

University of San Diego

Digital USD

Theology and Religious Studies: Faculty
Scholarship

Department of Theology and Religious Studies

9-2010

Lao Buddhist Women: Quietly Negotiating Religious Authority

Karma Lekshe Tsomo PhD

University of San Diego, tsomo@sandiego.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital.sandiego.edu/thrs-faculty>



Part of the [Buddhist Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Digital USD Citation

Tsomo, Karma Lekshe PhD, "Lao Buddhist Women: Quietly Negotiating Religious Authority" (2010). *Theology and Religious Studies: Faculty Scholarship*. 14.
<https://digital.sandiego.edu/thrs-faculty/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Digital USD. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theology and Religious Studies: Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Digital USD. For more information, please contact digital@sandiego.edu.

Lao Buddhist Women: Quietly Negotiating Religious Authority

KARMA LEKSHE TSOMO

UNIVERSITY OF SAN DIEGO

tsomo@sandiego.edu

ABSTRACT

Throughout years of war and political upheaval, Buddhist women in Laos have devotedly upheld traditional values and maintained the practice of offering alms and other necessities to monks as an act of merit. In a religious landscape overwhelmingly dominated by bhikkhus (fully ordained monks), a small number have renounced household life and become maekhaos, celibate women who live as nuns and pursue contemplative practices on the periphery of the religious mainstream. Patriarchal ecclesiastical structures and the absence of a lineage of full ordination for women have combined to render the religious roles of Buddhist nuns and laywomen virtually invisible throughout most of Lao history. With limited access to Buddhist learning, maekhaos live at the margins of Lao society, both spatially and economically. Based on interviews gathered during fieldwork in Laos and at a Lao temple in California, this paper examines the lives of Lao Buddhist women, their relationship to religious authority, and ways they might move from the margins to full inclusion in Lao religious life.

Keywords: Buddhist nuns, Laos, religious authority

This paper explores the roles of Lao Buddhist women and their relationship to male-dominated Buddhist institutions in the socio-political context of contemporary Laos. First, it considers the religious life of Lao Buddhist women and their current status in Lao Buddhist society. Second, it examines women's relationships to existing Buddhist institutions and to structures of religious authority and power. Third, it questions how Buddhists in general and women in particular reconcile Buddhist ideals of equality and authenticity with unjust Buddhist institutional structures. Field notes are incorporated to bring to life the lives of the nuns, the limitations they currently face, and the potential they hold for reconfiguring Buddhist reli-

gious life in the Lao Republic. Three central questions guided my research: What is the relationship between women and the religious establishment in Laos today, and how flexible is this relationship? What does it mean for Buddhist women to gain legitimacy in Buddhist institutional structures in which they have traditionally played no part? How might these institutional structures be transformed to reflect and accommodate new expectations of women's potential?

Women In Lao Buddhist Life

Aside from brief references to women's supportive roles as donors of the cloth that enables men and boys to ordain as monks and novices, little has been written about the religious lives of Buddhist women in Laos.¹ This lacuna is surprising in view of the fact that lowland Lao society is predominantly matrilineal² and matrilocal.³ Women in Laos enjoy considerable independence in family affairs, economic enterprise, and their religious lives. However, a closer examination of the nature of the Lao Buddhist tradition is revealing. Theravāda Buddhism became the major religious tradition of Laos in the fourteenth century; since then, *bhikkhus* have dominated every aspect of Buddhism in Laos, as in other Theravāda Buddhist societies. These patriarchal patterns and the absence of a lineage of full ordination for women help explain the virtual invisibility of Buddhist nuns and laywomen throughout most of Lao history.⁴ In addition, Laos was in a state of turmoil for decades; as many as one million people died as a result of carpet bombings, internecine conflicts, political upheavals, and the lethal effects of

1. A different version of this paper, 'View from the Margins: Buddhist Women and Religious Authority in Laos' appears in Adams and Hudok (2010).
2. Matrilineal refers to the fact that inheritance, especially land, is traditionally passed through daughters. The prevailing custom observed in many rural Lao Lum communities is to divide the land of deceased parents by the number of daughters, plus one; e.g., if a family has seven *ha* of land and 6 daughters, the land is divided by seven. Each daughter receives one share, except for the daughter (usually the youngest) who has taken care of the elderly parents, who receives two shares (in our example, 2 *ha* of land). This is her reward for caring for the parents.
3. Matrilocal refers to the custom whereby the son-in-law moves into the household of the wife. Even if the groom has already left his natal home and established an independent residence before marriage, he is expected to stay at least three days and nights after the wedding in the household of the wife. Dowry (called 'milk money') is paid to the bride's family. Additional customs observed during wedding ceremonies cement the power of women in the household. For instance, the groom and his entourage (which may include hundreds of relatives and friends) are required to walk to the bride's house. There, the bride's family blocks the entrance with a string. A stern (mock) interrogation by the bride's relatives follows, including questions such as whether the man will be a good husband, whether he will take good care of his wife, whether he will always love her, and so on. Only after the groom has answered satisfactorily is the string removed and he and his entourage allowed into the house. (In the case of a close friend of my co-researcher Beate Pinishe, the interrogation lasted for four hours before the prospective groom was granted access, and the marriage is reportedly a happy one.) In a traditional divorce, the husband brings the wife back to her family in person. Two articles discuss the danger that new Lao PDR property laws, allocations policies, and titling practices pose to the matrilineal property rights that lowland Lao women have traditionally exercised: Ireson-Doolittle (1999, 145–152) and Viravong (1999, 153–162).
4. An exception is Khampin, a princess who became a nun, mentioned in Evans (2009). Although overall historical documentation on nuns is sparse compared to that on monks, it is far more common in societies with an order of fully ordained *bhikkhunis*. Examples include Tsai (1994) and Grant (2008).

chemical defoliants during what has been called the CIA's Secret War in Laos.⁵ As with other aspects of life in modern Laos, Buddhism is in a state of recovery and women's issues have not been the most pressing concern.

