

A New Banknote in the People's Republic The Iconography of the Kip and Ideological Transformations in Laos, 1957–2006

OLIVER TAPPE

On 17 January 2006, the English-language newspaper *Vientiane Times* announced the introduction of a new banknote (denomination: 50,000 Kip) in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR). Hitherto, the highest denomination had been 20,000 Kip. The devaluation of the Lao currency¹ made it necessary to issue a new banknote: People had to carry wads of banknotes or simply used the US dollar or the Thai Baht for larger transactions. It was not the first time that the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) responded to rising prices with the emission of new banknotes and higher denominations.²

If one looks closely at the iconography of this banknote, it reveals a new element never used before in the LPDR: The Presidential Palace (Hò Kham: "Golden Hall"), situated in the centre of the Lao capital Vientiane, is displayed on the back of the banknote (Fig. 9b). Similar to other banknotes in circulation (2,000, 5,000, 10,000 and 20,000 Kip), the front (Fig. 9a) is dominated by the well-known icons Kayson Phomvihān (1920–1992), former president and LPRP's long standing secretary-general, and the national shrine of Laos, the That Luang ("Great Stupa").

During the last five decades, the iconography of Lao paper money has been frequently modified – parallel to socio-political transformations in Laos. In this article, the changing iconography of the Kip will be analysed in detail – as a representation or reconstruction of Lao national identity.³ I

¹ Current exchange rate (March 2007): 10,022 Kip to 1 US \$ (1979: 35 Kip to 1 US \$).

² Following the 1979 series (1 to 100 Kip) higher denominations were introduced in: 1988 (500 Kip), 1992 (1,000 Kip), 1997 (2,000 and 5,000 Kip) and 2002 (10,000 and 20,000 Kip).

³ Anderson (1991: 6) defines the nation as an imagined political community – imagined as limited and sovereign. The imagination of the nation and the collective identification with it is supported by the mediation of a specific image of the nation to its members via

argue that the LPRP, by means of the images on banknotes, reconstructs its specific version of the Lao nation from a heterogeneous reservoir of potential national icons and represents it as an assumed reality.⁴ The construction and propagation of a national ideology – a system of national ideas and values – is an essential part of the project of nation-building, especially for a post-civil war regime struggling for legitimacy and acceptance by all social and ethnic groups within the national borders.

Iconographically visualised on banknotes, the national ideology can be communicated throughout a nation-state – with a functioning monetary circulation as a precondition.⁵ Thus, the iconography of the banknote should be conceived as a Foucaultian technology of power and cannot be separated from political and ideological strategies.

The analysis of the iconographical transformations of the Kip during more than thirty years of LPRP rule provides valuable insights into the policy of symbolic production in Laos and its importance for the self-legitimising efforts of the regime.

At present, the country is witnessing a renaissance of traditional Buddhist elements even in official state ritual. This recalls the era of Lao monarchy and therefore produces serious ambivalences for the former revolutionaries (cf. Evans 2002b). For this reason, I will start the analysis of Kip iconography with the banknotes brought into circulation during the years of Lao constitutional monarchy (1954–1975).

education, newspapers, TV, museums – and via the iconography of the banknote. The power to stabilise such an identity can indeed be attributed to money, as Hart (1999: 260) suggests: “Communities exist by virtue of their members’ ability to exchange meanings that are substantially shared between them. There seems little doubt that money is an important vehicle for this.”

⁴ In accordance with Peirce’s semiotics (see Peirce 1991), the concept ‘icon’ is preferred here to ‘symbol’ because it works by resemblance and association instead of convention and arbitrariness. As regards processes of signification in material culture, iconicity implies contingencies and shifts of meaning (cf. Keane 2003). In the analysis of the iconography of banknotes, not only single icons should be examined but also the relations of the different elements with each other as constituents and representations of a national ideology. The concept of representation is used here in the sense of “making present anew” ideas and values as a creative social act (cf. Coppet 1992).

⁵ See Aglietta & Orléan (1998) for a discussion of key elements of monetary systems, such as authority and trust.

