 hungry	soo paa	sao saa paa	sao paa	sao paa	jooc paa	səʔ paa			
				jooc paa	jooc paa	caat siin kmaa	ʒuəc	yuəc	
218 thirsty	soo ʒanj	sao siənj paʒanj	sao paʒanj	sao siin paʒanj	caat siin kmaa	səʔ ʒanj	caat siin khmaa		sâu pa ang
219 drunk	ʒiir	ʒeer	ʒoor	ʒoor	ʒoor	ʒeer	ʒəʔr	ʒər pi	ʒiɾ
220 delicious	ceəp	cæp	ceəp	cæp	jeəp	jeəp	jeəp	cəp	
221 sweet	siə	siəo	siəo	sio	siəo	siəw	siəw	siəw	siaô
222 sour	sat	sat	sat	sat	sat	sat	sat	săt	săt
223 pepper-hot	ʒiim	prai	tiis	prai	prai	tih	pray	prej	pray
224 salty	khem	khem	khem	khem	khem	khem ʒij	kʰem	kʰem	khêm
225 thing	kriənj	kriənj	kriənj	kriənj	kriənj	khriənj	khriənj		krusəŋ
226 big	tuui	ronj	ruu	ruu	meek	ruu	meek	ru	rông
227 small	kəʔn	dæet	leəp	leəp	ʒeet	leəp	ʒeet	lɛp	dêt
228 tall, high	suunj	ʒəh	suunj	suunj	suunj	suunj	suunj	duə	sũng
229 low	tam	tam	tam	tam	tam	tam	tam	tām	tàm