Throughout the years of war, political change, and post-war reconstruction in Laos, Buddhist women have continued their devotions and their traditional practice of offering alms and other necessities to monks. A minuscule percentage⁶ has opted to renounce household life and become *maekhaos*: women who shave their heads, wear white robes, and observe eight, nine, or ten precepts. *Maekhaos* are female religious practitioners with vows of celibacy who live as nuns, yet do not have the status of being *bhikkhunīs* (fully ordained nuns). Although the origins of the *maekhaos* have yet to be traced, their dress and lifestyle are very similar to the *maechees* of Thailand. *Maekhaos* can be distinguished from *maesis*, the Lao term customarily used for female practitioners who have not shaved their heads, but may live alongside *maekhaos* in temple compounds. *Maesis* usually take up religious life on a temporary basis, sometimes to fulfill a religious vow or to accumulate merit for an ill or deceased relative, whereas *maekhaos* typically have a longer-term commitment. Nuns tend to live in the hidden corners of certain monks' monasteries; because abbots of monasteries must be monks, currently no community comprised solely of nuns exists in the country. Many *maekhaos* seek ordination later in life, after marriage and family, and most have received little formal education. *Maekhaos* have limited access to the Buddhist studies programmes available to monks, such as those in the larger monasteries of Vientiane. Instead, *maekhaos* learn Buddhism informally from individual monks and by attending periodic meditation courses. Several nuns told us that they eavesdropped when a monk explained Buddhism to laypeople; some stayed in the background and memorized every word the monk said. Occasionally, a nun will cross into neighboring Thailand and enroll at a Buddhist institute there in order to learn more. Although nuns live in a separate area within the temple grounds, they may be permitted to participate in the daily chanting and *Dhamma* talks with the resident monks.

Generally, however, *maekhaos* live at the margins of Lao society, both spatially and economically. Their simple dwellings stand literally at the margins of monks' temple compounds. Discouraged by custom from going for alms, a practice ordinarily reserved for monks,⁷ nuns receive the monks' surplus food in exchange for cooking, cleaning, and performing menial tasks for them. The typical patterns of marginalization are observable in the *maekhaos*' low social status, poor self-estimation, and the feelings of powerlessness that they expressed to my

5. For various perspectives on these events, see Breaux (2008), Conboy (1995), Issacs, Hardy, Brown, et al. (1987), McGehee (1983); and Warner (1996).

6. According to Zago, Lao nuns numbered 447 in 1968 and 443 in 1969–1970 (1972, 83). No official figures exist for subsequent years, but the number of Lao nuns is currently estimated to be between 600 and 800, in a population of 6.8 million.

7. Nuns are also discouraged by the meagre alms they receive, a tangible indicator of their status in society. Nuns told us that they used to go for alms in both Vientiane and Pakse, but discontinued the practice because they received less and less. Some nuns in the southern part of the country still go for alms, as witnessed by my co-researcher. We also heard first-hand reports that nuns occasionally go for alms during meditation courses in Vientiane; the practice seems to hold symbolic significance for the nuns, since it obliquely suggests their monastic status.

co-researcher and I when we met them. Individually, for instance, they strive for self-improvement in a Buddhist sense, but are often left alone, not able to receive helpful advice. During our interviews, most questions posed by *maekhaos* related to spiritual practices and to visions they experienced during their meditation sessions. One *maekhao* had spent many years alone in a forest cave, but had been unable to receive guidance about her state of mind and visions. Another inquired about the ethics of pursuing a ‘career’ as a clairvoyant, advising petitions on lottery numbers, as some monks do. Most *maekhaos* are unable or unwilling to articulate a clear strategy for their own social advancement, declaring that their goal is the achievement of spiritual liberation (*nirvāṇa*) — a worthy goal, to be sure, but one that is difficult to achieve without community support or spiritual guidance. As closely linked as these nuns are to their own personal networks, they lack adequate housing, nutrition, education, and healthcare, which limits their ability to serve as spiritual resources and exemplars for society — functions that are deemed significant for monks. For nuns to assume such a role is regarded as very beneficial by laywomen, if they happen to be familiar with nuns in their vicinity. Many laywomen said that they are much more comfortable discussing their sorrows and personal problems with another woman. For example, Maekhao Sisū, a solitary nun in Attapeu is very well known in her community and is supported by laywomen who turn to her for spiritual comfort. In another representative instance, however, a Lao laywoman we introduced to a nuns’ community near Vientiane expressed her surprise at the nuns’ knowledge of Buddhism and wisdom. This woman had repeatedly sought spiritual advice from monks, but had only received the stereotypical answer: ‘look inside and practise well’. When we visited the nuns’ community, she posed the same questions to the nuns and not only received a satisfactory reply, but also felt completely understood and accepted. Such incidents illustrate the need for a female presence in temples.

This study of the *maekhaos* is significant not only because these women have never before been studied, but also because it documents a group of religious women that has continued for generations and is growing, despite multiple levels of marginalization. To some extent, in terms of geography and a degree of self-imposed isolation, Laos itself may be viewed as politically, economically, and religiously on the margins. Except for some showcase monasteries in urban areas, the country’s monastic communities, situated peripherally to Lao society, mirror the country’s isolation. Often located on the edges of towns, Buddhist monasteries are self-consciously detached from family life, social norms, and politics. Further, within the religious establishment, the *maekhaos* are peripheral, excluded from the *Saṅgha* (monastic order) by virtue of their gender. The *maekhaos*’ response to gender discrimination and multiple levels of marginalization has been to develop sub-communities that are spiritually independent, while being economically and religiously dependent. The thesis advanced here is that, by embracing their marginal status, the *maekhaos* have established a spiritual independence consonant with their goal of spiritual liberation.

Negotiating Traditional Gender Roles and Expectations

In lowland Lao society, religious values are closely interwoven in all aspects of life. These values provide a foundation for decision-making, from the personal to the national level. Since in Laos, as in most Asian Buddhist societies, there is a

tacit assumption of the moral superiority of males, discriminatory or patronizing attitudes and the exclusion of women is implicitly reflected in religious and social institutions. In spite of Buddhist theory that affirms the equal potential of all human beings, renunciant women lack adequate religious education, material support, and legal recognition. Technically, female renunciants in Laos are regarded as pious laywomen, and not as full members of the Buddhist *Saṅgha*. As a consequence, *maekhaos* occupy a liminal status somewhere between the monastics and the laity, and lack the benefits of membership in either category. Because they are not fully ordained *bhikkhunīs*, they are not formally recognized as nuns either by the Lao *Bhikkhu Saṅgha* or the government. The nuns' nebulous, subordinate religious status and lack of legal recognition combine to limit their religious and educational opportunities. The limitations and neglect that Lao nuns face can, by extension, be seen to adversely affect Lao women's perceptions of their own spiritual potential. An analysis of the nuns' status from the perspective of social justice and human rights is therefore imperative. This imperative pertains not only to Lao nuns, but also to nuns in other Buddhist societies where women's religious rights are curtailed, such as Burma, Cambodia, Thailand, and Tibet. Nevertheless, the situation for *maekhaos* in Laos seems to be slightly better than for *maechees* in Thailand, in that, upon entering monastic life, women receive an identification card that establishes them as Buddhist nuns. The *maechees* of Thailand do not receive such a card and are therefore ineligible for the reduced transportation fares and other benefits that the monks enjoy.