The iconography of the Kip during the Royal Lao Government

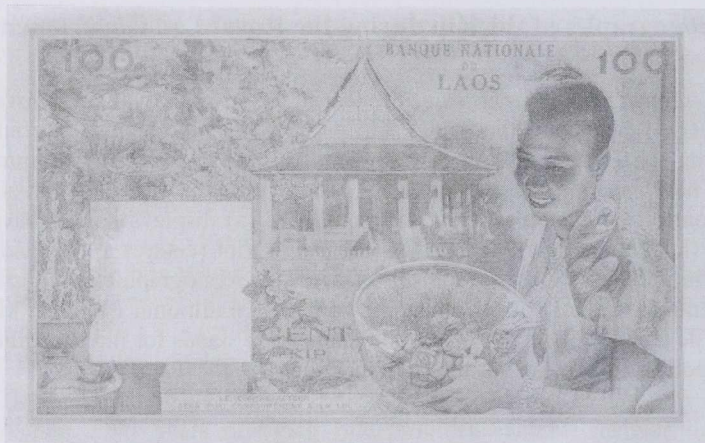
After gaining independence from France in 1954, the Royal Lao Government (RLG) introduced the Kip (1 Kip = 100 At)⁶ as the national currency, replacing the Piastre of French Indochina. In 1957, the Lao government issued new banknotes representing the ideology of the young nation-state. The front of the exemplary 100 Kip note (Fig. 1a) displays King Sisavang Vong⁷ (left), alms bowls with palm-leaf manuscript (centre) and the *naga*, protecting deities of Lao Buddhism (right). This iconographic composition represents the constitutional monarchy rooted in traditional Buddhist kingship. The icon consisting of bowls and manuscript stands for the constitution as the political equivalent of the Buddhist doctrine, the *dhamma*.⁸



1a

⁶ At coins were also used after 1975, but due to devaluation they fell into oblivion shortly after. Thus, I will confine myself to the analysis of banknotes. Yet, there are plans of the Lao government to re-introduce coins by 2010 "with the aim of providing more options for Lao people to use their own currency and so increase the circulation of the kip" (*Vientiane Times*, February 23, 2006).

⁷ King Sisavang Vong (1885–1959) was enthroned in 1904 and did not assume a very active political role. Today, in fact, he is often blamed for not supporting the first Lao independence movement after World War II, led by viceroy Phetsarat (cf. Lockhart 2003; Sila Viravong 2003). The king's royal emblem, a three-headed elephant under a nine-tier parasol, is discernible in the bottom left corner of the banknote.



1b

On the back (Fig. 1b), a Lao girl in front of a temple is displayed. The girl carries a basket filled with dok champa flowers, often used as an offering in Buddhist ceremonies. This scene represents the Buddhist temple as the traditional centre of Lao village communities (cf. Condominas 1998).

The 100 Kip note from 1957 is a visualisation of the Lao nation with its central pillars king, state/constitution, Buddhism and – on a lower level – the village community. However, only the culture of ethnic Lao is represented, whereas the minority groups⁹ remain invisible. This Lao chauvinism drove many groups into the hands of the communists who propagated national equality.

After his death (October 29, 1959), Sisavang Vong was succeeded as king by his son Sisavang Vatthana; the latter constitutes the prominent icon of the series issued in 1962/63 and 1974. The dualism kingship-Buddhism still characterises the iconography of these banknotes: Sisavang Vatthana is accompanied by images of temples and stupas (Fig. 2a) – with only a few exceptions. E.g., the back of the 100 Kip note from 1974 shows an ox-cart besides high-voltage power lines, and the back of the 500 Kip note (Fig. 2b) is dominated by a hydroelectric dam.

⁸ A similar icon epitomises the Thai constitutional monarchy, prominently presented on the Democracy Monument in Bangkok.

⁹ The national census of 2000 distinguished 49 ethnic groups distributed among the four ethno-linguistic categories Lao-Thai (which only comprises little more than half of the approx. 6 million inhabitants of Laos), Mon-Khmer, Hmong-Mien and Sino-Tibetan (Vatthana 2002: 195).



2a



2b

The icon of the dam, also visible on later Lao (and Thai) banknotes, represents technological development and the control and utilisation of water-power. Like in other developing countries, these dams are mythically glorified representations of modernity, progress,¹⁰ and civilisation.

The last series issued by the RLG communicates a modern constitutional monarchy, probably inspired by Thailand. Sisavang Vatthana, however, was not able to realise this vision. Instead, the civil war¹¹ in Laos culminated in the communist revolution, strongly supported by many of the marginalised

¹⁰ For a discussion of the particularly dynamic Thai discourse of civilisational thinking at the turn of the 19th century when the country was threatened by the European colonial powers, see Thongchai (2000).

¹¹ Since 1964, Laos became a sideshow of the war between the USA and North Vietnam. Both states ignored the sovereignty of Laos: While North Vietnam established a network of supply routes on Lao territory (the so-called “Ho-Chi-Minh Trail”), the US Air Force carried out heavy bombings of the Lao highlands (Stuart-Fox 1997: 136-145).

ethnic minorities. The LPDR was established on 2 December 1975 – and the monarchy abolished.¹²

Visions of a socialist society

Even before 1975, the Lao communists¹³ issued their own currency in the areas under their control – the “Liberation Kip” (Lao: *kip potpòi*).¹⁴ The iconography of this money displays visions of a peaceful, prosperous society (e.g. representations of rice cultivation, handicrafts and public health), as well as explicit references to the war. Conceived as a struggle of resistance (Lao: *kantòsu*)¹⁵ against the “American imperialists and their Lao puppets”¹⁶, the war is best represented on the 500 Kip note (Fig. 3a/b) with Lao ground troops shooting down a plane (obviously American). All these scenes represent the communists’ promise to protect the people in the “liberated” areas and to lead them towards victory, peace and development (Lao: *kanpatthana*).¹⁷

The concept of *kanpatthana* plays a decisive role in the iconography of the new series issued in 1979.¹⁸ After the founding of the LPDR, socialism had replaced the ideology of Buddhist kingship. Kip iconography reflects

¹² To this day, the death of King Sisavang Vatthana remains a state secret. He presumably died around 1980 in a re-education camp, like many other members of the pre-revolutionary elite (Evans 2002a: 183).

