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# THE CANOE RACING RITUAL OF LUANG PRABANG

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*Jos D. M. Platenkamp*

**Abstract:** This article presents an analysis of the canoe racing ritual conducted in the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers bordering the town of Luang Prabang in North Laos as part of an annual ritual cycle. It focuses upon the ways in which the socio-political order, articulated in the ritual, is valorized in reference to a model of cosmological sovereignty that is manifested in offerings brought to aquatic spirit manifestations of a primordial King and his Queen-Consorts. It identifies the present-day changes in the ritual that have been implemented by the socialist Lao state as part of an endeavor to replace the principle of monarchic sovereignty with the authority of the state and to supplant the socio-cosmological understanding of society with a corporate model of bureaucracy and market economy variables.

**Keywords:** canoe races, Laos, myths, rituals, socio-cosmological whole, socio-political order

... and from altar to altar they sought peace

— Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Book IV

In a brief, perceptive essay, Charles Archaimbault, the late *grand maître* of Laotian studies, examined the various forms in which canoe racing rituals were performed in different regions of Laos in the middle of the twentieth century (Archaimbault 1966). While he observed that seemingly similar canoe racing rituals were also conducted in other parts of continental Southeast Asia and southern China, he nevertheless rejected the idea advocated at the time<sup>1</sup> that in all cases the meaning of the rituals could be reduced to a single function, namely, to facilitate the irrigation of the rice fields by combating aquatic spirits that were intervening in the water regime of the main rivers and their

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tributaries. Comparatively scrutinizing the rituals conducted in Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Champassak—the three kingdoms in which Laos was divided until its unification under French colonial rule—he argued that in each case the canoe racing ritual should be understood as a “multi-functional ritual complex, the structure and functions of which vary according to the local subcultures” (ibid.: 389; my translation). Even though hydrological concerns, presumably reflecting an “ancient substratum,” were discernable in the three cases examined, “the canoe races may recount a phase of a historical-legendary scenario or be charged with ethical and political intentions” (ibid.). Archaimbault thus suggested that in spite of a superficial similarity among them, in each case the ritual expressed locally specific and hence variable ideas and values about the mythological, moral, and political order of the polity in question.

I aim to develop this line of thought further by examining the canoe racing rituals (*bun khaeng huea*) conducted at the present time in the Nam Khan river where, at its confluence with the Mekong river, the town of Luang Prabang in North Laos is located. I shall take into account the comprehensive socio-political changes brought about by the abolition of kingship, the subsequent establishment of the socialist Lao People’s Democratic Republic (LPDR) in 1975, and the more recent liberalization of the economy. I shall focus on whether—and, if so, how—these developments are expressed in the ritual in question and what such expressions reveal about their overall ideological valorization.<sup>2</sup>

## Historical Context

Prior to the abolition of kingship in 1975, Archaimbault had observed how canoe races were held in Luang Prabang twice a year. The first race took place in the ninth Lao calendrical month (i.e., August).<sup>3</sup> On the twelfth day of the waning moon, the crews of two canoes belonging to the palace offered flowers on behalf of the King to an aquatic spirit whose abode was localized at the junction of the Mekong and the Nam Dong rivers. After these offerings had been made, the canoes competed on the Mekong river, paddling toward the finish at the confluence with the Nam Dong river under the eyes of the King, his dignitaries, pages, and the royal orchestra. Afterward, the King awarded both crews—the winners as well as the losers—the same gifts of fruits, liquor, and snacks.<sup>4</sup> In 2004, elderly informants elaborated upon these events. They confirmed that in the past the first canoe races were held near the Nam Dong river by crews coming from the villages in that area. Before the actual competitions took place, each crew had to bring offerings of flowers, candles, and three sticks of incense to an aquatic spirit localized in the pond Nyok “that never falls dry” near the village of Sangkhalok.<sup>5</sup> They also recalled how, after these gifts had been made, the crews paddled to the Mortar Whirlpool (*khok thon*), situated under the right bank and opposite to the temple Wat Phabathai, where at the bottom of the whirlpool a mortar-shaped rock is the abode of the spirit Black (Dressed) Lady (*na:ng dam*). The spirit Black Lady is an ‘owner of the water, owner of the landing place’ (*chao nam chao tha:*). Archaimbault had

further observed that two days later the same events took place once more, this time at a different location. First, the crews offered flowers to the aquatic spirit *thao thong khuan* (identified in 2004 as Sir Large Field, *a:y thong kuang*) residing at the convergence of the Mekong and the Nam Khan rivers (see diagram 1). Then, once more witnessed by the King, the crews competed on the Nam Khan river, starting at its confluence with the Mekong and finishing at its confluence with the rivulet Huai Kang.

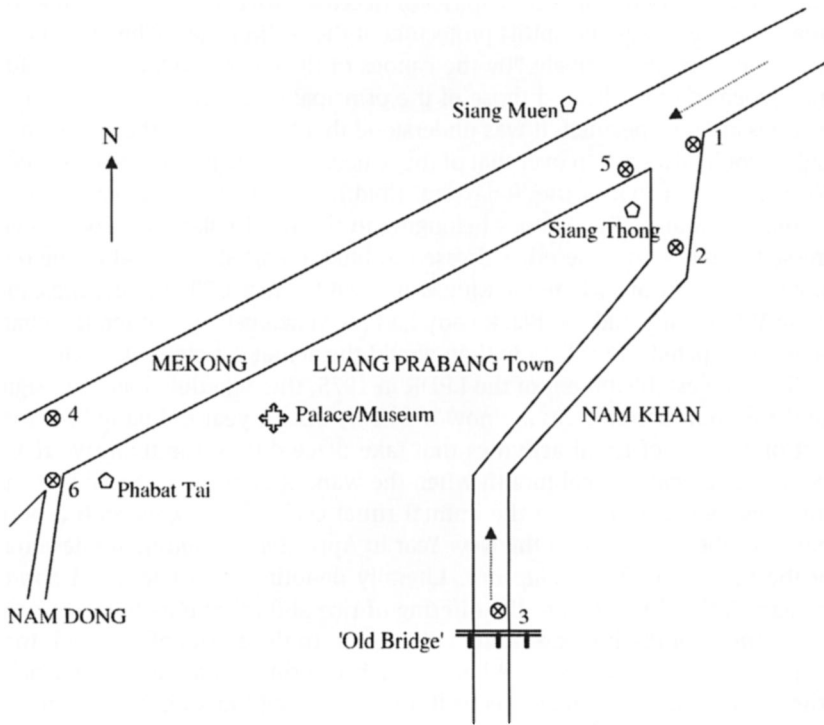


DIAGRAM 1 Cosmological Topography

Legend:

⊗ riverine spirit (*phi:*) or *naga* (*ngueak*) site

◻ village/town quarter (*ba:n*)

- (1) *naga* Sir Large Field (*a:y thong kuang*), residing at a rock that emerges from the water during the dry season named Tablet-Shaped Rock Bridging the Sky (*kon ka:y fa:*)
- (2) *naga* Ruffled-Haired Lady (*na:ng phom fuea*), residing at a rock that is submerged during the rainy season near the landing called Elephant Landing Place (*tha: sa:ng*)
- (3) *naga* Sir Golden Youngest Child (*tha:o kham la:*), residing in the Forest Landing Place (*tha: pafuean*) at the foot of a pillar of the Old Bridge at a large boulder that emerges during the dry season
- (4) *naga* Black (Dressed) Lady (*na:ng dam*), residing at a mortar-shaped rock in the Mortar Whirlpool (*khok thon*)
- (5) *naga* White (Dressed) Lady (*na:ng don*), residing in the Boat Whirlpool (*khok huea*)
- (6) Pond *Nyok*

Canoe races took place again in the twelfth Lao month (i.e., October) as part of the ritual activities centered on the That Luang, the reliquary stupa of the Kingdom. On the thirteenth day of the waxing moon, the leader of each crew put an offering of two plates of boiled chicken, fruits, tobacco quid, and liquor in the bow and stern of the royal canoe in order to “sustain the canoe and its hundred and twenty souls” (Archaimbault 1966: 385). Inside the canoe he placed two more plates with food, flowers, and candles. These were then offered at the altar dedicated to the ancestral spirits of deceased royal crews and to the rocks where the *naga* (aquatic spirit) protectors of the realm reside. Thereupon canoe races were run successively “by the canoes of the Queens (Queen of the Right and Queen of the Left) and those of the principal dignitaries” (ibid.); their trajectories are not specified. It was understood that the canoe of the ‘Queen of the Right’ would always win over that of the ‘Queen of the Left’ and the canoe of the ‘Vice King’ over that of the ‘Rajavong’ (ibid.). In 2001, my informants recalled a similar scenario. Two canoes belonging to the royal palace, one with a crew dressed in red shirts, the other dressed in blue, escorted the royal canoe on its way to the dais from where the King witnessed the races. Then, after the canoes of the White Lady and the Black Lady had raced against each other, the guards’ canoes competed as well. Only then would the actual competition begin.

Since the establishment of the LPDR in 1975, this schedule has been significantly altered. Canoe races are now held only once a year in Luang Prabang as part of a series of ritual activities that take place during the final two days of the ninth Lao calendrical month when the waning moon is still visible.<sup>6</sup> These practices, being a phase in the annual ritual cycle that begins with a performance of the Lao Ritual of the New Year in April (*bun pi: may*), are designated by the name *hò khao padap din*. Literally denoting ‘rice packets decorating the earth’, the title refers to the offering of rice and other gifts to the ancestral spirits (*phi:*) of the house and the village, and to the spirits of the land, roads, bridges, forests, and rivers. Whereas such offering rituals are performed in other Lao towns and villages as well, only in Luang Prabang do they immediately precede the canoe racing ritual. In the other towns, including Vientiane, Savannakhet, and Champassak, the races are held as part of the celebrations ending the Buddhist Lent in mid-October.

