

The Dynamics of *Kha Phra Kaeo* Identity in the Context of Thai-Lao History and Politics

Kiattisak Bangperng

Associate Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Mahasarakham University, Mahasarakham, Thailand

kiattisak.b@hotmail.com

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Abstract

This research reports on findings from an ethnographic study on the *Kha Phra Kaeo* ethnicity to uncover its formation and to analyze its dynamics and cultural negotiations in the context of Thai-Lao history and politics. The ethnonym *Kha Phra Kaeo* designates an ethnic group descended from the Bru, with a consistent cultural structure, language and belief system. They were first perceived as an ethnic group due to events connected to the possession of a contested Buddha image called *Phra Kaeo Phaluek Mok*. They are seen as more distinctly *Kha Phra Kaeo* than the Bru, to whom they were related. Due to state power and political changes in Laos, The *Kha Phra Kaeo* underwent cultural assimilation and formed a distinct cultural group based on their legends and ritual reproductions, which are related to the Buddha image, to emphasize the group's historical significance and to negotiate a higher place for the group within the Lao social hierarchy. The *Kha Phra Kaeo* people have the ability to adapt to changes while constructing a distinct ethnic and cultural identity.

Keywords

the dynamics of *Kha Phra Kaeo* identity – Thai-Lao Buddhist culture – the Bru ethnicity

1 Introduction

One of the indigenous peoples of Champasak are called the *Kha Phra Kaeo*, a name meaning “Servants of the Crystal Buddha.” Historically bestowed by *Chao Soi Sri Samut Phutthangkun* of Champasak, the very name reflects the historical significance of the group as the previous possessors of *Phra Kaeo Phaluek Mok* (the Crystal Buddha), which *Chao Soi Sri Samut Phutthangkun* seized and established as a palladium of the state. When the Champasak kingdom became Siam’s tributary state, the Buddha image was seized again, this time by Siam, and transferred to Bangkok where its name was changed to “*Phra Phuttha Butsayarat Chakkraphat Phimonmanimai*” (Fine Arts Department 1941; Phra Phrom Thewanukhro and Champasak royal ruler 1941; Bangperng 2018). The Buddha image subsequently became a Siamese/Thai symbol and was revered as a magical icon believed to contribute to the country’s prosperity (Chao Phraya Thiphakornwong 2012; Damrong Rajanubhab. H.R.H. Prince 1968).

Despite the historical significance of the *Kha Phra Kaeo* people as the discoverers of an important Buddha image, the ethnic group have largely gone unrecognized by modern Laotian society. During the transition period following the communist revolution in 1975–1992, the Lao state re-organized ethnic communities to remove what they considered “outdated elements” (Nguyen 2007, 130; Chiangthong 2007) and integrate all groups of people into consolidated Lao citizenship, regarded as the more progressive cultural group (Siripholdej 2007; Luangthongkum 2001). Under these changes, the *Kha Phra Kaeo* people adapted and reproduced legends and rituals related to *Phra Kaeo Phaluek Mok* as a basis of their historical existence and *Kha Phra Kaeo* identity while adapting to Lao culture and the socio-political context of the Lao state as its citizens. This research aims to understand the *Kha Phra Kaeo* people along two lines: *Kha Phra Kaeo* ethnicity and the group’s cultural adaptation in today’s context.

2 The Historical and Cultural Background of *Kha Phra Kaeo* People

Based on Champasak historical records (Fine Arts Department 1941) and local lore, *Kha Phra Kaeo* history started in 2279 B.E. (1936), when a *Lao Lum*¹ merchant informed Champasak’s *Thao Phraya Senabodi* (nobility) that a

¹ “*Lao Lum*” means “valley peoples.” The Lao make up the dominant socio-political group among the *Lao Lum*.

hunter known as *Kha Phran Thueng* (or *Kha Phran Thueang* in some versions of the legend), from the village of *Ban Sompoi Nayon* (currently Wapi district, Salawan Province) discovered a Buddha image made from white crystal. He did not know what it was but worshipped it based on his beliefs. When he went hunting, he made offerings, and when he shot an animal, he applied the animal's blood on the lips of the image. When he dried various things in the sun, he placed the image nearby as a sentry to keep his things secure (Sumchan 2017; Sang-alun 2017). *Thao Phraya Senabodi* then reported this to *Chao Soi Sri Samut Phutthangkun*, Champasak's ruler at that time. Thus informed, he happily assigned a senior officer and his team to bring the sacred image to Champasak. *Kha Ban Sompoi Nayon*² also joined this mission (Fine Arts Department 1941, 19–21).