¹³ The Lao communist movement was known as *Pathet Lao* (“Land Laos”).

¹⁴ It was not before June 1976 that the “Liberation Kip” became official currency in all Lao provinces (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, 2 July 1976) – until then, the image of the abdicated king was still in circulation!

¹⁵ *Kantòsu* is a key word in Lao official historiography: In the *Pavatsat Lao* (“Lao History”), even the struggles of the ancient Lao kingdoms against powerful neighbours like Siam or Burma are so labelled (cf. Ministry of Information and Culture 2000). Such a vocabulary implies the image of a small nation permanently fighting for sovereignty.

¹⁶ See the titles of photographs of the war years in the Lao National Museum (Tappe 2001: 62).

¹⁷ After the revolution, the LPRP promoted the slogan “Peace, Independence, Democracy, Unity, Prosperity” (written on the new state coat of arms) and promised to “protect and build up the nation” (Lao: *pokpak-haksa lae sangsa pathetsat*; cf. Ministry of Culture 2000: 1051).

¹⁸ With the denominations of 1, 5, 10, 20, 50 and 100 Kip (a 500 Kip note followed in 1988). When the series replacing the “Liberation Kip” was issued in 1979, the regime carried out some minor reforms facilitating private enterprise because the project of collectivisation had failed and famines struck the Lao people (Stuart-Fox 1997: 182).

this transformation by turning to socialist realism.¹⁹ The banknotes show detailed scenes, predominantly from the realm of production and development – with peasants, workers, nurses, and soldiers at work.



3a



3b

The front of the 1 Kip note (Fig. 4a) represents the vision of an egalitarian socialist society. Carrying the national flag, the different “classes” of Lao society form a united front.²⁰ The first row shows (left to right) a soldier, a female peasant, a worker (holding the flag), and a bureaucrat – possibly a party official. In the second row, thus subordinated to these four “pillars” of

¹⁹ Only a few remnants of Buddhist artistic tradition survived as ornamental framework. On the 100 Kip note, a temple is visible in the background – next to a high-voltage pylon.

²⁰ Mass organisations like the Workers’ Union, Women’s Union, Buddhist Union etc. were all integrated under the umbrella of the “Lao Front of National Construction” (Lao: *naeo lao sang sat*).

the new Lao socialist society, we find a Buddhist monk and some armed members of ethnic minorities in traditional dress. While this representation depreciates Buddhism (as one mass organisation among others), the ethnic minorities are revalorised due to their participation in the revolutionary struggle. Yet, both only form the second row in Lao society.²¹



4a



4b

The back of this banknote (Fig. 4b) displays a school class with its teacher pointing at Laos on a map of mainland Southeast Asia. On the one hand, this image is a representation of the importance of primary education for building a new society. After the revolution, the LPRP promoted the

²¹ The LPRP reproached the monks for being social “parasites” and forced them to participate in socio-economic development. Buddhist festivals were blamed for wasting resources and were “rationalised” (Evans 1998: 58). During the 90s, however, Laos witnessed a revival of Buddhist traditions.

establishment of primary schools throughout the country, albeit of poor quality due to lack of funds and qualified teachers (cf. Evans 1998: 153–167). On the other hand, the map represents the sovereignty of the Lao nation-state, finally achieved by the revolutionary struggle.

While the 1 Kip note represents the ideological base of socialist Laos, the 100 Kip note (Fig. 5a) represents the productive village community as the backbone of Lao society. Rice cultivation as the most important constituent part of Lao agriculture and subsistence is supported here by modern machines. The high-voltage pylon in the background stands for the vision of country-wide electrification. The back of the banknote (Fig. 5b)



5a



5b

displays icons of technological and infrastructural²² development (factory and bridge) and of a soldier as a representative of national defence. All this corresponds to the policy of the LPRP with its focus on development and internal security.

All in all, the iconographical configuration of the whole series tells the myth of a socialist, egalitarian and prospering national community whose reproduction is based upon socio-economic and technological development. Ideas and values like education, public health, and security are represented as well. All this contradicts the serious social and economic problems faced by the regime during the 70s and 80s. The LPRP had already started additional economic reforms when the political situation changed considerably with the collapse of the Soviet Union. This historical break is also reflected in the iconography of the banknotes.