My informants in Luang Prabang maintained that previously the timing of these canoe races in the different parts of the country reflected a ranking order among the domains (*mueang*), in which Luang Prabang as the royal seat took the first position. Therefore, only after the ritual had been conducted there could communities elsewhere perform it as well. My informants further explained, “In former times, in the ninth Lao month, the King, the prime minister, and his ministers should be present during the canoe race in Luang Prabang. When during the eleventh month they had canoe races in Vientiane, the King should be present there. If there were races in Vientiane and in Luang Prabang at the same time, who should be present where?” This indicates that the timing of the canoe racing rituals in the different parts of the country was a function of the political system that prevailed during the periods in question. Hence, along with the abolition of kingship and the loss of political status, this meant that

the rituals formerly conducted in Luang Prabang on two different occasions (in the ninth and twelfth Lao calendrical months) were now reduced to a single performance. What has remained are the races held at the Nam Khan river at the closure of the ninth Lao month; they coincide with the offering of gifts to the dead but no longer with the performance of ceremonies for the Buddhist That Luang reliquary of the kingdom.

The interpretation of the ritual's significance put forward by Archaimbault leans heavily on this former association of the second round of canoe races with the That Luang ceremonies. He had observed that in these ceremonies in Luang Prabang, a primeval ancestral couple, who according to the myths had once "trampled the earth into existence," played a key role. The dancing performances by masked representatives of these ancestral spirits mimicked their legendary creation of the Kingdom out of the waters. Although he did not specify their names, Archaimbault obviously was referring to the Grand Deities (*the:wada: luang*), the Paternal Grandfather Nyue and Paternal Grandmother Nyue (*pu: nyue nya: nyue*), who up to this day play a prominent part in the New Year's ritual of Luang Prabang (Platenkamp forthcoming a). Archaimbault associated these spirit performances and their mythical role of creating the earth out of water with the 'functions' of the canoe racing rituals as a whole. He maintained that the races aimed at inducing the aquatic *naga* spirits—at that time of the year residing in the inundated rice fields—to swim through the tributaries into the Mekong river again, thus opening up the water courses blocked by their presence. And yet "this magical drainage was only one of the functions of the canoe races" (Archaimbault 1966: 385). As the other function, he identified the fact that in the preliminary races on the occasion of the That Luang ceremonies in Luang Prabang—the outcome of which was predetermined—different members of the royal entourage quasi-competed to reaffirm their relative rank. Even though "the members of the palace and the representatives of the royal government confronted each other," the races "respected their dignity" and thus "allowed for an affirmation of the order of the Kingdom." Taking further into account that on this occasion the King himself withdrew into seclusion in order to meditate on the Buddhist "secret essence of Kingship," Archaimbault argued that "the canoe races contributed to ensure the success of the royal magic" (*ibid.*: 385–386). In this interpretation, the canoe races thus fulfilled a threefold function: first, to induce the *naga* to leave their abodes in the inundated rice fields in order to facilitate their drainage; second, to reaffirm the socio-political order of the kingdom by ritually proclaiming the ranking order of the royal entourage; and, third, to recharge the King's 'magical' power as a Buddhist monarch (Sanskrit *chakravartin*).

We have observed that the second performance of the canoe racing ritual during the twelfth Lao month no longer takes place. This stands to reason, since it was particularly on this occasion that the legitimacy of kingship—grounded in the Buddhist *dhamma* and authorized by its association with the That Luang reliquary of the kingdom—and the ranking order among members of the royal household was ritually articulated and reaffirmed. This raises the question as to the significance of present-day performances of the canoe racing ritual and the contemporary relevance of Archaimbault's interpretation.

## The Royal Gaze

In discussions with my informants about the significance of the canoe racing rituals, the myth pertaining to the Paternal Grandfather Nyue and Paternal Grandmother Nyue spirits, to which Archaimbault attached such an exegetic importance, was not referred to. Instead attention was drawn to the mythical process by which the main spiritual protagonists of the ritual had come into being. These protagonists are aquatic *naga* spirits, whose abodes are fixed in space and who hence need not be ritually induced to evacuate the rice fields and their irrigation channels. Three of these spirits are of key importance: Sir Large Field (*a:y thong kuang*); White (Dressed) Lady (*na:ng dòn*), Sir Large Field's 'senior wife'; and Black (Dressed) Lady (*na:ng dam*), his 'junior wife'. The following myth, related by elderly men in the village of Ba:n Siang Muen in 2004, recounts their genesis.

"A long time ago, a King in Luang Prabang ... had two wives. For seven days that King was human, but for the next seven days he was a *naga* (*na:k*). [During such latter periods] his two wives did not see him. Nevertheless, they wanted to visit their husband. It seems to me that the King then lived in a different room [of the palace]. In that room ... there were seven curtains suspended one after another. His wives opened the first curtain but did not see him. They then opened the second and the third curtain but did not see him. They went on to open the fourth, the fifth, and the sixth curtain, but still they did not see him. When they opened the seventh curtain, they saw their husband. He was a sleeping *naga*. In Lao language, he was a *ngu*: (snake).<sup>7</sup> After his wives had seen him, he could no longer return to his human condition. He had to remain a *naga* ... He slid into the pond [named] Taengkit in the palace grounds and thence into the Mekong river. Thereupon his two wives sat down on the Mekong riverbank searching for him. Maybe they sat in the watchtower at the stairs leading from the palace to the Mekong river. Then the Lord of the *naga* (*phanya: na:k*) struck the two wives with his tail [sweeping them] into the Mekong river. The eldest wife went to the whirlpool Huea; she is called White Lady (*na:ng dòn*). The second wife went to the whirlpool Thòn, and she is called Black Lady (*na:ng dam*). I do not understand that well; I only know that this is what happened. Then the era of the Kings began ... One of them [initiated] the canoe racing ritual. At that time, one paddled the canoes upriver, and Black Lady and White Lady went with them. That is why nowadays, before racing the boats, we must bring offerings at these sites, first to inform White Lady, then Black Lady, and then Sir Large Field staying at the mouth of the Nam Khan river [who is] the husband of White Lady and Black Lady ... White Lady is the King's senior wife (*mia nyai*), Black Lady his junior wife (*mia nòy*)."

In his alternating states of person and *naga*, the King initially encompasses the contrast between his human and his spiritual condition. So does his palace, in which the narrator has assigned different rooms to these contrasting states of being. In one part of the palace, the King in his human condition is visible to his two wives; they can freely 'visit' him here (and perhaps have sexual intercourse with him). As a spiritual being, however, he lives in a room secluded by seven



curtains that hide him from their gaze. It is thus his *visibility* that marks the King as a *social* human being engaged in a marital relationship. Such a valorization of visibility as a distinctive marker of the relations between a monarch and his subjects recurs in other ritual and mythological contexts as well. During the Lao Ritual of the New Year, in the form conducted in Luang Prabang prior to 1975, the King visually acknowledged the representatives of the autochthonous people gathered in his palace. By looking at them, he ritually imposed the condition of human sociality upon them, subjecting them to his royal authority (Platenkamp forthcoming a). This theme occurs in Indonesian societies as well. In North Moluccan myths and rituals, for instance, a ruler's visual acknowledgment of the indigenous people in his realm attributes to them a civilized status and a socio-political order (Platenkamp 2006). As in the Lao case, the indigenous peoples who are socialized under the monarch's gaze represent the autochthonous spiritual 'owners' of the soil and its chthonic sources of fecundity. The dynastic myths of Bima (Sumbawa, central Indonesia) recount how an immigrant King's gaze upon a *naga* princess renders her pregnant, whereupon she gives birth to the first *raja* of Bima. In this case, too, the socio-political order of the kingdom originates from the royal gaze (Prager forthcoming).

The present myth entails a remarkable inversion of this theme. Instead of the King's gaze upon his wives being the source of their sociality and of the order of the polity, his wives' witnessing him in his spiritual condition renders the King's temporary—hence relative—condition as *naga* absolute and irrevocable. As a result, the royal palace no longer shelters the King in his encompassing condition of human being and spirit. The King-as-*naga* slides away into the river, where he has existed as the *naga* Sir Large Field ever since. Being identified exclusively as spouses of the King, the condition of his wives is affected accordingly. Seated at the riverbank, longing to catch a glimpse of their royal husband in the image of a *naga*, the supreme *naga* Phanya:na:k sweeps them into the Mekong river where, as White Lady and Black Lady, they too have assumed a spiritual condition once and for all. Thus, whereas in other contexts the ruler's gaze upon spiritual beings—or autochthons conceived as such—is the socializing agency, in the present case his wives' gaze upon the King in his spiritual state deprives him of his social condition irrevocably: the King-turned-*naga* has lost his visible image for good.<sup>8</sup> We shall observe, however, how the canoe racing ritual in its entirety is predicated on the effort, performed on behalf of the King's two wives-turned-*naga*, to reconstitute the King's encompassing image, that is, to re-establish the cosmological and social parameters of the polity and the hierarchical order among them.

## The Cosmological Topography

These mythical events have resulted in the presence of the guardian spirits of the realm of Luang Prabang. The riverine sites where the spirits reside are the points in space between which all ritual activities oscillate. The relations between the spirits, modeled on those between a ruler and his two spouses,



constitute the parameters of a cosmological topography that situates the town's realm and its socio-political order within the borders of the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers, the guardians of which are these spirits (see diagram 1). These aquatic spirits belong to a larger group of *naga*, aquatic and terrestrial alike, whose abodes are distributed throughout the realm, well beyond the borders of the town itself.<sup>9</sup> My informants explained their importance: "These *naga* are the 'owners' (*chao*) of all the lands and waters of Luang Prabang. It is their task to protect the area. In times of danger we call out their names so that they will come to our aid." On the occasion of the canoe racing ritual, the *naga* spirits residing in places beyond the riverine borders of Luang Prabang town itself are summoned to gather in the temple grounds of Siang Muen village on the right bank opposite the town quarter of Siang Thong. However, rather than serving to unblock irrigation channels and tributaries, this centripetal movement of multiple *naga* is aimed at concentrating their protective power in the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers, in the immediate vicinity of Luang Prabang town, in order to safeguard both the territorial and the social integrity of the realm. On this occasion, "all these *naga* are invited to attend the races in the Nam Khan river. We have heard that they meet in the grounds of the Siang Muen temple ... These *naga* are benevolent, there are no enemies among them. Because they are the owners of the water, owners of the landing places (*chao nam chao tha:*), the canoe racing ritual is performed for them."

