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The Rise of Distrust: State Officials, Gifts and Social Hierarchy in Laos

Abstract

Conceptualisations of the state as a reified entity fall short in the case of socialist Laos. Foreign commentators often imagine Lao political life through a discourse of state governance, yet the Lao themselves, in popular narratives, tend to emphasise their day to day interactions with state officials. In their everyday lives, the latter are treated as individuals with which it is possible to interact. This article explores the relations between the Lao people and their government officials, and how those relations have changed in recent history (mainly since 1975). Wedding receptions – vital events in Lao social life, where power is invoked through performance and representation – are taken as case studies for the analysis of authority and legitimacy in a socialist state context.

Keywords: Laos; Gift; Power; State; Social change.

CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF THE state as a reified, faceless entity fall short in the case of socialist Laos. Foreign commentators often depict Lao[1] political life through references to state governance, yet the Lao themselves emphasise in their everyday narratives mundane interactions with civil servants, who appear as personified social agents rather than abstract figures of power. This situation can partly be ascribed to the small size of Lao urban centres,[2] which puts state officials in close, daily contact with ordinary people. In the capital Vientiane, the hub of political institutions, meeting civil servants at everyday social events is still very common even for people of low social status. Of course, the probability that a minister would sit next to a manual worker and engage in a conversation remains low, but both may be invited to

[1] The Lao make up the main ethnic group of Laos. In the Vientiane plain, they have historically, culturally and politically been the most prominent population and today represent about 70 % of the overall population (Sisouphanthong and Taillard 2000). There is no difference in the lao language between "Lao" and "Laotian", which renders the Lao State's process of assimilating the country's other ethnic minorities easier.

[2] Vientiane, the capital city, has for example no more than 300,000 inhabitants.

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and attend the same event wedding party. In the context of weddings, no explicit policy keeps the *phu gnay* (lit. "big men") apart from ordinary guests: the two will only be separated by a set of social conventions, most of which remain informal. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic domination (1979) would thus find an excellent illustration in the layout of the dinner guests: VIP tables are set at the front, while those who feel "too little" generally remain at the edges of the room.

Nevertheless, the larger picture of the relationship between the Lao and their elites is to be found elsewhere, in the shape of history and political structures. Historically, political structures in Laos associated politics and society *via* a religious and symbolic framework that was imagined as pre-existing the social field and justifying its (im)balances. In other words, explanations of the social order were ideologically, structurally and cosmologically given from "outside", legitimised through a supposedly autonomous symbolic source[3] which formed all kinds of social relations, from political ones to those between husband and wife.[4] Of course, this does not mean that relationships were immutable, but that society imagined them (as much as itself) as such. In Bourdieu's terms one could also describe this as *doxa* – that which is taken for granted and not discussed explicitly (Bourdieu 1979). In this perspective, humans ideologically had fewer possibilities to change social rules and their position in society because their authority mainly relied on the need and their capacity to fulfil the roles of the social and cosmological framework they were provided with (Mariani 2011).

This contributed to a naturalisation of politics and its hierarchies by containing them in an ideological order that, in principle, associated power with a given legitimacy that was beyond question. This naturalisation was radically affected by the takeover of the Pathet Lao in 1975, when the Buddhist monarchy was overthrown by a socialist

[3] Understanding this framework in a cosmological sense, I would identify three features of the system that legitimise the social hierarchy: first, the monarch was purportedly the heir to the eldest son of Khoun Borôm, the mythical ancestor sent to Earth by his father, the king of the sky (Pavie 1898). His authority also relied on his favoured relationship with the tutelary spirit of the kingdom, the real owner of the land. The king managed the cult to this entity, in acknowledgement of the fact that the spirit recognised him as the person in power. Last but not least, Buddhism, in which the monarch represents the highest authority on Earth, is a third source of the king's authority, fulfilled through the law of karma for which status is directly derived from meritorious and ethical behaviours in previous lives.

[4] Different codes materialised these conventions. For most, these codes were supposed to originate from a set of rules decreed by Khun Borôm and reported in a text, the *Kôtmay thammasat Khoun Bourôm* (Ngaosyvathn 1996). Other codes, such as for example, the *Kôtmay thammasat bouhan*, were inspired by Buddhism. This set of rules was further legitimised by the Buddhist law of karma, which is assumed to drive human ethical behaviour and thereby justifies differences in social status and power.

regime. Indeed, the subsequent appearance of a new political elite, whose status had not been symbolically inherited, broke the link with the cosmological legitimation of political power and hierarchy and thereby reshuffled the social order from the point of view of its legitimation. Structurally, this automatically implied the objectification of "the political", which shifted from an embedded status that Marcel Gauchet names "*le politique*" to a reified condition that he labels *"la politique"* (Gauchet 2005, p 19). Such a "reversal", which radically breaks away from the pre-existing and external frame of cosmological social norms, puts sociality and the rules of social relationships under question, forcing, or at least implying, the development of reflexivity. For these reasons, such a shift is described by Gauchet as "liberal" (2005, p. 23) because it theoretically opens up social structure to the production of sense and rules by anyone, paving the way for a liberal and individualistic ideology to develop.