The iconographic turn

The year 1991 can be regarded as a turning point in the history of the Lao PDR. The constitution was redrafted after almost 16 years of socialist rule and took into account the new situation after the collapse of world communism. Yet, the LPRP maintained its leading role in a one-party state. It stressed the principle of “democratic centralism” through the idea of a people’s republic “with the Party exercising a dictatorship on behalf of the ‘multi-ethnic Lao people’ in order to lead them to a state of ‘collective mastery’” (Stuart-Fox 1997: 202). Following the examples of China and Vietnam, the economy was liberalized as a prerequisite to development and prosperity.

Interestingly, the socialist icons of star, hammer and sickle were removed from the national emblem. The vacant position was filled with a Buddhist monument – the That Luang. This monument was declared “Symbol of the Lao Nation” (Vientiane Times 1996) and has since embellished all newly issued banknotes. Despite the political continuity of the LPRP, iconographic reminiscences of the ideological relationship with the Soviet Union have thus been replaced by a Buddhist icon – a commitment to Lao Buddhist tradition as an essential component of the Lao nation.

So what qualifies the That Luang as a central representation of the Lao national community?

²² The poor infrastructure is one of the central problems of Laos. To this day, only little more than 50 percent of the national road network is tarmacked, and only 70 percent of the national road network is passable throughout the year (Vatthana 2005: 177).

On the one hand, there is the cosmological aspect of the stupa (Lao: *that*): This shrine as an *axis mundi* marks the centre of the Buddhist cosmos and is seen as a source of religious merit (Lao: *bun*) (cf. Ladwig 2000). Moreover, the That Luang is the site of one of the most important festivals of Lao Buddhism.²³ In 1991, with the de-legitimisation of socialist ideas, the LPRP started to appreciate Buddhist cultural values as essential parts of the Lao nation and as potential by legitimating symbols.

On the other hand, the That Luang was erected by King Settharat (r. 1548–1571)²⁴ in 1566/1567 on the occasion of the relocation of the capital from present-day Luang Prabang to Vientiane (cf. Stuart-Fox 1998: 80). It thus represents the sovereignty of the Lao polity (Lao: *müang*) with Vientiane as its political centre. It stands for the traditional relationship between Lao monarchy and Buddhism – a problematic connotation for the socialist regime.²⁵ In official historiography, the LPRP therefore stresses another aspect of the That Luang: It epitomises primarily the *kantòsu* of the Lao people against foreign aggressors due to the fact that it had been destroyed several times by Burmese, Siamese, and Chinese invaders.

Here, the LPRP recalls a national heritage that transcends the successful revolution and has a much higher potential to represent the long history of the Lao *müang*. The party praises the That Luang as an icon for the “perseverance and generosity of the Lao people” (cited in Evans 1998: 41) and for the unity of the country. In official rhetoric, traditional Buddhist values find themselves linked to socialist ideas, and, what is more, the LPRP assumes the role of the king as protector of Lao culture and Buddhism.

The iconography of the 1000 Kip note (Fig. 6a), issued in 1992, illustrates this shift away from socialist ideology. Three women in traditional dress are pictured beside the That Luang. They represent the three main ethnic categories Lao Lum (“Lao of the plains”), Lao Thoeng (“Lao of the mountain slopes”) and Lao Sung (“Lao of the mountain tops”). The designation “Lao” in these toponyms is erroneous, assimilating as it does non-Lao minorities like Mon-Khmer groups (Lao Thoeng) or Tibeto-Burman groups like the Hmong (Lao Sung). Despite the official policy of

²³ “Rationalised” after 1975, with gambling and alcohol forbidden, the That Luang Festival saw a revival during the 90s as a religious festival cum trade fair including “[...] displays showing the nation’s political, economic and social progress” (Vientiane Times 1996: 33). This aspect illustrates how the LPRP strives for an amalgamation of socialist and Buddhist ideology instead of pursuing a complete socialist transformation.

²⁴ A statue in front of the That Luang pictures him sitting on his throne.

²⁵ Even in 1977, the LPRP erected a “stupa of the unknown soldier” which never received much public attention.

detailed censuses²⁶, the icon of the three women was probably chosen as the most suitable representation of the “multi-ethnic Lao people” (Lao: *pasason lao banda phao*). This icon visualises ethnic solidarity from the joint revolutionary struggle up to the present task of building the Lao nation.

Up to now, however, the LPRP has failed to sufficiently improve the living conditions of the ethnic minorities, for example infrastructure, health, education, and political participation. Political and economic power remains in the hands of the ethnic Lao. Thus, the iconographic representation of the multi-ethnic national community of Laos glosses over the present problems of the minorities who are marginalised and subject to assimilatory pressure.²⁷



6a

²⁶ In the LPDR, the census serves as an instrument for levelling ethnic heterogeneity (to promote “national equality” in the words of the regime) as well as to effectively control the population by the dominant Lao ethnic group: “[...] the new regime created ‘ethnic groups’ as equals in their membership of the nation. In reality, the egalitarian ideology serves another purpose: the State, as a vector of ethnicity, actively manipulates, creates, suppresses (or maintains) ethnic boundaries, the ultimate objective being the formation of a homogenous national culture out of real heterogeneity” (Vatthana 2002: 194; cf. Vatthana 2006, ch. 6).

