Nghe-anh, for joint operations with Nguyen forces, which would march up from the south. The Thai and Lao annals provide some support for this conclusion, although not in 1798.

In February 1799, Nguyen Anh sent a request to Bangkok, asking for Lao and Khmer troops to harass the Tay-son in Nghe-anh from the rear (presumably by marching up the Mekong, crossing the cordillera and attacking outlying posts). Meanwhile, Nguyen forces would attack from the south (Thipakòrawong 1978: 226–7). Ordinarily, Nguyen Anh's forces sailed up the Vietnamese coast each year, catching the seasonal winds that begin in late May. Rama I realised, however, that an army operating in the cordillera in June would be caught in the annual rains, which usually began about that time, and that too many men would be lost because of resulting fevers and disease. He therefore gave orders for 5,000 Khmer troops to assist the Nguyen, not in Nghe-anh but in the assault on Qui-nhon (which fell during the 1799 attacks).

The Thai chronicles do not record a response concerning the request for Lao forces, but the basic proposal seems to have been accepted in a modified plan. One Lao chronicle records the arrival of 20,000 Thai soldiers at Nakhòn Phanom in 1801/2, for operations against the Vietnamese at a battle site identified only as Tha Sida (PP70b: 143)—obviously a river landing called Sida by the Lao, and possibly in the river basin leading down to Vinh. Another Lao chronicle shows that Vientiane Lao forces were fighting the Vietnamese during the same season in Phuan territory. Thus, during the campaign season leading to Nguyen Anh's victories in June and July 1802, both Lao and Thai forces seem to have been in the field, attacking outlying positions on the Tay-son western frontier, while Nguyen forces moved north up the coast.

9 MILLENARIAN MOVEMENTS IN LAOS, 1895–1936:

DEPICTIONS BY MODERN LAO HISTORIANS

BERNARD GAY

What are the rôle played and the place occupied by historical research in Lao society since decolonisation and the proclamation of the country's independence in 1953? History, a long-neglected field, has become a subject of national concern since 1975. The change occurred in 1974–5, after the short-lived Provisional Government of National Union was formed in April 1974. When the communist party assumed total power in December 1975, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) superseded the Kingdom of Laos.

During the entire period of the monarchy and revolutionary war from 1945 to 1975, only slight interest in the study of history was shown by the pro-Western Lao élite who retained control of the administration in Vientiane. The lack of development of a Lao history curriculum, even for purposes of elementary-level teaching, was exacerbated by the fact that the Ministry of Education relied on French teachers, who were neither trained in history nor knowledgeable about the country's past. They did not even have a command of the Lao language adequate to draft history textbooks for Lao secondary schools. In the portion of the country controlled by the revolutionary Pathet Lao party, the historical pamphlets that were issued aimed only at glorifying the great deeds performed by the revolutionary forces in their struggle against the 'imperialism' of America and its allies.

Since its founding, the government of the Lao PDR has devoted its attention to drafting both a national history and a history of the Lao revolutionary party. In order to paint such a vast historical canvas and carry out the ambitious plan to encompass the entire period from prehistoric times to the end of French colonial rule, the official published version will be chronologically divided into three parts. Thus far, only the third volume (Thongsa et al. 1989) has appeared in print. It begins with the arrival of the French in Laos during the 1880s and ends with the last days of the French administration. Its principal theme is the struggle for independence.

Among the episodes of Lao history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the popular movements that unfolded in the centre and south of the country between 1895 and 1936 have been a primary focus of investigation and analysis by modern Lao historians. These movements are well worth examining, both for their subject matter and for their analyses, which are illustrative of certain trends in contemporary Lao historiography. The first part of the present study is devoted to the events that took place between 1895 and 1936. This part relies essentially on work conducted in the French archives and in the field in southern Laos. Full documentation of the source materials cited in this part of the study can be found in Gay (1987). The second part of the study examines the representations of these events by Lao historians.