It is clear that many Lao nuns define themselves in relation to monks. Their self-definition reflects social expectations of nuns within hierarchically ordered Buddhist monastic structures as well as the roles and expectations of women within patriarchal Lao society at large. As scholars become more sensitive to gender issues, many also become increasingly aware of the important links between gender identity, cultural identity, and religious identity. Moreover, increasing global awareness has led to an appreciation for the diffusion and intra-fusion of cultures over time. As Grant Evans has noted, 'In real historical cultures as against imaginary pure cultures, borrowing and diffusion takes place continuously, although at different levels of intensity. What was once foreign becomes, over a few generations, hallowed custom' (Evans 1999, 14). The tendency to define women in relation to men, that until recently characterized most societies, is now shifting, as concepts of gender equality begin to infuse societies worldwide. As Lao women begin to redefine themselves in relation to changing social structures, Lao nuns will no doubt also begin to rethink their relations to monks.

In many ways, the conditions of nuns in Laos mirror conditions for nuns in other Theravāda Buddhist societies. Monks are deemed worthy of support no matter what their level of education or other activities may be, even if they have only become monks temporarily. Followers tend to offer support to those with the most promising potential for making merit. Monks' circumstances contrast sharply with those of nuns, who by tradition are dependent on their families and the monks they serve, even if they become nuns for life and are fully devoted to the *Dhamma*. Whereas monks receive the 227 precepts of a *bhikkhu* and are revered as members of the *Saṅgha*, nuns in Laos and other Theravāda countries occupy an ambiguous status. This allows them a certain measure of independence, since they live in their own separate area of the temple, are permitted to

handle money, and cook for themselves. Although nuns must seek permission from the abbot to travel outside the temple, they regulate most aspects of their own lives. Some Theravāda nuns worry that, if they were to become *bhikkhunīs*, they would come more closely under the monks' authority and forfeit the extent of self-governance they now have. Others, for example the Burmese nuns interviewed by Hiroko Kawanami, seem comfortable with their subordinate status within the religious and political hierarchies: 'In Burma, the nuns have adopted a pragmatic attitude in their dealings with the *Saṅgha* and political authorities by positioning themselves conveniently within the monastic hierarchy, and negotiated their religious position so as to remain a non-threatening force' (Kawanami 2007, 242). At the same time, the nuns' ambiguous status relegates them to the margins of the monastic establishment, in which they have no official place. Their status reveals an implicit contradiction. On the one hand, nuns and laywomen enjoy the advantage of being able to participate in Buddhist ritual and contemplative life without being bound by the restrictive precepts that regulate the lives of the *bhikkhus*. On the other hand, they are excluded from the advantages that the *bhikkhus* enjoy by virtue of their elevated social and spiritual status. As soon as boys are 'old enough to scare away the crows', they are eligible to receive *pabbajjā*, the rite of going forth from the household life. Once they are 20 years old, they are qualified to receive *upasampadā*, the rite of full ordination as a *bhikkhu* and a full member of the *Saṅgha*. On this basis, *bhikkhus* are regarded as legitimate 'fields of merit' for laypeople, who offer them respect, practical assistance, and the requisites of daily life in the belief that they will thereby accrue tangible and spiritual benefits in this and future lives. Women who wish to enter monastic life in Theravāda Buddhist societies are generally considered ineligible to receive *pabbajjā*, since the Theravāda order of *bhikkhunīs* died out around the eleventh century and many believe that there are currently no *bhikkhunīs* to ordain them. Instead, women have the option of receiving the five precepts of a laywoman (*upāsikā*) or the eight precepts of a renunciant woman (*maekhao*), but are not regarded as 'fields of merit' and must fend for themselves to obtain the requisites of daily life. Although Lao nuns enjoy a certain autonomy, because of their small numbers, fewer precepts, and somewhat negligible status, their freedom of movement and the extent of their participation in monastic life depends on the inclination of the abbot to exert control.

An example of the ways in which Lao nuns and laywomen participate in religious life are the traditional *bhasi* string ritual, called *soo khuan*: engaging with the spirits. These are said to have their origins in Brahmanical or indigenous practices that have been integrated into Southeast Asian Buddhist practice. Although non-Buddhist in origin, the officiant begins the ceremony with a recitation of the Buddhist refuge formula. As in Thailand (Swearer 1995, 49, 53), it is believed that there are 32 body parts, each of which has a corresponding *khuan*: soul or spirit. The ritual may be used for prevention or cure, to pull the *khuan*s together or help them stay together. The ritual may be performed by a monk or a layman, often a former monk, who knows the passages to be recited.⁸ After the ceremony, the officiant and all the other participants wind strings symbolic of blessing, prepared with knots in the middle, around each others' wrists as a gesture of well-

8. In some ethnic groups, such as the Thai Dam, a woman functions as the leader of this ceremony.

wishing. The knot is believed to 'fix' the *khuans*. Ideally, all participants leave the ceremony with 32 strings on their wrists. Lao Buddhists wear the knotted strings for at least three days after the *bhasi* ceremony. This seems to be a variant of the string ritual found in Thailand and other Theravāda countries, where it is often incorporated into *paritta* ceremonies, wedding ceremonies, and so on. In Laos, the ritual is also performed for protection when traveling, for house blessings, for purification after an accident or a quarrel, or to ward off bad luck. The ritual may be performed during a ceremony in a temple or one may approach a renowned monk and request him to wind a string around one's wrist to gain or regain health and good fortune. In some temples, the ritual seems to be an income-generating activity, as the petitioner makes offerings in cash or kind. In other cases, especially in poorer settings, a monk or nun may offer strings to benefactors as tokens of gratitude. Strings are also used when some misfortune has already befallen a person, such as a serious illness. In such cases, the strings are wound around the ankles. Women participate fully in this ritual. Recently at Wat Lao Boupharam in San Diego, California, women dressed in fine traditional clothes took their places on an outdoor stage before an audience of several hundred people. The male president of the temple society assumed leadership in the chanting, but women and girls took the lead in tying strings on the wrists of one another and the congregants. Although a man assumed authority in ritual terms, in spatial terms women were literally centre stage. This ritual, organized at a Lao temple in the United States, represented a reversal of the usual placement of nuns below monks. In Theravāda monasteries, nuns, even those who have been ordained for decades, typically sit on a mat on the floor, while monks, even those who have just been ordained, sit on a raised platform above them. The seating arrangement of nuns below or behind the monks is symbolic of the subordinate position nuns hold in the religious hierarchy, a position that has rarely been questioned.