²⁷ In present-day Laos, there is a tendency to substitute animist “superstition” with “civilised” Buddhism – with the promotion of the Lao language as a central component of the regime’s assimilation policy (cf. Kossikov 2000).



6b

The back of this banknote (Fig. 6b) again represents agricultural and technological development – still the prominent aim of LPRP politics. For many ethnic minorities who fought with the revolutionaries, this banknote might derisively appear as a broken promise.

The next important transformation within Kip iconography took place in the late 90s. The prominent icon on the front of the 2,000, 5,000 (Fig. 7a), 10,000 and 20,000 (Fig. 8a) Kip notes (issued between 1997 and 2002) is the aforementioned long-time leader of the LPRP, Kayson Phomvihan. The portraying of a real person is a novelty in the iconography of post-revolutionary Laos. It reflects the attempt by the regime to establish a “cult” around the late president through a blend of revolutionary glorification and Buddhist tradition (Evans 1998: 24–40). In 1992, his state-sponsored funeral took place in a Buddhist ceremonial setting, recalling former royal funerals. Later, a Kayson Memorial Museum was opened in 1994,²⁸ and 150 memorial busts of Kayson were erected throughout the country. Official historiography praises him as the great leader of the revolution – together with the “red prince” Suphanuvong (first president of the LPDR) – and credits him with the pragmatic change in economic policy. On the banknotes, Kayson becomes the iconic “face” of the LPRP and represents both the success of the revolution and the modern Lao nation-state under the leadership of the party.

Kayson is accompanied by the That Luang (2,000, 5,000 – Fig. 7a – and 10,000 Kip) and the famous temple Vat Siang Thong (20,000 Kip, Fig. 8a) – the latter also visible on the aforementioned banknote from 1974 (Fig.

²⁸ It had been located at Kayson’s headquarters before it was moved to a new building, sponsored by Vietnam, in 2000. In front of this museum, a huge statue of Kayson greets the visitor.

2a).²⁹ Vat Siang Thong was built during Setthatirat's reign and is one of the most precious sites in the UNESCO world heritage city of Luang Prabang. The combination of Kayson with Buddhist icons represents the traditional relationship between political power and religion. Ironically, the political leader responsible for the suppression of Buddhism after the revolution is now displayed as the patron of traditional Lao culture.³⁰ Kayson and his party seem to fill the socio-cosmological gap left by the abolished monarchy—an ideological balancing act for the regime. To make this plausible, official



7a



8a

historiography selects some of the old kings of Lan Sang and characterises them as proto-revolutionary fighters for Lao independence. For instance, Setthatirat's warfare against the Burmese and Chao Anuvong's struggle

²⁹ In addition, we find some Buddhist ornaments such as a stylised *naga* (5,000 and 20,000 Kip).

³⁰ See the false assertion of a party official, cited by Evans (1998: 45), that Kayson had always attended the That Luang festival.

against Siamese hegemony are both interpreted as *kantòsu* of the Lao people against foreign domination (cf. Ministry of Information and Culture 2000). Here, I argue, the regime creates a genealogy of Lao national heroes fighting for sovereignty and unity – with Kayson and his comrades as final victors of this long-lasting struggle.

The backs of these four banknotes display some of the few achievements of the Lao economy, such as hydro-power plants (2,000 and 20,000 Kip, Fig. 8b), a cement factory³¹ (5,000 Kip, Fig. 7b), and a bridge (10,000 Kip). Here at least, the socialist realism of former LPDR banknotes is still present – indicating economic and technological development. These icons are indeed subordinated to Kayson and That Luang but nevertheless play an important role in official state ideology and the party's self-legitimizing efforts. Yet, prestigious projects such as bridges across the Mekong³² completely depend on foreign financial aid. At the beginning of the 21st century, the icon of the bridge stands not only for general infrastructural improvements but also for the improved international relations of Laos. Membership of ASEAN and the normalised relations with Thailand especially exemplify this tendency.³³ The icon of the hydropower plant indicates the potential of hydroelectricity in Laos. In the eyes of the LPRP, the controversial Nam Theun II dam project promises development and prosperity.³⁴

Broadly speaking, the iconography of Lao paper money issued between 1997 and 2002 represents the following national ideology: At the top of the hierarchy of national ideas and values we find the LPRP whose revolutionary

³¹ The cement factory near Vang Vieng (Vientiane province) is one of the largest industrial enterprises of Laos.