French archives are a rich source of primary materials on the Lao millenarian movements that began in 1895 and continued almost to the end of the colonial era. Three major phases can be distinguished by place and by time. The first phase consists of demonstrations on the Bòlawen (Bolovens) plateau in southern Laos, between 1895 and 1898. A more intense and longer-lived series of contestations was enacted in the same region between 1899 and 1936. The third phase encompasses the disturbances that erupted in Savannakhet Province and continued there and elsewhere from 1899 to 1903.

FIRST PHASE, 1895–8

In 1895 and twice in 1898, the fertile Bòlawen plateau was the focus of excitement provoked by individuals who called themselves holy men: the *phu mi bun*, meaning literally persons with Buddhist merit. These public demonstrations were not widespread and affected only villages inhabited by some of the Proto-Indochinese ethnic minorities. The disturbances were sparked off by two individuals who were Lao—the ethnic group that was politically and socially predominant in Laos but not strongly represented in the troubled area. The two Lao men were apparently strangers to the plateau area, and both were former Buddhist monks. By posing as magicians and pretending to have great magical powers, they imposed themselves on the gullible villagers, who were animists rather than believers in Buddhism.

The Lao man who initiated the movement in 1895 is known as Ong Thòng. (*Ong* is an honorific. His assumed name, Thòng, means 'gold' or 'golden'.) He was born in Bangkok and represented himself to the villagers as 'a son of the king of Vientiane, inspired by the gods'. He made himself the de facto governor of the district of Dasia and asserted that he was responsible for stopping the spread of a cholera epidemic. In recompense, the inhabitants of villages that he had 'spared' from this plague were exhorted to pay sums of money to him. The government authorities, not surprisingly, took a dim view of his activities and his interference in local administration. But when they arrested him, he managed to escape. His escape was interpreted by the villagers as a miraculous occurrence, which reinforced his reputation as a person who could exercise extraordinary powers. This monk-magician reappeared in 1901 as one of the protagonists in the Bòlawen movement, which he helped to lead from 1901 to 1910.

Another movement arose also in 1895, in an area neighbouring the Bòlawen plateau but centred on Kham Thòng Yai, a minor administrative centre in the river basin of the Se Dòn. This movement was led by another holy man—known as Ong Khao, probably because he wore robes of white (*khao* in Lao)—who was assisted by a faithful lieutenant known as Ong Dam (*dam* meaning

black) and ten followers. Kham Thòng Yai was one of the crucibles of millenarian activities from 1901 to 1910. During the violent events of 1902, which spread through the Lao-speaking towns on the right bank of the Mekong under Thai control, holy men known as Ong Khao and Ong Dam were among the leaders. A man called Ong Dam was arrested in the Bòlawen area at Ban Chalang on 31 January 1902. Ong Khao first came to public attention in 1894, when he dispensed 'justice' in the tribal area around Ban Dasia. This holy man performed his ceremonies using objects stolen from the Catholic mission in the Kontum plateau area. After escaping the first time from the agents of the princely ruler of Champasak, he was arrested again. Once released, he abandoned the claim that he possessed magic power. Also associated with this movement was a man named Kaen, who was from Phaya Fai and likewise claimed to have supernatural powers. He exhibited his powers to the local populace for some time, but then he was arrested and fell into obscurity.

SECOND PHASE, 1899–1936

The second major phase of millenarian movements was centred on the Bòlawen plateau and lasted from 1899 to 1936. More than thirty authors have made studies of these events: a series of confrontations that were among the most momentous and long-lasting encountered by the French colonial authorities in Indochina.