Another ritual sets women in an eerily uncertain light. The Phaved celebration commemorates the *Jātaka* tale of Prince Vessantara, the 'charitable prince'.⁹ In this past life story of the Buddha as a *bodhisattva*, in a highly celebrated act of generosity, the prince gives away all his possessions, including his wife and children, to a highly objectionable character. This story is portrayed prominently on temple walls throughout Laos and Thailand, along with depictions of the hell realms. When the feast of Phaved is celebrated, about a month after the end of the rainy season retreat (*vassa*), the story of Prince Vessantara's noble act is recounted to the public. Framed as the enlightened activity of a *bodhisattva*, this story has a major impact on the lives of women in Lao society. As spectators, women participate in the celebration at their local temple every year and old grandmothers cry each time they hear the story. From a feminist perspective, the story is highly problematic, in that it reinscribes women's appropriate submissiveness and obscures the merit of generosity with a devaluing of women and children as property. Ostensibly, it teaches the Buddhist values of generosity and selflessness, yet Vessantara's wife has become an icon of the submissive, self-sacrificing Lao woman. A fuller examination of this story is needed to understand its impact on women (and men) in Theravāda Buddhist societies. What questions does the story raise for women? How has this story influenced their understandings of

9. See Cone and Gombrich (1977). Sid Brown provides an analysis of the story in the Thai context (2001, 137–142).

Buddhism and of gender? And why, out of more than 500 *Jātaka* tales, has this story has achieved such prominence?

Revealing the Invisible: Nuns' Communities Near Vientiane

My observations of Lao women over the past eight years have focused on women's roles in Buddhist institutions and culture and the relationship between Buddhist institutions and political power. From these observations, I have come to several tentative conclusions. First, women, especially *maekhaos*, are a nearly invisible sector of Lao Buddhist society that has received little or no scholarly attention. Second, the academic study of Buddhist women in Laos is warranted because of the questions it raises about women's roles and Buddhist cultural adaptation in a rapidly changing society under socialist rule. Third, many of the assumptions that have been made about women's subservience in Theravāda Buddhist cultures may not neatly fit the Lao situation. Buddhist women in Laos continually demonstrate their practical and religious capabilities without attracting much notice, and seem highly skilled in negotiating the terms of their subordination in a male-dominated society. As an example, Maekhao Sisu, an elderly nun with her own *kuti* in the grounds of a monastery in Attapeu, is appreciated as a spiritual friend and resource for other women, by appointment. Together, the women cook and offer alms to the monks and help prepare for Buddhist celebrations. Given the influence of traditional roles and values, Lao Buddhists might be expected to follow the lead of Buddhists in Thailand and perpetuate male-dominated social and institutional patterns. However, precisely because Lao nuns occupy an ambiguous status vis-à-vis the male religious hierarchy — neither *Saṅgha* nor lay — their options remain open. They have yet to obtain the modicum of government recognition that places nuns in Thailand and Sri Lanka under official purview. Lao women may decide to remain unrecognized, content with their quiet contemplative lives and tangential to the ecclesiastical establishment, or might instead follow the model of Vietnam, a neighboring socialist country with a vibrant *Bhikkhuni Saṅgha*. Although most of these nuns are Mahāyāna, since 2002 some Vietnamese Theravāda nuns have begun receiving *bhikkhuni* ordination in Sri Lanka (Phap 2004, 167). If Lao Buddhist women had the opportunity to receive full ordination as *bhikkhunis* and were formally recognized by the Lao *Bhikkhu Saṅgha* and the government, this would open up many religious and educational opportunities for them. Given access to greater opportunities, it is possible that a new generation of young women would enter monastic life and gain the knowledge and skills to contribute positively to the revival of Buddhism in Laos. A few case studies provide background for assessing women's roles and potential.

My research on Lao Buddhist women began in San Diego, California, and continued during three visits to Laos, where I conducted fieldwork as a religious studies scholar focusing on the roles of women in Buddhism. In October 2001, I first visited Wat Boupharam, a Lao Buddhist Temple in San Diego, with students from my classes on Buddhism and World Religions at the University of San Diego. Since then, I have revisited the temple many times and became more closely acquainted with the monks and members of the temple community, especially women. In January 2003, I visited Laos to learn more about Lao Buddhism, to investigate the roles of women in Lao Buddhist culture, and to compare their religious roles and practices with those of Lao Buddhist women living in San Diego. During this

visit, I was assisted by Beate Pinisch, a German agricultural expert and freelance consultant who lived in Laos from 1986 to 2007 and who had a close connection with two communities of nuns in the vicinity of Vientiane. When I returned to Laos in July 2004, we traveled from south to north to locate additional nuns' communities and to document the nuns' lives and aspirations. In January 2007, we visited these nuns again and located several more remote, unmarked communities of nuns. Our field research was a process of discovery and of establishing friendships rather than an exhaustive ethnographic study. At first, many people we met found it curious that we were interested in the lives of nuns, but since I am a Buddhist nun and my companion spoke fluent Lao, we soon formed bonds of trust and understanding and had some remarkably candid conversations. The following are some snapshots.