230 long	liəŋ	leenj	looŋ	looŋ	looŋ	leenj	looŋ	loŋ	lieng
231 short	kɛc	kɛc	kɛɛʔ	kiəʔ	kɛʔ	kec	kɛʔ	kɛʔ	kětch
232 broad, wide	kwaanŋ	kwaanŋ	kwaanŋ	kwaanŋ	kwaanŋ	kwaanŋ	kwaanŋ	kwanŋ	kuáng
233 narrow	kheep	kheep	kheəp	kheep	kheəp	kheep	kheep	k'h'ep	
234 thick	ban	tm#il	ban	tm#il	ktɔn	ban	ktən	tməl	
235 thin	kdaa	gdaa	kdaa	kdaa	ŋənaa	kadaa	ŋnaa	kda	k'da
236 deep	lək	ləʔ	lək	lək	lɤk	lək	lək	ləʔ	lǔc
237 shallow	tʰiin	gdal	tʰiin	tʰiin	tʰiin	tʰiin	tʰin	twɔn	túr
238 round	ʔum lum	dbir	tbir	tbir	dbir	ʔɔm-lɔɔm	dbir	tbwɔr	t'bonr'
239 color	sii	sii	sii	sii	sii	sii	sii		
240 red	ksor	ksor	ksor	ksor	ksor	ksor	ksor	ksɔr	kh'sor'
241 yellow	ksaai	ksaai	ksaai	ksaai	ksaai	ksaay	ksaay	ksaj	kh' say
242 blue	ksʰiŋ	sii ʔit	ksʰiŋ	ksʰiŋ	lee	ksəŋ	sii faa	ksəŋ	sī khīao
243 white	luk	luuʔ	luuʔ	luuʔ	luuʔ	luk	luuʔ	luʔ	luc
244 black	jam	jam	jam	jam	ŋɛŋ	yam	ŋɛŋ	yǎm	yam
245 green	ksʰiŋ	ksʰiŋ	ksʰiŋ	ksʰiŋ	kciəo	ksəŋ	kciəw	ksəŋ	k'song
246 sound, noise	siəŋ	siəŋ	siəŋ	siəŋ	siəŋ	siəŋ	siəŋ		sīeng
247 light weight	kjiil	gjal	kjool	kjool	gjool	kayəəl	gjool	kjɔl	k'yiən'
248 heavy	kjʰh	gjʰh	kjuh	kjuh	gjuh	kayih	gjoh	kyuh	k'yɔ-kh'
249 dry	pah	pah	pah	pah	pah	pah	pah	pah	
250 wet	bɔk	bɔɔʔ	sum	bɔʔ	bɔʔ	bɔk	bɔʔ	bɔh	bo-k'
251 soft	kjiim	piəʔ	kjəəm	piəʔ	piəʔ	kayəəm	piəʔ	kmaʔ	
251 soft		ʔuuc							
252 hard	kraŋ	kɛən	kraŋ	kɛən	kɛən	khraŋ	kɛn	kɛn	crang
253 full	kbiə	gbəi	kbaɪ	kbaɪ	gbai	kabiə	gbay	gɔŋ	ka bê
254 new	tmia	tmməi	tmməi	trmai	trmai	thmia	tarmay	trməj	tum mê
255 old	prom	prom		prom	prom	phrom	prom	prom	próm
255 old			sir						
256 raw	ris	ris	kəəo	ris	rih	rih	rih	rws	
257 done, ripe	kin	kin	kin	kin	kin	kin	kin	kwn	
258 good	lʰii	jat	jat	jat	jat	ləəy	jat	yac	lê, lô
259 bad	sree	sree	sree	suə	sua	sua	sray	sre	
260 difficult	lmbaak	lmbaaʔ	naaʔ	lmbaʔ	naaʔ	yaak	naaʔ	lǎm baʔ	bark
261 easy	ŋaai	ŋaai	ŋaai	ŋaai	ŋaai	ŋaay	ŋaay	ŋaj	ngáy
262 expensive	kjʰh	phɛɛŋ	phɛɛŋ	phɛɛŋ	pheəŋ	phɛɛŋ	phɛɛŋ	pʰɛŋ	
263 cheap	kjiil	thiɪʔ	thiik	thiik	thiik	thiik	thik	yoh	
264 clean	saʔaat	saʔaat	saʔaat	saʔaat	ŋaam	ŋaam saʔaat	saʔaat	sǎʔǎt	
265 dirty	piən	kəbuuʔ	piən	piən	smbuur	piən	smbuur	sǎ lum	sa rê
266 quick, fast	wai	wai	wai	wai	wai	vai	vay	vej	vai
267 slow	ʔiŋ	ʔiŋ	ʔəŋ	ʔiŋ	ʔiŋ	ʔiŋ	ʔiŋ	ŋwʔ	p'oi p'umg
268 fat	tuui	miəs	miəs	miəs	blon	tuy	blon	miəs	mi-es'