Historians have previously regarded 1900 or 1901 as the starting point of this phase of Lao millenarian movements. But in fact, the incidents began in 1899, when the local Lao authorities first warned the French administration about the activities of a certain Nai Mi. Nai Mi belonged to the Ngeh ethnic minority,[1] was a son of a village head of Ban Chakam and acquired a reputation as a healer. As his renown spread among the villages, his 'miracles' drew a large number of people, to whom he distributed candles that were supposed to ensure happiness. According to information gathered by French commissioner J.-J. Dauplay, Nai Mi was formerly a monk, had become literate in Pali and Lao, had been instructed in

sacred Buddhist texts and had once performed a pilgrimage to a sacred Buddhist site in Bangkok. In February 1901, Nai Mi proclaimed himself (or perhaps was recognised by his entourage) to be a holy man (*phu mi bun*), and he adopted the name Ong Kaeo (*kaeo* meaning 'precious gemstone'). He had ceremonial buildings erected on two mountains—Phu Tayin and Phu Takao—and invited the populace to attend a traditional Lao religious festival (*bun*). Up to this time, the colonial authorities paid no attention to him, despite the reports made by local Lao officials.

The mountain-side ceremonies, which drew together thousands of people of heterogeneous political and cultural backgrounds, immediately became a source of anxiety for the French authorities. Among the themes of Ong Kaeo's public discourses were religious topics tinged with Buddhist eschatology. One general belief, which is common to all areas where Theravada Buddhism prevails, is that Theravada Buddhism itself will last for 5,000 years and will be succeeded by another form of Buddhism. (The origin of this belief is a very late and apocryphal prophesy attributed to Buddhagosa.) In a letter written in May 1901, Ong Kaeo announced that the 5,000 years marking the end of Buddhism had already elapsed and that a holy man had become manifest. In another letter, he presented himself as the supreme head of a new religion that had just come into existence.

Although these notions were probably incomprehensible to the French, and to most other people who were not Buddhists, Ong Kaeo adopted them into his religious synchretism, which also made use of other beliefs that are deeply entrenched in all communities in the region. These beliefs include the existence of individuals who have supernatural powers and can perform miraculous acts, such as resuscitating the dead, healing all kinds of illness, transforming ordinary stones into gold, becoming invisible, flying through the air, ensuring agricultural abundance and dispensing amulets that bestow invulnerability on the bearers. While presenting himself as one such person, Ong Kaeo incorporated a political motive into his message to the people. He proclaimed himself a king or ruler (*chao somdet*) and simultaneously called upon the French to withdraw to their homeland.

Early in 1901, the movement was still a peaceful one. In February, for example, Ong Kaeo received a French trader in a friendly way. Suddenly, around March or April 1901, Ong Kaeo became bellicose. Assertions advanced by contemporary observers to explain this change are numerous and contradictory. The Catholic missionaries and some French officials, however, perceived the fatal combination of beliefs and exercise of authority that was at work. The deep-seated belief of the populace that Ong Kaeo was a person with supernatural powers, juxtaposed with the intrusion of the forces of law and order into the area where Ong Kaeo displayed his miracles, transformed a relatively innocuous local drama (one of many that have doubtless been played over the centuries) into a movement with a hostile objective. Official interference precipitated open and radical confrontation, aimed at the local Lao officials and the French colonial authorities.

Commissioner Remy and the Lao governor of Saravane attempted on 15 March to apprehend Ong Kaeo at Nòng Mek and to put an end to his public performances and religious activities. Their failure to capture him drew the attention of a far greater audience than Ong Kaeo alone could ever have attracted. Once again, an avoidance of arrest was equated, in the minds of the people, with proof of miraculous powers. Those who believed in his miracles, along with others who had remained skeptical thus far, now became fully convinced of his powers. They willingly placed themselves under his command, and he sent them on several forays against local police posts. Their lack of success in these attacks did not prevent them from continuing to believe in the powers of their holy man.

Dissension between French officials at different posts—a characteristic of bureaucracy throughout the colonial period—enabled Ong Kaeo to remain on the run for years and to evade the patrols sent out by commissioners at Pak Se, Saravane and Attapeu to arrest him. The ineptitude of such officials encouraged him all the more to pursue the tactics of guerrilla war and, from the safety of his forest refuge in the mountains, to launch an ambush against anyone who ventured into the mountains in search of him. Ultimately, it took a blockade of the Bòlawen plateau to put an end

to his activities. He was captured and he died on 10 November 1910—killed (so the officials reported) while trying to escape.