In 2003, we visited two communities of nuns in the vicinity of Vientiane. The first, Wat Tham Kok Ma (Horse Stable Cave Monastery), was reached by traveling 18 km from the capital on intermittently paved roads. From the Lao side of the river, we glimpsed an ornate newly constructed temple complex on the Thai side of the Mekong. As the word *tham* (cave) suggests, this small monastic community was located in a landscape of huge natural rock formations about 800 meters from the banks of the river. As we gradually learned, however, the fragile nature of the Lao environment parallels the fragility of *maekhao* communities in rural Laos. As we approached the nuns' residence in the direction of the Mekong, we encountered three images of the Buddha's final passing away (*parinibbāna*) and a ten-foot image of the Buddha with a six-inch miniature Buddha in a cavity at its centre. The images were typical of popular Buddhist workmanship, with the body, limbs, and countenance conspicuously out of proportion.¹⁰ Passing by the *kuti* of an elderly monk who lived apart from the other monks, we noticed a small but rather elaborate altar that had been erected on the porch against a backdrop of Indian-inspired posters depicting events from the life of the Buddha. Nearby was an image of Nang Thoranee, the legendary 'land owner' or Earth Mother, popular in Laos and Thailand.¹¹ She was depicted wringing water from her hair, symbolizing the victory of the Buddha-to-be over the tempter deity Māra, famous for assailing him and trying to deflect him from his goal of enlightenment. In her current role in Laos, Nang Thoranee helps ancestors and loved ones achieve a fortunate rebirth. Although she is not specifically Buddhist, she appears at Buddhist sacred sites, where she represents the beneficial, compassionate, and quietly powerful nature of women.

Two nuns greeted us warmly at the porch of a small *kuti*.¹² The resident nun and her companion, who lives in a small forest community on the banks of the Mekong about 700 meters away, had been nuns for three *vassa* (rainy season

10. Buddhists are careful to distinguish the workmanship of an image from the image itself. Once an image is consecrated in a ceremony of 'opening the eyes,' it is regarded as equivalent to a Buddha (some might say 'sacred,' by virtue of being a representation of and ritual link to the Buddha), regardless of artistry.

11. Her powerful association with the land can also be seen to extend beyond the local. See Guthrie (2007, 168–181). In Thailand, Nang Thoranee is also known as Jao Mae Toranee, a more formal appellation.

12. Out of respect for their privacy, we do not use the full names of these nuns or artificially assign pseudonyms, but use abbreviated forms of their names.

retreat periods).¹³ A third nun, who had been ordained for 16 *vassa*, soon joined us. Maekhao Na lost no time in explaining that her primary reason for becoming a nun and serving monks was to create merit (*tam bun*). She launched into a spirited explanation of Theravāda Buddhist beliefs and meditation practices, which she permitted us to videotape. By staying at this isolated place as a nun, and cooking, cleaning, and making donations to the monks, she believes she can create great merit and live a meaningful life. Earlier, she decided she was not learning much from the sermons of the monks in the temple where she was staying and went to Thailand to pursue her study and practise of *Dhamma*. Since returning to Laos, she finds the quietude of forest life far preferable to the distractions of city life and especially appreciates the opportunity to serve the monks of Wat Tham Khok Ma on a daily basis.

During the four years we visited the nuns, we observed the impermanence of their residence at Wat Tham Khok Ma. In the course of those years, the nuns moved between Wat Tham Khok Ma and the community on the Mekong several times. Sometimes the reasons they moved were benign. For example, the nuns were adept at collecting traditional medicinal plants and thought that the community on the banks of the Mekong, not far from a road, provided better marketing possibilities. Other reasons for moving were less benign. In one instance, agents of an ecotourism corporation tried to take advantage of the beautiful surroundings of Wat Tham Khok Ma to establish a resort. They widened the road, which led to massive deforestation, built huts for tourists, brought in 'entertainers', took food supplies from the nuns, and even permitted animals to be killed on the premises of the *wat*. After the death of the aged abbot, a highly esteemed monk, the nuns also did not feel completely welcome anymore. Even though the ecotourism resort only survived for a few months, when we last visited in 2007, few monastics remained at Wat Tham Khok Ma.

The fate of Horse Stable Cave Monastery aptly illustrates the nuns' liminal status in Lao society. Despite their advanced age and meagre means of support, they worked hard to establish a forest retreat where they could observe their precepts and practise *Dhamma* at a distance from the disturbances of city life. For years, their community served as a refuge where nuns could live and accumulate merit through meditating and serving the needs of monks living nearby. Yet, in the end, the atmosphere of the community they had worked so hard to create was compromised by commercial interests. The nuns were deprived of the very things that brought them to the *wat* — solitude, quietude, an undisturbed natural setting, and a nearby community of monk practitioners. Whereas the monks could easily relocate to a wide range of other temples, the nuns had few options. The fact that the nuns had no official protection or legal recourse demonstrates their vulnerability. Without legal status, they find themselves in a precarious situation and a category that renders them practically invisible.

The second community we visited near Vientiane, Wat Pa Sokpaluang (Sokpaluang Forest Monastery), was an example of a small, growing nuns' community. Despite its bucolic name, this *wat* is quite centrally located, near the for-

13. Seniority is reckoned in years of monastic ordination, which is calculated by the number of *vassa* (Lao: *phansa*) a nun or monk has observed. For this reason, observing the *vassa*, one of the three primary rites for monastics, assumes special importance in Buddhist cultures, particularly in Theravāda ones.

eign embassy district. The first time we visited, we met a 73-year-old nun from Luang Prabang who had been ordained since 1998. Before becoming a nun, she raised twelve children, one of whom lives in Berkeley, where the nun stayed for one year. Her children, especially one son, supply her with the necessities of life. When we visited Wat Pa Sokpaluang again a few days later, we met a nun named Maekhao Muang, who became a nun when she was 25 and had been ordained since 1965. In 1980, she started a medicinal sauna at the *wat*, which is frequented by tourists and provides a modicum of income for the community. Meditation classes for foreigners are held at the *wat* on Saturdays (taught by monks, not nuns). A young novice who knows English translates the meditation instructions for those who attend. There are currently around 30 nuns living in this community, as well as about 50 *bhikkhus* and many novices. Most of the nuns have difficulty getting the necessities of life and therefore are not able to stay as nuns for a long time. Maekhao Muang is in the process of founding a new monastic community for nuns only; this community will begin with eight nuns, including one who is 18 years old. Young nuns like this one are rare, due to a lack of adequate support and the relatively low social status of *maekhaos*.

While we were talking with the eldest nun, a young monk came bringing a small bucket of sticky rice for her. This gesture of generosity illustrates the interdependency and friendly cooperation between nuns and monks. The nuns supply the monks with whatever goods and services they can; when the monks have extra food or other donations, they share them with the nuns. Monks are not allowed to store food overnight, but the nuns have not taken this precept. Therefore, the nun was allowed to keep the sticky rice overnight and steam it for breakfast and lunch the next day. Ever since she was a young girl, her only wish was to become a nun. However, she honored the wishes of her parents, got married, and bore more than a dozen children. As soon as her children were grown, she became a nun. As a laywoman, she attended the preparations for the five-day *saṅghadāna*, an annual ceremony at which offerings are made to monks at the conclusion of *vassa*, the rainy season retreat. After becoming ordained, she no longer attended this celebration, preferring instead to stay in solitude, away from the crowds. For many years, she attended *vipassanā* meditation courses held at various *wats*.