Confronted with a fundamental lack of legitimacy, members of the new political elite quickly understood that they would have to appropriate the roles in the official events of Lao social life formerly filled by the old elite they largely replaced. As many Lao observers and foreign scholars argue (Evans 1998; Stuart-Fox 1996, 2005, 2006), they were so efficient in this replacement process that it can be quite difficult to distinguish any radical change in the state officials' behaviour through time. In this article, I will first argue that this observation can easily be extended to a variety of seemingly mundane circumstances. An ethnography of Lao weddings reveals that state officials and the new elites are today taking real pains to act in accordance with social expectations. It shall show how alliances between the old and new upper classes played a pivotal role in the appropriation of the former elites' status. Such alliances were initially forbidden, and their gradual (re)normalisation appears to have had a strong effect on the legitimacy of state officials by linking them to well-known historical families. Moreover, because wedding receptions serve as loci for cash transactions and symbolic or social exchanges, they also contribute substantially to the creation, maintenance and extension of patronage networks.

Secondly, the aim of this article is to show that this analysis remains superficial if we do not take into account the structural move described above as a reshuffling of a social order that was understood by many before the revolution as a naturally given condition. By discussing the gift in the context of weddings, I argue that one of the main consequences of this shift is the growing sense of distrust among the Lao urban population towards the "generosity" of the elite. Indeed, this

transformation of the social order, the "liberal reversal" as I have labelled it with Marcel Gauchet, made many ritual actions and forms of social behaviour – previously embedded in this structure – happen in a kind of "vacuum". Thus, the shift from the former elites, to whom power was conceded, to the new who have seized it, created the possibility that the choices of social actors could be entirely individuated. Yet, if it may have been "normal" for a person of noble decent to behave in an ostentatious manner, the *parvenu* who behaves in this way can be a subject of suspicion. Many people cannot assign clear motives to his or her generosity, which in turn feeds people's doubts about the purposes of that generosity. Thus through the example of wedding parties I argue that, although the "liberal reversal" caused by the revolution did not really change behavioural standards, it nevertheless discreetly modified their perception by reducing confidence in the intentionality of the "other".

Alliances and wedding strategies of the revolutionaries

A detailed examination of the creation of the communist administration in 1975 reveals that full attention was paid to its "representativeness". Most social groups were "integrated" in order to represent the spectrum of the national population. The most famous example is Prince Souphanouvong, who was a noble, son of the last *uparat* (vice-king) and one of the main characters of the Laotian revolution. His descent was crucial for the communists' propaganda. We could provide some more examples such as Boutsabong Souvannavong (Deputy Minister of Finance), a descendant of a prominent and long standing bourgeois Vientiane family. Sithon Kommadam, Deputy President of the People's Supreme Assembly and living symbol of the Lao people's ethnic diversity is another example. He was born a Lavi (an ethnic minority of southern Laos) and served the state's rhetoric on the integration of ethnic minorities. According to my respondents, Kou Souvannamethi, who was Minister of Justice, was chosen for his reputation of wisdom built up through his long monastic education in the south of the country. However, most of these persons' access to power was limited, as authority remained mainly in the hands of politburo members.

One might conclude that the matrimonial strategies of the new rulers would follow a similar pattern. In reality, however, the contrary happened and initially the relationship building via marriages was

managed in a very conservative way. Indeed, during the new regime's first years, marriages of the elite took place endogamously inside the Party and, more precisely, inside the historical core of revolutionary resistance. Thus, many senior civil servants and even Ministers who had contributed to the rise of the communist movement, in Laos or abroad, but who had not experienced the hardships of the revolution, were not seen as belonging to the "revolutionary family". In other words, matrimonial choices first institutionalized relationships based on political history. Under such circumstances, the compliance of future wives and husbands was of secondary importance, and their consent was sometimes obtained under substantial pressure. This was, for example, the case for the daughters of Souphanouvong and Khamtay Siphandon, both prominent members of the politburo. Indeed, one of their daughters came back from the USSR where, as a student, she had married a civil servant appointed by the former regime to the Laotian embassy. Another young woman was planning to marry a medical doctor who had come back from France after 1975. Interestingly, both men were put in jail until the women agreed with their father's choice.[5] The first one eventually had to divorce, showing the state's strong will to control the networks of its servants.

The matrimonial options of communist civil servants began to change in 1986 with the institution of the New Economic Mechanism. Some former bourgeois family members who had not left the country had spent years supporting the communist expansion, often against the will of their relatives. To show their gratitude, the new rulers appointed them to important, but mainly technocratic positions. Somphavan Inthavong and Boutsabong Souvannavong, both prominent members of the two largest bourgeois families of Vientiane, were among them. They were integrated into the state administration, but initially excluded from matrimonial alliances with the revolutionary elites. It seems, however, that the advantages that could be obtained through coalitions with these "house" families (Lévi-Strauss 1984) gradually outweighed the initial mistrust. In the beginning of the 1980s, Kaysone Phomvihane, the uncontested leader of the revolution, initiated this new process by giving his son into marriage to one of the nieces of Somphavan Inthavong. My respondents mentioned that Mrs. Inthavong is said to have insisted on the prestige that her niece's education and social origins gave to Kaysone, one of the few