After the death of Ong Kaeo, one of the lieutenants of his movement, named Kommadam, officially remained a rebel but concurrently cultivated good relations with the head of the minor French administrative post that was responsible for keeping him under surveillance. Kommadam maintained a low profile until 1925 and then declared himself 'Lord of the Khòm'. (The title that he assumed, *Chao Phaya Khòm*, implied in Lao that he presided over the spirits of a vanished race, the Khòm, who are imagined to be the builders of the ancient stone temples of Champasak and other towns.) He claimed to have magic objects in his possession, to be omniscient and to have been sent by the heavens to establish a kingdom of upland tribal peoples. The tribal peoples in part of the Bòlawen plateau acknowledged and believed in his claims. His following swelled between the years 1930 and 1936—a period in which the effects of the global economic recession became progressively felt in Laos. In spite of regular pursuit by Lao officials, he maintained a guerrilla resistance on the Bòlawen plateau for a whole decade. Finally, in September 1936 a military unit succeeded in killing him.

THIRD PHASE, 1899–1903

The third phase of millenarianism centred on Savannakhet Province and is often called the 'Phò Kaduat' revolt. During 1899 the Mekong River was criss-crossed by 'preachers' who originated in Laos. (According to Thai reports, however, they came from the little administrative centre of Khong Chiam on the Thai side of the river.) They announced the coming of a holy man and foretold dire misfortunes that would befall anyone who failed to obey his orders. They also prophesied that a catastrophe would occur during the second week of April 1902; that it would last seven days and seven nights; and that it would be followed by a Golden Age for all who expiated their sins according to the holy man's commands. These prophesies spread throughout Savannakhet Province.

Disturbances developed rapidly, which necessitated the despatch of a unit of the local gendarmerie from Sepon. On 30 November 1901, at the village of Ban Huai Büng, the headman and his wife Mae Bing (the self-proclaimed queen of the tribal peoples) were arrested. Also arrested, at Ban Talai, were Phò Bing and his wife—another Mae Bing, who was popularly recognised as the mother of all holy men. French attempts to restore law and order produced no tangible results, and the agitation continued to mount with increasing fervour. A similar millenarian movement was concurrently in progress on the Thai side of the Mekong during March 1902. It was crushed as a result of swift action by Thai military forces.

On the Lao shore, in fulfilment of a Lao oral tradition, a holy man known as Ong Pha Chan (*pha chan* signifying 'the moon' in Lao) presented himself to the people and performed ceremonies with active assistance from the head of the monastery in Ban Sida. His given name was Adoni, and he was also known as Phò Kaduat (literally 'Father Kaduat'). He invited everyone to venerate a statue of the Buddha, which he claimed had fallen from the heavens. People from more than 120 villages were convinced that this miracle had indeed occurred, and they flocked to his ceremonies, where they received from the holy man a selection of incantations (*mantra*) and magic verses (*gāthā*). These, they were assured, would make them invulnerable.

The French authorities, fearful of incipient guerrilla insurgency, responded by sending an armed force to deal with the problem. This attempt, in turn, provoked a violent response from the massed villagers, and the violence spiralled to the point of frontal attacks between the opposing forces. Finally, in December 1902, the movement began to collapse. By that time, most of the leaders had been arrested or killed.

MILLENARIAN NATURE OF THE MOVEMENTS

The movements described above were millenarian. The term millenarian in the Lao context has a typological dimension above and beyond the historical Judeo-Christian meaning of this term, in

the sense that in Laos it refers to a combination of destruction and ensuing regeneration. It therefore carries a dual religious message: the end of the world as we know it, and the re-appearance of a past Golden Age. This end of the world, followed by the rebirth of an era of bliss and prosperity, can take any of several forms. It can be perceived as either distant or near, or as determined (or not determined) by some sacred text that specifies the moment of the great day and its duration (limited in time or eternal). The return of a Golden Age, which is often mentioned in creation myths, may be perceived as collective, universal or restricted to a group; it is sometimes preceded by a natural cataclysm and always brings about radical change. The notion of returning to a Golden Age generally combines multiple aspirations, including the religious (to purify the faith), the political (to found or re-establish a political order, a dynasty, an ethnicity or national independence) and the socio-economic (to proclaim equality, justice and prosperity). It is often linked with the coming-to-earth of an exceptional person, such as a divinity, messiah or prophet.