At the outset, they could not find the Buddha image, left hidden in a pond. The *Sena Amat* (military officers) of Champasak then threatened to punish *Kha Phran Thueng* severely if he did not disclose the whereabouts of the image. Therefore, *Kha Phran Thueng* brought the image out of hiding. After that, an entourage of the king of Champasak transported the image by boat until they reached the Mekong River, whereupon the image fell into the river. The king of Champasak ordered soldiers to dive into the river to find the image, however, without any success. At night the king had a dream, in which a deity told him to summon the *Kha*, the hunter who had originally found the image. After waking up, he ordered his entourage to bring *Kha Phran Thueng* to help find the image. *Kha Phran Thueng* arrived, dived into the river, and quickly retrieved the image. The king of Champasak allowed the hunter and his people to join the procession carrying the image to the capital of the Champasak kingdom (Fine Arts Department 1941, 22; Sumchan 2017).

Once the Buddha image arrived at the capital, the king ordered craftsmen to build a pavilion for its enshrinement. A celebration was held for seven days to commemorate the occasion. After the success of the mission, everyone was content (Phraya Maha Ammattayathibodi 1941, 22–23).

After the *Phra Kaeo Phaluek Mok* was inaugurated as the city's palladium, the Champasak king appointed *Kha Phran Thueng* as the *Kha* leader of the village of *Ban Sompoi Nayon* and ordered a group of *Kha* to safeguard the Buddha image and to provide wax and white cloth which were to be used in the worship of the image. After that, he called them "*Kha Phra Kaeo*" (the servants of the precious Buddha image) which has been used as an ethnic designation ever since (Fine Arts Department 1941, 22; Wiphak Photchanakit 1987, 46). Some of

2 The *Kha* who lived in a village named "*Ban Sompoi Nayon*".

them moved from *Ban Sompoi Nayon* and built houses near Champasak town to take care of the Buddha image.

The term “*Kha*” was an ethnic cover-term used by those in power in the Champasak Kingdom to refer to groups of native people living in the forest and hilly areas. Belonging to an Austroasiatic linguistic group, they were traditionally considered “slaves” in the Lao cultural context. They did, in fact, have their own names, such as Akha, Yae, Ta’oi, Lawen, and Nyaheun (see Phraya Prachakitkorachak (Chaem Bunnag) 1919 and Phumisak 2013). The *Kha* is also the lowest-ranking member of the Lao socio-cultural structure.

However, the *Kha Phra Kaeo* were different from typical *Kha*, as they had social standing and were excluded from exploitation because they were appointed by the king of Champasak to safeguard the Buddha image. This gave them a special social status and privileges that kept them from being exploited and oppressed. They were also able to connect themselves to the symbolic power of the sacred Buddha image. In fact, the ethnonym “*Kha Phra Kaeo*” was not what they originally called themselves, but an ethnonym created by their overlords. Before that, *Kha Phra Kaeo* were a distinct ethnic group. Document and fieldwork research confirms that these people are indigenous to the area and still maintain their own culture and dialect. Their mode of living encompassed foraging, hunting and rice cultivation. Prior to their adoption of Lao Buddhism, they strictly adhered to their own religious traditions (animism), which stipulated numerous rules and taboos: for example, clan members were expected to strictly follow family hierarchy; women were not permitted to leave the village at night; and sons-in-law were required to work diligently and show tremendous deference to their wives’ senior family members. The son-in-law and daughter-in-law were not permitted to enter the house by the same door as the senior family members; they were required to enter through the opposite door, resulting in two entrances typical of *Kha Phra Kaeo* houses. They were strictly endogamous in the ethnic sense. To evoke the protective power of the spirits, they annually held feasts and ceremonies, both at the family and community levels; the most significant one at the family level is called the “*Ra-poep* ritual”. It is a ritual in which clan members supplicate ancestral spirits for protection and blessing. This ritual is mandatory for all clan members, including their in-laws. They believe that if they do not participate in this ceremony, their lives and the lives of their families will become chaotic and out of balance, and that clan members will become ill.

The *Kha Phra Kaeo* people’s social organization is based on this two-level system – the community level and the family level. On the first level, the *Kha Phra Kaeo* people place emphasis on “the supreme spirit of the community”

which they believe watches over them. For community affairs and important activities, such as digging wells, they perform rituals to worship the highest spirit for permission. Everyone is a member of a clan. Each clan has its ancestral spirits who have power to control every member's daily lives as well as social behaviors and relationships, such as marriage, birth, and the behavior of their son/daughter-in-law towards elderly members. Those who violate the rules will be punished through sickness or death.

Within this system of beliefs, relationships and internal organization, communities and clans are arranged in a hierarchical order. As a respected leader, the *Chao Labo*³ leads the ceremony for the highest spirit and has power to enforce the rules and prohibitions on community members. At the clan level, the *Chao Hit*⁴ is the leader who hosts the ceremony for ancestor spirits and enforces the rules and prohibitions regarding the relationships between clan members. For example, a son/daughter-in-law cannot use the same stairway as elderly members (father/mother-in-law, father/mother, and other elderly members). These cultural practices and customs distinguish the *Kha Phra Kaeo* as an ethnic group different from others, particularly the Lao.