[5] Khamtay's daughter married the son of Maisuk Xaisomphaeng, who was Minister of Industry and Trade, while Souphanouvong's daughter married an ethnic Khmou police officer.

communist rulers who, as outlined in popular discourses, had not "studied in the forest" (*hian you nay pa*). This story, which was followed by the father's two successive promotions, is well known by many Lao in Vientiane and the case was often described to me as an example of the collusion between the political, economic and symbolic interests of their elites. Moreover, it reveals a tendency that would further develop with the introduction of the New Economic Mechanism (Stuart-Fox 2001, p. 68), especially at lower levels of the political hierarchy (Mariani 2006).[6] With this marriage, such alliances started to create large social networks between communists, members of the former bourgeoisie and even the former Lao aristocracy, who had already intermarried with the bourgeoisie well before the revolution.

This extension of the matrimonial strategies of the revolutionary elite promoted the state's sociological and political support in a capital of very modest dimensions. Through the progressive appropriation of the former elites' alliance strategies, they also permitted the reconstruction of a system of interaction that "those who had supported the former regime well understood" (Stuart-Fox 2005, p. 8). As the following brief history of Lao weddings will show, this scheme of re-appropriation is also crucial for understanding the policies of the Laotian state toward weddings in general and is moreover reflected in the behaviour of state officials during these events.

A brief history of Lao wedding practices and strategies

Before 1975, Lao weddings were central to social life as the process involved a huge network of persons and could last for months (Bourlet 1907; Doré 2000; Phoumirath 2004). Thus they were an ideal opportunity for expressing sociability, which usually reached its climax at a lunch that could last until night time and brought together entire social networks. Weddings experienced a first shift in the early 1950s, when an important new component was added to the usual dramaturgy: the wedding reception. These dinner parties, held in the evening in addition to the traditional lunch receptions at home, were offered by the

[6] For example, the daughter of Phonmek Dalaloy, then Minister of Health and member of the Central Comity, married the son of Boutsabong Souvannavong. The eldest daughter of Souban Saritthirat, also a member of the Central Comity and Minister married a member of the Sananikon family, a large, reputedly pro-American family. At a higher political level, one of Khamtay Siphandon's daughters married a Sihachak, a former bourgeois family of Vientiane (related to the Souvannavong family).

elites of this period, who introduced modern codes without changing the established dramaturgy. In urban areas, these gatherings became rather large and brought together more people than any other non-official event.

Like other important local events, weddings suffered a major disruption in 1975 when the whole process leading from the meeting of the engaged couple to the ceremony was banned and replaced by a sequence of ideological formalities. Confirming Sicard's account (1981, p. 48), my respondents describe drab ceremonies where *basi* narratives celebrating the union were substituted with official Party rhetoric. This sparseness contrasted with the baroque proceedings that those who wanted to marry had to pursue up to this point for weddings involved a difficult quest for permits taking them from the offices of village chiefs to ministries, *via* the Lao Women's Union.

At the same time, the government started to organise collective weddings as it had done previously in the "liberated zones" of the country. Ideologically, such events were perfectly in accordance with the communist doctrine that prohibited any form of ostentation and "useless expenditure", reducing weddings to the core functions of biological reproduction and political symbolism. The Lao who had recently returned from France (about one hundred) – following the new government's appeals for rebuilding the country – formed the main target population of these collective weddings. Party officials may well have thought that the example given by these people, who returned out of free choice, would exalt patriotic feelings among civil servants.

Since these returnees[7] had spent so many years abroad, they were always kept under surveillance by the authorities. As most of them were highly qualified, however, they were appointed to senior technical positions that the revolutionary elites could not fill. This obliged the latter to tolerate some transgressions. Aware of the state's tremendous need for their skill and knowledge, the repatriates soon understood that they had more room for manoeuvre than others. They used, among other things, these opportunities for organising wedding parties in their preferred way. For this reason, the returnees were among the first who dared to contravene the new wedding practices by organising traditional rituals and small receptions after official occasions. In order to calm state officials' annoyance at such insolent behaviour, some returnees invited the latter to the ceremonies, casting them in the social role traditionally associated with persons of high social status. In order not to lose face by giving their support

[7] The Lao government called them "refugees": *ôp pha gnop*.

to events they should condemn, these officials made political speeches. In sum, by activating a *habitus* – and an *ego* – that even senior communist officials could not completely shake-off, returnees contributed to the restoration of the social sphere in relation to politics, re-forming the traditional bond that had been untied by the revolution.

Many of my respondents portray the wedding reforms as very unpopular (see also Phoumirath 2005). Even among senior civil servants, many thought that weddings should remain a private affair, rejecting one of the core characteristics of totalitarianism: the intermingling of the private and public sphere (Arendt 1973). The returnees' "resistance" thus took place in a tacit and general context of mistrust against rules that were opposed to the most obvious common sense, a phenomenon probably reinforced by the cultural practice of distinguishing between the person acting and her formal role.[8] The opposition to new wedding practices was also grounded in this persistence of the personal and social point of view among officials.

