

TURBULENT NATIONAL IDENTITY IN LAOS: THE HMONG ETHNIC GROUP AS A CASE STUDY

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DOI: 10.17510/paradigma.v8i2.272

ABSTRACT

Since the independence, Laos has changed its national identity based on different principles namely Buddhism, Socialism and Consolidation between Buddhism and Socialism. These changes have given dynamic impacts to the identity of the people not only from their political life but also from socio-cultural life. This paper will specifically discuss the impacts undergone by the Hmong as one of the ethnic minorities that are often excluded from the discussion of ethnic groups in Laos. The discussion uses three approaches of ethnicity, namely Primordialism, Instrumentalism, and Constructivism in order to explain the dynamic identity of the Hmong. This paper argues that ethnic identity is always changing since it depends on the strength of power and resistance towards the assignation and assertion of meanings.

KEYWORDS

National Identity; the Hmong; Laos; Ethnicity.

1. Introduction

The national identity of Laos has undergone endless changes since Laos declared its full independence in 1953. The shift from Buddhism to Socialism as the basic principle embraced by the leaders has undoubtedly directed them to a different socio-political path. Not to mention, France, Vietnam, and the United States of America that have planted their influences upon this landlocked country also contribute to the turbulent nation-building of Laos. Such unstable situation affects the relation among the ethnic groups specifically in regards to the ethnic identity of the dominant and the minority in national level. Broadly speaking, the national identity becomes the arena of contestation among the ethnic groups during the nation building of the new independent country.



Picture 1. Laos among Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, and Vietnam (Source: www.operationworld.org/LAOS).

Most scholars have come up with several explanations why tension occurs between the dominant ethnic group and the minority. Nevertheless, the discussion about the Hmong as one of the ethnic minority groups often sinks under the broad history of Laos' nation-building. Despite that, the Hmong have actually played an important role in Laos, especially during the shift of Laos' national principle (Chan 1994, 11). Thus, this essay will particularly address the Hmong's position during the shift and slightly touch the issue afterwards.

In order to discern the situation of the Hmong, the discussion on Laos will be divided into three periods, namely the Buddhism period starting from the independence in 1953 to 1975, the Socialism period during the 1975-1980s, and the consolidation of the Socialism and Buddhism period since 1980s. This division provides a clearer position of the Hmong during each period. More importantly, these periods suggest that none of the national principles has actually accommodated the Hmong's ethno-cultural distinctiveness as part of the new nation. Instead, Laos' national principles, in this case Buddhism and Socialism, have shaped the identity of the Hmong and at the same time impeded the integration of the Hmong into Laos' nation-state.

This issue will be dissected using three approaches of ethnicity theory, namely primordialism, instrumentalism, and constructivism. These approaches are taken, for the issue of Hmong integration in the new nation is related to their identity as a distinct ethnic group. The next section will discuss the approaches of ethnicity from various scholars. It will be followed by the discussion on the Hmong's position during three periods in Laos and the conclusion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Over five decades, the term ethnicity has become remarkably significant for studies related to social sciences (Guibernau and Rex 1997). Even though it has been widely used since then, the term has never had single fixed interpretation. In the academic context, this term is usually discussed along with the concept of race. While the former accentuates categorization of people based on the shared culture, the latter focuses on

the physical characteristics as the core categorization. Apart from the concept of race, there are many approaches to fathom the concept of ethnicity itself. Scholars from different backgrounds may propose different approaches to comprehend ethnicity based on their own perspectives. Giving such condition, this paper will only employ three approaches to understand ethnicity, namely primordialism, instrumentalism, and constructivism. These three are chosen because they are likely related to one another.

The first approach which is primordialism views ethnic identity as a “given”, rigid identity attached to a person since he/she was born (Cornell and Hartmann 2007). Geertz (1996) claims such inevitable identity is the result of primordial attachments in one’s life that give him/her sense of belonging towards a particular group. However, this approach faces many critiques. One counter-argument is delivered by Eller and Coughlan (1996) as they argue that it is possible for ethnic identity to undergo changes through generations, and emotion cannot be considered primordial. It means that ethnic identity created in the past might not be relevant to the context of present days. Although one has deep affection towards a particular group, such emotion is not primordial as he/she is the one who decides to embrace the identity. Thus, there is possibility for him/her to change the preference of ethnic identity.