A perusal of southern Lao history reveals evidence of such movements and their leaders in 1578–9, in 1791 (Chiang Kaeo), in 1819–20 (Sakiat Kòng) and around 1850 (Mò Ha). These four movements have all the aforementioned characteristics, as did the Bòlawen movement between 1899 and 1910. The striking religious aspects in the Bòlawen case are its predicted end of the fifth Buddhist millennium (thus fulfiling the earlier prediction that Theravada Buddhism would end) and the arrival of a holy man—both of which are documented in Ong Kaeo's May 1901 letter. In a June 1901 letter, Ong Kaeo represented himself as the supreme head of a new religion that would supersede Theravada Buddhism. Then he announced the return to a Golden Age, in which rice (the Lao staple of life) would grow by itself in the fields without cultivation—a theme found in written and oral legends of most South-East Asian countries. At the same time, passing himself off as a miracle worker, he performed feats of magic and organised religious ceremonies. At these gatherings, in return for gifts, he distributed amulets to confer invulnerability and beeswax candles to ensure happiness and prosperity.

Complex religious ingredients are present in the Savannakhet Province movement between 1899 and 1903. The end of the world was announced for the month of April 1902, at which time the earth was supposed to be immersed in total darkness for seven days and seven nights. Anyone hoping to survive this scourge would have to adhere scrupulously to a set of prescriptions (taboos on certain foods, an interdiction against using money, an exhortation for virgin girls to marry), to perform a pilgrimage to the most sacred stupa in the region (the That Phanom on the Mekong) and to obey the instructions of the holy men when they appeared. The coming of the holy men was heralded, and the names of two of them in particularly (Phò Kaduat and Ong Buddha) were announced. Finally, a Golden Age was predicted, which would take concrete form through the restoration of the Lao kingdom of Lan Sang, the appearance of a universal monarch (an *avatār* of a future Buddha) and the departure of all foreigners (meaning the Thai and the French).

The movement directed by Kommadam from 1926 to 1936 likewise had a religious component. Kommadam represented himself as a holy man who was endowed with magic powers. He claimed he was sent to earth by celestial spirits, to destroy the society that was imposed on the peoples of the Bòlawen region under Lao tutelage. His mission was to replace the prevailing order with an indigenous Khòm kingdom, which would ensure happiness for all the Proto-Indochinese peoples.

INTERPRETATIONS OF THE MOVEMENTS

Three-fourths of the studies published about these movements have been written by foreign historians. Studies conducted by Lao are primarily literary (Kathay Don Sasorith) or are overtly political (party members of the Neo Lao Haksat or authors writing officially for the Lao PDR) or attempt to be scientific (Thongsa et al., Mongkhol Sasorith, Sa Nhanh Dongdeng and Chanthi Saignamongkhoun). Their goals are thus different.

Kathay Don Sasorith in his book *Pour rire un peu* (1947) tries merely to be anecdotal. But his account of Kommadam's cordial

relations for many years with a local French official provides insights and information that help to explain why this unruly chief had no trouble with the French until 1925.

By contrast, a book that has some political agenda to orient it will endeavour to integrate its interpretation of these millenarian movements into an anti-colonial context and to link the movements with the broader struggle waged by the Lao people for their independence. For example, Kaysone Phomvihane places Ong Kaeo, Kommadam and Phò Kaduat among the five great heroes of Lao history since the fourteenth century.