In this context, Prince Souphanouvong appears to have been the first to organise an official wedding reception in 1989 for the marriage of his eldest son with a woman from Luang Prabang of common descent. His motivations are difficult to reconstruct, but some close relatives told me that when he became ill and left political life, he started to express regrets about the loss of Lao customs and showed a growing interest toward reformist ideas. The celebration took place at the "Mekong" restaurant, which was the premier establishment in Vientiane devoted to wedding receptions and built thanks to the patronage of a high official. Subsequently, the French embassy was allowed to organise French national day there. Many state officials, bourgeois and ordinary people followed with events, making visible and even official what had until then taken place only on the sly. Weddings, and especially wedding receptions, quickly became once again central events of social life, privileged places for status expression and legitimisation. For rich families, receptions are today the

[8] As an example one could here mention the case of Feng Sadchidtapong, who spent fourteen years in jail on very serious charges. One could describe the process of his imprisonment, from initial warnings to the ultimate penalty, as a play between the institutional and the personal frames of reference: in the moments that immediately preceded and followed his arrest, he was for example threatened with punishment at the institutional level; he was then given the option of freedom and even a higher position within the state administration if he agreed to apologise to certain figures. It would therefore appear that ideas about honour and pride were much more important than the actual politics and laws in this critical phase of Lao history.

main opportunity to bring together their entire social network. The composition of the latter of course depends on the organiser's social status, but there is nevertheless a requirement to bring together many people. Hence, for important families, invited guests can range from higher state officials to domestic employees.

A family picture as a mirror of social and political hierarchy

After this historical analysis, I will now turn to my ethnography of weddings. In 2005 the Many and Seun[9] families organised a reception in the biggest and most expensive hotel in town to celebrate the union of the new couple. More than 700 people attended the dinner. Among them were many politicians and successful entrepreneurs, and close links between these people were openly displayed. The father of the bride was a very senior civil servant at the Ministry of Trade and Industry, and her mother was the owner of major businesses with operations throughout the whole country. The groom's family made a fortune in the construction industry and now manages a number of other lucrative firms. None of them were from former elite local families.

Facing the large room, a speaker invites the bride and groom and their close relatives to take their places next to him and welcome the guests. Many pictures of this event will be taken but, according to the groom's account, only a small selection of relatives could appear on the "family picture" due to technical reasons and the limited range of the camera. In fact, except for the bride and the groom's parents, most of the relatives are kept out of the scene and replaced by important persons. Among the fourteen "family members" remaining, two are Ministers and five are wives of Ministers. Instead of taking a place next to his daughter, as is the usual case, the groom's father stands between "his friend", the Director of the Central Bank, and the wife of the Minister of Education. Obviously, the "family" that appears in this scene has little to do with biological kinship, but with the objectification of social hierarchies and the bounds of clientelism.

After a few minutes, the Minister of Education is invited to present the speech he has prepared in honour of the new couple. It is framed in a very high register of language, with Buddhist references and Pali expressions such as *vivaha moungkhoun* for "wedding", from the Pali

[9] All names are pseudonyms.

words *vivāha* (wedding) and *mangala* (auspicious), instead of *sang khopkhoua may* ("to build a new family"), the expression laid down by the communists in 1975. These lexical choices mark a return to a rhetoric that was previously forbidden (Evans 1998; Nick Enfield 1997) and are part of the broader process of re-appropriation described above. The same attitude can also be detected in the dress codes apparent at the dinner, which are quite different from the former revolutionary standards. Thus, like many women in the room, the Minister's wife is dressed in a richly decorated, silk *sin* (straight skirt), which was forbidden during the early years of the revolution, but once again appears completely normal today.

The appropriation of the former elites' codes of representation has obtained a certain degree of recognition from the people toward whom it is directed and thus seems largely successful. Indeed, respondents brought up after 1975 with whom I discussed the text of the Minister's speech described the particular language used as typical of current *phu gnay*. Thus, while extempore associating some traditional linguistic codes with their current elites, people do tend to acknowledge the latter in their role. This observation is finally confirmed at a symbolic level through the use of the concept of *kiat*, which is generally translated as "renown, dignity, fame, prestige, reputation, glory" (Kerr 1992). Aiming to give it an anthropological depth, I have proposed elsewhere (Mariani 2008a) the complementary translation of "worthiness". Indeed, if *kiat* is unquestionably a complex category, defining someone as having *kiat* mainly means that others are confident in his capacity to act in accordance with admitted norms, including Buddhist ones. Thereby, *kiat* illustrates the necessity of the appropriateness of subjective choices of social actors to objective social expectations. As the term is used very often in everyday life, it provides an ideal point of observation to understand how personal initiatives and collective norms are bound to each other in Lao social life. Yet, for most of my respondents, it is obvious that the present-day *phu gnay* have *kiat*, which implies that they are considered to act as expected. This confirms at least partially the success of the undertakings of the new elite regarding this appropriation.