Such a concentrated presence of the *naga* of the realm in the immediate vicinity of Luang Prabang requires the observance of certain rules of avoidance (*khalam* or, as a contraction, *kham*, 'to respect in awe') aimed at upholding a categorical separation between the spirit 'owners' of the land and those of the water. This is the time when "all lords of the *naga* come to meet, and the White Lady and Black Lady come to play/perform (*lin*) in the river. When one approaches their offering sites, one must not wear red clothes. We may wear white or black without any problem. When we are in the land, we may wear red, but when we go sailing or fishing, we should avoid doing so, lest these [riverine] spirits mistake us for spirits of the land." But most important is the injunction to perform the canoe races. These are deemed an offering to the spirits, particularly to the Black Lady and White Lady, for "it is they who view and supervise the Nam Khan and Nam Kong rivers during this period ... These spirits must be respected because they control the whole area of Luang Prabang up to the present day ... That is why they must open the race, because they are the owners of the water, owners of the landing places. It stands to reason that these spirits watch the canoes racing; they consider this as a sign of respect for them. All owners of the water (*chao nam*) must be invited to take part together, because these spirits want to preserve this tradition."

## The Market

The canoe racing ritual is embedded in a series of actions that extend over several days. In the early morning of the day preceding the canoe races, a ceremony

marking the opening of the ritual period is held in the office of the province's governor and is attended by all of the villages' and town quarters' heads (*na:y ba:n*). On this day, traders from all over the province and from regions as far away as China travel to Luang Prabang to sell their merchandise at a fair in the streets. Being officially sanctioned by the district's government and strictly limited to this one half-day period from morning until noon, it qualifies as one of the biannual 'appointed markets' (*tala:t nat*), the other being held on the day preceding the New Year's ritual in April. On these occasions, my informants stated, "all people know that they may come and sell things." Women in particular sell all kinds of foodstuffs, household utensils, clothing, and toys. There also are games to be played and merry-go-rounds for the children. Amid dense crowds, young unmarried people parade the streets and have themselves photographed in front of the Nam Phu fountain in the town center, "for you want to be seen there with friends." Thus, immediately preceding the actions that constitute the canoe racing ritual complex, Luang Prabang opens up to the outside world, allowing people from beyond its borders to supply it with commodities that originate abroad. These market activities are not subject to the strict rules of exchange that apply to all ritual actions subsequently performed. On the contrary, they provide the local society with an influx of goods, the value of which is not determined by ritual. The 'appointed market' constitutes a social context in which relations with the outside world, represented by foreign traders and the commodities they offer for sale, are valued in a specific sense. Their contribution to the ritual complex is stipulated, but their presence is restricted to a single morning. Their activities are sanctioned by political instead of ritual injunctions, and anonymous market relations determine the value of their merchandise.

One particular item for sale at the market, however, is valued in very different terms. It is a citrus fruit named *ma:k man*, which grows in higher regions beyond the floodplains of Luang Prabang and is said to be available at the Luang Prabang market only during this time of the year. This fruit is charged with cosmological significance. In the New Year's ritual it used to be offered to the King by Khasak people, representatives of the autochthonous Mon-Khmer-speaking 'Lao of the Hillsides' (*Lao thueng*). In the latter context, the fruits were ritually referred to as *ma:k man ma:k nyue:n*. *Ma:k* denotes 'fruits',<sup>10</sup> whereas the lexeme *man* in conjunction with *nyue:n* recurs in prescribed formulas pronounced during the rituals of marriage and healing. In these instances the formula reads *hay man hay nyue:n*, which translates as 'to bestow *man*, to bestow *nyue:n*'.<sup>11</sup> The lexeme *man* in this context signifies 'to maintain a stable relationship'; the lexeme *nyue:n* denotes 'longevity'. The ritual formula thus signified that a continuous relationship between the autochthonous people and the Lao King was valued as a life-giving relationship, in which the former provided "the support of the prosperity of the Kingdom and the longevity of the monarch" (Archaimbault 1964: 59; see also Platenkamp forthcoming a). On the present occasion, the households of Luang Prabang must purchase this fruit at the market, for it is an essential component of the offerings made the following day.

## Feeding the Dead and the Living

That next day, people offer food to the Buddhist monks residing in their town quarter or village temple (*wat*), to the ancestral ‘spirits of the house’ (*phi:huean*) and its yard, and to the founding spirits of the village or town quarter (*phi:ba:n*). On this occasion, all offerings (*tak ba:t*) made are subsumed under the name ‘rice packets decorating the earth’ (*hò khao padap din*). During the previous night, women in every household have prepared cooked glutinous rice wrapped in banana leaves (*khao tom*) and rice biscuits (*khao nom*), which, along with water (*ya:t nam*) and the ‘fruits of longevity’ (*ma:k man*) discussed above, are now offered to the ancestral *phi*: spirits of the house and the spirits of the site where the house has been built. Whereas the offerings made to the former are placed in their shrine inside the house, the offerings to the latter are left on top of the fences and on the branches of the trees in the house’s yard. The offerings of rice and other foodstuffs to the Buddhist monks are made at two separate times. Immediately after sunrise, the monks from the town quarter’s temple take part in their daily morning procession through the streets, where they are awaited by women kneeling and men standing in front of their houses who place their gifts in the bowls extended toward them. Each household makes these offerings independently. Shortly afterward, the whole town quarter’s population gathers in the temple to perform similar offerings collectively. Waiting in rows in the temple’s front yard, they offer their food gifts to the monks who pass by in a long line. Food is also offered to the widowed women past child-bearing age who reside as ‘white mothers’ in the temple grounds. It is understood that the food offerings made to the monks, particularly the ‘fruits of longevity’, are also destined for the founding ancestral spirits of the town quarter (*phi:ba:n*). Hence, at selected locations in the temple grounds, some people place small food offerings for these ancestors as well.

On this occasion, the offering of food gifts to the monks assumes a peculiar form, for also present in the temple grounds are Lao children and representatives of non-Lao societies (in this case Khmu) who classify as ‘Lao of the Hill-sides’. Earlier we observed that the latter used to represent the autochthonous people and their spiritual origins during the New Year’s ritual. After having received the food gifts from the Lao people, the monks give some of them to the children and the non-Lao adults present. It is argued that by means of this particular transfer (which to my knowledge takes place only during this ritual occasion), the food gifts, having passed through the hands of the monks, have acquired the additional value of being ‘authorized’ (*saksit*). A comparable transference of gifts, from the people to representatives of the clergy and thence to the people again, also takes place on the occasion of the New Year’s ritual in Luang Prabang. In that context, water is obtained from sources under the authority of autochthonous *phi*: spirits, poured into *naga*-shaped conduits to flow over the Buddha statues in the temples, and collected subsequently by the devout. By means of this transfer, the water, too, has become ‘authorized’ (*nam sa:ba:n, nam saksit, ‘authorized water’*).<sup>12</sup>

Both this circulation of water during the New Year's ritual and the present transfers of the rice in the temple grounds reflect the authorization—valued in terms of the Buddhist *dhamma*—of ritual processes of transfer. Yet whereas in the New Year's ritual the autochthons are the original providers of the water that is subsequently 'authorized' by the clergy and distributed among the Lao, in the present ritual the autochthons receive from the clergy the 'authorized' gifts of rice that have been made to the latter by the Lao. This indicates that the gifts of rice made to the spirits of the house and its yard, to the founding ancestral spirits of the town quarter, and to the temple's monks and 'white mothers' are valued as part of an overall annual process of transfer. In these circumstances, the gift of rice to the autochthons represents a final counter-gift in acknowledgment of the gift of water that, along with the 'fruits of longevity', was initially received from the sources under their jurisdiction. The fact that all food offerings made to the spirits, the dead, and the monks are subsumed under the title 'rice packets decorating the earth' underlines this. To conclude this cycle of transfers, however, the socio-cosmological order of kingship must be ritually re-established.

### Socializing the Canoe

In mid-morning that day, the crews prepare their canoes for the races on the following day. These preparations involve subjecting the canoes and their crews to various types of cosmological relationships. Before examining the ritual acts performed to that end, let us scrutinize the ideas pertaining to the construction of a canoe. The forest is one of the domains, projected beyond the social space of the towns and villages, that are subject to the authority of anonymous *phi*: spirits. Constructing a canoe from a tree cut in the forest requires the acknowledgment of a relation of 'ownership' (*chao*) between the tree and its *phi*: spirit. Such tree-owning spirits are collectively denoted as 'maidens of the trees' (*na:ng may*), and they are propitiated by a small offering brought to them. Once a tree has been singled out for being worked into a canoe, it is individualized. A 'personal' name is assigned to it that bears witness to the female gender, which the particular *phi*: spirit, as the 'owner of the canoe' (*chao huea*), transfers to the canoe as a whole. For instance, the canoe formerly racing on behalf of the town quarter Siang Thong was named Na:ng Boloï (Maiden Lovely Girl), and the one doing so nowadays is known as Na:ng Bua Nguen (Maiden Silver Lotus). My informants explained that "such names are gifts to the *phi*: spirit who is the maiden of that particular tree." This indicates that by means of the act of name-giving, a spirit exemplar from the collective category 'spirit maidens of trees' becomes socially identified.