Among the authors who attempt to be scientific in their approaches to the history of millenarian movements, a distinction has to be drawn between those few who have some training in history and those who have none at all. It is also important to distinguish between authors who are obliged to present the official viewpoint and those who are not. Finally, a distinction should be made between writings that are based on field research—collecting testimony directly from the actors in these dramas, and drawing upon the traces of them imprinted on the collective memory—and writings that are limited solely to the ideas that can be formulated while working in an office.

How do Lao writers present the millenarian movements? Lao views of the genesis and the termination of the phenomena outlined above can be divided into four trends. According to Lao authors, the movements are (1) purely political, (2) political with recourse to manipulation of magic and religious beliefs, (3) religious and political or (4) social and superstitious.

The school of thought that presents these movements as having a purely political origin is headed by two major figures who have examined the Bòlawen and Savannakhet movements: one schematically (Phoumi Vongvichit 1968) and the other with brevity (Kaysone Phomvihane 1975, 1976 and 1978). Phoumi Vongvichit, a member of the Politburo of the ruling party and acting president of the Lao PDR until 1991, anchors the origins of the movements within the aims and methods of French colonisation. He argues that the colonial system needed to keep the people in ignorance (and hence in misery), in order to exploit and pillage natural resources,

and that this system used weapons of division, repression and obscurantism. He does not precisely describe these brutal methods but asserts that the people were forced to react against them. The people thus took arms against excessive exactions, including heavy taxation, forced labour and requisitions of goods.

For Kaysone Phomvihane, general secretary of the Communist Party until his death in 1992, these movements are firmly rooted in the traditions of heroic struggle waged by the Lao people against foreign aggressors, which can be traced back to the founding of the first independent Lao kingdom more than six centuries ago. It is notable that the heroes he cites prior to the struggle against French colonialism are King Setthathirat, who resisted the first Burmese invasions in 1569–70, and Chao Anuwong, who fought for independence against the Thai in 1827–8. This portrayal of history implicitly acknowledges that the Lao had good relations with their other neighbours, including the Chinese, Vietnamese and Cambodians.

A second school of thought gives prominence to the political facets of the movement, while also acknowledging that the manipulation of popular cultural and religious beliefs is a subsidiary explanation. This is the marxist school of the Committee for Social Science Research (Thongsa et al. 1989). If its position were accepted and officially endorsed by the political decision-makers, this endorsement would represent a step forward in taking into account the role of mentalities and religious beliefs in the march of history. Building on the analysis of Phoumi Vongvichit, this school of thought draws upon evidence that reveals the oppression and exploitation of national resources by the colonial regime. It completes the picture by mentioning two other factors leading to the revolts: the famine of 1902, which decimated numerous villages in Savannakhet Province, and the system of slavery, under which the population of the Bòlawen plateau had suffered during more than a century of Thai rule.

To these political, social and economic causes, this school of thought adds the manipulation, by leaders of the Bòlawen and Savannakhet movements, of popular belief in magic and the millenarian expectation of the coming of a universal ruler (known

as Phaya Thammikarat), as a means of gaining the trust of the population and provoking them to rise against the authorities. According to this school of thought, this strategy had been devised and agreed upon by all the heads of the insurrection on both banks of the Mekong when they met at Khemmarat in 1900. Curiously enough, some members of this school even say that contemporary French authors identified Phò Kaduat and Ong Kaeo as the foretold universal ruler.

A third school accords equal importance to religious factors and to the political goal of independence. The attention of this school is concentrated only on the movement in Savannakhet, although this focus is never explained. This school of thought is represented by the Collectif for World Peace, a marxist-controlled organisation, which issued a booklet through the publishing house of the Pathet Lao in 1953. The theme is also portrayed by Sa Nhanh Dongdeng in his biography of Phò Kaduat published in 1974.