By employing these means, the recognition of the contemporary elite's social status is apparently achieved. In the first part of the article, I showed some of the many factual similarities that bind the new and former elites, agreeing with most of the contemporary observers of Laos. I have provided some ethnographic evidence showing the rapid revitalisation of state officials' behaviour in and toward weddings, proving their understanding of the necessity to fulfil the traditional expectations

associated with their status. Yet, it seems to me that the similarity in behaviour prevents us from seeing the fundamental difference that lies beyond these appearances. Indeed, while breaking the link between the political and the social spheres, the communist revolution forced the new elites to rebuild it. Something that was normally given *a priori* suddenly had to be re-created. The former elites were organically bound to their social roles, which were founded in metaphysical laws that implied and were prior to social laws. In this framework, their status had to be justified, not obtained *and* justified. The present-day bond between the political elites and their social roles seems identical, but it is structurally completely different. The bond here is mechanical, formed by the agency of some people and their will to *obtain* a social status (before justifying it). The former relations and positions were symbolically largely given, while current ones are in that sense chosen.

I shall now show that, despite the appearance of a successful appropriation, this structural detail has challenged the manner in which political elites, and more precisely their generosity in wedding receptions, are perceived. Generosity cannot be interpreted in the same way if it is perceived as an implication of free choice and individual agency, as is nowadays possible, or as a simple inherited obligation, as was mostly the case before the political changes of 1975. In other words, perceptions of the same act of generosity, probably motivated by similar reasons, can be completely different, depending on whether it is ideologically normal/normative (resting on a duty) or not (resting on a choice). In the former case, generosity relies on a pre-existing explanation, while in the latter it is structurally individualised. Then, it may be difficult to accept generosity without trying to understand its motivations, its intentionality. Here we find a root for suspicion and doubt about the other's personal motives of action. Because the new elites and state officials are acting outside the former cosmological frame with its inherited social hierarchies, they are suspected, for example, of acting completely selfishly.

Suspicion in the wedding gift

As mentioned above, wedding parties provide the *phu gnay* with a unique opportunity to display their power and generosity. This makes these events very competitive in terms of size and expenditure.

If Laotians of common social status normally organise them at home, those who can afford it, or wish to believe they can, rent a room in one of the many specialised restaurants or hotels of Vientiane.

Organising such an event may be extremely expensive and often drives people to sell family goods, especially land, and/or to borrow money. Nevertheless, the investment is partly offset by the financial contribution of the guests. Guests receive their invitation in an envelope displaying their name; the envelopes are filled with money and placed in an urn as guests enter the dining room. The amount given depends on many factors, the most obvious of which are the quality and the nature of the relationship (whether it is professional, familiar or clientelist, for example). Since gifts are officially justified by the circumstances, and money transfers are expected, weddings in reality also provide an excellent opportunity to introduce more pragmatic and personal intentions than simply the desire to help the new couple at the wedding. Thus, a guest can give a subsequent sum of money to test the potential helpfulness of the host in circumstances that can be evoked later in a discrete way. It is then up to the organiser to link *or not* the unexpected gift and the story he was told. Corruption can subtly be disguised this way because, in case of refusal, the money is lost but the reputation of the giver is preserved, as the wedding endows the gift with legitimacy.

Whatever the motives that guide the choice of the amount, the main reference for the gift strategy seems to be found elsewhere, namely in the dinner's supposed cost. Indeed, the code of honour requires a minimal contribution corresponding to the cost of the dinner. Since these costs cannot be known precisely (even if they can easily be estimated), guests are left to their own interpretation. Considering the many solicitations of Lao social life as much as the will of the elites to organise expensive dinners that many cannot afford to "pay", most guests give less than the estimated cost. So in most cases, the total amount reached by the contributions does not offset the investment made in the wedding. In my case studies in Vientiane, the reimbursement usually reached only one-third to one-half of the investment. Interestingly, despite the fact that everyone knows this situation and that no one can personally provide an example of a profitable reception, the rumour of some people making a profit of their wedding has spread among Vientiane's population. Doubts particularly affect members of the elite that are, more than anybody else, suspected of trying to obtain financial advantages out of the situation and/or to organise parties that do not correspond with their real social and economic status. This situation has paradoxical

consequences as it pushes the *phu gnay*, especially these who have political responsibilities and represent the state, to donate more in order to prove their good faith. But when doing this, they actually increase people's doubts. The expectation of honesty, the need for the elites to fulfil a social and consensual role, pushes them into a difficult quest for funds. Considering the amount of money spent on weddings, this probably contributes to the high level of corruption in Vientiane.

Nevertheless, doubt does not primarily concern corruption, but is focused on the general intentionality of the giver; on the desire to be somebody that is suspected of guiding the elites' behaviours when they should be acting unselfishly. Considering the lack of any empirical evidence that could show that state officials really obtain a financial advantage from their weddings, and because of their strong commitment to showing a detachment from any material benefit, we can argue here that the *phu gnay* are mainly victims of generalized and unfair accusations. These suspicions are rooted in an imaginary possibility ("it *could* happen that way") which, I think, was curtailed before the revolution by social mechanisms that fixed one's position. In the old system, one could hardly be suspected of trying to obtain a social status, because it was generally already established and simply had to be maintained. As pointed out by an respondent, in the pre-1975 period, people *knew* the members of their (political) elites, whose presence was thereby naturalised. So their behaviours were more or less expected and, while they were also known as sometimes being corrupt, they could not be suspected of pretending to be someone they were actually not. By pointing again to the question of the state-servants' social role (instead of the question of illegal practices and corruption), people demonstrate the subjacent vacuum that characterises their relations with state-officials. Although the facts discussed in the first part of the article seem to hint at the contrary, something has fundamentally changed in the perception of the elites.