Phra Kaeo Phaluek Mok had been enshrined as a priceless sacred object in Champasak ever since the era of *Chao Soi Sri Samut Phutthangkun*. Until 1778, Champasak was governed by the Siamese (Srisawat 1960, 295). The Champasak ruler tried to hide the Buddha image because he was afraid that it would be taken away (Phra Phrom Thewanukhro and Champasak royal family 1941). In 1808, *Phra Wichai Ratsuriyawong Khattiyarat*, the Champasak ruler, passed away. King Rama II was informed of his death and therefore sent a governor to arrange a royal cremation ceremony. When the governor arrived at Champasak, he was informed that *Phra Kaeo Phaluek Mok* was there. After due consideration he thought, "It is so special. It is an image that the King would want as an auspicious symbol in Bangkok. It should not reside in Champasak, which is a colony" (Phra Phrom Thewanukhro and Champasak royal family 1941, 61). He then issued a public announcement to offer the Buddha image to King Rama II (Phra Phrom Thewanukhro and Champasak royal family 1941; Wiphak Photchanakit 1987, 57). After that, the Buddha image was transported to Bangkok with a great celebration and placed within the Royal Palace. The King and the elites of Siam considered the Buddha image to be the Thai kingdom's sacred possession. It was invested as the main image for important

3 A community elder.

4 A clan elder.

rituals such as the *Sokan* ritual,⁵ the *Runnasat* ritual,⁶ and the *Aphat Winat* ritual⁷ (Wiphak Photchanakit 1987, 48). The Buddha image was thus considered to be of equal importance, in terms of its spiritual power, with the most sacred symbol of Siam, the Emerald Buddha (Fine Arts Department 1941, 186).

After establishing the Buddha image within the Royal Palace, the elites of Siam attributed subsequent successes and prosperity to its auspicious presence in the capital. They attributed the Siamese acquisition of the prestigious white-skinned elephant to the influence of the image,⁸ and they believed that the image aided them in their military victories over the Burmese and Mon. Besides, many merchants came to trade and offer gifts in recognition of the ruler's prestige derived from the acquisition of the Buddha image (Phra Phrom Thewanukhro and Champasak royal family 1941, 68–69). Later, King Rama IV renamed the Buddha image *Phra Phuttha Butsayarat Chakkraphat Phimonmanimai*⁹ (Chao Phraya Thiphakornwong 2012, 205–206). Currently, it is enshrined in the Amphon Sathan Hall in Bangkok.

After The *Phra Kaeo Phaluek Mok* was taken by Siam, the *Kha Phra Kaeo* in Champasak were no longer responsible for protecting the image. Fearful of the new authority, they were driven to live in the forest and hilly areas. Though no longer affiliated functionally with the *Phra Kaeo Phaluek Mok* cult of Champasak, they still retain in their social memory their association with the sacred image. Now they live in separate communities and have adapted to the Lao culture. However, they have maintained their *Kha Phra Kaeo* identity through shared cultural characteristics such as their ethnonym, language, beliefs, and rituals.

3 Fieldwork Methodology

This research paper is a project that collects data using a qualitative research methodology. I research documents such as legends, chronicles, and related research materials, combined with the analysis of data from fieldwork (participant observation) that took place in 2016–2017. During this period, I

5 The royal ceremony of topknot shaving for pre-adolescent princes and princesses.

6 The rain-calling ceremony at the beginning of a rainy season.

7 The Buddhist ceremony of evoking the power of *Paritta* to protect people at the time of severe epidemic outbreak, like cholera.

8 When a monarch acquires a white-skinned elephant, it is believed to bring good luck. The kingdom shall prosper.

9 This term implies that the Chrystal Buddha is an auspicious and magnificent symbol of the possessor, who is destined to be a great emperor.

interviewed locals from various *Kha Phra Kaeo* communities in the Champasak and Salawan areas. In addition, I also did fieldwork in the Bru communities near the Thai-Lao border. More importantly, I took part in the *Kha Phra Kaeo* people's important and infrequent rituals, such as the *Ra-poep* (ancestor worship ceremony) and the *Bun Namatsakan Phra Kaeo Phaluek Mok* (the merit-making ceremony to worship *Phra Kaeo Phaluek Mok*).