³² The first "Friendship Bridge" between Laos and Thailand was opened in 1994 near Vientiane, the second one connecting the cities of Savannakhet (Laos) and Mukdahan (Thailand) in 2006. These bridges are key projects for infrastructural improvements in Laos to make it a "land-linked" instead of a "land-locked" country within the so-called Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), an association of the countries Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, China (Yunnan province), Vietnam, and Cambodia to promote communication and trade (cf. Vatthana 2005: 174). For a comprehensive overview of globalisation processes in Laos, see Rehbein (2004).

³³ In November 2004, an ASEAN summit was hosted by Laos for the first time – an important symbolic event for a country "that joined the organisation less than ten years ago after decades of war followed by several years of diplomatic and economic ostracism from the international community" (Vatthana 2005: 179).

³⁴ With financial backing from the World Bank and several donors like France and Thailand, this dam is to be constructed in Khammuan province (central Laos). An output of 1,070 megawatts is expected, 93 percent of which is to be exported to Thailand (Vatthana 2005: 178). Yet, the environmental impact and the consequences for the resettled population, mostly ethnic minority groups, are incalculable. For a recent assessment of the changing roles of hydropower for Lao state-building, see Whittington (forthcoming).

struggle and building of the contemporary Lao nation-state is personified by Kayson Phomviharn. Moreover, the party claims authority and legitimacy by its assumed relationship to and patronage of Buddhism, represented by the national icon of That Luang. Thus, state and religion in Laos appear to be united again despite massive transformations within the religious domain after 1975. In addition, the iconography of ethnic Lao culture, as displayed on these banknotes, swept aside the idea of a multi-ethnic people – a clear reflection of the aforementioned minority policy of the LPRP.³⁵ The Lao national ideology is completed by relating the socio-cosmological relation-



7b



8b

ship between state and religion to the value of development as the basis of social reproduction.³⁶

³⁵ As Vatthana Pholsena (2006: 180) aptly puts it: “From inclusion to re-marginalization”.

³⁶ This complementarity of both sides of banknotes reminds us of the classic dualism reflected by either side of a coin: The head mostly represents the state (e. g. by the icon of the king’s head) while the tail often just shows the denomination representing the market (see Hart 1986). On Lao banknotes, however, we rather witness a dichotomy between a

The striking similarities of these banknotes (especially 20,000 Kip) to the RLG banknotes of 1974 require close consideration. Indeed, we find more resemblances here than between the 1997/2002 banknotes and the Liberation Kip or the series of 1979. This may nourish speculations whether a return of an at least ceremonial Buddhist kingship to Laos is imaginable. Meanwhile, the LPRP has started to erect statues of some of the “patriotic” kings from the Lao past (see Ministry of Information and Culture 2002 for a list of all planned memorial sites). In January 2003, the regime unveiled the statue of the founder of the first Lao kingdom of Lan Sang – Chao Fa Ngum (r. 1353–1374). Attended by Buddhist monks and high-ranking party officials, this ritual act strengthened the self-image of the LPRP as the only protector of Lao Buddhist culture and as legitimate heir of the ancient Buddhist kings. However, this trend masks the fact that the regime still follows Marxist-Leninist principles and employs “politics of ritual and remembrance” (Evans 1998) as efficient means of social control.

Recent tendencies: the 50,000 Kip note

As mentioned above, the new 50,000 Kip note (Fig. 9a/b) introduces a new element, namely the icon of the Presidential Palace. Instead of icons of development it embellishes the back of the banknote while the front is still dominated by Kayson and That Luang. Here there are iconographical parallels with the Vietnamese Dong. For years, the iconography of the Dong was characterised by the dominant image of Ho Chi Minh accompanied by icons of development. Yet, the banknotes issued since 2001 display the revolutionary leader together with historical buildings. The date “2004” printed on the 50,000 Kip note suggests that it was designed two years ago, probably inspired by Vietnamese banknotes. We have to bear in mind that the influence of Vietnam on its former “apprentice revolutionaries” (cf. Brown & Zasloff 1986) never ceased in LPRP politics.³⁷

cosmological domain with references to Buddhist principles and the “profane” sphere of development.

³⁷ LPRP functionaries regularly attend political training sessions in Hanoi, as exemplified by the following report: “During the nine-month course, the [Lao] students studied the basic principles of Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh’s thoughts and lessons on the leadership of the Communist Party of Viet Nam in the process of national renewal, construction and defence.” (*Vietnam News Agency*, January 18, 2006). It is obvious that Marxist-Leninist principles are not at all obsolete in the political culture of Laos and Vietnam.