The last trend is represented by Mongkhol Sasorith (1973), a researcher educated in France who has progressive views. He attributes social and superstitious origins to the movement led by Ong Kaeo and social ones to the Savannakhet movement. Referring to the reconstruction of Laos undertaken by French colonisation, he explains these movements in terms of civil oppression exercised by the Lao against the peoples of the mountains—oppression that had caused numerous revolts in the past. Whereas the Lao acknowledged symbolically that the upland peoples were the indigenous inhabitants of the land, the Lao nonetheless imposed on them heavy taxes, harsh forced labour and multifarious other exactions. This existing near-enslavement was exacerbated by additional demands from the central colonial authorities, including more taxation, services and requisitions. To this list of grievances, Mongkhol Sasorith adds a dimension not mentioned by other writers: the arrogance, the brutality and the incomprehension of some French colonial officials. Another difference is that he adopts the viewpoint of a colonial author, citing—among various reasons for Kommadam's defiance of the French—the prohibition by French authorities of the traditional practice of slave hunting, which was a source of appreciable revenue

in southern Laos. Finally, Mongkhol Sasorith notes that Ong Kaeo used numerous superstitions to strengthen his leadership as a holy man, which he defined as

> a kind of Messiah who, having received from the spirits certain special powers (which rendered him invulnerable and capable of making miracles), was entrusted with the mission of ruling over men and ensuring justice among them. (Sasorith 1973: 146–7)

These four views put forward by Lao authors, on the genesis of the movements in the Bòlawen plateau and Savannakhet Province, require some comment. The authors trace the movements etiologically only to frustrations and grievances: economic (tax pressure and natural catastrophes that generate misery), social (ethnic enslavement and exploitation) or political (vicissitudes of political power and rejection of colonial authority). The human factor is never directly taken into account as a possible motive force behind these movements. For ideological reasons, Lao historians have presented these movements as anti-colonial revolts and have refused to take into account their genesis. In this way, they avoid reference to the irrational beliefs that marxism condemns. Finally, by studying these movements only in their second phase, when transformed into armed struggles, Lao researchers are able to point to a national resistance against the colonial system in southern Laos.

On the other hand, certain hesitations and variations are notable within the marxist perception of these movements, especially with regard to the importance of religious and cultural factors in their emergence. These factors were perceived as central to the 1953 study by the Collectif for World Peace, but they have since been reduced to subsidiary causes and are portrayed simply as a tactic adopted by the leaders of the movements. The successive shifts in emphasis demonstrate the evolution of marxist thought in Laos, which started with a far-from-orthodox ideological interpretation that can be attributed to a lack of ideological training. A rigid marxist position then came to the fore, based on rejection of irrationality, although it soon returned to a tentative effort to take account of factual realities. It is interesting that the only researcher (Mongkhol Sasorith) who

discusses the superstitions inherent in these movements was educated in France.

Archival and published documents demonstrate that none of these movements began as insurrections against the colonial system. Whether in the Bòlawen plateau region or Savannakhet Province, a long period elapsed between the moment when a miracle worker initiated a movement and the moment when the movement was transformed into an insurrection against colonial power. Moreover, it was only when colonial administrators decided to arrest a miracle worker—and failed—that the movement became radicalised, bellicose and opposed to the colonial power. To this the archives bear witness.

The gap that exists between the actual course of events earlier in this century and its representation in subsequent writings is created by the dogmatism of the authors and, in particular, by a materialist vision of reality that minimises and often ignores the psychological, religious and cultural variables influencing these movements. These constraints permitted the authors to envisage only one aspect of the appearance and repression of these movements. This blinkered portrayal of events was reinforced by an ideological concept of what history *had* to be like, if it were to be shaped according to the desired tradition of the national struggle to safeguard (or recover) independence and of the march of societies towards socialism. These reductionist histories, mutilating reality, led to the creation of a gallery of heroes, who are more civic models than historical persons, and to the perpetuation, against hard facts, of an illusion of ethnic cohesion and harmony. In re-appropriating these episodes of their national past, contemporary Lao historians have tailored them to the dimensions of an official history.

NOTES

1. Concerning the Ngeh minority, see Lebar et al. (1964: 144).