All ethnographic information about the *Kha Phra Kaeo* people was gathered through fieldwork in the following *Kha Phra Kaeo* communities: *Ban Non Phra Chao*, *Ban Song Khon*, *Ban Don Khwang*, *Ban Kutchik*, *Ban Tha Yai* in Phon Thong district, Champasak Province, and *Ban Nong Song Hong*, *Ban Sa Phat*, in Wapi district, Salawan Province. Fieldwork in Bru communities including: *Ban Lat Suea*, *Ban Na Ngam*, *Ban Lui*, in Chana Sombun district, Champasak Province, Lao PDR, and *Ban Tha Long*, *Ban Woen Buek*, in Khong Chiam district, Ubon Ratchathani Province, Thailand, yielded information on Bru ethnicity. After gathering field data, I compared, examined, and analyzed it in order to reveal the history of *Kha Phra Kaeo* ethnicity and interpret their negotiating strategies in the contemporary Laos socio-cultural context.

4 The Origin of *Kha Phra Kaeo* people

The *Kha Phra Kaeo* were ruled by Champasak, an old kingdom that covered the entire southern area of traditional Laos and shared a common border with the southern part of *Isan*, especially Ubon Ratchathani Province, northern Cambodia's Ratanakiri Province and central Vietnam's Quang Tri and Quang Binh. Later, districts and provinces were designated by the Lao government. The old kingdom of Champasak was divided into provinces, such as Salawan, Xekong, and Attapeu (Phothisan and Pommachan 2000; Evan 2002; Ministry of Justice 2019). Today, the *Kha Phra Kaeo* population and communities are divided up into two provinces: Salawan and Champasak. In Salawan Province, the *Kha Phra Kaeo* are found in Wapi district, namely the areas of *Ban Nong Song Hong* and *Ban Sa Phat*. These areas are their original home. They are the source of *Phra Kaeo Phaluek Mok* stories and legends. In Champasak Province, the *Kha Phra Kaeo* live in Phon Thong district, specifically *Ban Non Phra Chao*, *Ban Song Khon*, *Ban Don Kwang*, *Ban Kutchik*, and *Ban Tha Yai*. The *Kha Phra Kaeo* community in Champasak Province was separated from *Ban Sa Phat* and *Ban Nong Song Hong* in Wapi district after the Champasak king ordered them to protect the Buddha image (Phra Phrom Thewanukhro and Champasak royal family 1941; Wiphak Photchanakit 1987). The *Kha Phra Kaeo* of these two areas share a common ancestor; they are the same group of families tasked with

caring for the Buddha image by providing the wax and white cloth needed for ritual purposes.

After the Buddha image was taken to Siam, the cultural and family relationships of the *Kha Phra Kaeo* in the two areas faded over time. It could be said that a sense of cultural union had been lost because of time and geographical separation. Memories of any relationship between them were lost, and it was found that most of them could not provide information about their relationship. In fact, they could not ascertain that the *Kha Phra Kaeo* people in the other area were their relatives, nor could they identify family ties.

In my fieldwork, I found that because of change over time under the administration of the modern Lao government, the *Kha Phra Kaeo* community in Salawan Province changed dramatically due to their adoption of Lao culture. However, the *Kha Phra Kaeo* community in Champasak Province remarkably still called themselves "*Kha Phra Kaeo*". The Salawan's *Kha Phra Kaeo* did not recall any social or ethnic connection with their Champasak counterparts. Changes in the *Kha Phra Kaeo* communities in the Salawan and Champasak provinces were different.

In addition, during a period of nearly three centuries of historical and political association with the Buddha image, the *Kha Phra Kaeo* people lack historical memory regarding their original ethnic identification before being designated by the Champasak rulers as *Kha Phra Kaeo*. It is thus my aim to enrich our knowledge as much as possible of the ethnic foundation and identification of the group prior to becoming *Kha Phra Kaeo* centuries ago. My intention is not to argue for an essentialized ethnic identity which remains static and does not change over time, but to examine the historical background, the formation of ethnic identity, and cultural adaptation among the *Kha Phra Kaeo* people of present-day Laos. In 2016, I conducted fieldwork in a number of *Kha Phra Kaeo* communities in Champasak and Salawan to learn about their cultural traits, such as language, beliefs, rituals, livelihoods, and social organization. I found that the *Kha Phra Kaeo* have a language and cultural character consistent with the Bru people. In terms of spoken language, I invited Bru people from different villages to verbally communicate with the selected *Kha Phra Kaeo* informants and found that they could communicate well with each other even when the two parties spoke their respective dialects. Moreover, when collecting information on beliefs and social culture, I found that their belief systems, rituals, and social organization were consistent with each other. This will be discussed later.

The language of "*Kha Phra Kaeo*" is related to that of another Austroasiatic-speaking *Kha* group in Champasak who call themselves "Bru". *Kha Phra Kaeo* people have their own spoken language which is similar to the Bru language.