The icon of the Presidential Palace is reminiscent of the early years of the modern Lao nation-state. During French colonial rule, the palace ground was the site of viceroys Phetsarat's residence. Phetsarat helped to establish the city of Vientiane as the political centre of Laos and led the first independence movement of 1945 (cf. Sila Viravong 2003). The palace in its present form was constructed under King Sisavang Vatthana in 1974 – as secular counterpart of the royal palace in Luang Prabang (called *Hò Kham*, as well). While the latter is a museum today, the *Hò Kham* in Vientiane houses the State President (Lao: *pathan pathet*). This representative office is held by Chummaly Sayason, who in June 2006 succeeded the aged revolutionary



9a



9b

Khamtay Siphandon (* 1924) from whom he had also inherited the LPRP's chairmanship in March 2006, on the occasion of the 8th Party Congress.³⁸

³⁸ Aged 70, the longtime party functionary and former minister of defence, Chummaly Sayason, is still a member of the old revolutionary generation. Thus, a change of leadership style and political outlook is not to be expected. The Thai newspaper *The Nation* (March

Unlike Buddhist or socialist icons, the Presidential Palace represents more explicitly the modern Lao nation-state with its political centre at Vientiane and the inseparable relationship between party and state.³⁹ The national flag in front of the building is an icon of the independent Lao nation-state, as well.⁴⁰ Finally, the Presidential Palace replaces icons of development, possibly in order to emphasise political sovereignty and stability instead of the need for further economic development.

The message on the new banknote is clear: The most important constituents of the Lao nation are the legitimate rule of the LPRP, the Lao Buddhist culture and the political centre, Vientiane. This might be seen as a kind of iconographical centralisation focused on lowland Lao supremacy. The multi-ethnic national community displayed on the 1,000 Kip note from 1992 appears as a short episode even though it is still highlighted in official LPRP rhetoric.

Conclusion

From 1957 to 2006, the Lao Kip underwent several iconographic transformations. Such changes represented shifts within the national ideology, depending on how royal or socialist regimes reconstructed the system of Lao national ideas and values.⁴¹ By iconographically shaping the national ideology, the respective rulers attempted to emphasise their sovereignty and legitimacy.

During the rule of the Royal Lao Government, the political elite stressed the relation between kingship and Buddhism. Icons representing economic and technological development appeared at the end of RLG rule and became

23, 2006) comments: "The Communist Party and the state apparatus are not in good shape. Many officials are stuck in an inefficient, corruption-prone bureaucracy that offers few incentives for them to improve their performance in order to better serve their country. The party's announcement of an ambitious goal to eradicate poverty and shed least-developed-country status by 2020 might be too ambitious."

³⁹ In official documents, party (Lao: *phak*) and state (Lao: *lat*) are often mentioned in the same breath and sometimes even hyphenated *pak-lat* (as in the documentation of the plans to erect statues for Lao national "ancestors", Ministry of Information and Culture 2002).

⁴⁰ The national flag was designed by the first Lao independence movement in 1945. The flag consists of two red and one blue stripe with a white full moon in the centre. The red represents the blood of the Lao people fighting for independence, the blue stands for the fertility of the Lao soil, and the moon is an icon of purity (Sila Viravong 2003: 132).

⁴¹ Lao historiography is contested and multi-stranded, especially concerning differing Marxist-Leninist and nationalist perspectives on the history of the country (cf. Goscha & Ivarsson 2003; Vatthana 2004, 2006).

dominant after the revolution of 1975. Socialist iconography replaced Buddhist icons, and a new national ideology based on a socialist transformation of society was established. However, the revival of Buddhist iconography during the 1990s demonstrated the importance of traditional cultural values for the constitution of a national identity (cf. Smith 2000). In Laos, the nation-building discourse now includes clear cultural references linking the revolutionary struggle to Lao Buddhist heritage.

Two aspects of Lao paper money should be noted: First, the iconography of the banknote can not be considered separately from political and social transformations because it functions as a mirror of such developments. Second, it is an essential component of symbolic politics in order to enhance legitimacy, just as monuments or museums.

In Laos, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party presents itself as pillar of the Lao nation and as the guarantor of Lao sovereignty, development and culture. The regime exploits the Buddhist cultural heritage, e.g. by officially interpreting the heroic kings of Lan Sang as proto-revolutionary "ancestors" (Lao: *banphabulut*).

Moreover, small denominations like 500 and 1,000 Kip will disappear from circulation in the future, and, what is more, along with their iconography, the idea of a socialist multi-ethnic national community seems to be withering. Despite some revolutionary allusions, the culture of the ethnic Lao now dominates Lao national ideology, seriously marginalising ethnic minority groups. This reflects the current focus of the LPRP on cultural assimilation.

Finally, the regime claims authority over the (historical or ideological) "truth" and attempts to control the "true" meaning of icons, narratives etc. Both national historiography and iconography appear as Foucaultian technologies of power and as manifestations of Althusser's ideological state apparatuses (see Foucault 1998, Althusser 1971). Thus, the analysis of the iconography of the banknote is helpful in examining ideological nation-building processes.

It remains to be seen if the LPRP is able to maintain its power in the future. During the 8th Party Congress in March 2006, the regime cultivated its monolithic appearance as the one and only legitimate representative of the "Lao people". Tendencies towards civil democracy are still disapproved of by the LPRP.