269 thin	guor	goor	goor	goor	goor	kadɔɔy	goor	ɣɔɟ gɔɟ	g'uar'
270 old aged	riəh	riəh	riəh	briəh	thao	riəh	breeh	briəh	a'kh' riər-kh
271 young	nɪm	num	num	num	num	num	num	num	nùm
272 year	pɪi	pɪi	pɪi	pɪi	pɪi	pɪi	pɪi	lvan	pi
273 this year	lwaanɣ ʔee	mai lawaanɣ	lwaanɣ nai	lwaanɣ hai	waanɣ niəh	vaanɣ ʔee	pɪi neeh		
274 last year	ŋɔl waanɣ	naa lawaanɣ	tee mɪl waanɣ	neel waanɣ	neel waanɣ	ŋalvaanɣ	pɪi phaən maa		
275 next year	ʔɔl waanɣ	ʔuul lawaanɣ	ʔool waanɣ	ʔool waanɣ	ʔol waanɣ	ʔuər vaanɣ	pɪi ʔalvaanɣ may		
276 month	diən	diən	diən	diən	diən	diən	diən	dwən	durən
277 this month	diən mee	diən beʔee	diən nai	diən hai	diən nee	diən mee	diən nee		
278 last month	diən kiil	diən kiil	diən kiil	diən kiil	diən ʔɔk klaai	diən mom dih	diən skil		
279 next month	diən tmia	diən tmmii	diən tlɔh	diən naa	diən til ʔee	diən thamia	diən mæə		
280 today	mai tiɪ	mai diɪ	ʔii ʔoon	ʔii ʔoon	ʔaʔoon	mee tæə	ʔaʔoon	ʔiʔon	may to
281 yesterday	tisiŋee	naan ʔee	tee tʔai	tai tʔai	tee tniəh	tasia	tee tneeh	ʔi tʔej	ta-ê
282 tomorrow	roonɣ ʔuəs	tiʔ ʔuəs	tʔai	paa tʔai	pniəh	ŋŋʔuəyh	pniəh	pǎʔ tʔej	p'ta-ê
283 morning	tɔɔn ʔuəs	khaʔ ʔuəs	sən ʔoos	ptuʔ ʔoos	nel ʔuəih	ʔuəyh	neel ʔuəyh	teʔ ʔɔs	sang u-es'
284 noon	ʔasiŋee	tii sŋai	sən sŋai	neel sŋai	nel sŋai	pasia tɔɔnɣ	neel sŋay	ŋam pa ʔɔs	nham tra day
285 evening	karɔŋ	kranɣ kasən	sən krɔoo	ʔoor boo	nel bao	sɔŋ	neel baw	ŋam bo	kar-suənh
286 night	ʔaasɔŋ	tii sən	sən boo	neel boo	nel sabao	ŋan sɔŋ	neel sbaw	nel bo	sang sô-ənh
287 above	tanɣ tul	too tooi	tanɣ til	tanɣ til	kntil	tanɣtuul	kantil	tǎŋ tuul	tang tūnl'
288 below	tanɣ sul	sɪ sɪo	tanɣ sil	tanɣ sil	knsil	tanɣsil	kansil	tanɣ swul	tang sūnl'
289 far	liən	leenɣ	geenɣ	geenɣ	klaai	leenɣ	geenɣ	geenɣ	lieng
290 near	kdiəh	gdiəh	kdiəh	kdiəh	gdiəh	kadiəh	gdeh	kdiəh	k'dir-kh'
291 to come	wɪt	wɪt	wæt	wɪt	wɪt	væt	væt	lɔh	plong
292 to go	ŋaan	mɪr	mɪr	mɪr	mɪr	ŋaan	mɪr	mɪr	mɪr
293 to enter	doo	dao	dao	dao	dao	dɔɔ	daw	dǎw	dâu
294 to exit	loh	loh	læəs	læəs	lih	loh	lih	læs	lô-kh'
295 I	ŋɔɔ	ŋee	ʔaŋ	ʔaŋ	ʔej	ŋɔɔ	ʔej	ʔej	nhia
296 you	mɪ	mæə	mɔɔ	mɔɔ	mɔɔ	mɪ	mɔɔ	mɔ	mo
297 he, she	dɛe	nam	ʔah		nɪ nee	nɪ	nɪ	nə, nɪw	no
298 we	ʔaʔiə	cuʔ ʔai	muət ʔee	cuʔ ʔee	ʔah ʔai		cuʔ ay	ʔe	ê
299 you pl	bɪə	cuʔ bæə	buət bee	cuʔ bee	cuʔ bai		cuʔ bay		bê
300 they		cuʔ ʔah	muət ʔah		cuʔ ʔii		ʔǎh		nó
negator	ʔii	cɪi	tha	ci	ci	ʔii	ʔii	ci	tə-kh
to have	ʔuui	ʔuui	ʔii	ʔii	ʔii	ʔuuy	ʔii	ʔi	uy
Lao people			rii		rii	rii	rii	ri	ry

Appendix III: Photos from Ban Saleuy (Houaphan province, Lao PDR, Oliver Tappe, 2019)



Photo 1: Main road of Ban Saleuy (copy of the Sam Neua monument on the left)



Photo 2: Silk weaving



Photo 3: House front



Photo 4: Buddhist temple in Ban Saleuy



Photo 5: Phong-style silk scarf