The distrust towards the motivation of current elites is linked to the disappearance of the organic link between political power and its former symbolic source. As generosity had long been (and still is) promoted as a virtue,[10] it was structurally associated with a normative obligation that contributed to normalising any form of mistrust of

[10] Generosity is also a prime virtue in Lao Buddhism, as exemplified in the story of Prince Vessantara, a former reincarnation of the Buddha. The story is also invoked in many Lao discourses about generosity. See my discussion elsewhere (Mariani 2009, 2012), and Patrice Ladwig (2009) on the ethical ambiguities that can be attached to the gift in Buddhist narrative and practice.

one's motivation as being driven by individual and egoistic interest. In the past, one was supposed to express one's generosity (itself an expression of one's social status) based on characteristics mainly attributed to the giver, but not self-chosen. The disappearance of such criteria disengaged or individualised one's choice from the pre-existing social structure, giving in principle anyone the opportunity to choose their own grade of generosity and thus to achieve the social status pertaining to this quality. Simultaneously, this also created the possibility of suspecting that someone could be generous for negative, or at least self-interested reasons. The point here is therefore not to oppose current and former elites on the basis of their actual virtue and sincerity, as they probably share all "natural" human intentions, the bad as much as the good. We even observed that they continued to act in similar ways, demonstrating their desire not to appear as individualists. However, I think it is crucial to underline the structural differences between two social frames of action, in which generosity and social status are expressed and perceived as normal or not normal. We have to analyse the difference in perception that is implied in this shift. Thus, from an anthropological point of view, the interesting issue about weddings is not linked to the question whether or not the former elites were selfish (they probably were), or whether they behaved like the current ones. The crucial point is to understand that marriages could, ideologically, not include the idea of reimbursement. To a certain extent, the former elites could be suspected of everything, but they were not suspected of trying to obtain status and financial benefits from weddings.

Generosity, gift and social change

My hypothesis is that we are now dealing with a social situation in which choice structurally precedes norm. This permits the unveiling or imagination of a certain intentionality behind behaviours in wedding gifts, but also beyond that. The breaking away of the frame of norms, of inherited social status and its cosmological explanation, implies a potential for the individualisation of social obligations. As I have described above, this introduces a moment of doubt into the whole social sphere, making it a structural parameter of the whole current sociality. By approaching the question of the gift and generosity, which express social status, I aim to show that the growing feeling of uncertainty toward the motivations of others is correlated by

a growing will to rationalise this incertitude. Although this insecurity is in reality inherent to human relationships and has well been documented for the case of the gift and the need to return (Bourdieu 1980; Godbout 2000), I argue that in the present case this helps to show how the communist revolution has in fact been conducive to social change.

Interestingly, while trying to obtain broader accounts on the elites' generosity beyond those concerning wedding expenses, one can observe that disillusioned statements are in reality very common among the Lao urban population. Thus, doubts about people's sincerity are not limited to weddings and are often expressed through comments such as a "real gift [or generosity] doesn't exist", "is not for free"; "gifts cannot be spontaneous"; "the giver has a reason to give [or to be generous]"; or "he is expecting something in return".[11] Since the same persons often opposed such statements to an idealised and "traditionalised" past when things were different and feelings "purer", we could first be tempted to put into perspective these observations through Herzfeld's concept of "structural nostalgia" (2005, p. 147-182). The opposition between the present and an idealised past would then be considered as a device, a kind of narrative tool people use in order to understand their current social order, rather than an objective testimony of how things really were. My argument here is that there is in fact no reason to confront these two possibilities, for they do not mutually exclude each other, but are complementary. Indeed, if the idealised "Lao way of doing things" is often invoked as a solution to the so-called problem of the disappearance of generosity and spontaneity, it also corresponds to something real that can be objectively described by the individual and the anthropologist. It even corresponds to very obvious and universal circumstances: when the gift occurs in circumstances in which an existing relation (of an institutional or emotional kind) precedes and frames the interaction, and generosity is somehow embedded in the experience, the existence of a gift does not come to mind in the form of a calculation of mistrust. This is especially the case with friends or acquaintances. Here the gift is received as natural, normal, and is somehow not individualised and necessarily connected to a strategy by the receiver or the giver. No intention is perceived and spontaneity is stressed as ruling the situation. In Laos this is, for

[11] Excepting the second and the last one, these quotations were given to me in French, a language many senior Lao officials speak very well. These notices are included here because they summarise the idea more directly than statements made in Lao in which the main ideas are often expressed through contextualised examples.

example, expressed through the idiom *nam cay tong maa koon*, "spontaneity must prevail") (Mariani 2009). There is not necessarily any conscious debt toward a person who is believed to give with such "spontaneous" generosity; it simply expresses the state of the relationship.