The next approach is instrumentalism that actually challenges the primordial concept of fixed ethnicity. By using this approach, ethnic identity is considered as an instrument that is used to achieve collective interest, and this is the result of circumstances that put them in such condition (Cornell and Hartmann 2007). As circumstances surely change over times, it allows ethnic identity to be fluid. Cohen (1996) shares this view as he states that ethnicity is a “political phenomenon”. He further explains that the dispute over cultural difference must have serious political association behind it. Furthermore, as ethnicity is considered as an instrument, the collective interest is not limited to political power. Ethnicity can also be used to gain economic resources or status interest (Cornell and Hartmann 2007).

The last approach is constructivism in which ethnic identity is regarded as social construction. Cornell and Hartmann (2007) argue that this construction includes the formulation of criteria to create boundaries among people then people need to assign or assert meanings to those criteria. People outside the group can assign meanings to the criteria, and people within the group can assert their own meaning. To elaborate, Reminick (1983) suggests three levels of systemic operation to achieve ethnic identity, which are psychological, sociological, and cultural levels. The psychological level involves a person’s acquisition towards the ethnicity he/she embraces. The sociological level is where a person interacts with people within the ethnic group so that he/she maintains the boundary of his/her preference. The cultural level includes:

“on the one hand, the traditions, history, and values that preserve and maintain ideas, sentiments, and codes of social action and individual conduct, and on the other hand, symbolic content and the contemporary meaning that ethnicity has with regard to the group’s present concerns, goals, and problems” Reminick (1983).

Jenkins (1997) has the same argument as he notes the importance of individuals to shape an ethnic group. He further explains that such group is formed by categorization correlated to the issue of power and resistance. Therefore, ethnic identity is always changing, depending on the strength of power and resistance towards the assignation and assertion of meanings. The dynamic state of ethnic identity in this regards then is similar to the instrumentalist approach. Nevertheless, the concern of this approach does not view ethnic identity as a medium to fill collective benefit as instrumentalist does. This view puts more concern on the agency of the people both from outside the ethnic group and within the group.

3. Discussion on Different Periods based on The National Identity

3.1 Buddhism Period

This period is determined based on the assertion of Buddhism into the state after the independence of Laos. During this period, Buddhism became the foundation of national identity, and the culture of Lao ethnic group was asserted in the making of national symbols (Ireson and Ireson 1991, 923). It was no coincidence that Buddhism and Lao culture were preferred as the foundation of the new country, although Laos is comprised of many ethnic groups. Chan (1994, 2–3) states that Lao ethnic group embracing Buddhism has dominated the territory of the current Laos since the mid-twelfth century as the founder of Lan Xang Kingdom. Then, it was also dominant that Lao ethnic group formed Lao Issara (Free Lao) as the response of French colonization in 1945 (Pholsena and Banomyong 2006, 10). Given Lao domination for almost 700 years, Lao ethnic group was able to assert their own religion and culture which were not mostly adhered by other ethnic groups.



Picture 2. Buddha Statue in Luang Prabang as part of Buddhism identity (Source: www.loupiote.com/photos/2684568038.shtml).

Although Lao successfully asserted Buddhism and Lao culture into the state, this action faced challenge from Pathet Lao as the communist group in Laos. This began in 1949 when Lao Issara leaders were split because of their unsuccessful attempt to create an independent state (Evans 2002, 91). At that time, Royal Lao Government (RLG) which was formed under French domination did not grant the people full control over their new-born state. Thus, some Lao Issara leaders influenced by the Vietnamese left Lao Issara. They then founded Pathet Lao which was opened for all people in Laos regardless of their ethnic backgrounds to counteract the French colonization (Pholsena and Banomyong 2006, 8). This condition triggered RLG dominated by Lao and Pathet Lao to fight against one another.

Despite the fact that Laos was given independence in 1953, the battle between RLG and Pathet Lao did not cease. It became severe since Vietnam with its socialism ideology provided help for Pathet Lao (Pholsena and Banomyong 2006, 15). Meanwhile, the USA which strongly opposed communists gave great assistance for the RLG (Hamilton-Merritt 1999, 70). During this separation of leaders in Laos, the Hmong

was also split into two different political groups. Chan (1994, 10) stresses that the separation of the Hmong was based on the clans, for he describes how Ly clan favored the RLG, while Lo clan supported Pathet Lao. Those two clans are the most dominant ones within the Hmong that were able to draw huge support for the two different political groups. To illustrate, Faydang, as the second son of Lo clan's chief, managed to engage the Hmong to fight for the independence (Chan 1994, 17). On the other hand, Vang Pao taking side to the USA united his Vang clan with Ly clan through political marriage, so he could get powerful support from Ly clan (Hamilton-Merritt 1999, 97). Vang Pao later was widely known as general involving the Hmong to fight against communists in north-eastern Laos (Chan 1994, 36–41).



Picture 3. Vang Pao from Ly Clan (Source: www.nytimes.com/2008/05/11/magazine/11pao-t.html).

This division of clan was actually not an issue rising after the independence of Laos. The feud between Ly and Lo clan had triggered the division in 1920s when both clans competed for an official position during the French colonization, which led them to take different political sides (Evans 2002, 136–137). This shows that the tension between the Ly and Lo clans has a historical root which emphasizes their preference over different political groups. In this case, the tension in the past might have an impact to their division in the recent times, for Faydang had been confronting Touby Lyfong, the son of Ly clan, since the official position's dispute during French colonization (Chan 1994, 10). However, the dispute in the past cannot be regarded the same as the recent dispute, for the underlying causes and the actors might be different. In other words, the conflict between clans is a continuous process that may take different shapes over times due to different causes and actors depending on the situation taking place.

Regarding the split of the Hmong clans in Laos, Walton's paper related to ethnic separation in Burma might provide a useful insight. He states that during pre-colonial Burma people having the same "political patronage networks" would form a group based on the patronage, which later would be categorized based on ethnicity by the colonizer (Walton 2013, 7). In the Hmong case, political patronage led to the separation of clans, but these divided clans were not grouped based on ethnic boundaries as those in Burma. The Hmong itself is already an ethnic group whose members share the same ethnic identity and culture. Therefore, the division only shows political preference of the clans either in the past or in the present Hmong.

CLAN	Ly Clan	Lo Clan
Political group	Royal Lao Government formed under French Colonization	Pathet Lao
Influence	Buddhism	Communism
Country that gives assistance	United States of America	Vietnam
Dominant figure within the clan	Vang Pao (married to Ly Clan) Touby Lyfong	Faydang

Table 1. Classification of Dominant Clans among the Hmong

The problem of this explanation is that the discourse related to cultural distinctiveness of the Hmong was barely present. Instead, it focused on the Hmong's political support over specific group. In order to be part of Laos, they had to support either RLG attached to Buddhism or Pathet Lao emphasizing on socialism. In other words, the Hmong was not identified based on their ethnic identity derived from their cultural distinctiveness. Instead, both Buddhism and Socialism play a more significant role in determining the Hmong's identity and their integration in Laos. In this case, ethnic identity of minority groups specifically the Hmong was attenuated by the national principle and the dominant ethnic group.

Looking at the situation during the Buddhism period, the primordial approach of ethnicity does not work for the Hmong since the Hmong did not claim their identity as a given or primordial. The issue might seem to be better explained using the instrumentalist approach, for the Hmong grouped themselves based on the collective interest. The discussion from the literature review shows that the Hmong clearly took the side based on political interests. However, this approach does not really fit in the situation of clan division. The instrumentalist approach of ethnicity considers one ethnic group as one entity that shares the same identity for their collective interest. It means that the Hmong should use their identity to gain political power. In fact, the Hmong as one entity have two different interests. They did not use the Hmong identity but the clan identity to acquire political power. Thus, the instrumentalist approach does not always explain the situation between ethnic groups, but it can also be used to explain the situation among clans within an ethnic group.

Another problem is that the portrayal of political leaders for the clans such as Faydang and Vang Pong was too prevalent. Their political preferences towards a specific political group cannot be generalized as the political preference of the whole clan. For instance, Lo Ma who was the son of Lo clan favored the perspective of his teacher from Ly clan because of the teacher's quality (Hamilton-Merritt 1999, 82). It points out that although members of the clan are expected to follow the leader (Hamilton-Merritt 1999, 90), there are many factors determining the decision of clan members such as political exposure and individual agency. Thus, division based on political preference cannot be taken straightforwardly to explain the clans' stance during this period. Instead, it might have been better to address them as anti-socialist Hmong and pro-socialist Hmong. By doing this, the separation of the Hmong will be clearer, although it still does not touch the cultural distinctiveness of the Hmong as an ethnic group.

3.2 Socialism Period

The battle between RLG and Pathet Lao mentioned earlier was won by Pathet Lao when they finally took over the government and marked the beginning of the socialism period in 1975. Ireson and Ireson (1991, 923) state that the vital reason underlying Pathet Lao resistance was the outrage of minorities over the domination of Lao ethnic group. Such domination did not leave space for other ethnic groups to maintain their own cultural norms and religions. Thus, Pathet Lao elevated the importance of equality among ethnic groups to counteract

Lao domination. However, Evans (2002, 212) argues that the issue of ethnic cultural differences was, in fact, not really significant among the people in Laos during the RLG period. For the Hmong, specifically, the issue of their integration into the new nation-state was more about their political preference than their cultural distinctiveness. In fact, it is the new government formed in 1975 namely Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) that raises the awareness of the people related to their cultural differences by bringing up the issue of ethnic equality (Evans 2002, 213–214). This awareness has brought new dynamic issues into the nation.

Firstly, ethnicity was not only used to define cultural identity but also a symbol of resistance (Walton 2013, 4). Initially, Pathet Lao used ethnic identity of minority groups to resist Lao domination. Unfortunately, this resistance affected the Hmong position during the national integration in this period. As most of the Hmong were associated with RLG, they became the enemy of the new government. They, for instance, tried to eliminate the anti-socialist Hmong by attacking them both using chemical and biological poisons (Chan 1994, 46). Thus, the Hmong resisted the LPDR's mistreatment by fleeing the country to the USA/Thailand and forming Lao government abroad (Chan 1994, 47). The Hmong's resistance can be said as the result of cultural awareness raised by LPDR, for mistreatment received by the Hmong denies the essential principle of Pathet Lao which had been underpinning the equality among the ethnic groups. This situation describes how ethnicity is used to legitimize resistance which results in exclusion and detachment of a specific ethnic group from Laos.

Country of Residence	Hmong Population
USA	226,522
Minnesota	54,524
Laos	550,000

Table 2. Hmong Population (taken from <http://education.mnhs.org/immigration/communities/hmong>).



Picture 4. The Hmong in USA grow vegetable and flower to be sold in local farmer's market (Source: www.jefflindsay.com/Hmong_tragedy.html).

Secondly, LPDR institutionalized the terms Lao Loum (lowland), Lao Theung (midland), and Lao Soung (highland) which were based on the traditional types of a dwelling place suggesting their cultural origins (Ireson and Ireson 1991, 921). Actually, these terms had been introduced during the Buddhism period as an adaptation of French categorization to identify ethnic groups in Laos (Pholsena 2006, 155). The institutionalization in this period was aimed to unite the people, yet it in fact undermines the cultural distinctiveness among all ethnic groups (Ireson and Ireson 1991, 926). This categorization specifically places the Hmong under Lao Soung criteria. By doing so, the Hmong culture and custom are regarded the same as the other ethnic groups under the same category. Schliesinger (2003, 57–58) states that such simplification does not reflect the reality, but the officials still use it until now. Thus, this institutionalization only discerns the project of controlling ethnic boundaries in favor of state's interest (Pholsena 2006, 176).

Name of categorization	Distinctive characteristics on common origin and language
Lao Loum or Lowland Lao	All ethno linguistics Thai Groups
Lao Theung or Midland Lao	Mon Khmer and Austronesian Groups
Lao Soung or Highland Lao	Tibeto Burmese and Hmong Yao Groups

Table 3. Categorization of Ethnic Groups during the Socialism Period (Taken from <http://www.craftrevival.org/Extralinks.asp?PageCode=P00023>).

The last significant point of this period is the appropriation of Buddhism into Socialism. Pholsena and Banomyong (2006, 161) argue that Buddhism has been combined with the socialism in order to reduce the dominance of Lao ethnic group. Thus, Buddhism no longer becomes the official religion but is regarded as national custom (Evans 2002, 202). However, such effort does not include any attempt to bring other ethnic groups' religions in the national level, given the fact that socialism does not favor the idea of religion. Instead, it can be inferred that the focus on reinterpreting Buddhism in the country still implicitly emphasizes the dominance of Buddhism. Thus, it is no surprise that the animist religion adhered largely by the Hmong and Christian religion believed by other small numbers of the Hmong is not encouraged by the government (Ovesen 1995, 26). This reveals how the government imposes the national principle, both Buddhism in the past and socialism in the present, to be adhered by the people, yet this attempt barely includes the Hmong's religions as an integrated aspect of the nation.