Maekhao Muang invited us into the temple for the evening chanting. On a raised platform on the same level as the small Buddha altar sat eight *bhikkhus*, including one holding a microphone who led the chanting. In a row on a platform below the *bhikkhus* knelt 22 novices clad in robes of various hues, from bright orange to ochre to brown. Leaving one row of space in between themselves and the novices, 28 white-clad *maekhaos* arranged themselves in neat rows and knelt to await the service. The head nun sat on a thin white cushion and made a point of fetching a green satin cushion for me, a visiting foreign *bhikkhuni*. During the liturgy, the nuns either knelt on their heels or sat with their legs to one side. At one point, the head nun turned to me and said 'meditation', at which point we were all allowed to sit cross-legged. The meditation lasted only a few minutes, after which we resumed chanting. The novices then recited the refuge and a few other verses, after which the *bhikkhus* left the hall. The nuns then recited the refuge and more verses, and the service concluded. An aged monk wearing glasses and a woolen shawl around his shoulder approached me to ask where I was from

and whether I spoke Lao or French. I replied that I was American and apologized that I spoke neither. The senior nun, Maekhao Muang, made a point of telling him twice that I was a *bhikkhuni*, then led me away to see her sauna.

Hidden Treasures: Nuns' Communities in the South

In 2004, we headed to southern Laos seeking to document the existence of additional communities of nuns. At Wat Luang in Attapeu, we learned that there was one elderly nun, Maekhao Pat, who was away in Vientiane at the time of our visit. We spoke with a large group of curious novice monks, some heavily tattooed and draped in beach towels, who were astonished at our interest in nuns. The women of Attapeu, on the other hand, were very informative and appreciative of their resident nun, with whom they seemed to have a close relationship. The women told us that every year, together with Maekhao Pat, they helped prepare for Buddhist celebrations held at the *wat*. They regularly cook and offer alms to the monks, and also seem to provide necessities for Maekhao Pat. When Beate Pinisch visited the *wat* again later and met Maekhao Pat in person, she found her to be tiny in stature, with an extraordinarily strong presence. The information the young novices had given us — that she had chosen monastic life because she could not find a husband — proved untrue. Maekhao Pat had been married and had several children before she became a nun. The cliché that women become nuns only because they are miserable and desperate is prevalent in Lao society. Why else would anyone renounce marriage and family to live a solitary life of deprivation? This cliché reflects the significant disparity that exists between attitudes toward renunciant women and renunciant men in Lao society, attitudes that are often mirrored in other Buddhist societies.

At Wat Pabat in Pakse, we discovered a community of nuns living in *kutis* behind the main temple in the grounds of the monks' monastery. The nuns in residence included Maekhao Peng, who was 83 years old and had been ordained for 20 years; Maekhao Sai, who was 80 and had been ordained for ten years; and Maekhao Haun, who was 74 and had been ordained for six years. Maekhao Sai explained that, more than ten years ago, the community had had an excellent teacher named Bhikkhu Kumari who taught them *Dhamma* by explaining the teachings word by word in a very clear way. After he died, there had been a succession of teachers who came and went, but none had been able to teach in such a lucid way as he did. A bit wistfully, the nuns expressed their gratitude to this *bhikkhu*, who taught them what *Dhamma* they knew. The nuns did not appear to be in good health and lived in very poor conditions, which they worked to keep clean. When we visited again in 2007, we found that a 23-year-old nun named Sina had joined them to receive training. Several of the laywomen who bring food to the nuns expressed sincere respect for the nuns and the path of *Dhamma* they have chosen.

Driving 18 km north of Pakse, near a village named Sapai, we arrived at Wat Phou Takai, a monastery with ten nuns and ten monks that is dedicated to the practice of *vipassanā* meditation. One nun from the community was away studying in Myanmar and another, Maesi Kaisi, was living in California. The nuns who were currently living at the monastery included Maekhao Chan (77), Maekhao Dang (75), Maekhao Kong (68), Maekhao Laa (76), Maekhao Si (65), Maekhao Phet

(47), Maekhao Sai (59), Maekhao Si (55), Maekhao Ta (24), and Maekhao Kom (80). Even though the latter two women had not shaved their heads, they were referred to as *maekhaos*, rather than as *maesis*. The choice of terminology seemed to value the two women as members of the community of *Dhamma* practitioners, regardless of the length of their hair.

Maekhao Si had been a nun for eleven years. She had been very sick before she became a nun, but has been fine ever since. She began a practice of eating vegetarian food on the new moon and full moon days and is now fully vegetarian. Her former husband, who has now remarried and lives in the United States, is a supporter of the monastery. He built a bungalow for Maekhao Si and continues to support her practice financially. He also donated funds to build a bungalow for three monks at the monastery. In our travels, we came upon several instances of nuns who were supported by their former husbands.

The nuns at Wat Phou Takai pointed out the distinction between forest monks, who specialize in meditation, and monks in traditional temples, who perform ceremonies and generally attend to the needs of the laity. Monks who stay at traditional temples supply their lay followers with amulets for protection, perform rituals (such as winding the *bhasi* strings), and provide information that people use in selecting lottery ticket numbers, they said. The information needed for the lottery is generally given in code, for example, referring to animals such as elephants, scorpions, and so forth, that correlate with a system of numerology. Monks who supply winning numbers are highly regarded and financially rewarded. The monks from Wat Phou Takai do not engage in such practices, which are prohibited by the *Vinaya*; instead, they concentrate their energies on *vipassanā* meditation practice. They are allowed to go into the village for ceremonies, but must stay at the village temple, not in private homes. ‘You can’t sit on rice husks and expect to stay clean’, Maekhao Si noted. The import was clear: one cannot become involved in worldly affairs and expect to remain untainted. The tension that exists between forest monks and city monks was implicit in her statement. All the nuns that we met expressed a decided preference for quietude and avoided worldly involvement.