The iconography of the 50,000 Kip note represents the official image of the Lao nation – a sovereign and stable nation, politically and culturally centralised under the strong leadership of a monolithic party. Despite enjoying a satisfactory degree of political stability and increased international

legitimacy, the Lao People's Democratic Republic still faces considerable socio-political challenges.

References

- Aglietta, Michel & André Orléan (eds. 1998): *La Monnaie Souveraine*. Paris: Editions Odile Jacob.
- Althusser, Louis (1971): *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review.
- Anderson, Benedict (1991): *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso.
- Brown, McAllister & Joseph J. Zasloff (1986): *Apprentice Revolutionaries: The Communist Movement in Laos, 1930–1985*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Condominas, Georges (1998): *Le Bouddhisme au Village*. Vientiane: Editions des Cahiers de France.
- Coppet, Daniel de (1992): Comparison, a Universal for Anthropology: From 'Representation' to the Comparison of Hierarchies of Values. In: Kuper, Adam (ed.), *Conceptualising Society*, pp. 59–74. London: Routledge.
- Evans, Grant (1998): *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance: Laos since 1975*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Evans, Grant (2002a): *A Short History of Laos*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm.
- Evans, Grant (2002b): Revolution and Royal Style: Problems of Post-socialist Legitimacy in Laos. In: Shore, Cris & Stephen Nugent (eds.), *Elite Cultures – Anthropological Perspectives*, pp. 189–206. London: Routledge.
- Foucault, Michel (1998): *The History of Sexuality Vol. I: The Will to Knowledge*. London: Penguin.
- Goscha, Christopher E. & Søren Ivarsson (eds. 2003): *Contesting Visions of the Lao Past: Lao Historiography at the Crossroads*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.
- Hart, Keith (1986): Heads or Tails? Two Sides of the Coin. *Man*, Vol. 21: 637–656.
- Hart, Keith (1999): *The Memory Bank*. London: Profile Books.
- Keane, Webb (2003): Semiotics and the social analysis of material things. *Language & Communication*, Vol. 23: 409–425.
- Kossikov, Igor (2000): Nationalities Policy in Modern Laos. In: Turton, Andrew (ed.): *Civility and Savagery – Social Identity in Tai States*, pp. 227–244. Richmond: Curzon.
- Ladwig, Patrice (2000): Relics, "Representation" and Power. *Tai Culture*, Vol. 5, No. 1: 70–84.

- Lockhart, Bruce M. (2003): Narrating 1945 in Lao Historiography. In: Goscha, Christopher E. & Søren Ivarsson (eds.): *Contesting Visions of the Lao Past: Lao Historiography at the Crossroads*, pp. 129–163. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.
- Ministry of Information and Culture (ed. 2000): *Pavatsat lao (dükdamban – pachuban)* [Lao history (ancient – present)]. Vientiane.
- Ministry of Information and Culture (ed. 2002): *Phunampha sathapana anachak lan sang ekaphap phanya fa ngum laenglathòlani khòphòp 650 pi* [The leader and builder of the united kingdom of Lan Sang, Phanya Fa Ngum Laenglatholani, 650th anniversary]. Vientiane.
- Peirce, Charles S. (1991): *Peirce on Signs: Writings on Semiotics*. Edited by James Hoopes. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Rehbein, Boike (2004): *Globalisierung in Laos. Transformation des ökonomischen Feldes*. Münster: Lit.
- Sila Viravong, Maha (2003). *Prinz Phetsarat: Ein Leben für Laos*. Translated and edited by Volker Grabowsky. Münster: Lit.
- Smith, Anthony D. (2000): *Myths and Memories of the Nation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stuart-Fox, Martin (1997): *A History of Laos*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stuart-Fox, Martin (1998): *The Lao Kingdom of Lan Sang: Rise and Decline*. Bangkok: White Lotus.
- Tappe, Oliver (2001): Die Repräsentation von nationaler Identität im Laotischen Nationalmuseum. *Asien*, No. 81: 53–71.
- Thongchai Winichakul (2000): The Quest for “*Siwilat*”: A Geographical Discourse of Civilizational Thinking in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Siam. *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 59, No. 3: 528–549.
- Vatthana Pholsena (2002): Nation/Representation: Ethnic Classification and Mapping Nationhood in Contemporary Laos. *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol. 3, No. 2: 175–197.
- Vatthana Pholsena (2004): The Changing Historiographies of Laos: A Focus on the Early Period. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 2: 235–259.
- Vatthana Pholsena (2005): Laos in 2004. Towards Subregional Integration: 10 Years on. *Southeast Asian Affairs* 2005: 173–188.
- Vatthana Pholsena (2006): *Postwar Laos. The Politics of Culture, History, and Identity*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Vientiane Times (ed. 1996): *Symbol of the Lao Nation – The That Luang of Vientiane*. Vientiane: Vientiane Times Publications.
- Whittington, Jerome (forthcoming): *Auditing Capitalism, Managing Contingency: Reflexive Environmental Norms in Lao Hydro-Development*. PhD Dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley.