

THE 1901-1902 "HOLY MAN'S" REBELLION

by

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The "Holy Man's"¹ uprising of 1901-1902 was a large scale popular rebellion involving Northeast Thailand, Southern Laos, and the adjacent portion of the Vietnamese Central Highlands. Scholarship to date has not adequately considered the rebellion's character as transcending present national boundaries, having common leadership, and growing out of common regional causes.

The principal commentators on the "Thai" rebellion have been Toem Wiphakphotchanakit, Tej Bunnag, and Charles Keyes. Toem includes a chapter on the rebellion in his history of Northeast Thailand.² Tej Bunnag's article gives a history of the events of the "Thai" rebellion, and an interpretation explaining the uprising in largely economic terms.³ Charles Keyes' paper discusses the rebellion as an example of the potential affinity of Thai Buddhist culture to millenarianism given changes in elite-group structures and political leadership.⁴

The principal writers on the "Lao-tribal" rebellion in French Laos and Viet-nam have been J.J. Dauplay, Paul de Boulanger, and Bernard Bourotte. J.J. Dauplay, French Commissioner of Saravane (1905-1921), portrays the rebellion as a Lao-tribal uprising against French political and administrative reforms that were applied too stringently and were imposed too quickly.⁵ Paul de Boulanger emphasizes the role of the "mystical and superstitious" nature of the tribal people of Southern Laos in their

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- 1) This uprising has come to be known in the literature as the "Holy Man's" rebellion. The Thai term is *Phu Mi Bun*, which literally translated is "he who has merit".
 - 2) Toem Wiphakphotchanakit, *Prawatsat Isan* (History of Northeast Thailand) (Bangkok, 1970), pp. 559-587.
 - 3) Tej Bunnag, "Khabot Phu Mi Bun Pak Isan R.S 121" (The 1901-02 Holy Man's Rebellion in Northeast Thailand) in *Sangkhomsat Parithat* (Journal of the Social Sciences), 5: 1 (June 1967), pp. 78-86.
 - 4) Charles Keyes, "Millenialism, Theravada Buddhism, and Thai Society" (Unpublished paper, March 1972).
 - 5) J.J. Dauplay, *Les Terres Rouges du Plateau des Bolovens* (Saigon, 1929).

reaction to French reforms.⁶ Bernard Bourotte portrays the political instability of the period, and the effects of both French and Thai maneuverings and political reforms on the various tribal groups of Southern Laos and the Central Highlands of Viet-nam.⁷

The greatest problem of the studies to date is that they tend to see the rebellion in discrete national terms—ending at either bank of the Mekong River. The impression given is that there are two separate rebellions—the “Holy Man’s” rebellion in Northeast Thailand and the “Kha-Lao”⁸ rebellion in Southern Laos. In both cases, there are vague references to trouble on the other side of the Mekong and allusions to nefarious machinations of the party on the “other bank” being responsible.

This paper will consider the rebellion as a general uprising in the Lower Mekong Region that transcended national borders. The attempt will be made to prove that, to the extent the rebellion was an organized movement, it was under common leadership, and grew out of the reaction of a common Lower Mekong socio-economic polity to a wide range of challenges to it by both the Siamese and the French.

Background

The background to the rebellion must be sought in the factors that led up to the situation in the Lower Mekong at the turn of the century.

Prior to the late nineteenth century reforms of King Chulalongkorn, the territory of the Siamese Kingdom was divided into three administrative categories. First were the *inner provinces* which were in four classes depending on their distance from Bangkok or the importance of their local ruling houses. Second were the *outer provinces*, which were situated between the inner provinces and further distant tributary states. Finally there were the *tributary states* which were on the periphery of

6) Paul de Boulanger, *Histoire du Laos Français* (Paris, 1931).

7) Bernard Bourotte, *History of the Mountain People of Southern Indochina up to 1945*, USAID translation of “Essai d’histoire des populations montagnards du Sud-Indochinois jusqu’a 1945”, *Bulletin de la Societe des etudes indochinoises*, n.s., v. 30 (1955), pp. 1-116.

8) “Kha” is the common, though somewhat pejorative, term used for the Austroasiatic tribal people of Northeast Thailand, Laos, and Viet-nam. I use it here because it is common parlance in the literature and for lack of a better term.

Siamese control. The inner provinces were administered from Bangkok; whereas both the outer provinces and the tributary states were relatively independent in internal affairs. Their obligations were such that the outer provinces sent annual tribute money to Bangkok; whereas the tributary states sent gold and silver trees every three years. Both were expected to give Bangkok military assistance in times of war.⁹

In the Northeast, the Siamese inner provinces reached to Nakhon Ratchasima, which had been founded by King Narai in the seventeenth century.¹⁰ Beyond this were the outer provinces, including the Suwannaphum-Roi-et region of Northeast Thailand, which came under Siamese control in the latter half of the eighteenth century.¹¹ Furthest afield were Vientiane and Bassac, which became tributary states following the 1778 advance of Siamese armies,¹² and came under increasing Siamese control after the destruction of Vientiane in 1827.¹³ Until the encroachment of the French in the late 1880's and early 1890's, Siamese power expanded throughout the Lower Mekong Region. By the 1880's, "Siamese dignitaries were stationed in Attopeu, Bassac, Stung Treng, and Ubon",¹⁴ Saravane was administered by a *Chao Muang* under Siamese control, and King Chulalongkorn claimed the entire Lower Mekong Region as far as the mountain scarp on the eastern edge of the Kontum Plateau in Viet-nam.¹⁵

The political, social, and economic relationships among the Siamese, the Lao, and the Kha peoples were very complex. In the region of the outer provinces, *i.e.* most of the Khorat Plateau, the Siamese ruled through the Lao noble houses and their hereditary political hierarchies.¹⁶ These hierarchies were ranged under the local lords, the *Chao Muang*. The top four positions, the *Chao Muang*, *Uppahat*, *Ratchawong*, and *Ratchabut*,

9) Tej Bunnag, *The Provincial Administration of Siam from 1892 to 1915* (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 1968).

10) Charles Keyes, "Domain, Kinship, and Political Control on the Khorat Plateau" (Unpublished paper, February 1972), p. 14.

11) *Ibid.*, p. 11.

12) Tej Bunnag, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

13) Bernard Bourotte, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

14) *Ibid.*, p. 57.

15) *Ibid.*, p. 86-87.

16) Charles Keyes, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-8.

which were in descending order of status, authority, and right to succession, were confirmed in office by the Siamese King. In most cases this meant that the King did not in any sense appoint "his" men, but rather conferred ruling status on the existing Lao nobility. Below the four major officials were the *krommakan muang* or functionaries, who were appointed by the *chao muang* without the need for approval by the King. Thus in the political administration of the outer Lao provinces, local hierarchies, constituted along kinship lines, were predominant. A similar Lao hierarchy was present in the tributary state of Bassac, though only the vassal King was confirmed by the Siamese King in Bangkok. As we have seen, there were Siamese "dignataries" stationed in Ubon, Bassac, Attopeu, and Stung Treng, but their positions were more that of resident representatives of the Siamese King than as formal members of the local ruling hierarchies.

The place of the Kha tribespeople in these socio-political structures was both important and complex. The region of the Bassac tributary state east of the Mekong River, *i.e.* the Bolovens Plateau, Saravane, Attopeu, and the Kontum Plateau, was largely populated by Kha tribes, the most important of which were the Alak and Loven of the Bolovens Plateau, and the Sedang of the Kontum Plateau.¹⁷ These tribal people were reported to have been "sparsely colonized" by a few Lao families, presumably the ruling nobility.¹⁸ With Bassac under the suzerainty of Bangkok, the tribal people were required to pay a tax in gold as well as providing gifts to the minor mandarins—all of which were collected by Lao militiamen.¹⁹

Bassac was an important economic center, for it was the outlet for the trade from the east bank of the Mekong, including the Bolovens Plateau, Saravane, Attopeu, and Kontum Plateau regions. From Bassac, trade in cardamon, rubber, wax, resin, skins, horns, and slaves, was conducted with Ubon, Khorat, and Bangkok.²⁰ One of the most significant economic roles of the tribal peoples was in the slave trade of the

17) On the tribal groups, their characteristics, and distribution, see Bernard Bourotte, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-23.

18) Paul de Boulanger, *op. cit.*, p. 343.

19) Bernard Bourotte, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

20) Ch. Lemire, *La France et le Siam* (Paris, 1903), p. 34.

time. From the fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries, the increasing encroachments of the Lao, Siamese, Khmer, and Vietnamese peoples had been driving the tribal peoples from the valleys into the hills. Coupled with this, the Siamese, Lao, and Khmer were making slave raids among the tribal people. As a result, some of the stronger among the tribes, notably the Sedang, Ta Hoi, and Jarai, began to prey upon the weaker tribes for their own profit in selling slaves to the Siamese, Lao, and Khmer. This system of slave trade kept the markets of Phnom-Penh, Bangkok, Bassac, and Stung Treng supplied with slaves—with profits to the stronger tribes and the Lao, Siamese, and Khmer middle-men. The Sedang emerged as the most important group in the slave trade. They relied on war for the capture of slaves, and not only preyed upon weaker tribes, but also captured Vietnamese from the plains in the regions of Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, and Binh Dinh.²¹

By the 1880's then, the eastward expansion and political control of the Siamese was at its height. They ruled the Khorat Plateau as outer provinces through the local Lao nobility, and in the Bassac tributary state, the local Lao rulers, who dominated the more powerful tribal groups who in turn controlled the less powerful, were vassals of Siam. It was at this stage that the French began to take on increasing importance in the Eastern region.

In the late 1880's, France decided to further enforce its 1883 treaty with the Vietnamese to protect the rights and frontiers of Annam.²² The French interpreted this to mean that any areas that had previously paid tribute to Vietnam should come under French Protection. The Second Pavie Mission (1890-91) sought to eliminate the Siamese posts along the Annamite Mountains and establish French control of the region of the Kontum Plateau. The Third Pavie Mission (1892-93) sought the occupation of Laos.²³ This led to the Paknam incident and the treaty of 1893, by which all of the territories on the east bank of the Mekong were ceded to France, and which required the Siamese to withdraw all armed forces to a minimum of twenty-five kilometers from the river.²⁴

21) Bernard Bourotte, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-54, 75, 83.

22) *Ibid.*, p. 87.

23) *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.

24) Tej Bunnag, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-140.

In 1896 the British and French signed a treaty in which they agreed that neither country, without the consent of the other, would advance armed forces into the region of the greater Menam watershed. This did not include Northeast Siam, which is a part of the Mekong watershed.²⁵ Thus the Lower Mekong Region was divided by the Mekong River into Siamese and French areas of control, and the status of Northeast Siam, while not directly in question, was residually uncertain.

Relations between the Siamese and the French at the turn of the century were acrimonious. The twenty-five kilometer zone on the west bank of the Mekong was impossible for the Siamese to control, given the terms of the 1893 treaty. It became a haven for lawless characters from both sides of the river. The French then made the impossible demand that the Siamese restore order in the zone—without allowing them to station armed forces there.²⁶ In addition, the French tried to claim the Sayaboury and Champassak regions on the west bank of the Mekong, on the grounds that they were integral parts of the French-protected Luang Prabang and Bassac Kingdoms.²⁷ The problems of keeping order in the twenty-five kilometer zone and the control of Sayaboury and Champassak remained in a constant state of turmoil until the treaty of 1904 which ceded the disputed territories to France.

Substantial political and administrative reforms were made in the Lower Mekong Region in the closing years of the nineteenth century. One of the most significant was King Chulalongkorn's 1874 decree on the progressive elimination of slavery. By this decree, anyone born into slavery after 1868/69 would become free on attaining the age of twenty-one.²⁸ As the results of this decree were coming to be felt in the declining value of slaves, the Ministry of Interior in 1884 issued a decree to the easternmost areas under Siamese control that the capture and selling of Kha slaves was forbidden. This decree severely interrupted the Thai-Lao-Kha slave trade patterns on the east bank of the Mekong before it came under French control in 1893.²⁹

25) Copy of 1896 Franco-British Treaty in *U.S. Despatches from Siam* (August 7, 1902).

26) Minister to Hay/no. 127, *U.S. Despatches from Siam* (August 7, 1902).

27) Tej Bunnag, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

28) David K. Wyatt, *The Politics of Reform in Thailand* (Yale University Press, 1969), p. 51.

29) "Khamhaikan Ryang Muang Attopeu" (Testimony Concerning Muang Attopeu) in *Prachum Phongsawadan* (Collected Chronicles), pt. 70 (Khurusapha ed., v. 44: Bangkok, 1969), pp. 188-190.

The increasing problem of the encroachments of the British and the French on the Southern and North-eastern borders of Siam led the Siamese government to appoint permanent Commissioners responsible for defense and revenues to all "frontier" areas. In the 1880's Commissioners were appointed to Nongkhai, Bassac, Nakhon Ratchasima, and Ubon.³⁰ These Commissioners were to coordinate the efforts of the local, provincial, and central governments, and to make administrative changes affecting manpower and revenue at their discretion. While under Siamese suzerainty, there was a head tax of one tical (\$. 60) on Lao and tribal people in the Bassac Kingdom,³¹ although about twenty percent of the people were exempted from paying taxes by offering their service to the nobility. In 1891, the Siamese Commissioner of Bassac took the ruling Lao nobility into Siamese government administrative service to compensate them for loss of power and prestige under the new tax system.³² In the west bank region of Northeast Siam, the Commissioners also sought to undermine the strength of the local Lao nobility and bring their areas under increasing central control through further "nationalization" of taxes in the Bassac, Ubon, and Nongkhai regions.³³

Following the cession of the east bank territories to France in 1893, the Siamese government further tightened its administrative control in its west bank regions. From 1893-1896, the central government, through its Commissioners, formalized and redefined the duties of local provincial administrators, and took over the judicial and financial administration of the provinces.³⁴ In 1899, the Ministry of Interior established the *Thesaphiban* system of provincial administration that formalized administrative practices under the bureaucratic control of the central government.³⁵ As a result, the payment of tribute was abolished in 1899,³⁶ and the Commissioner of the Northeast established a four baht tax to be collected from all able-bodied men, of which thirty-eight percent went to the National Treasury, fifty-nine percent to the local *Siamese* administration, and three percent to the lower ranking Lao officials.³⁷

30) Tej Bunnag, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-104.

31) J.J. Dauplay, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

32) Tej Bunnag, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

33) *Ibid.*, pp. 116-117.

34) *Ibid.*, pp. 178-179.

35) *Ibid.*, p. 191.

36) *Ibid.*, pp. 261-262.

37) Tej Bunnag, "Khabot Phu Mi Bun . . .", p. 81.

The results of the Siamese reforms were that the Lao officials' bases of support were undermined by the central government.³⁸ The head taxes were unpopular among the people, and their burdens were further increased by corrupt practices of extracting money from them by local officials facing declining power, prestige, and fortune.³⁹

On the French side of the river, increasingly stringent reforms were also felt. The French created a transportation system centering on Saigon. The products of the east bank Bassac region were sent down the Mekong River, transported around the falls near Khong Island, and shipped on to Saigon by steamer. Thus the profits from the trade were transferred from the Lao of the Lower Mekong to Saigon.⁴⁰ In addition, head taxes were tripled from what they had been under the Siamese, and the number of people exempted was reduced.⁴¹ From the mid 1890's to 1900, there was a resurgence in the traditional Lao-tribal pattern of slave trade. In reaction to this, the French sent militiamen to the interior region to interdict the slave trade, suppress banditry, and build fortified military posts.⁴²

The result of the French reforms was a general discontent on the part of the Lao and Kha populace. The economic positions of both Lao and Kha leaders were undermined, and both were dismayed and unprepared for the increase in taxes. In addition, Lao officials resented the Vietnamese who accompanied French officials and treated the Lao as though they were in Vietnamese conquered territory.⁴³

In short, at the turn of the century, the people on both sides of the Mekong faced similar situations, and had similar dissatisfactions. The old Thai-Lao-Kha social hierarchy and political-economic relationships had been broken. The Lao of Northeast Siam had come under the domination of what was to them "foreign" Siamese rule, and the Lao

38) Tej Bunnag, *Provincial Administration* . . . p. 89.

39) Tej Bunnag, "Khabot Phu Mi Bun . . .", p. 81.

40) Ch. Lemire, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

41) J.J. Dauplay, *op. cit.*, p. 59. Dauplay gives the French rate as \$2. The *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail* (Aug. 3, 1901) quoting L'Opinion of Saigon (July 19, 1901) says that Doumer imposed a \$4 poll tax on all males over twenty years old.

42) Bernard Bourotte, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

43) J.J. Dauplay, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

and Kha of the east bank of the Mekong had come under the domination of the French and Vietnamese. The kingdom of Bassac was divided by the river. The populace was upset by new and higher taxes. The bases of power and prestige of the Lao nobility and Kha tribal leaders had been undermined. The seeds of rebellion were firmly rooted, and needed only a few precipitating incidents to germinate into full flower.

The Rebellion

Writers from the Thai side have asserted that the rebellion began in French Laos, and writers from the French-Lao side have claimed that it began in Siam. A careful sifting of the evidence on both sides leads to the conclusion that the major incidents of the rebellion began in 1901 among the Kha in French Laos. The main Kha groups involved were the Alak, Nha-heun, and Loven of the Bolovens Plateau-Saravane-Attopeu Region, and the Sedang of the Kontum Plateau.

In March, 1901, Remy, the French Commissioner at Saravane, became increasingly concerned with the growing attraction of a self-proclaimed "sorcerer", known both as Bac My and Ong Keo,⁴⁴ who was reputed to have supernatural powers. He was an Alak tribesman who was performing rituals on Phou Kat Mountain, south of Saravane, and was attracting an increasing following among the Kha groups of the Bolovens Plateau. By the end of March, 1901, *Phu Mi Bun* (Holy Man) Ong Keo and his following grew more threatening, and Commissioner Remy with fifteen militiamen, went to the plateau to investigate. On April 12, Remy and his fifteen militiamen were surrounded in the pagoda Thateng by fifteen-hundred Kha tribesmen armed with flintlocks. Remy was able to talk himself out of the situation and return to Saravane, though by this time the entire plateau was aroused.⁴⁵ News of the *Phu Mi Bun* and his followers reached Prince Sanphasitthiprasong, High Commissioner of Monthon Isan in Thailand via the ruler of Champassak, along with the rumor that they would cross the Mekong and attack Ubon. The High Commissioner had heard similar stories of mystics and sorcerers and was not inclined to take it seriously.⁴⁶

44) *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail* (hereafter referred to as *BT*), (Oct. 19, 1901) quoting the *Courier d'Haiphong*.

45) J.J. Dauplay, *op. cit.*, p. 60. Dauplay gives the figure of 1,500 attackers. The *BT* quoting *L'Opinion* of Saigon (July 19, 1901) gives the figure 300.

46) Toem Wiphakphotchanakit, *op. cit.*, p. 563.

The situation in French Laos became more serious when later in April, 1901, a Frenchman named Menard was killed by Kha tribesmen while travelling from Saravane to Bassac.⁴⁷ Later, trouble broke out in the Kontum Plateau, inspired by Sedang followers of the *Phu Mi Bun*. In that region, northwest of Kontum, the French had set up a military post with a French military officer named Robert in charge of stopping the transport of Annamite slaves sold along the Mekong by the Sedang and Loven. On May 29, 1901, the post was attacked and Robert was speared twenty times by Sedang tribesmen.⁴⁸ Thus through May, 1901, the incitement to violence among the followers of the *Phu Mi Bun* was confined to Kha tribesmen in Southern Laos and the Kontum Plateau of Viet-nam.

The leadership of the *Phu Mi Bun* uprising is particularly interesting. The French sources and Thai contemporary newspapers all agree that the main instigator was the Alak tribesman, Bac My or Ong Keo. Dau-play, in describing his tenure in Saravane, reported that in several of the wats of the Saravane region, there appeared white cotton panels depicting Ong Keo as a *Thevada* (god) enjoying the blessings of a Buddhist Paradise. In 1906-07, he destroyed more than fifty of these in Saravane alone.⁴⁹ Ong Keo was joined by the Loven chiefs Komadam and Kom-maseng,⁵⁰ and was also reported to have a first lieutenant named Ong Wan, who appeared in the Savannakhet region, and was the most important leader in the rebellion on the Thai side of the river.⁵¹ Another report claimed that Ong Keo stayed on the religious side of things, and left the direction of the movement to a man named Ong Luang, who claimed to be descended from the Kings of Vientiane, and had been imprisoned at Khong in 1895 for trying to have himself proclaimed "Phu Mi Bun, Luang Sakda, Nailam of the Khas."⁵²

47) Accounts here differ somewhat. The *BT* (Aug. 2, 1902) quoting Saigon's *L'Opinion* says his head, hands, and feet were cut off and displayed in a bird cage. The *BT* (Oct. 19, 1901) quoting the *Courier d'Haiphong* says his body was never found.

48) Bernard Bourotte, *op. cit.*, pp. 103-104; and J.J. Dauplay, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

49) J.J. Dauplay, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

50) M. Colonna, "Monographie de la Province de Saravane", *Bulletin des Amis du Laos*, no. 2 (1938), p. 86.

51) *BT* (May 29, 1902); and Toem Wiphakphotchanakit, *op. cit.*, p. 564.

52) *BT* (Oct. 19, 1901) quoting *Courier d'Haiphong*.

By June, 1901, Lao began to become involved in the rebellion. A band of *Phu Mi Bun* followers began burning *salas* in the villages along the Sedone River in Laos. Soon Lao chiefs began to join in the uprising—including the *Chao Muang* and *Uppahat* of Ban Khamthong-nyai, the *Ratchawong* of Saravane, and the *Uppahat* of Attopeu.⁵³

By this time the *Phu Mi Bun* movement was also growing in Northeast Thailand, but had not yet entered its violent phase as in Laos. In Northeast Thailand, a prophecy was being circulated that in the sixth month (*i.e.* May) of the year 1901

.. a major catastrophe will occur. Gravel will become gold and silver and gold and silver will become gravel. Gourds and pumpkins will become elephants and horses, albino buffalo and pigs will become man-eating *yaksa*. Thao Thammikarat (*Phu Mi Bun*) will come to rule the world. Whoever wishes to remain free from these evil happenings should copy or retell this story and make it generally known. If one is pure and has not performed any evil or bad karmic deeds (or if one wishes to become rich), one should collect gravel so that Thao Thammikarat can transform them into gold and silver. If one has performed various evil deeds, then in order to become a pure person one should perform the ritual of *tat kam wang wen* whereby one arranges to invite monks to come sprinkle 'holy' water. If one is afraid of death, one should kill albino buffalo and pigs before the middle of the sixth month to prevent them being transformed into *yaksas*. If one is still a maiden or a married woman who has not yet consummated her marriage, one should quickly take a husband. Otherwise the *yaksas* will catch you and eat you.⁵⁴

The prophecy was said to have come from the east, and the rumor was that the *Phu Mi Bun*, Thao Thammikarat (Ruler of Law or Ruler of Justice), would also come from the east.⁵⁵ Through the rest of 1901 and the beginning of 1902, would-be prophets arose, people collected pebbles and gravel, animals were slaughtered, and monks were attracted to perform the appropriate rituals.

53) *Ibid.*

54) Charles Keyes, "Millennialism . . .", pp. 19-20—a translation combining elements of the accounts of Tej Bunnag, *op. cit.*, p. 78; and Toem Wiphakphotchanakit, *op. cit.*, p. 559.

55) Tej Bunnag, *op. cit.*, p. 80,

In March, 1902, Northeast Thailand began to experience the violent phase of the rebellion. Ong Man, the lieutenant of Ong Keo from Savannakhet, appeared with the claim that he was Thao Thammikarat and began to recruit and arm a band of followers from the Khemmarat-Sapheu region.⁵⁶ On March 28, 1902, Ong Man and his followers robbed and burned Khemmarat, executed two Khemmarat *krommakan* officials, and captured Phra Khemmaratdetpracharak, the governor of Khemmarat, whom they used to attract the townspeople to join the movement.⁵⁷

When Commissioner Sanphasitthiprasong heard about the Khemmarat incident, he telegraphed the commander of the army at Nakhon Ratchasima to send reinforcements quickly. Four hundred soldiers were sent. Two hundred were sent by way of Surin—one hundred to Srisaket and one hundred to Ubon. Two hundred were sent by way of Suwannaphum—one hundred to Roi-et and one hundred to Yasothon. They were given orders to put down any trouble they met along the way, and to report to Commissioner Sanphasitthiprasong.⁵⁸

Meanwhile, Ong Man and his followers had set up their headquarters in Ban Sapheu. Ong Man by this time had about a thousand followers whom he had organized into armed fighting units.⁵⁹ After a few minor incidents, Commissioner Sanphasitthiprasong ordered the commander of the Ubon army to examine the situation and report the facts. He sent a dozen soldiers in the direction of Ban Sapheu. On the third day, one private came back and reported to the Commissioner that the group had fallen into an ambush laid by the *Phu Mi Bun*, and that all the others had been killed. This victory over the soldiers enhanced the prestige of the *Phu Mi Bun* and attracted fifteen hundred more followers. The rebels then resolved to attack Ubon.⁶⁰

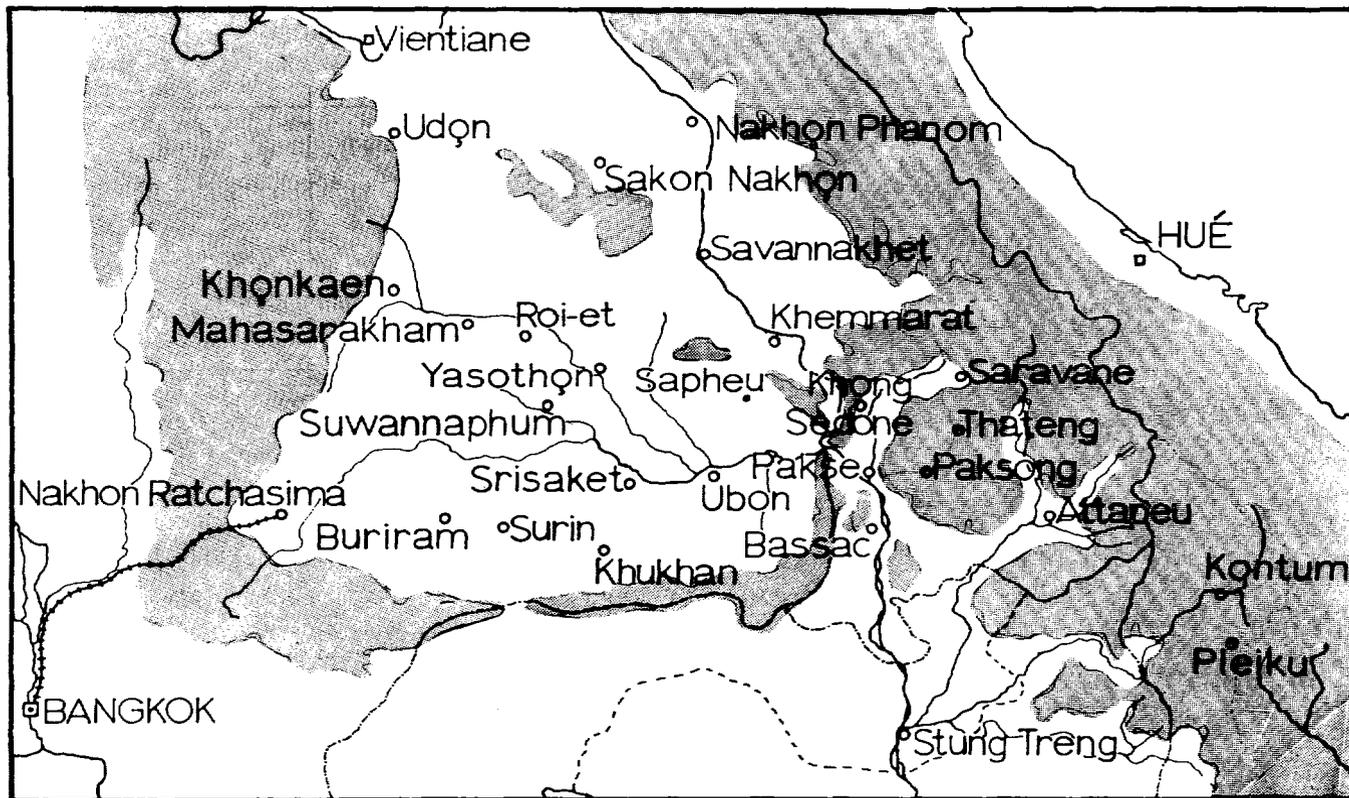
56) Toem Wiphakphotchanakit, *op. cit.*, p. 565.

57) Tej Bunnag, *op. cit.*, p. 83; and Toem Wiphakphotchanakit, *op. cit.*, p. 564.

58) *Phraratchahalekha Ratchakan ti Ha thi kiao kap Pharakit khong Krasuang Mahat Thai* (Royal Letters of the Fifth Reign Concerning the Affairs of the Ministry of Interior), v. 2, (Bangkok, 1970), p. 384.

59) Toem Wiphakphotchanakit, *op. cit.*, p. 556; and Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, *Nithan Boranakhadi* (Historical Anecdotes) (Thonburi, 1968), pp. 339-40. Prince Damrong says Sanphasitthiprasong had 200 soldiers from Bangkok—and local militia in training—a total of around five hundred. Toem's account gives a total of around one thousand. I am following Toem on the perhaps dubious ground that his version is in great detail with complete names, dates, and numbers whereas Prince Damrong's version is more generalized.

60) Toem Wiphakphotchanakit, *op. cit.*, p. 568-569.



Land above 200 m. --- Siam northeast border 1893/1902 — Present borders

Km. 0 20 40 60 80 100

Courtesy of Prof. David K. Wyatt,
 Department of History,
 Cornell University.



At this point, Commissioner Sanphasitthiprasong reacted with strength. He sent an artillery unit of one hundred soldiers armed with rifles and two cannon to suppress the *Phu Mi Bun*. They, along with a group of local militia, left Ubon on April 2, 1902, and reached Ban Sapheu on April 3. They set up an ambush along the trail leading to Ubon to wait for the *Phu Mi Bun* and his followers to make their move. The next morning the rebel group set out for Ubon and walked into the ambush. The result was that considerably more than three hundred were killed, many fled, and four hundred were captured. Ong Man was said to have passed himself off as a farmer and to have escaped with ten of his followers.⁶¹

Of prime concern to King Chulalongkorn was the problem of relations with the French in the deployment of Thai soldiers in the twenty-five kilometer zone along the Mekong River. The French Ambassador agreed to work with the Thai in suppressing the rebels, but the Vice-consul in Ubon insisted that if Thai soldiers were sent into the twenty-five kilometer zone, they must be accompanied by a French official. The King's concern for the sensitivity of relations with the French is shown by his instructing his Ministry of Foreign Affairs to send a telegram thanking the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs for working out procedures by which Thai troops could enter the twenty-five kilometer zone. He insisted, however, that Thai strength was sufficient, and that French troops should not cross to the Thai side of the Mekong.⁶²

With the deployment of Thai troops, rebellious incidents quickly subsided in the Northeast. Following legal actions against captured local leaders of the *Phu Mi Bun* movement, the Thai government considered the case of the rebellion closed; however, on the Lao side of the river it was far from ended.

61) *Ibid.*, pp. 570-572; and Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, *op. cit.*, pp. 341-342. There were undoubtedly far more than ten followers who escaped with Ong Man. If we follow Toem's figures, he would have had about 2,500 followers before the Sapheu incident; following Damrong's figures around 1,000. In any case, Ong Man and followers appeared in an attack on Savannakhet three weeks later so he presumably escaped the Ban Sapheu incident with more than ten followers.

62) *Phraratchahallekha . . .*, *op. cit.*, pp. 392, 394, 404.

Late in April, 1902, Ong Man and Ong Keo, with "hordes" of Laotians; chanting and playing the khene, surrounded the French Commissariat in Savannakhet. They were convinced that the French militia's ammunition would turn into frangipani flowers, and they would be in no danger. The French opened fire on them leaving one hundred fifty dead in the square and at least as many wounded. Ong Man and Ong Keo escaped.⁶³

Following the Savannakhet incident, the rebels withdrew to the Phou Luong mountains on the northeast edge of the Bolovens Plateau, and the situation was relatively calm until 1905, when on November 30, a group of rebels surrounded Ban Nong Bok Kao and massacred forty-one Loven tribesmen.⁶⁴ Under greater French pressure, most of the remaining rebel leaders, including Ong Keo, surrendered. Khomadam, however, successfully escaped.

Following Ong Keo's surrender, he confessed and swore loyalty to the French, after which he escaped to Thailand. After gaining further arms and supporters, he returned to Laos, where he held out against the French on the Bolovens Plateau.⁶⁵ In 1910, Chao Nhouy (Rasadanai), Prince of the Na Champassak ruling family and Governor of Champassak, arranged for negotiations between Ong Keo and Fendler, a French government representative. After a weapons search, in which Fendler knew that by Lao custom the head would not be touched, he pulled his pistol from under his hat and killed Ong Keo.⁶⁶

After Ong Keo's death, Khomadam continued to resist the French until he was shot in attempting to escape a French suppression attempt in January, 1936.⁶⁷ Interestingly enough, the legacy of this rebellion is

63) J.J. Dauplay, *op. cit.*, p. 62; *BT* (May 29, 1902); and *Phraratchahatlekha . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 420.

64) J.J. Dauplay, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

65) *Ibid.*, p. 65.

66) Wilfred G. Burchett, *Mekong Upstream* (Berlin, 1959), pp. 207-212. Burchett's account of the shooting of Ong Keo comes from an interview he had with Khamphan, Khomadam's son and Si Thon's younger brother. This interview also outlines Khomadam's career of resistance.

67) M. Colonna, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

still part of the struggle in Laos. The son of Chao Nhouy, who arranged the negotiation in which Ong Keo was shot, is Prince Boun Oum, the present Lao rightist leader; and the son of Khomadarn, heir to Ong Keo's rebellion, is Si Thon, the present Vice-chairman of the Pathet Lao for the Southern Hill People.⁶⁸

Interpretation

Phra Yanrakkhit, chief monk of Monthon Isan, attributed the Thai side of the rebellion to the people's "hardship and need". He emphasized the poverty of the Northeast, where there was very little opportunity for wage labor, and very little profit to be derived from agriculture. This situation, coupled with corruption in tax receipts and registration of animals on the part of local officials, made life increasingly difficult for the populace, and rendered them susceptible to rebellion.⁶⁹

Phra Yanrakkhit's analysis contains an interesting distinction. He implies that conditions with regard to corruption were satisfactory in areas ruled directly by *Siamese* government commissioners. However, the problem of corruption was greatest in areas far from government commissioners where local leaders bullied the people. (He was writing to Commissioner Sanphasitthiprasong.)

Following the Ministry of Interior's reforms of the 1890's, both the local leaders and the populace were left in an uncertain position. The local leaders lost their direct control over revenue and manpower to the central government bureaucracy. Thus, they faced economic hardship and loss of status. The Ministry of Interior, however, suffered from its own shortage of manpower, and hence selectively brought some of the local leaders into the government administration as salaried civil servants. These leaders would presumably have vested interests in the success of the new administrative reforms, and would be expected to oppose the rebellion. However, those who were not hired by the bureaucracy would presumably be the local leaders falling back on their traditional, though eroding, sense of control of revenue and manpower, and extracting money from the populace through corruption. It would

68) Alfred W. McCoy, "French Colonialism in Laos, 1893-1945" in Nina S. Adams and Alfred W. McCoy, *Laos: War and Revolution* (New York, 1970), p. 89.

69) Tej Bunnag, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

also be expected that these people with their dissatisfactions would be likely candidates for leadership in the rebellion—for they had no future in the new order, but could gain by a return to the old order.

The common people would similarly have been in an uncertain position. To the extent that they saw the governmental reforms, particularly the newly imposed taxes, as oppressive, they could be expected to react to these influences from "outsiders" by rallying to their traditional leaders, at least the ones who were not "colloaborating" with the central government as civil servants. On the other hand, to the extent that dispossessed local leaders were "squeezing" their people above and beyond the government taxes, the people could be expected to react against them. The ambiguity of the positions of both local leadership and the populace is reflected in their being on both sides of the issue—as rebels and as local militia putting down the rebels.

J.J. Dauplay, French Commissioner of Saravane (1905-21), emphasized the Kha misunderstanding of French policy, and the corruption of Lao officials as important in the uprising. He claimed that the Kha had traditionally submitted to the Lao or Thai; therefore the French should not be seen as taking away their independence. Rather, the French should be seen as liberators, removing the Kha from bondage to the Thai and Lao, and making them equal under French law. Dauplay complained that the Kha were dislocated by their new freedom, that they did not know how to make decisions. In fact they hardly seemed to notice the gift of independence—and finally took counsel with their "natural" chiefs, the Lao, against the French. In addition, both Lao and Kha officials under the French became corrupt in tax collection and price fixing. They were further angered when the French eliminated vassalage and slave-trading. Dauplay thought the French were in error in challenging the system of debt-slavery, for it cut off servants from the Lao and the merchants and only angered them. Also, the Bolovens Plateau drew its revenues from trade in slaves—and its leaders reacted with fury when the French cut off Vietnamese slave trade by occupying Kontum.⁷⁰

Both Phra Yanrakkhit and Dauplay reflect the common political and economic conditions faced by local rulers and the populace on either

70) J.J. Dauplay, *op. cit.*, pp. 55-58.

side of the river. The local ruling elites had been deprived of power, and then split—some being co-opted by the Siamese and the French, and others retaining their traditional hold over the people which led them to leadership in the rebellion. Both Siamese and French complained of corruption on the part of these dispossessed rulers—yet “corruption” from the point of view of the new order may well have been “rulers’ prerogative” or “acceptable sources of revenue” in terms of the old order.

In addition to this uncertainty of “legitimacy” of rule, we must also bear in mind the uncertainty of the relationship between the Siamese and the French. In 1893 the French had taken control of the east bank of the Mekong that had formerly been under the control of the Siamese. This split the Bassac Kingdom in two, leaving the capital and ruling family on the Siamese side, and most of the territory on the French side. The ruler of Bassac, a Siamese sympathizer, was reported to have sided with the rebels in the hope he could get back the territories of Saravane and Attopeu when the “just ruler” came to reign.⁷¹ The French, however, were claiming the west bank portion of the Bassac Kingdom which they saw as being within their legal rights. Both the Siamese and the French were deeply suspicious of the motives of the other, the twenty-five kilometer zone on the Siamese side was essentially ungoverned, and relations over responsibilities for its control were strained.

Another point strongly emphasized by Dauplay was the millennial element. This contains the sense that the *Phu Mi Bun* have special powers from the spirits which makes them able to rule and dispense justice, to do miracles, and to have the quality of invulnerability.⁷² He further records the impression that this tradition of millennialism, spiritual power, and invulnerability was stronger among the non-Buddhist Kha than among the Buddhist Lao. The Lao around the Plateau, who had had long contact with the Kha, were seen to have adopted these elements of Kha tradition, but the more “pure” Lao of the Mekong and the Khong regions took this less seriously.⁷³

71) Bernard Bourotte, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

72) J.J. Dauplay, *op. cit.*, p. 56,

73) *Ibid.*, p. 65.

The issue of millennialism is a difficult one. Obviously, Dauplay cannot be entirely correct in interpreting this solely as a Kha phenomena, for the appeal of the millennial elements is heavily stressed in the Thai side of the rebellion, where the Kha were an almost inconsequential minority. Keyes argues that the potential for millennialism is inherent in the Theravada Buddhist traditions of Southeast Asia; that there is a recognition of people with extraordinary powers, and a proto-Bodhisattva ideal of the coming of the Maitreya Buddha.⁷⁴ Given this conceptual frame, Keyes argues that "millennialism appears to be most associated with crises in human relationships and the most central of these relationships is the distribution of power within society including both power over men and power over resources and wealth."⁷⁵

It has been shown that during the period of the rebellion, there was a serious crisis in the distribution of power within the society of the Lower Mekong Region. The panels found in the Saravane area portraying Ong Keo as a *Thevada* suggest the invocation of the proto-Bodhisattva Maitreya tradition. In addition there were repeated references to "Phu Mi Bun" (he who has merit) and "Thammikarat" (Ruler of Law or Ruler of Justice). On the Lao side of the river, and specifically among the non-Buddhist Kha, the more common reference was to invulnerability—as though invulnerability to bullets or personal harm was a kind of "proof" of the "legitimacy" of the *Phu Mi Bun* and his cause. The tradition of sorcery, spirit-mediums, and invulnerability is particularly strong in the Kha tradition, as has long been acknowledged by the Lao.⁷⁶ The point is that sorcery and millennialism are intertwined parts of both Thai-Lao and Kha traditions, and that while they may well have been 'vehicles' for the rebellion, they are less likely to have been its causes.

The main cause of the rebellion appears to lie in the far reaching political changes instituted by both the Siamese and the French. The

74) Charles Keyes, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

75) *Ibid.*, p. 4.

76) Kha sorcerers have been believed to have the knowledge of ceremonies that will render a person invulnerable, and by tradition one of the sons of the family of the "Kings of the Front" of Luang Prabang have been sent to Attopeu to have this ceremony performed. See Jean Larteguy, *The Bronze Drums* (London, 1967), pp. 29-30.

results of these changes severely dislocated the economic patterns and traditional leadership structures of the Lower Mekong Region.

In the political sphere, power traditionally held by various Lao elites had been taken over by "outsiders" and "foreigners"—the Siamese and the French. They had initiated the new order of reforms that imposed central government control, increased taxation, changed traditional trade patterns, and radically altered power relationships among central governments, local nobilities, and the local populace. The local rulers lost their control over taxation and manpower, and without this control, their traditional positions were no longer viable. The French diversion of the trade of Southern Laos from Ubon and Bangkok to Saigon further undermined the economic position of the area. Siamese and French suppression of the traditional Thai-Lao-Kha slave trade also contributed to the disruption of traditional social patterns.

The results of the political and economic changes fell the hardest on local ruling elites and secondarily on the local populace. This led to a crisis of authority, power relations, and social relationships. The local rulers had been displaced by government bureaucrats, and the bases of their traditional power had been eroded; however they presumably retained much of their traditional charisma and social legitimacy in the eyes of the local populace. Those who had not become government civil servants were ripe for leadership in the rebellion. Increased taxation, an imperfectly understood bureaucratic system, and confusion over who was in authority led many among the local populace to become willing followers in the uprising.

The background religious elements of the traditions of the Maitreya, the *Phu Mi Bun*, and the invulnerable sorcerer were there to be incorporated by the leaders of the rebellion. By drawing upon these elements, the rebellion's leaders became focal points for the dissatisfactions of the populace. Without this religiously sanctioned leadership, it would have been far more difficult to have organized the rebellion's followers.

The rebellion was the reaction to a profound and systematic dislocation of the traditional life of the region. Once the rebellion had begun, the local populace found itself in a situation of instability and confusion. Two sets of elites were vying for control of the region. The

Siamese and the French represented the new bureaucratic order; the leaders of the rebellion a return to the old "feudal" order—with the *Phu Mi Bun* reinstating the "rule of law" the people understood. The rhythm of events was temporarily suspended—people in the region were not sure which way control would go, and many were attracted to the rebellion.

King Chulalongkorn showed a deep insight into the causes of the rebellion when he discussed with Prince Damrong the case of a would-be *Phu Mi Bun* who tried to set up an independent *muang*. The King felt that this man was not crazy, but knew the old Lao administrative methods practiced "in the reign of Rama III when he set up towns for people from Vientiane."⁷⁷ King Chulalongkorn saw that the rebellion was an attempt to turn back to older governing traditions in the face of dislocations caused by the new reforms.

The rebellion was a widespread but short-lived cause in Siam. It was suppressed within a few months, marking the successful administrative incorporation of the Lao Northeast by the Siamese central government. In Laos, however, the success of the French was less than complete. The Southern Lao were brought under the French administrative structure, but the French were unsuccessful in suppressing some of the most important tribal leaders. Though the French have been replaced by the Royal Lao Government, the legacy of the rebellion is still a part of the present struggle over which elites shall govern the peoples of Laos.

77) *Phraratchahatlekha . . . , op. cit., p. 434.*