Parallel examples from both languages are: a chicken is called *truai*; a fish is called *a-ka*; a frog is *a-joh*; a human is *kruai*; house is *dong*; younger sibling is *a-am*, to run is *ta-lu*; a pillow is *ka-nia*. These languages are in the Austro-Asiatic Mon-Khmer language family (Premrirat 1999; Luangthongkum and Puengpa 1980; Schliesinger 2003). The Bru people are native to the hills and make a living by swidden agriculture. They inhabit the border area between central Vietnam and Champasak and in the conservation area of southern Laos. The origins of the most densely populated and oldest settlements were in the provinces of Quang Tri and Quang Binh in central Vietnam. They were classified by the Vietnamese government as the *Bru Van Kieu* ethnic group (Dang 1993, 69–71; Schliesinger 2003, 114–119). According to Kiattisak Bangperng's research (2015), the majority of the Bru people in Champasak and southern Laos migrated from Vietnam. It was also found that the Lao government classifies the Bru people as "*Ka-tang*" (Department of Tribes 2008, 54). Locally, however, this group prefers to be referred to as Bru rather than *Ka-tang*.

On cultural grounds, I have discovered that the *Kha Phra Kaeo* and the Bru are truly compatible. There is a system of belief in spirits in Bru communities; the clans are classified by the spirits that each clan worships. In a community, there are many clan groups classified according to the clan spirit, but at the community level they coexist, and the highest spirit is responsible for controlling activities and social relations across the clans and communities. The highest spirit of the community holds supreme power while the clan spirit has secondary power. All clans observe and practice these beliefs regarding the hierarchy of spirits. I also found these attributes in the *Kha Phra Kaeo*'s communities.

The system of beliefs in spirits also informs rules imposed on members. In the Bru community there is a rule prohibiting women from leaving the house at night. *Kha Phra Kaeo* women observe this rule as well. Bru communities have a rule that prohibits community members from marrying into other ethnic groups. The *Kha Phra Kaeo* people used to practice this rule strictly for fear of being punished by the clan spirits. In addition, the highest spirit of the community is believed to watch over outsiders' entry to and departure from the Bru community. When an outsider enters a community, the ceremony of permission must be performed for the highest spirit. The *Kha Phra Kaeo* people do this, too. They even forbid outsiders from entering their community until the ceremony has been performed and the spirit's blessing obtained.

The system of beliefs also results in a social organization structured according to hierarchical relations. In the Bru community, members of the clan are closely related to the clan spirit. *Chao Hit*, the clan's religious head, was revered by his family members, including his son-in-law, daughter-in-law, and

grandchildren. He controls behaviors and social relations of all family members. In *Kha Phra Kaeo* communities, the son-in-law and daughter-in-law must also respect *Chao Hit* and other elders. Even when the son-in-law desires to host a party and celebrate with his friends, the approval of *Chao Hit* is required. The highest spirit of the community maintains the solidarity of the community and exercises authority over outsiders' entry. In Bru communities *Chao Labo* is a supreme authority that is respected by all community members. He also dominates *Chao Hit* in the worshipping ritual performed for the highest ghost. This custom is found among the *Kha Phra Kaeo* communities as well. *Chao Labo* is the head of the *Ra-poep* ceremony, whereas *Chao Hit* will simply assist.

Importantly, based on field data, the *Kha Phra Kaeo* and the Bru have a similar traditional ceremony called the *Ra-poep* ceremony. The *Ra-poep* ritual takes place at the ancestral house, and the clan's members carry the deceased's bones from the cemetery to the ceremonial pavilion, along with offerings such as clothes, wine, and tobacco. A spiritual intermediary from the same ethnic group invites the spirits of the ancestors to accept the offerings. The sons-in-law of the family dance around the ceremonial pavilion. The rite continues for three days, with the clan members slaughtering a buffalo on the last day as a sacrifice to the ancestors' spirits. They keep the remains after the ritual concludes, believing that the remnants from the sacrifice will bring them good fortune. When the *Ra-poep* is complete, the ancestral spirit will watch over and protect all members. Other ethnic groups do not hold this ceremony. It is a traditional Bru rite. According to my fieldwork, the Bru people in Champasak province have assimilated into Lao culture and abandoned several indigenous customs, such as the *Ra-poep* ceremony. On the other hand, the *Kha Phra Kaeo* people have maintained theirs, which is significant when it comes to power negotiations within the Lao socio-cultural hierarchy.

Based on the notable cultural coherence between the Bru and the *Kha Phra Kaeo* peoples, it is most probable that the latter are the cultural descendants of the former, still more-or-less maintaining their original cultural practices and customs. Another important fact to add here is that both groups have maintained close cultural ties with each other up to the present time. For example, the *Kha Phra Kaeo* people in *Ban Non Phra Chao* led by Nueang Sumchan¹⁰ and the Bru people in *Ban Woen Buek* led by Ki Khambunrueang¹¹ consider

10 A ceremonial leader (*Chao Labo*) of *Kha Phra Keao* in Phon Thong District, Champasak Province.

11 A prominent figure of the Bru community, *Ban Woen Buek*, Khong Chiam District, Ubon Ratchathani Province, Thailand.

themselves relatives. They visit each other and help raise funds for the construction of new buildings for schools and temples within their villages.

While the *Kha Phra Kaeo* were originally the Bru, they were renamed *Kha Phra Kaeo* as a result of their discovery of the Buddha image and their roles in Thai-Lao history and politics. Because they were given the responsibility of protecting the Buddha image, the task became meaningful to them as it gave them a higher social status than other *Kha* groups. As a result, a distinct *Kha Phra Kaeo* identity, differing from Bru identity, emerged. Rather than Bru, they present themselves as *Kha Phra Kaeo*. Additionally, as will be discussed later, they reproduce the *Kha Phra Kaeo* identity in order to be recognized as part of the Lao sociocultural structure.

5 Cultural Adaptation and Negotiation

When studying the history of southern Laos, we can see that Champasak was populated by many non-Lao ethnic groups. Later, political and social expansion of the *Lao Lan Chang* kingdom came into greater dominance, resulting in changing power structures and social class divisions between Lao and indigenous peoples, viewed from the perspective of the Lao state as a battle between civilization and barbarism (Bangperng 2019, 269–288). This could be called a kind of colonial struggle between the Lao and the *Kha*. The latter group has traditionally been considered “uncivilized” by Laotian society.

During the pre-republic period, the political dominance of the Lao ethnic group and the colonial powers of Siam and France were periodically extended into the Champasak area (Winichakul 1994). Indigenous people of the area were under the rule of, forced into slavery by, and compelled to pay taxes to the colonial regimes. They were called either “*Kha*” or “*Suai*” according to the manner in which they were arrested as slaves and forced to pay tribute to their masters. During the era of Siamese rule, when Étienne Aymonier explored Champasak, he recorded the events of the Siamese tracking the *Kha* in the forest to sell them as slaves at the Attapeu district market (Aymonier 1895). Nueang Sumchan, a former *Kha Phra Kaeo* ruler in Phon Thong district whom I interviewed, still recalled how the *Kha Phra Kaeo* were oppressed under the French around 1937–1947. They were ordered to build roads and carry luggage for the French; this was in contrast with the Lao people, who were always appointed to a higher status (Sumchan 2017).

According to official policy, the Lao government classifies its own population into three groups: namely the *Lao Sung* (the hill tribes), *Lao Thoeng* (highland tribes) and *Lao Lum* (lowland Lao people) (Pothisan and Phoomachan, 2000).

The *Lao Lum* people have political and socio-cultural dominance in this classification system. Indigenous tribes were considered second-class citizens, with a lower culture and no civilization. However, they could be civilized by embracing the Lao people's culture. On the one hand, the classification of these tribes as "Lao" represented an attempt to expand "Lao-ness" to dominate all groups of people. The Lao government has implemented a policy of rebuilding the nation through a radical revolution and integrating ethnic minorities into Lao identity (Nguyen 2007, 130). This was done along with efforts to reduce 'backwardness,' which is, from the government's point of view, inherent in traditional ways of life (Baird and Bruce 2008, 118–119). In some cases, ethnic groups, which still have traditional lifestyles such as shifting cultivation, are also perceived as a development obstacle (Siripholdej, 2007). The Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism in Laos has tried to provide information to ethnic groups on how to live according to the "civilized culture" of the nation (referring to Lao culture) in order to support the Lao national development policy (Luangthongkum 2001, 78–81).

During the early years of the Lao socialist state (1975–1983), the government attempted to classify people in accordance to the areas where they lived. The Lao government aimed for unity and development by embracing the idea of cultural diversity. However, reality did not support their political ideals. As the state power expanded its reach into various communities in order to convert people into Lao citizens, they needed to establish new governing systems and carry out cultural proselytization in order to achieve this goal. Thus, non-Lao villages became political units to which the state powers appointed community leaders, village police, and local members of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party in order to maintain order. The school became an institution for cultivating the new ideology and promoting the Lao language and culture in local communities. Lao culture with its roots in Buddhism was promoted as the national culture that people in various ethnic groups should accept.

Bolstering policies of ethnocentrism and programs of modernization, the Lao government regarded many traditional cultures and beliefs as backward or uncivilized. When the government implemented the NEM (New Economic Mechanism) in 1986, it had an impact on development policies as well as the livelihoods and cultures of many ethnic groups, including those who practiced shifting cultivation. The government encouraged these people to produce marketable crops such as rubber and cassava. Such changes in modes of production drastically changed their lives. Furthermore, the promotion of tourism has influenced the cultures of various ethnic groups. They themselves have turned into a consumable product, dressing up as exaggerated replicas of themselves in traditional clothing and displaying scenes of a fictitious traditional lifestyle in order to enhance the tourist experience.