During this period, the people had already had agency to construct their identity. However, this agency was controlled by the government for the sake of political interest. Thus, it is better to use the instrumentalist-constructivist approach to explain the situation during the Socialism period. Firstly, the government had constructed ethnic identity based on the culture through these three categorizations: Lao Loum (lowland), Lao Theung (midland), and Lao Soung (highland). These categorizations came from the outside ethnic groups, but the response of the ethnic groups on these categorizations was not recorded. It implicitly states that the ethnic groups accepted the identity constructed by the government. Secondly, such a constructivist approach should be combined with the instrumentalist approach since the government used the categorizations as a political tool. This was a political tool to claim the power against the previous government dominated by Lao people. This political tool was shown vividly from the government treatment against the Hmong who were considered close to the previous government. The exclusion and detachment of the Hmong from Laos are the result of using ethnic identity to gain political power.

3.3 Consolidation of the Socialism and Buddhism Period

Consolidation period began when the state leader's attitude towards politics, moral, and cultures shifted after the economic liberation was implemented by the end of 1980s (Pholsena and Banomyong, 2006, 159). This brings changes not only in the economic field but also in socio-cultural life of the people. While Buddhism implicitly held a dominant position during the socialism period, Buddhism begins to be widely recognized again during this period. It can be seen from the change of national badge which used to be hammer and sickle portraying a socialist symbol into Pha That Luang shrine reflecting the pivotal symbol of Lan Xang Kingdom (Pholsena and Banomyong 2006, 171). This suggests that socialism has failed to accommodate the people's needs so that it leads them to trace back their identity to the Kingdom of Lanxang and Buddhism. Kohl (1998, 228) names this situation as rediscovery of the past in order to create national identity. Nevertheless, this rediscovery officially approves the return of Lao domination.



Picture 5. National Badge during the Socialism Period (Source: www.hubert-herald.nl/Laos.htm).



Picture 6. National Badge during the Consolidation Period (Source: <http://www.hubert-herald.nl/Laos.htm>).

Given the coming back of Buddhism and Lao domination explained above, it might be expected that the Hmong who were previously associated with Lao ethnic group would finally see positive light for their life. It might appear that way, for the government has recently allowed the Hmong in Laos and those migrated to the USA to meet one another (Evans 2002, 213). Regrettably, the association of the Hmong with RLG in the past still takes into effect. The Hmong in the highland, specifically, are not really treated equally because the government tends to be suspicious towards their loyalty, given their association with the anti-socialist movement in the past (Ovesen 1995, 13–15). This recent situation shows how the Hmong are barely detached from their historical background. It further creates prejudice which might lead to implicit exclusion taking the form of unfair treatment towards them. The future Hmong generations might not have any relation with the anti-socialist movement, so they do not deserve the unfair treatment based on the prejudice.

The discussion on Hmong related to ethnic identity during the Consolidation period is almost similar to that during the Socialism period. Nonetheless, the cultural distinctiveness can now be seen freely. The below picture was taken by a tourist in 2014 upon the Hmong held New Year's Celebration. The color of their dresses reflects their tribe namely Black Hmong, Blue Hmong, and White Hmong. It seems that the

discourse of clan does not appear. This situation suggests that the Hmong have passed the three levels of systemic operation to achieve ethnic identity. The individual embraces his/her own identity, the individuals are interacting among their social groups, and the culture is widely shown to wider population to mark their identity.



Picture 7. The Hmong (picture taken from <http://grandescapades.net/hmong-new-years-celebration/>).

4. Conclusion

The explanation above has suggested that national principles of Laos which are Buddhism and Socialism have shaped the national identity of the nation. The former was mostly imposed to homogenize the various ethnic groups, so it legitimized the domination of one ethnic group. Meanwhile, the latter evokes the notion of ethnicity by emphasizing the cultural equality among ethnic groups. Nevertheless, it failed to realize its intention due to political interest of the state leaders. Both national principles do not provide conducive situation for the integration of the minority, in this case the Hmong, for ethnic domination and leaders' interest barely accommodate the minority to be part of the new nation. In short, they become the obstacle rather than unifying tools for integration.

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