From this perspective we can understand that people do not really make claims about the disappearance of "pure" relations, which is indeed exaggerated. However, they make claims about the increasing rareness of these relations; a perception that in turn can objectively justify the feeling of disappearance. Even the most impassioned and deformed expression of subjectivity may have an objective basis and it is part of the role of the anthropologist to explore appearances in order to confirm this (or not). Carrying this argument further, we would then simply wonder if, as people's narratives suggest, gifts and behaviours that are *perceived* as spontaneous (which means that they are framed) were indeed more numerous in the past. And is generosity correlatively harder to understand and manage today (because it is more often individualised and its underlying intentionality is more often perceived by the receiver)? Yet I argue below that such an observation can be understood precisely as a consequence of the "liberal reversal", which mechanically cuts the link between the political and religious spheres. It can also be related to the growing urbanisation of Vientiane and to the economic changes that began affecting the country in the early 1950s. Nonetheless, as I show elsewhere (Mariani 2012), these economic and urban changes were much more progressive and much less influential than the brutal structural shift provoked by the communist revolution.

According to this frame of understanding, it is thus not possible to adopt Herzfeld's point of view and disqualify the very idea that the "gift no longer exists" *a priori*. Such a feeling is indeed objectively grounded. It derives from the growing objectification of the gift and generosity, and it is a symptom of societies and more generally situations in which the gift, generosity and intentionality are individualised. In other words, nostalgia may be "structural", but it is so precisely because it is a consequence of a particular structural and ideological setting (the setting of a structurally individualised society or context) in which generosity can be objectified. My purpose here is to underline the rise of nostalgia due to the disappearance of the framework once constituted by norms and structures embedded in cosmology, bit I am not arguing for radical discontinuity. Other examples might include relationships between strangers, in which no explicit normative frame precedes the interaction, and which always

and everywhere prompt people to be cautious. The crucial difference between the past and present is thus not related to the appearance of a new kind of relationship or the disappearance of some others, but to scale and probability. In the past, people knew much better than they do today what to expect of "the other", starting from their elites, who were almost permanent. So the very idea of generosity implied in the gift did not even have to be expressed, and was therefore not a subject of doubt. This has dramatically changed because of the liberal reversal and its consequences: the growing individualisation and number of situations or "events" (such as wedding parties) in which gift giving happens without any frame.

Thus, it is certainly not a coincidence if discourses about the "pure" or "true" gift or generosity are very widespread in common-sense narratives around the world, especially in so-called "modern" societies and in changing societies. It has even been endowed with a prominent scholarly status by some researchers among whom Jacques Derrida (1991) is probably the most famous. For Derrida, as for my respondents, the gift cannot be "pure" because a gift can only be a (real) gift if it is not recognised as such by the receiver (Derrida 1991, p. 26). Yet, I argue that associating the gift and counter-gift is not obvious and that there is no guarantee that the actor who has incorporated generosity as a norm will always perceive this. Gift and intentionality are often not perceived when they result from a pre-existing relationship. In other words, recognising the gift as a gift is not evident to everyone in every empirical circumstance. So, Derrida's statements prevent us from thinking the social dimension of the gift, which does not have to be "pure" *a priori* (just as experience is not intellectual *a priori*) because social actors do not necessarily intellectualise its social dimension. His analysis removes the normative dimension of reality by considering it as given to consciousness.

Knowing if a pure gift is possible or not may be an interesting metaphysical question, but it hides a crucial question for the social sciences as a whole: do people think it is possible? And under which structural circumstances can this be performed? What does it imply in terms of understanding? I argue that in order to reach a complex understanding of social reality, we need to systematically consider people's analyses and perceptions as part of our scientific quest. We have to take the ethnography they perform of their own society seriously and we should not make them disappear behind a unidimensional interpretation and representation. Derrida's point of view springs from a presupposition rooted in an already individualised

society. In contrast to that, I have argued that, for my respondents, this point of view is *in the course of evolving*, provoked by the increasing individualisation of their society. It is only this moment of transition that gives birth to a reflexivity *à la* Derrida, but we can still perceive the traces of a social order in which this was not the natural state of affairs. One could say that we are, here, witnessing the transition from one form of *doxa* to another.

In this paper I have explored the relevance and transformation of social norms as reflected in wedding strategies and associated gift giving. In a kind of Weberian (1992) manner I have contrasted two "ideal types" of social situations. Employing a historical perspective, I have argued that before the revolution social status and gift-giving in weddings was embedded in the experience of a social world that was largely fixed concerning status, role behaviour and expectations. Cosmology and inherited status were crucial references for ordering society. I have contrasted this with the situation after 1975. Here I proposed that a more reflexive and intellectualised approach has developed as a result of the destruction of this *doxa*.

The breaking away from former frames of reference has led to the appearance of new social principles that opened society to individualised self-expressions; a "liberal reversal" took place. I have shown that the communist state not only introduced new policies, but that it also broke the link that connected the former state's servants to its citizens. These social connections were so deeply rooted that they were nearly impossible to perceive on a reflexive level or, moreover, to repair after their destruction. I argued that even though the new state and its officials largely succeeded in re-appropriating most of the consensual social behaviours, they became the subject of a structural distrust. Taking the example of weddings and gift giving, I have shown that even if these *parvenu* try to act like their predecessors from the old regime, they are entering a vicious and endless circle of having to prove themselves. In order to stay in power, they had no choice but to behave in this way and re-enact the behaviour of the officials of the former regime, but with the difference that their gifts are subject to rumours of the accumulation of wealth and mistrust.