The final monastery we visited in 2004 was Nong Bua Thong, a forest monastery located on the outskirts of Vientiane. We spoke with two of the five nuns in residence. Maekhao Man was 56 years old and had been a nun for four years. Her companion, Maekhao Paa, was 73 and had been a nun for nine years. Maekhao Man had lived at this forest monastery for nine years, including five years before she ordained. She had just returned from staying four years in a cave far in the mountains, at a place 70 km north of Vientiane. During this time, she read Buddhist books, but had no teacher. Sometimes during meditation, she had certain supernormal experiences (‘appearances’) that she was unable to explain.

The nuns at Nong Bua Thong have attended many training courses in *vipassanā*, a meditation technique that has become popular throughout the world.¹⁴ Just as Buddhist festivals are opportunities for laypeople and monastics alike to travel and interact, the *vipassanā* courses that are held periodically in various locations

14. *Vipassanā* is ‘insight’ into the three marks of existence, that phenomena are: impermanent (*anicca*), unsatisfactory (*dukkha*), and devoid of an independently existing self (*anattā*). The term also refers to meditation that produces insight and to a meditation movement that began to spread during the latter half of the 20th century in Southeast Asia and the West.

provide opportunities for nuns to travel and keep in touch, even though the courses require silence. Our informant told us that these training courses are attended by many nuns — usually 30 to 40 or even 100 — in addition to many *mae-sis*, laywomen who live temporarily like nuns. When we asked about nuns' communities, they mentioned Na Kun Noi, a *vipassanā* temple with 16 nuns located about 30 km from Vientiane, and Sam Paket, a temple with ten or more young nuns, as well as Wat Pa Sokpaluang, the temple in Vientiane described above.

Maekhao Man explained what she called the six steps of *vipassanā*, which included mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasati*) and a four-stage walking meditation, with several different ways to position the hands. During walking meditation, one must be vigilant and not allow one's eyes or thoughts to wander. While walking, one is mindful of breathing, following the breath to the tips of the toes as they are placed first on the ground. The aim is to develop constant mindfulness (*sati*). Another meditation method is to continuously recite the name of the Buddha, '*Buttho, buttho, buttho...*'. Maekhao Man explained that intensive Buddhist meditation training involves keeping eight precepts and more. At the end of the day, the practitioner reflects, 'What good actions have I done today? Did I harm anyone with my thoughts, words, or deeds?'

The *vipassanā* training courses require strict discipline: no sleeping during the day, one bath per day, no talking, no intoxicants, no reading, no chewing of betel nut, no smoking, and no handling of 'gold' or money. Practitioners take just one meal per day, at 10 am, and have one hour to eat this meal; they are not supposed to eat fast, but to eat an appropriate amount mindfully. All the food is mixed together and then distributed. Donors make contributions to sponsor this meal (*dāna*), as they like. Each person has to make her own sleeping arrangements, such as a makeshift hut in the forest ('like an animal'). The courses are like forest retreats and are usually held during the dry winter months, especially from January to March. Sometimes the nuns also hold *vipassanā* training courses at their own temple, during which they cook meals for the many laywomen who attend. The abbot of their temple is a *bhikkhu*; he had just arrived back from Japan and was scheduled to go to France soon.

The daily schedule at Nong Bua Thong includes waking up at 3 am to pay homage to the Buddha, do the morning chanting, and meditate. The nuns then meditate another full hour beginning from 4 am. At 5 am, they begin cooking breakfast and eat at 7 am, when the monks return from their almsround. At 8 am, they begin cooking lunch and eat at 11 am, followed by a rest period. At 4 pm, they do walking meditation, at 5 pm they bathe, and at 5:30 they pay homage to the Buddha, do the evening chanting, and meditate. The nuns work alongside the monks and sometimes with laywomen, especially those women who come to stay in the temple for 24-hour practice periods. Each nun has her own hut, which she builds herself. Maekhao Paa, the elderly nun at the temple, told us she built her hut with contributions received from a relative who lives in the United States.

In 2007, following leads given by several people, we arrived at a small *wat* on the outskirts of the village of Xebangfai, near the border between Khammoune and Savannakhet Provinces. There we met Maekhao My, a nun who lives by herself in a tall wooden *kuti* to the right of the *wat*. No other nun was living in this village. In her youth, Maekhao My had been the domestic employee of a wealthy family. When we met her, she had been a *maekhao* for ten years and was very

interested in learning, especially languages. Her little *kuti* showed evidence of her studies, with an array of beginning English books as well as palm leaf Buddhist manuscripts. Maekhao My was teaching herself both English and Lao Tham, an ancient sacred script. Even though her *kuti* is located within the temple compound, she is approached independently by village women who want to learn *Dhamma* and meditation, and young students who want to study languages. She impressed us as unusual, both because she is independent-minded enough to live alone and because she is so intensely devoted to learning.

Several hours south of Pakse, we found a community of four nuns living on the edge of Wat Hatxaikhoun, where two monks also live. The *wat*, located on a picturesque hilltop along the Thai border, is one of several in the area. Maekhao Deng (75) was married before, but had no children and became a nun when she was 29. Maekhao Lim (74) and Maekhao Mong (66) have each been ordained less than ten years. Maekhao Pai (75) had five children, but they all died. A year after her husband became a monk, she became a nun. She lamented that, in recent times, few women want to live the monastic life, but emphasized that the same is true of men. She recounted that before the establishment of the Lao People's Democratic Republic by the Pathet Lao in 1975, there had been many generations of nuns in Laos, but in later years teachings, study programmes, and *Dhamma* talks had become rare, so there was nothing to attract new nuns.

Two laywomen looked after the nuns, shopping at a market 40 km away, fetching drinking water from a nearby factory, cooking meals, and tending to other tasks at the *wat*. Everyday they joined in the chanting at 4 am and 6 pm. Along with the nuns, they had attended a ten-day *vipassanā* meditation course, rising very early in the morning and alternating walking and sitting meditation throughout the day. One of the women (aged 43) told us the sad story of her life. One of seven children, she had attended a French school when she was young. When she was in the fifth grade, her parents were shot and her grandmother would not let her continue school. Gradually, even though she was still a child, she was able to open a noodle shop and send her siblings to school. However, she did not have enough money to bury their murdered parents properly. She married, but her husband died when she was five months pregnant, so she went to live at the *wat*. Her baby died at birth and she has stayed at the *wat* ever since. She told us that she plans to stay at the *wat* for the rest of her life, which is a great comfort to the nuns, who rely on her care. Just a few years ago she had a dream, in which her father gave her a fish. Because it was a very strange and vivid dream, she decided to consult one of the nuns. The nun told her to bet on the fish (lottery numbers in Laos are related to animals), which she did with all of her last cash. She won enough money to bury her parents, with some left over to donate to the *wat*.