Even up to the present time, the *Kha* peoples are still perceived by local Lao as “the others”. Living backwardly in the forest and hilly areas, they are hierarchically subordinate to the Lao in cultural terms. As one interviewee, a young Lao woman, explains, the “*Kha* are unclean and superstitious people; their languages are also confusing” (Chindasit 2017). Indigenous beliefs tend to be looked down on in the Lao context, thus forcing the *Kha* to adopt Lao Buddhism. This sense of religious and cultural superiority over the *Kha* is encapsulated in the words of a Lao officer from Laman, Xekong province, who holds that “*Kha* are ignorant because they practice superstitious beliefs; sometimes raw meat is eaten in their savage rituals” (Khambunrueang 2017).

Amidst the political, social, and cultural changes of the dominant Lao society, *Kha Phra Kaeo* cultural adaptations varied according to context. The *Kha Phra Kaeo* in Salawan Province have assimilated almost completely to Lao culture and have lost their own spoken language, beliefs, and culture. Like typical Lao people, they are Buddhists and follow Lao customs. No one has maintained a significant *Kha Phra Kaeo* identity other than being able to recite the legend of the Buddha image that was discovered by their ancestor at the mountain called “*Phu Phra Kaeo*”, located to the north of the community. They did this in order to emphasize the historical importance of the area while simultaneously assimilating as Lao citizens.

Apart from state power and policy, an important factor affecting the lives of the *Kha Phra Kaeo* in this area is their openness to economic changes. Located close to town, their community developed into a half-urban, half-rural area with shops and markets. However, they still carried out events related to the Buddha image, reviving the legend of *Phra Kaeo Phaluek Mok* as local history. Community leaders and senior members collaborated on a book about the Buddha image’s history in order to educate descendants and the general public. Additionally, in Wat Nong Song Hong, the historical event of the Buddha image’s discovery was brought to life through the sculpture of *Kha Phran Thueng* wielding a crossbow to hunt animals, shooting and injuring a bird, as per the Buddha image’s legend. It is an artistic representation of the story at the discovery site that emphasizes the community’s significance and historical roots.

Incorporating Lao Buddhist tradition, the *Ban Nong Song Hong* people here have developed an annual ceremony named “*Bun Namatsakan Phra Kaeo Phaluek Mok*”, held in the third month. The ceremony reminds them of their social memory and status associated with the Buddha image. Essential in the ritual sense is evocation of the power of the sacred image, invited in the spiritual sense from Bangkok to preside over the ceremony (Suwannasarn 2017). This religious ceremony is similar to important religious ceremonies in

Lao culture that are also held in the third month, such as *Bun Prasat Wat Phu*, and *Bun Phrathat Luang*.¹² Lao people from various communities participate in the annual *Bun Namatsakan Phra Kaeo Phaluek Mok* ceremony. It is celebrated with entertainment, such as *Molam* (หมอลำ, folk song performance) and songs commemorating the legend of *Phra Kaeo Phaluek Mok*. The ceremony thus reaffirms the traditional *Kha Phra Kaeo* identity and at the same time reconceptualizes it within the contemporary context of Lao citizenship.

The *Kha Phra Kaeo* in Champasak Province have also adapted to Lao social/cultural structure under the state's power and policy concerning Lao citizenship. However, it should be noted that the community has experienced less prosperity because it is located in the hills. Unlike the *Ban Nong Song Hong* people in Salawan Province, they have not fully assimilated to Lao culture, and they have retained much of their ethnic identity. They continue to call themselves *Kha Phra Kaeo* and have established a *Kha Phra Kaeo* identification through the use of ancestral cultural tools such as their ethnonym, the *Ra-poep* ritual, and their spoken language. The majority of *Kha Phra Kaeo* people continue to speak their native language in everyday life and perform *Ra-poep* rituals that have been modified to suit Lao religious ceremonies, music, and dancing while retaining certain elements of their ethnic culture. This revised ceremony serves as a conscious demonstration of the group's identification with traditional *Kha Phra Kaeo* culture (Duangpanya 2017).