Lao society is now composed of opposite elements that urge it to conciliate the incompatible: on the one hand, the obviousness of usual (historical) social norms and the necessity to fulfil them, and on the other hand the basic fact that in order to reach their social status, the new political elites had to radically betray those norms. The fact of having betrayed the rules that regulated the social sphere before the

revolution caused a definitive rupture. "Good behaviour" and "appropriate manners" such as generosity cannot disguise the fact that the social sphere has been through an essential rupture. It was believed that the main characteristics of the former framework of understanding of social hierarchy guaranteed the immutability of the setting, and it was precisely this aspect that was transformed, if not destroyed, by the revolutionary politics. In a way, Lao society is still trying to perpetuate itself as it always did while simultaneously feeling that this is not a good solution.

While debates on the role of norms and self-choices in people's behaviours are still very prevalent in the social sciences, it seems that we sometimes lose sight of the people's point of view, of the anthropology they do of their own society. In this spirit, we should refocus the debate on the Laotian state to the level of everyday life, instead of analysing it through a foreign and politically-centred lens. I have tried to take this seriously by exploring the relation on both a structural and ideological level.

Finally, and by way of an outlook, I would note that, in my opinion, there is no other way for the relationship of politics and the social to follow than its new "natural" slope. The political and the social fields have been subject to differentiation. Thus, the phenomenon of re-appropriation I have discussed in this article must not be misleading, because it was mainly a reaction towards a shift that was too radical to perpetuate. We could compare this to an amputee who regrets the loss of a leg and continues to imagine it is still there, especially during the first years after amputation. Only later do they progressively accept the loss and begin to organise their lives in a different way. Thus, we can reasonably suppose that senior civil servants as representatives of the state will progressively become more and more differentiated and set apart from the rest of society. They will become more abstract for most people, who will no longer be able to meet them in mundane circumstances (see also Mariani 2006, 2008b). I already observed that because of increasing social competition and differentiation, normal people were less often invited to parties today than in the past. Before the revolution, they were involved with the organisation and participated in a way that relegated them to a lower social status, but at least they had the option of being there. Today, they have no role to play at these events. Even those who are invited to wedding parties of *phu gnay* often decide not to attend. Either they cannot afford to attend, or they fear that they will not know how to behave in the context of such an event. Seen from this perspective, the relationship between the Lao, their elites, and therefore

the state, will become more and more disincarnated. A crucial question is whether or not people will be able to accept this as a necessity that comes with increasing social differentiation, or if they will demand a closer proximity. We can only speculate whether such a proximity would once again be built on older patterns or be established through new mechanisms. Ultimately, I believe that politicians as "representatives" of the state will have to find new ways of legitimising themselves.

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This article is based on a four years of ethnographic fieldwork (2004-2008) during which I lived and worked in Vientiane. A substantial part of my work focused on weddings and I attended about 40 of them. From my group of main contacts, eight were current or former high senior state officials. Another three were of noble descent, four had blood links with were members of former bourgeois families and five were part of the new bourgeois elite. The ideas presented here are explored in more depth in my book (Mariani 2012). I thank Bernard Sellato, Pierre Petit, Holly High and Patrice Ladwig for their comments.

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Résumé

L'idée que l'État pourrait être envisagé comme une entité autonome, lieu distinct où s'exprime le pouvoir, n'est pas pertinente dans le cas du Laos. Si les questions de gouvernance focalisent ainsi l'attention des observateurs internationaux, elles apparaissent comme secondaires pour les Lao eux-mêmes, dont l'attention se porte sur la vie sociale des hommes politiques avant de s'appliquer à leurs qualités d'hommes d'État. L'argumentation revient sur les changements qui, depuis la révolution communiste de 1975, ont affecté cette relation entre les Lao et les membres de leur élite gouvernante. Ce sont les fêtes de mariage, lieux centraux de l'expression et de la légitimation du pouvoir, qui servent d'illustration à cette analyse de l'évolution du rapport à l'autorité et à la légitimité.

Mots clés: Laos ; Don ; Pouvoir ; État ; Changement social.

Zusammenfassung

Im sozialistischen Laos wird der Staat nicht als unabhängige Einheit verstanden. Empfinden ausländische Beobachter die Regierungsfragen als entscheidend, betrachten die Laoten diese als zweitrangig. Ihre Aufmerksamkeit richtet sich auf das soziale Miteinander der Politiker und nicht auf ihre staatsmännischen Fähigkeiten. Dieser Aufsatz geht der Frage nach, wie sich die Beziehungen zwischen Laoten und Vertretern der regierenden Eliten seit der kommunistischen Revolution von 1975 weiterentwickelt haben. Hochzeitsfeiern – Höhepunkt des laotischen Lebens, bei denen vielfältig Macht zur Schau gestellt wird – bilden die Grundlage für eine Untersuchung von Autorität und Legitimität in einem sozialistischen Staat.

Schlagwörter: Laos; Geschenk; Macht; Staat; Sozialer Wandel.