Turning a tree and its anonymous spirit—selected from the forest as a non-social cosmological domain—into a cultural artifact and giving it a personal name entail the integration of the wood and its spirit 'owner' into the social domain proper by 'binding' its spiritual component parts (*khuan*) to that social domain. As in the case of the socialization of a human infant, this

process of socializing a being that derives its *khuan* from the cosmological domain must be ritually enacted. Hence, a ‘*khuan*-inviting’ (*su khuan*) ritual is conducted on behalf of the *khuan* of the canoe, not only after it has been built but also each time it is to perform its task in the canoe racing ritual. Small offerings of rice and flowers are laid down in the bow and the stern, and white cotton threads are tied around the protruding parts in order to ensure that the *khuan* remain embodied by the canoe, thus preserving the spiritual and ‘corporeal’ integrity of the canoe as a whole. In the case of the *su khuan* ritual performed on a Lao child one month after birth, a numerical model is employed that signifies this ritual integration of its *khuan* into the social community. The 32 *khuan* of the infant become part of a whole that is composed of 128 *khuan*; the *khuan* of four persons are seen as a quadripartite numerical model of a ritually constructed social community (Platenkamp forthcoming b). Earlier we observed that, according to Archaimbault (1966: 385), the canoe embodies 120 souls. But since the Lao person is composed of 32 *khuan*,<sup>13</sup> this indicates that the social integration of the canoe is also modeled on the relations between a multiple set of beings, each embodying 32 *khuan*. Rather than identifying the canoe as a singular being, the idea that a canoe embodies 120 *khuan* (an obvious approximation of the 128 *khuan* constituting the Lao ritual community) signifies that it has been integrated into a community of *khuan* and hence has been truly socialized. Only after this ritual socialization has been accomplished will the canoe be protected against attacks by malevolent aquatic *phi*: spirits, that is, those *naga* from beyond the borders of the realm that are not propitiated by sacrifices.<sup>14</sup>

In the early morning of the day when the races take place, a series of offering rituals are performed. At daybreak, elderly people from the villages whose crews partake in the races bring small offerings to the ‘maidens of the canoe’, the individualized female spirit ‘owners’ of the trees from which the canoes have been constructed. On such an occasion witnessed in 2004, the canoe of the village Ba:n Pakwed (in Siang Nguen district) was moored at the left bank of the Mekong river near its confluence with the Nam Khan river. There, three offerings were made to its spirit ‘owner’. At the bow one elderly couple offered cooked chicken, glutinous rice, water, rice liquor, and a bundle of banana leaves filled with candles and incense. Another couple placed women’s clothes, a mirror, and a comb—“for the [spirit] owner is a woman, they like beautiful things”—amidships, and a third couple put food offerings in the stern. While doing so, the men and women gently stroked the canoe, addressing the ‘maiden of the canoe’ with utterances such as “Today we shall race the canoe. Do come and protect us so that we will win.” Once more, the analogy with the socialization of a child is evident in the offerings made to the canoe’s ‘owner’. During a ritual called ‘ceremony to leave the month of avoidance of the child’ (*pithi: ò:k kham duean ae:nò:y*), which is conducted one month after an infant’s birth, gifts similar to those made to the canoe are also transferred to the infant. This transfer socializes the infant’s *khuan*, which is now seen as the bearer of highly valued qualities and attributes (Platenkamp forthcoming b). The canoe’s *khuan* is socialized in a similar manner on this occasion.

## Reuniting the King with His Queen-Consorts

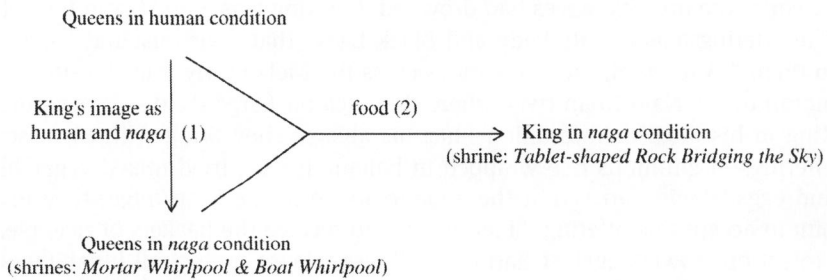
Before the canoe races begin that day, two canoes are launched into the Mekong by crews from the village Siang Muen, on the Mekong riverbank opposite the northern part of Luang Prabang town. One man takes a seat in the bow and one in the stern; both are dressed as women. The twelve other crew members in each canoe are female. And while the entire crew of one canoe is dressed in white, that of the second wears black. These crews are said to be the ‘representatives’ (*ta:ng na:*) of the spirits White Lady and Black Lady, respectively. In the myth discussed earlier, these spirits were identified as the elder and younger wives of the King in his encompassing identity of human being and *naga*. As representatives of these spirits (not to be confused with the ‘maiden of the canoe’ spirit embodied in the boat’s wood and identified by its personal name), the crews bring the spirits White Lady and Black Lady a remarkable offering.<sup>15</sup> They paddle along the Mekong’s right bank to the aquatic abodes of White Lady and Black Lady. There, they offer the spirits gifts that my informants identified as “the image of a person and the image of a *naga* snake” (*hu:p khon hu:p ngueak*), cut from the skin of a banana palm. These images represent the King in his encompassing identity of *naga* and human being: “White Lady and Black Lady know that we offer them the image (*hu:p*) of their husband, that the spirit (*wi:nnya:n*) of the King has come to visit them ... For at the time his wives had drowned, the King was a *naga*, and he still is. The offering tells [White Lady and Black Lady] that their husband has come to them.” Afterward, the two canoes cross the Mekong river to the site at the mouth of the Nam Khan river where the *naga* Sir Large Field—the primordial King in his *naga* manifestation—has his abode. They bring with them small offerings of glutinous rice wrapped in banana leaves, fried mixed vegetables, and eggs. Having arrived at the aquatic abode of the King/*naga*, they invite him to accept this offering: “Please come to receive the packets of rice, please protect our rowers against harm and illness, please protect all inhabitants of the village, please shield the children from accidents in the river.” The offerings are then thrown overboard.

In more than one sense, this offering ritual aims to reunify what in mythical times had been separated. On the one hand, the human condition of the King’s two wives—who had been existing only as *naga* since their mythical transformation—is restored. They are represented—“made newly present” (Coppet 1992: 64–65)—by the living crews, witnessed by the fact that the female identity of the King’s wives is imposed upon both male and female crew members alike. On the other hand, the King’s condition, which since primordial times has been manifested as *naga* only, is transformed in a similar manner. Being represented in the two banana palm cuttings, the King has once again assumed his original dual state, which encompasses a human being and a *naga*. It is in their human representation as female and feminized crew members that the King’s wives offer the image of the King—in both his human and his spiritual form—to his wives in their spiritual condition, thus effectuating that “the King has come to them.” In other words, not only are the King and



his wives represented once more in both human and spiritual form (the former as a dual image, the latter as living persons and *naga*), but also their marital relationship, disjoined long ago when the marriage partners-turned-*naga* were assigned different aquatic abodes, is reunited in space and time.

It stands to reason that it is the King's wives (represented by the crews) who enact this process of reconstituting an encompassing socio-cosmological relationship by reuniting the spiritual with the human and the King with his Queen-Consorts. Indeed, it was the women's transgressive gaze that had brought about the King's transformation into a *naga* in the first place. Hence, it is their task to undo this primordial desocialization of the King for the duration of the coming year. The relationships thus reconstituted are valued by the acts performed immediately afterward. After having made the King visit his spirit wives, the crews—human representatives of the latter—paddle to the site of the King/*naga*, bringing him food offerings and imploring him to protect the inhabitants of the realm. The differential values assigned to this reconstituted encompassing relationship are articulated in the gifts offered by the human representatives of the Queen-Consorts: having offered the dual image of the King to his wives-as-*naga* first, as representatives of the latter, they then offer food to the King's spirit.



**DIAGRAM 2** Offerings Made to the King and His Queen-Consorts

The resocialization of the King and his consorts effectuated by the offerings made to them—that is, the re-establishment of their marital relations as the founding relationship of the kingdom—constitutes the socio-cosmological order, in reference to which all subsequent ritual activities are valorized. It is this order that protects the realm of Luang Prabang against external spiritual threats. Once the relations between the King and his Queen-Consorts have been re-established, all subsequent ritual activities are performed in reference to the royal *naga* spirits' role of sheltering the realm from foreign foes: “[The royal *naga*] prevent all other spirits from bringing evil to this area during this ritual. For in the South there are *naga*, and in the North there are *naga* too. From the Kading river mouth [entering the Mekong south of Vientiane] the *naga* come up to Luang Prabang. Black Lady and White Lady see to it that



these *naga* will not disturb life in Luang Prabang.” But most significant is the expectation that the reconstitution of the cosmological-monarchic order will protect the *internal* order of Luang Prabang from social and political dissent. Time and again, informants emphasized that once the respect due them has been paid, the King and his Queen-Consorts will “prevent people from fighting among themselves (*sadtu:*) and from moving away.”

## Reuniting the King with His Subjects

Before launching their canoes into the river, the other crews are addressed early in the morning by the abbot (*chao a:wa:t*, ‘master of the temple’) in the Buddhist temple of their village or town quarter. No offerings are made on such occasions, but the abbots sprinkle the canoes and crew members with ‘authorized water’ (*nam mon*). Such rituals generally aim at imposing the authority of the Buddhist *dhamma* on domains ‘owned’ by *phi*: spirits. In this case, it is the *phi*: spirit ‘maiden of the canoe’—whose *khuan* had been ‘bound’ to the community earlier and had been given an individual name—that the monks endeavor to subjugate to the Buddhist values.

On 14 September 2004 at 10:00 AM, the crew from the village Ba:n Shaluan, in the vicinity of Luang Prabang town, brought their canoe and oars to Luang Prabang town and placed them on display in front of the main hall of the Wat Saen temple. After photographs had been taken of the canoe and its crew, they entered the hall where Satthu Kamchao, the abbot of the temple and patriarch of Luang Prabang, awaited them. After chants in Pali had been sung, the abbot delivered a short sermon, emphasizing that “of course, one should do one’s best to win, but one must not be angry or disappointed when one would fail.” Then more chants were sung, after which the crew left the temple hall. In the temple yard, two unmarried girls from their home village, dressed as brides and carrying bowls with bundles of flowers, awaited them. The girls, referred to as ‘maidens of the canoe’, led the crew members—two of them bearing the splendidly carved pointed bows and sterns to be attached to the hull later—in a procession around the temple hall, while the crew shouted victorious cries: “We are number one!” In this vaunted mood they left the temple grounds and paraded through the main street toward the Nam Khan river.

It may seem puzzling that the two girls should be addressed as ‘maidens of the canoe’, the very term reserved for the female spirit ‘owners’ of the canoes. Yet this development appears to reflect an innovation, introduced by the socialist government after the abolition of kingship in 1975, aimed at devaluing the notion of spiritual ‘ownership’ of the canoe with the goal of transforming it into a secular idea altogether. For although some elderly people maintain that this practice of referring to unmarried girls as ‘maidens of the canoe’ was meant to be a mere embellishment, it appears to have been motivated by a more profound, politically relevant consideration. We observed earlier that the privilege of representing the female spirits White Lady and Black Lady previously adhered exclusively to the crews from the village of Siang Muen.

Until 1975, no other crews had been entitled to represent female spirits. Yet, as people in Siang Muen maintain, “after some other villages and town quarters had assumed this privilege as well, other crews followed suit.” In other words, a ranking order—ritually expressed in the privileged task of one village to represent, on behalf of all other villages and town quarters of the realm, the spirits of the Queen-Consorts of the primordial King and maintain a shrine dedicated to them—has been affected by a principle of equality, which is now evident in the presence of ‘maidens of the canoe’ among the crews of all participating villages and town quarters.<sup>16</sup>

At this time of day, the crews from the participating villages and town quarters each launch their canoe in the Nam Khan river. But before the actual races are run, another series of offerings is made to the *naga* ‘owners of the water’ by each crew in turn. In each canoe, the crew, the ‘maiden of the canoe’, and an elderly man, titled *chao cham* or *kuan cham*, step aboard. The last is the officiant charged with presenting offerings to the *naga* spirits. One after the other, the canoes first sail downstream to the mouth of the river where the aquatic site of Sir Large Field, the *naga* manifestation of the primordial King, is situated. Here, as my informants explained, each officiant makes an offering and “speaks with this [spirit] owner. It is of utmost importance that all members of the crew look very closely [at the site] and pay their respect. This place is more important than any other of the [*naga*] sites. This spirit controls the whole of the Nam Khan and the Mekong area. That is why we must make an offering there first and pray that no accidents will happen to us, that we will be healthy and strong, that we beat the other boats in the races.” While the officiant boards the canoe again, the entire crew worships the *naga* with their gaze<sup>17</sup> and prayers while making forward-bending movements with their upper bodies. The offering made by the officiant consists of a triangular bamboo frame with a bottom plaited from coconut leaves (*katho:ng sa:m chae:*, ‘offering with three corners’) and containing soup (*kae:ng*), minced raw meat (*la:p lueat*), and rice (*khao*). But once again, a human image (*hu:p khon*) and that of a *naga*, this time drawn on paper, are part of the offering as well. “In this way the ‘souls’ (*wi:nnya:n*) of all [deceased] people enter into the drawing. It is offered to worship these [*naga*], so that they come to assist us. This offering is only made at this site.”

The sequence of these successive offerings made to the *naga* spirits signifies the hierarchical order of the relationships involved. Only after the marital relationship between the primordial King and his Queen-Consorts has been re-established—by offering the King’s dual image (as human being and as *naga*) to his Queens and the food gifts to the King—can the relations between the monarch and his deceased and living subjects be “made present anew” in a similar manner. The human images “of all people”—this time identified as manifestations of the Buddhist concept of *wi:nnya:n* (‘soul’, from Pali *viññāna*)—are offered to the King, so that by means of this offering the kingdom is now articulated as a relation between the primordial royal couple and their deceased subjects, uniting the dead and the living in an encompassing socio-cosmological polity. Each canoe then sails upstream to the foot of the Old Bridge, where the *naga* Sir Golden Youngest Child resides (see diagram 3).

They pass a temporarily constructed hall (*pha:m say*), situated at the Luang Prabang bank of the Nam Khan river approximately halfway between the two offering sites at the finish line, where the senior state representatives have taken their seats to witness the event. Having arrived at the site of Sir Golden Youngest Child, the officiant disembarks and places an offering, consisting of a plate with six bundles of candles and flowers wrapped in banana leaves (*khan hok*, 'plate six'), on the rock that is the abode of this *naga*. After the officiant has boarded the canoe again, the entire crew worships the *naga* with prayers while making seven forward movements with their upper bodies.

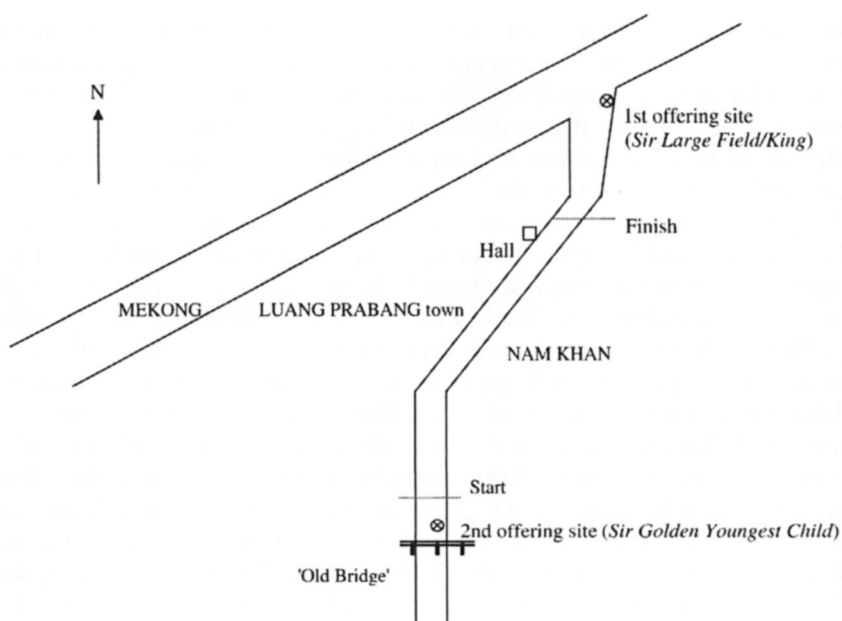


DIAGRAM 3 Offering Sites Visited by the Racing Crews

In the days of the kingdom, the competing crews were recruited from the villages and the town quarters of the realm of Luang Prabang. Let us recall that whereas in those days a sense of fierce competition appears to have motivated these crews, the ways in which this competition was valued were more complex than that. On the one hand, conducting the races expressed the acknowledgment of the cosmological sovereignty exerted by the *naga* spirit manifestations of the primordial King and his two Queen-Consorts over the realm. Let us also recall how my informants emphasized that these *naga* “view and supervise” the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers and “control” the realm of Luang Prabang “up to the present day.” They are “the owners of the water, owners of the landing places” who “watch the boats racing,” and the canoe racing ritual is “performed in respect to them.” On the other hand, taking place before the

eyes of the living King and his royal entourage, the races were run in tribute to his authority as the ruler of the realm and its inhabitants. It is remarkable that irrespective of whether they had won or lost the race, all crews were rewarded with the same gifts bestowed by the King. It demonstrates that the competitive character of the races was subordinated to this relationship with the King, a relation shared equally by all crews as male representatives of the villages and town quarters of the realm.

## The Races

After the offerings have been made, the races now commence. From this moment onward, representatives of the provincial and municipal governments, who so far have kept conspicuously aloof from the scenes of the offerings, assume a leading role. High-ranking state officials gather in the hall provisionally erected at the Nam Khan riverbank (see diagram 3), where they accept the homage brought to them by the crews. In 2001, the provincial governor, the vice governor, and the deputy chairman of the National Assembly were among those present. In 2004, they included the deputy minister for information and culture, the deputy governor of Luang Prabang province, the head of the district of Luang Prabang, the head of the division of the Provincial Committee for Planning and Cooperation, and all heads of the provincial and district divisions.<sup>18</sup> In accepting the homage brought by the crews, they are making the claim that the races are performed as a tribute neither to the *naga* spirits of the primordial King and his Queen-Consorts nor to the living monarch, but rather to the authority of the state. They thus publicly propagate the Lao state ideology—instead of cosmological kingship—as the corpus of ideas and practices in terms of which the competitions are to be valued. What valorization of the ritual, then, do these state representatives propound? For one thing, they ignore all cosmological dimensions of the canoe racing ritual that are manifested in the protracted series of offerings to the *naga* spirits, other than those religious representations that are part of the Theravada Buddhist *dhamma*. This is readily evident from the following transcript of the official program, issued by the municipal government on 9 September 2004.

The values propagated by the state are articulated most clearly in the speeches delivered at the opening of the races. On the day of the races in 2004, after an official of the Sports Committee of Luang Prabang province had read aloud the program and had emphasized that the events should “serve the conservation of our traditional culture in Luang Prabang as a World Cultural Heritage site and tourist city,” he publicly identified the various groups of people witnessing the events. These included “officials and members of the business community, as well as members of the ethnic minorities in Luang Prabang” and several high-ranking state, provincial, and municipal authorities. In announcing the personal names and functions of the authorities, he revealed how the state had appropriated the ritual’s organization: “The guests attending are, first, Dr. —, the deputy minister for information and culture [applause]; second, Dr. —, the deputy

Official Program of the Canoe Racing Festival, 14 September 2004

LAO People's Democratic Republic

Peace, Unity, Democracy

Head of District Luang Prabang

Document Nr. .../LP Town

*Agenda of Activities*

*Ho Khao Padap Din*, Canoe Racing Festival,  
Ninth Month 2004 at Luang Prabang

Monday Waning Moon 13 September BE 2547/13 September 2004

- morning: 6:00–12:00: market fair in streets
- afternoon: 13:00: all racing boats continue to practice by themselves
- evening: 19:00: all racing boats celebrate by themselves

Tuesday Waning Moon 14 September BE 2547/14 September 2004

- 6:00: religious performance: offerings to the monks in the temples
- 10:00: all boats gather at Nam Khan
- 11:00: each boat is registered with the Committee of Sports
- 11:30: racing boats gather in front of the tribune
- 11:45: officials and guests arrive at the tribune
- 12:00: formal opening of the canoe racing takes place
- 12:30: canoe racing begins based on the schedule until the final race

Announcement of the winner and the handing out of the prizes

The Responsible Committee closes and thanks the guests

Closing Announcement

governor of Luang Prabang province [applause]; third, Mr. —, the head (*chao*) of Luang Prabang district, and the head of the committee responsible for the festival [applause], the members of the Committee for the Offerings of Rice (*ho khao padap din*) and the canoe racing festival [applause], the head of the division of the Provincial Committee for Planning and Cooperation [applause], all heads of the provincial and district divisions [applause], foreign and domestic guests [applause], and people from other villages [applause].”

Thereupon the head of Luang Prabang district was given the chair: “First I would like to pay respect to the deputy minister of information and culture, to the deputy governor of Luang Prabang province, and to the foreign and domestic people. I am very happy to be here and present the Offerings of the Rice and the Canoe Racing Festival to you, and to welcome the guests from the national,

provincial, and district governments. I express my respect and friendliness to the foreign and domestic guests, to the crews of the canoes, and to all people of Luang Prabang who have supported and have come to witness the competition in September 2004. Ladies and gentlemen, this is the Offerings of the Rice and the Canoe Racing Festival, the tradition of Luang Prabang as it took place in former times until the present day. Each year this means that the planting of the rice in the rainy season has been completed. We have arranged to have the canoe racing together before the first waxing moon of September to generate happiness among the different villages and town quarters, so that the strong people of the villages can display their vigor. Canoe racing means that they can share the experience. We also wish to demonstrate our good and beautiful culture that is the identity of Luang Prabang. The canoe racing this year takes place as the result of the productive cooperation of all parties of government and people in Luang Prabang province, especially in Luang Prabang district. We therefore invite you to celebrate this day the conference at which the [Communist] Party was founded. We also welcome the productive competition of the fourth conference of the district's [Communist] Party that will take place in the near future."

Several statements made in this speech are revealing. Firstly, the canoe races (that "took place in former times until the present day") are presented as a perfect replica of the ritual as it was conducted in the past. All changes implemented since the abolition of kingship and the founding of the Republic are ignored, so that the "tradition of Luang Prabang" is portrayed as an unchanging social practice that has survived unscathed despite all of the political turmoil and revolutions in the latter half of the twentieth century.<sup>19</sup> Secondly, whereas the ritual is a stage on which competitive actions may be displayed ("the strong people of the villages can display their vigor"), the competition is not meant to endanger the relations of solidarity among the participating villages and town quarters. On the contrary, the races should "generate happiness among the different villages and town quarters." Thirdly, the Communist Party is portrayed as the source of this ritually generated happiness. In "productive cooperation of all parties of government and people," a harmonious socio-political order will be ceremonially enacted that is not authorized by the cosmological foundations of kingship but originates in the Communist Party itself. Hence the remarkable claim that by performing the canoe racing ritual, one celebrates "the conference at which the Party was founded." The extent to which the Lao state has appropriated the ritual is readily evident when one recalls how in former times the canoes racing against each other articulated the distinctions (measured in the physical performance of their male crews) between the villages and town quarters that constituted the kingdom. These competitions were subservient, however, to an encompassing system of both cosmological and socio-political order, shielding the realm not only from the intrusion of foreign evil spirits but also from internal strife and dissent. By valuing the races as tributes both to the primordial spirit King and his Queen-Consorts and to the living King and his entourage, the mood of fierce competition among men from different villages/town quarters, which might jeopardize the socio-political order of the



realm, was subordinated in value to the immutable order of the polity as a socio-cosmological whole.

Nowadays, however, under the aegis of the Communist Party as the source of solidarity and happiness, a corporate model of society is propounded, of which, in this ritual context, the individual crews represent the component parts. Not only do the different villages and town quarters constitute this model, but also the state's organizations, which are active at various government levels, and different types of economic organizations. Hence, before emphasizing once more the need to achieve harmony, the head of the district carefully specifies how the 16 canoes taking part are divided into two categories: those representing the present-day body politic-and-economic, on the one hand, and those representing the territorial categories in which the state has classified its citizens, on the other. "There are canoes from official and business staff, and from the people in the town quarters and the villages (*ba:n*). Three canoes [not from Luang Prabang] come from the district (*mueang*) Ngoy, the district Siang Nguen, and the district Chomphet. May the competition this year be concluded in happiness and cooperation, that is what I wish upon and propose to the rowers of each canoe. May you act sportive and fair. I wish that together we preserve our beautiful traditions. To the rowers I say that by working together you contribute to the preservation of our culture. Therefore, do respect the rules of the competition that have been fixed by the committee. I also wish that the sub-committees perform their tasks properly and be respected. I wish that the festival this year be successful. At this moment I am the representative of the government of the *mueang* Luang Prabang and the Canoe Racing Committee. Thanks are due to the following ladies and gentlemen [he mentions all the commercial sponsors]. Now we have opened the canoe races."

Elderly informants recalled how in the days of the kingdom, each village and town quarter contributed its own crew to the canoes taking part in the races, which at times numbered as many as 52. Together with the canoes of the royal household and palace staff and those representing the spirits White Lady and Black Lady, these crews represented the component parts of the kingdom-as-a-whole in both its socio-political and cosmological dimensions. Presently, not only has the number of canoes been reduced considerably (in 2004, apart from the two canoes representing the spirits White Lady and Black Lady, only 16 canoes competed), but also the composition of society, as manifested in the identity of the crews, has changed significantly. In 2001, in the absence of crews from the royal household and palace staff, the canoes still represented the various villages and town quarters. The few state organizations that were involved (such as the Youth Group or the Development Group) were those active at the village level.<sup>20</sup> Three years later, however, in addition to the villages and town quarters, not only representatives of state ministries at the district level but also commercial enterprises had entered the scene. They took part with their own canoes and/or sponsored some of the villages' and town quarters' crews (see table 1).

The corporate image of society, propagated by the state to replace the socio-cosmological order of kingship as the system signifying and valorizing the



TABLE 1 Crew Affiliations and Sponsors (2004)

<i>Crew Affiliations</i>	<i>Sponsors</i>
Unidentified village, Ngoi district	Idem*
Ministry of Health	Number One ("Just Use It") Condoms
Phabad quarter, Luang Prabang town	Several hotels and guest houses
Pak Lueng village, Chomphet district	Ministry of Trade and Tourism
Apha:y quarter, Luang Prabang town	Idem
Saluen village, Luang Prabang district	Gerbera Landmines Clearing, Ministry of Pensions
Pakwaet village, Siang Nguen district	Banque pour la Commerce Extérieure, Number One Condoms
Phan Luang village, Luang Prabang district	Hotels and guesthouses
Ministry of Planning and Cooperation	Ministry of Planning and Cooperation
Siang Thong quarter, Luang Prabang town	Lane Xang Bank
Ministry of Immigration	Ministry of Immigration
Siang Maen village, Chomphet district	Idem
Donmo village, Siang Nguen district	Ministry of Construction, Post, and Transport
Lao-European Cooperation Mikro Projects	Lao-European Cooperation Mikro Projects
That Luang quarter, Luang Prabang town	Number One Condoms
Pakha:m quarter, Luang Prabang town	Viso Washing Powder

\*All participating villages and town quarters are partly sponsored by money raised among their inhabitants. When exclusively so, this is indicated by 'idem'.

canoe races, manifests itself not only in the governmental and commercial identities represented by the canoes, but also in the financial support that they grant to the crews representing individual villages and town quarters.<sup>21</sup> Since the crews' shirts display the corporate emblems of the sponsoring enterprises or the names of the ministries involved, the competition increasingly acquires a bureaucratic and commercial standing. This has also affected the system of rewards. In the days of the kingdom, the crews competed for the honor bestowed by the King upon the winning team, but at the end of the races all of the crews were rewarded with the same gifts of foodstuffs. At the present time, the ranking order among the competitors is expressed in prizes of increasing monetary value. It stands to reason, therefore, that my elderly informants perceived the current practice as a lamentable commercialization: "In the past one competed for the honor and not for money. Nowadays it is all gambling

and monetary interest. There are less canoes, and enterprises sponsor them.” Nevertheless, the organization of the races and the prize system have retained characteristics that set them apart from all modern sports competitions.

After the government officials have declared the races opened, the canoes of the spirits White Lady and Black Lady are the first to compete on the Nam Khan river. Instead of being a ‘race’ between athletes measuring their individual physical prowess, this is a ritual competition the outcome of which is established beforehand. Let us recall how in the days of the kingdom the first canoes to sail the river in August were those of the ‘Queen of the Right’ and the ‘Queen of the Left’, and it was understood that as a rule the former would always win against the latter. We also observed how Archaimbault interpreted this rule as a ceremonially proclaimed affirmation of the ranking order among the sections of the royal household. However, not only has the abolition of kingship failed to render this competition redundant, its logic still displays the same pattern. My informants explained that nowadays one lets “the canoes of Black Lady and White Lady go ahead—because Black Lady and White Lady came from the palace—and race against each other. But White Lady should always go slightly ahead, because she is the senior wife. Even if during the race Black Lady should approach the finish first, it must give way to White Lady to reach the finish line first.”

In speaking of Black Lady and White Lady, my informants were not referring to women actually present in a palace but to the Queen-Consorts who had been transformed into *naga* spirits. This points toward the fact that also in the days of the kingdom the ranking order of the royal household, ritually proclaimed by the outcome of the races between the canoes of the ‘Queen of the Left’ and the ‘Queen of the Right’, was grounded in the mythically articulated relationship between the spirits of a primordial King and his two Queen-Consorts. Only this may account for the fact that in the present-day absence of kingship, the outcome of the competition between the two canoes—whose female/feminized crews ‘make newly present’ the spirits of these Queen-Consorts—still reaffirms their ranking order. In this manner, an overall hierarchical order is re-established that used to be predicated on a relationship of relative-age affinity—in which the parts of the polity relate to the whole as a senior and junior wife relate to the King—that was authorized by the cosmological order among the *naga* spirits of primordial predecessors. Although its political dimension has been abolished, this order continues to exist in its cosmological dimension. Despite being ignored by state representatives, the ritual re-establishment of this cosmological order is still considered the *conditio sine qua non* for the social and economic well-being of society. Indeed, my informants believed “that if this competition goes well, the rice in the fields and the fish in the water will be abundant and plenty.”

Only after this ranking order among the spirit Queen-Consorts has been reaffirmed do the actual races commence. Each canoe is manned by a crew (*nak si: pha:y*, ‘rowers’) of up to 56 members, “strong and good rowers, all selected from the same village or town quarter.” In the bow stands the leader (*na:y hua*) commanding the team. Seated behind him is the ‘person to lead the paddling’ (*khon*

*uan phay*); rocking up and down to increase the speed, he whistles rhythmically to synchronize the paddling. In the stern, three men referred to as 'leaders at the back' (*na:y tha:y*) steer the canoe. The races are organized in the following manner. All canoes divide into two classes (A and B). In the first round, canoes in each class compete in pairs (A1 <-> A2 ... A7 <-> A8, and B1 <-> B2 ... B7 <-> B8). In the second round, the winner of each pair competes with the winner of another pair in the same class (thus, assuming that a higher number always wins over a lower one, A2 <-> A4, A6 <-> A8, and B2 <-> B4, B6 <-> B8). At the same time, the losers from each pair that competed in the first round now compete against each other in pairs as well (A1 <-> A3, A5 <-> A7, and B1 <-> B3, B5 <-> B7). In the third round, the winners of the second round of races, held among the winners of the first round, compete with each other (A4 <-> A8, B4 <-> B8). The losers of that second round (A2, A6, B2, B6) race against the winners of the second round of races, run between the losers of the first round (A3, A7, B3, B7, thus A2 <-> A7, A6 <-> A3, B2 <-> B7, B6 <-> B3). In all subsequent rounds, this principle is repeated: the losers among the winners (A4, B4 in round 3; B8 in round 4) compete against the winners among the losers (B7, A7 in round 5; A7 in round 7). In the final round, the winner of the competition in round 4 among the winners (A8) races against the winner of the seventh round among the losers (B8).

This type of competition does not immediately lead to an irrevocable exclusion of a team that has lost one race, as would be the case if only the winners of each set were allowed to compete with the winners of other sets in quarter-finals, half-finals, and finals. The aim of the latter system, characteristic of modern sports competitions, is to establish as efficiently as possible a binary ranking order among the teams. In the canoe races this aim prevails as well, but it is paired with another interest, namely, to engage the crews as long as possible in the race. The contribution of the crews to the competitive performances is valued more highly than the efficiency of their exclusion.<sup>22</sup> The same interest is manifest in the distribution of the prizes. Although the ranking among the crews is expressed in the different monetary values of the prizes handed out, all teams are rewarded for their efforts.<sup>23</sup> Two principles of remuneration are thus combined: the ranking order established in the competition is expressed in the unequal monetary values of the rewards, yet all teams are rewarded for having participated irrespective of the outcome of the races. After the winners are announced and the prizes distributed, the canoe racing ritual is terminated.

## Conclusion

The canoe racing ritual discussed here is part of an annual cycle of rites that is initiated by the performance of the New Year's ritual, and it is in comparison to the latter that this ritual should be understood. Elsewhere (Platenkamp forthcoming a) I have shown how by means of the New Year's ritual, performed at the end of the dry season in April, a flow of water is generated, moving from the peripheral sources under the jurisdiction of *phi*: spirits to the center

of the realm. There the water is brought into contact with the masked spirits, the Paternal Grandfather Nyue and Paternal Grandmother Nyue (the supreme among the *phi*: spirits), and with the Buddha statues and members of the Buddhist clergy. As a result of this contact, the water becomes ‘authorized’ by the Buddhist values *and* by the values adhering to the non-Buddhist spiritual origin of the fertility of the land and the fecundity of human beings. As ‘authorized water’, it is subsequently distributed among the town’s inhabitants to shield them in the year to come from the intrusion of malevolent spirits in the social domain. Simultaneously, the main rivers carry away all the impurities resulting from social and political strife within the realm during the past year. The ritual enactment of these contrasting flows of water effectuates the transition from the past to the present year, marked by the coming of the monsoon rains and the beginning of the rice-growing season. In the course of this ritual, a socio-cosmological order of the realm of Luang Prabang is enacted that differs significantly from the one brought about by the canoe racing ritual.

During the New Year’s ritual performed in monarchic times, the social morphology of the realm manifested itself at two distinct levels. At one level, it consisted of the relations between the Lao monarch and the non-Lao autochthonous people, who were categorically classified as servants or subjects. The latter acted as the guardians of the fertility of the soil under the jurisdiction of autochthonous *phi*: spirits. In the initial phase of the ritual, they briefly occupied the royal throne in the palace, assuming a contextually superior position. By offering the ‘fruits of longevity’ to the King, they made the fertility of the soil available to the kingdom at large. In return, they received the King’s socializing gaze, his advice, and gifts of clothing. Since the abolition of kingship in 1975, such transfers are no longer made.<sup>24</sup> But other transfers still are, and these articulate the second level of the social morphology. At this level, it is not the relations between the Lao monarch and the non-Lao autochthons that are enacted, but rather the internal order of the domain of Luang Prabang. Processions are held in which the marriageable Lao girls, led by the masked spirits—the Paternal Grandfather Nyue and Paternal Grandmother Nyue (the primeval ‘owners’ of human fecundity)—parade from the town’s southwestern ‘tail domain’ (*ha:ng mueang*) “of the King’s younger wife” to the northeastern ‘head’ domain (*hua mueang*) “of the King’s elder wife” and, two days later, in the reverse direction. All town quarters participating in these processions are assigned to either of these domains. As explained by my informants, the itinerary and significance of these processions are understood<sup>25</sup> to reflect the norm that “the junior wife of the King should pay a visit to the senior wife first; only then will the senior wife visit the junior one.” In other words, in this context the internal order of the realm is modeled on relations of relative-age affinity, connecting the ‘head’ and the ‘tail’ domains of the realm to the royal palace as senior/junior wife-givers to the King. Therefore, the focal concern of the New Year’s ritual is not only to procure the water and fertility of the soil from the non-Lao autochthonous people and the chthonic spirit ‘owners’ for the benefit of the society at large, but also to value the status of the Lao villages/town quarters of the realm in terms of the human fecundity that is embodied in their marriageable girls, who are offered in tribute to the King.

The canoe racing ritual focuses on a different concern altogether, and a different dimension of the social morphology of the realm is articulated in it. This ritual is conducted some five months later at the end of the rainy season. By that time the rice has been harvested, and the fertility, which the performance of the New Year's ritual had made available to the society, has come to fruition. Being embedded in a series of ritual activities denoted as 'rice packets decorating the earth', the canoe racing ritual proper is part of an overall endeavor to offer the life embodied in the rice and the 'fruits of longevity' to its spiritual sources of origin and 'ownership'. But just as the incorporation of water and fertility into the society during the New Year's ritual requires their transfer along various paths—expressing in the process the hierarchical order of relationships of which the society is constituted—likewise in the present case the offerings of rice and the 'fruits of longevity' to their spiritual 'owners' pursue different destinies. In this case, too, a hierarchical order of relationships is enacted. One such destiny is the Buddhist clergy. Preceding the actual canoe racing ritual, the monks receive gifts of rice that are offered to them in the streets and on the temple grounds. They value these offerings primarily in terms of the Buddhist precept of the 'merit' that accrues to the donors, but the latter value these offerings also as gifts to the founding ancestral spirits (*phi: ba:n*) of the town quarters. Furthermore, the monks, by redistributing parts of these gifts, charge the rice with the authority (*saksit*) of the Buddhist *dhamma*, just as during the New Year's ritual the redistribution of water transforms its value into 'authorized water'. In both cases, the Buddhist *dhamma* is claimed to be the source of value that is superior to the spiritual 'owners of the water, owners of the land', the original 'owners' of the fertility in the realm.

However, people also offer gifts of rice to the spirits of the house, the yard, and other sites charged with spiritual presence. These gifts are valued not for the 'merit' they generate but in terms of a very different set of ideas. The latter ideas come to the fore most clearly when, in preparation of the actual races, a series of offerings is made to the main *naga* spirits that reside in different abodes in the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers. They are the spirit manifestations of a primeval King and his Queen-Consorts who on this occasion have summoned "all other *naga* of the realm" to focus their protective powers on the domain of Luang Prabang. The offerings serve to transcend the separation in space between the *naga* King and his Queens as well as the disjunction in time between their originally human and present spiritual conditions. Female/feminized crews representing the Queens offer the King's image to the Queens' spirits, and then offer food to the spirit King; afterward, all canoe crews offer the King the images of his deceased subjects. The intention of these offerings is to reconstitute a socio-cosmological whole, encompassing the relations between *naga* spirits and humans, between the ancestral King and his Queen-Consorts, and between the ancestral King and his deceased subjects. In primordial times, it was the Queens' transgressive gaze that had caused this whole to fall apart.

Once again, the principle of royal relative-age affinity emerges as the founding relationship of the polity. In the New Year's ritual, this relationship is projected onto the domains of the King's senior and junior wives, that is, the

terrestrial order of Luang Prabang town and the living human inhabitants of its quarters. But in the canoe racing ritual, the relationship is projected onto the aquatic abodes of the ancestral royal spouses in the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers. And in this ritual context, in which the kingdom's past becomes reunified with its present and the ancestral spirits of all deceased subjects are reunified with their monarch, the living inhabitants of the realm are *not* valued as wife-givers to the King. The autochthonous people play no role whatsoever, and the relations between the realm's villages and town quarters are not valued for the fecundity embodied in marriageable girls. My informants underscored that during the canoe racing ritual, "no amorous relations are pursued, as during the New Year's ritual." Instead, it is an opportunity to vaunt the vigor and prowess of the male racing crews.

In former times, the races were conducted in tribute to the living King. In his present-day absence, the races are held in tribute to the King's spiritual ancestry and that of his Queen-Consorts. This at least is the valorization experienced by the participants. It should be emphasized that the task of these *naga* spirits is not restricted to protecting the realm from external dangers. They are also implored to shield the realm from internal strife and dissent. This signals that in this ritual two contrasting values are enacted, for it escapes no spectator's attention that the conduct of the male crews, both before and during the races, is motivated by a fierce ambition to surpass the crews from all other villages/town quarters in physical excellence. However, both in the past and in the present, this aggressiveness (legitimate as it might be in defending the realm against outside threats) is contrasted to the value of internal mutual solidarity and social harmony. In the days of the kingdom, this gap between the crews' potentially detrimental competitiveness and their integration into the social collectivity of the realm was bridged by orchestrating the races in a particular manner. The races could not be run until after the offerings had been brought to the *naga* spirits of the royal ancestors and after the crews representing different sections of the royal entourage had performed. Both the offerings to the *naga* spirits and the preordained outcome of the competition among the palace crews reaffirmed the immutable order of the kingdom as a socio-cosmological polity to which the value of male vigor and fierce competition must be subordinate. Hence, whatever the outcome of the races, the same royal reward was accorded to each crew.

At the present time, the Buddhist clergy and the state have appropriated these ritual tasks. High-level state representatives fly in from Vientiane, the state capital, to receive the tribute brought to them by the crews.<sup>26</sup> In speeches delivered by the Buddhist clergy of Luang Prabang and by government representatives, the crews are implored not to let their individual ambition call into question Buddhist values or jeopardize the social harmony of the polity. However, both the clergy and the state publicly ignore the idea that the canoe racing ritual is performed in tribute to the spiritual foundations of the kingship. They are conspicuously absent when the offerings are made at the aquatic abodes of the *naga*, and instead of acknowledging these royal ancestors as the cosmological guardians of the integrity of the body politic, the state representatives portray the Communist Party as such.



In recent years, the canoe racing ritual has become the stage on which the current socio-economic transformation of Lao society is being played out. Now that the state has eased some of the restrictions on its economy (Rehbein 2004) and commercial enterprises have appeared, these entities have seized the opportunity to sponsor canoes and/or crews. In doing so, both the state and private enterprises exploit the ritual as a framework in which commercial interests and corporate identities are presented as being part of and subservient to the collective interests of the state, just as the fierce male competition for honor and the renown of villages and town quarters used to be part of, and subordinate to, the kingdom as a socio-cosmological whole. This may account for the fact that, in contrast to the canoe racing ritual, the New Year's ritual of Luang Prabang has not been turned into a setting for the purpose of conveying a corporate image of society. Nowadays, the New Year's parades exalt the fertility of the land and the fecundity of the marriageable girls in tribute to the Buddhist *dhamma*—values that are inimical to potentially violent competition (cf. Platenkamp forthcoming b). The canoe racing ritual, on the other hand, celebrates male vigor and strength in tribute to the polity—an idea quickly appropriated by the main actors currently competing in the emerging market economy.

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## Notes

1. Archaimbault refers to “[Jean] Przyluski and his school” (Archaimbault 1966: 389). A similar interpretation of Cambodian canoe racing rituals was put forward by Porée-Maspero (1962–1969: 2:362); for an incisive critique, see Davis (1984: 204ff.). Aijmer (1964), however, presented a highly differentiated analysis of the canoe racing rituals conducted in Central China.
2. My fieldwork in Luang Prabang between 1997 and 2005 was generously supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft and conducted under the auspices of the Institute of Cultural Research, Ministry of Information and Culture, LPDR. I am much indebted to Dr. Houmphanh Ratanavong and Mr. Khammanh Siphanhxay MA for their valuable assistance in Laos, to Prof. Volker Grabowsky for his expert linguistic advice, and to Ms. Mina Bahar MA, Dr. Patrice Ladwig, and Prof. Guido Sprenger for their critical comments on an earlier version of this text. Statements made by informants were recorded verbatim in Luang Prabang town or neighboring villages.



3. Davis's statement (1984: 204) that, according to Archaimbault, the races were held in Luang Prabang at the end of the dry season is puzzling, since that season is believed locally to end with the performance of the New Year's ritual in April.
4. My informants identified these royal gifts as "buckets of cucumbers, one for each crew."
5. This village was known previously as Siang Dong and, as such, was part of the ancient name of Luang Prabang: Siang Dong Siang Thòng.
6. The period in which the races take place in Luang Prabang ranges from the end of August until the middle of September. In 2004, when most of the data discussed here were collected, the ritual was performed on 14 and 15 September.
7. A similar identification of *naga* and *ngueak* was recorded in North Thailand (Davis 1984: 212n17).
8. The desocializing role of his wives-turned-*naga*, who deprive the King of his human royal state and transform him irrevocably into a *naga*, relates inversely to the Indian motif of female *naga* who, by sexually uniting with the King, grant him the authority to found a kingdom. See Davis (1984: 206) for a critique of interpretations (e.g., Porée-Maspero 1950; Przulski 1925) of *naga* as predominantly female. Whether they are "a predominantly male symbol" (Davis 1984: 207) seems equally questionable in the present context.
9. The other guardian spirits and their aquatic or terrestrial abodes include the following: Thao Thong Cham (aquatic) at Pha Diau at the left bank of the Mekong opposite the quarter Siang Thong; Thao Kham Kio (aquatic) at Pha Suea under the left Mekong bank opposite the temple Siang Khong; Thao Bun Nyeua (aquatic) under the Midèn cave upriver Mekong; Thao Khamphang (terrestrial) near Hathien village on the slopes of the Phu Sa:ng mountain upriver Mekong; Thao Khamla:n (terrestrial) in Phu Suang mountain southeast of Luang Prabang; Thao Bunyuang (terrestrial) in the Pak U limestone mountains opposite the Tham Ting cave; Thao Khamthaen (aquatic) at Pha:sha: under the left bank of the Mekong opposite the temple Nong Xay; Thao Thongloa Phasumshao (aquatic) under the right bank of the Mekong at the temple Prabad; Thao Usuphanak (terrestrial) near the temple Chomshi in Luang Prabang town; Thao Kungthabuli Phasat (unidentified); Thao Ulongkacao (possibly terrestrial) at Pak U opposite the Tham Ting caves; Thao Somphu (aquatic) at Kengthong at the foot of the bridge over the Nam Suong upriver Mekong
10. My informants identified *ma:k man* as a spicy berry and *ma:k nyue:n* as a type of citrus fruit, both of which grow only in mountainous areas. The construct *ma:k man ma:k nyue:n* also refers to a ritual that the Khasak performed in a place called "Valley the Oranges" (Kio Ma:k Na:o) before they made their appearance at the court.
11. Lao ritual speech displays the canonical parallelism that is characteristic of the ritual languages of many Austronesian-speaking societies as well (Fox 1988; Koret 1995).
12. The verb *sa:ba:n* literally denotes 'to vow', 'to take an oath'. 'Authorized water' used to be distributed by the rulers of the realms (*mueang*) to sanction their authority over their subjects (Grabowsky 2004).
13. The Muang (Davis 1984: 210) and the Lao Isan (Tambiah 1970: 75) in North Thailand also view a person as being composed of 32 *khuan*.
14. In this perspective, Davis's interpretation of the aggression exerted in Kham Mueang by *ngueak* against the canoes in terms of an "intellectually intolerable situation in which a ritually important male object [that is, the canoe associated with male *naga*] is under the control of female power," a situation to be "resolved ... by subjecting the [*phi*: of the wood] to the threat of attack by the phallic *ngueak*" (Davis 1984: 215), is redundant, at least for the North Lao case. The dominant contrast is not between male and female spirits or between "the socio-cosmic principles of male and female, which are forever at war" (ibid.: 217). Rather, it is between the canoe, as a socially integrated living being, and non-socialized, antagonistic *naga* spirits.
15. Until the abolition of kingship in 1975, in the seventh Lao calendrical month (i.e., June), the elderly men of this village, Siang Muen, brought an offering to the spirit White Lady.

Only to her—the elder wife-turned-spirit of the King—a terrestrial shrine (*hò*) appears to have been devoted. “In the White Lady’s shrine we brought a dish of minced meat, soup, and so on, and the officiant invited her to come and eat. When he felt she had finished eating, those who had come together would eat as well.”

16. A similar development has affected the New Year’s ritual. Female ritual roles, formerly the privilege of certain town quarters only, have been replaced by the selection of ‘beauty queens’ among candidates from all town quarters (Platenkamp forthcoming a).
17. See Babb (1981) and Eck (1981) for a comparable notion of vision (Sanskrit *dar’san*) as the means of communication par excellence between living and spiritual beings in Hinduism. It must be emphasized that at the present occasion the gaze is an act of worship offered by subordinate to superordinate beings. This notion of ‘gaze’ is fundamentally different from the royal gaze as the socializing agency discussed earlier.
18. Significantly, only after the first race between the crews representing the spirits White Lady and Black Lady had been held did Khamtay Siphandon, the president of the Republic, arrive to take his seat in the hall. However, it was said that since his wife was born in the same village in Luang Prabang province as the provincial governor, the president attended the canoe racing “as a private person only.”
19. Compare Tappe (forthcoming) and Grabowsky (forthcoming) for instances of the Lao state propounding the uninterrupted historical continuity of its ideology in the officially sanctioned historiography.
20. In the races run in 2001, the canoes represented the following villages/town quarters or state organizations at the village/town quarter level (data about sponsors in that year are unavailable): Ngoi (district), Saluen (village), Phenkan Kanhuammue (Division of State Committee Planning and Cooperation) (village), Wad Phabadtai, Saonum (Youth Group of the That Luang town quarter), Phan Luang (village), Mueang Kay (village), Kum Phatthana (Development Group of the Siang Thong town quarter), Pak Khan (town quarter), Siang Lom (village), Siang Nguen (village), Aphai (town quarter), Wat Saen (town quarter), Hat Hian-Phusi (town quarter), Siang Muen (village), Nunsahuat (village), and Kum Phatthana (Development Group of the Fakhum town quarter).
21. In one case, detailed information is available about the sums of money involved. The inhabitants of the Siang Thong town quarter had raised 800,000 kip (approximately 60 euros) for their canoe and crew themselves. The Luang Prabang branch of the Lane Xang Bank—prompted by the abbot of the Wad Siang Thong temple, “who personally enjoyed the races very much”—decided, “after having consulted with its main office in Vientiane,” to contribute 3,000,000 kip (about 220 euros). With this sum, the building of a new canoe could be financed.
22. The system even allows for the possibility that a team that has lost once could become the overall winner—for instance, if A2 should win all subsequent races after having lost the first one.
23. The following prizes were awarded in 2004. The first prize consisted of a beaker of 1 kilogram of silver and one silver bowl. The beaker is to remain in the possession of the crew, while the bowl is to be passed on to the winner in the following year. If a crew wins the first prize in three successive years, the beaker remains in its possession. The second prize consisted of half a kilogram silver and an unspecified sum of money handed over in a closed box. The third prize was half a kilogram of silver and an unspecified but presumably smaller sum of money in a box. The fourth prize was an unspecified sum of money, and the fifth through sixteenth prizes were also sums of money, presumably in decreasing amounts. Crew members who won the ninth prize revealed that it was 650,000 kip (about 47 euros). Elaborate betting usually goes on during the canoe races, involving stakes as high as US \$1,000.
24. See Platenkamp (forthcoming a) for the changes implemented by the state government in this respect.
25. It goes without saying that in the official discourses on the parades, this understanding of their significance is ignored altogether.

26. History repeats itself, for even after the Laotian government had moved its seat to Vientiane, the King did not follow suit and “Luang Prabang simply became the royal capital of Laos. Thus, royalty in Laos remained geographically aloof, or off-center, from the mundane world of real politics, and histories dealing with the period of the Royal Lao Government are punctuated by the decamping of the prime minister and his entourage to Luang Prabang to attend this or that festival and royal ritual” (Evans 1998: 96).

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