The reason why *Kha Phra Kaeo* are able to maintain their ethnic identity is not only the geographical remoteness of their settlements. It has something to do as well with the people's conscious utilization of the legend in order to claim their superiority over other *Kha* groups. To them, the legend of *Phra Kaeo Phaluek Mok* is the story of Champasak's founding and is regarded as part of Champasak culture. Additionally, this legend was interpreted, contained, and documented in the Laotian state's past. Thus, the history and mythology around the Buddha image are valuable and significant for the Lao people's understanding and memory. The Champasak *Kha Phra Kaeo*'s outward identification as "*Kha Phra Kaeo*" has a major impact on the role of "being *Kha Phra Kaeo*" in Lao society and community. The ethnic name "*Kha Phra Kaeo*" refers to their position as "servants" or "slaves" to a prominent Buddha image valued by the Lao state. The claimed affiliation with the sacred image confers on

12 These two ceremonies are held annually on full moon days in the third month to celebrate the Lao people's *Makha Bucha* Day. This three-day, three-night celebration promotes Laotian traditional customs. The *Bun Prasat Wat Phu* ceremony takes place at *Wat Phu* or *Vat Phou* in Champasak Province, a UNESCO world heritage site. The *Bun Phrathat Luang* ceremony takes place in *Wat That Luang*, a significant Lao PDR sanctuary in Vientiane's capital.

them a higher status and historical significance that distinguishes them from other traditional *Kha* people or various other minorities who have attempted to assimilate into the Lao society, which has looked down on and marginalized them socially (Condominas 1990; Nguyen 2007). The *Kha* people have generally attempted to avoid being identified as *Kha* out of fear of being insulted by the Lao ethnic group (Bangperng 2016). However, in the case of the *Kha Phra Kaeo* they can still say, “We are *Kha Phra Kaeo*, not ordinary *Kha*” (Sumchan 2017).

Having demonstrated how *Kha Phra Kaeo* people construct their ethnic identity *vis-à-vis* the socially superior Lao group, I hope that their struggle to carve out a niche for themselves in the ethnic hierarchy sanctioned by the Lao state comes to light, thereby reducing prejudice and discrimination against them. When presenting themselves, they want others to call them “*Kha Phra Kaeo*”. When I attended and recorded the *Ra-poep* ceremony, several members of the *Kha Phra Kaeo* community in Champasak tried to explain to me, as an outsider, how “this ceremony reflects the *Kha Phra Kaeo* culture and can be found nowhere else.” They anticipate that the recorded data would be made publicly available. This will help emphasize that being a *Kha Phra Kaeo* is not simply about negotiating social standing inside the Lao socio-cultural system, but also the pride of being a member of an ethnic group with distinct cultural and historical roots. The *Kha Phra Kaeo* experience demonstrates how the formation of ethnic identity is influenced by political background and social transition of a larger society within which the group is embedded.

6 Conclusion

The word “*Kha Phra Kaeo*” refers to the name of an ethnic group commonly referred to as “*Kha*,” a collective noun for Austro-Asiatic populations. The roots of the *Kha Phra Kaeo* can be traced back to the Bru, a larger parent community dispersed across southern Laos’s Champasak district. The *Kha Phra Kaeo* people speak a mutually intelligible dialect of Bru and have historically shared a similar community and social structure. The Buddha image called “*Phra Kaeo Phaluek Mok*” was discovered by *Kha Phran Thueng* in the jungles of Champasak. When news of the discovery reached the king of Champasak, he dispatched military officers to bring the Buddha image to Champasak for enshrinement. He then elevated *Ban Sompoi Nayon* to the status of a city and appointed *Kha Phran Thueng* as its ruler. Finally, he assigned to *Kha Phran Thueng* and his people the responsibility of safeguarding the Buddha image. From that point on, they were referred to as “*Kha Phra Kaeo*,” a name that eventually evolved

into an ethnonym distinct from that of the Bru ethnic group. When the Siamese invaded Laos, the Buddha image was transferred to Bangkok where it was renamed “*Phra Phuttha Butsayarat Chakkraphat Phimonmanimat*” by King Rama IV. A group of *Kha Phra Kaeo* people were forced to hide in wooded and hilly areas out of fear of the newly established authorities. Salawan *Kha Phra Kaeo* descendants have lost touch with their Bru historical roots. Following the political changes in Laos, the *Kha Phra Kaeo* of Salawan Province assimilated into Lao culture but maintained the legend of the *Phra Kaeo Phaluek Mok* and invented a ceremony to emphasize their historical significance. They have been successful in assimilating the legend into mainstream Lao culture and forming connections with the local Lao. By contrast, the *Kha Phra Kaeo* in Champasak Province have fashioned a distinct *Kha Phra Kaeo* identity, calling themselves *Kha Phra Kaeo* and maintaining their indigenous spoken language as well as reproducing the *Ra-poep* ceremony to confirm their historical identity while maintaining their social status among Lao social classes. *Kha Phra Kaeo* people, therefore, have displayed the potential to adapt to different conditions, powers, and domination while maintaining their cultural identity. On the one hand, this study on *Kha Phra Kaeo* people's ethnic identity reflects the historical contention around a sacred image between Lao and Siamese polities, each functioning under Theravada Buddhism. On the other hand, this study reveals the way in which an ethnic minority draws upon a legend recorded in the chronicles of the dominant cultural group to create the story of their origin, and via the story make a claim for a higher place in the established ethnic hierarchy. This process entails both acculturation and negotiation.

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