Coda: An Encouraging Reception

Before leaving Laos in 2007, we went to meet the *Saṅgharāja* of Laos, a senior monk named Ajahn Vichit who impressed us as remarkably friendly and supportive of women. He repeatedly stressed that women can do anything men can do and that the main thing is to practise the *Dhamma*. We had come to invite him to attend the International Congress on 'Buddhist Women's Role in the Sangha: Bhikshuni Vinaya and Ordination Lineages' to be held at Hamburg University in June 2007.

When we explained the purpose of the gathering, he immediately seemed to understand the importance of equal opportunities for women in Buddhism. There was no pretense about him, which created an atmosphere of mutual respect, so it was very easy to talk with him. He emphasized that his comments (for example, that an order of *bhikkhunīs* was a good idea) reflected his own personal views, not necessarily those of Lao monks in general. He said that this was the first time someone had come to talk to him about the full ordination of women and he appreciated the opportunity to meet Buddhists from other cultures. We sincerely urged him to attend the conference in Hamburg, because we felt that the perspectives of an open-minded Lao Theravāda monk of his stature would be a valuable addition to international dialogue on the ordination issue. Unfortunately, due to poor health, he was not able to attend that historic gathering.¹⁵ The Congress, organized by Thea Mohr and Bhikshuni Jampa Tsedron of Hamburg University, focused specifically on how full ordination for women can be instituted in the Tibetan tradition, but gathered *Vinaya* scholars and practitioners from a variety of traditions toward that end. Although the outcome of the Congress was inconclusive, it brought needed attention to the issue of women's roles in the *Saṅgha* and in Buddhism more broadly.

Needless to say, one cannot discount the possibility of monks being publicly supportive and privately opposed to the full ordination of nuns. Nevertheless, the monks we met in Laos seemed much more open to the idea of full ordination for women than their counterparts in Thailand. From a theoretical perspective, a strong case can be made for the ordination of women, since the Buddha is recorded to have affirmed the equal potential of women to achieve liberation and to have admitted his stepmother Mahāpajāpatī into the *Saṅgha*, thereby initiating the Buddhist monastic order for women (*Bhikkhunī Saṅgha*). Yet it is commonly argued that, from a practical perspective, the ordination of women in the Theravāda is now impossible due to the absence of a *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* in the Theravāda tradition. As global momentum for religious equality for women builds, however, and the nuns of Theravāda countries like Sri Lanka forge ahead to receive ordination from *bhikkhunīs* from Korea and Taiwan, the case for opposing full ordination for women becomes weaker and weaker. Already, an estimated 800 Sri Lankan nuns have received *bhikkhunī* ordination, setting an important precedent for nuns in other Theravāda societies.

The day before we met the *Saṅgharāja*, we went to meet Ajahn Bouakham, the monk in charge of Buddhist education in Laos. This monk studied abroad in India and had a reputation for being very open-minded. He took us to the site of a proposed new Buddhist university in a beautiful location in Phoatong. He told us that the government has donated a huge piece of land for this purpose, but has no money to construct buildings. Taking Vietnam as a model, they intend to provide equal educational opportunities for monks and nuns, as well as lay-people. The only stumbling block is the quarter million dollars needed to realize the project.

Until the university comes into being, Maekhao Kaek and Maekhao Kiem at Wat Sila Salalam Pokam near Vientiane would like to create a Buddhist institute where girls and young women can receive an education and prepare for higher

15. A selection of papers from the International Congress on 'Buddhist Women's Role in the Sangha' have been published in Mohr and Tsedron (2010).

studies. A young policewoman in the neighborhood is busy accumulating funds to help support her family, so that she can become a nun. In 1999, the nuns established a *vipassanā* meditation centre called Wat Sila Salalam Pokam, about 20 minutes outside of Vientiane. They applied for permission to establish a temple for nuns only, but their application was not approved. Instead, Maekhao Kaek's nephew, a monk, serves as nominal abbot. Every year, the nuns hold month-long *vipassanā* courses that are attended by up to 500 people, including monks, nuns, and laypeople. These courses are a great service to the Buddhist community in Vientiane. For the other ten months of the year, the nuns would like to use the facilities at Wat Sila Salalam Pokam as a school for girls, but have found that community support for the project is minimal. Maekhao Kaek studied *Dhamma* and meditation for several years in Thailand and completed a Bachelor's degree in Buddhist Studies in Yangon in 2005. A year later, she and Maekhao Kiem attended the 9th Sakyadhītā International Conference on Buddhist Women in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, where they were inspired by the examples of work being done by nuns in other countries. In February 2007, through the Jamyang Foundation, the nuns at Wat Sila Salalam Pokam were awarded the Women and Engaged Buddhism Award from the Buddhist Council of the Midwest in the United States, and plan to use the award to provide books, tables, chairs, and teachers' salaries for the school. Maekhao Kaek has also asked the government's permission to found a Lao Nuns' Association.

There is no question that Buddhist education programmes for women are lacking in Laos and are badly needed. Education programmes in Burma and Thailand may serve as a model, but the status of nuns in those countries still leaves much to be desired.¹⁶ The nuns of Laos might also look to Vietnam, where nuns have access to full ordination as *bhikkhunis* and also to higher education at any of the country's three Buddhist universities, located in Hanoi, Hue, and Ho Chi Minh City. If the women of Laos had opportunities for Buddhist learning and ordination like the women of Vietnam, they could no doubt become a powerful force for social change and the restoration of Buddhist traditions in Laos.

Conclusions: From the Margins to the Future

This examination of the lives of Lao nuns and their relationship to religious authority in Laos is preliminary and provisional. Many questions remain and the questions are likely to change with further research. The first set of questions is historical: Are we justified in assuming that the *maekhao* tradition is a continuing thread from earlier times? What evidence can be found?¹⁷ If present-day communities of *maekhaos* are evidence of a revival, what did earlier traditions look like? The second set of questions is institutional: What criteria can be used to compare communities of Buddhist nuns in Laos to communities of monks, and what are the interrelationships between them? A third set of questions emerges from a feminist analysis of the data collected: What specific roles do women play in the revival of Buddhist traditions? How responsive is the religious establishment to

16. See Kawanami (2007) and Falk (2008).

17. There is scant mention of nuns in Lao Buddhist history, apart from a brief mention of Princess Khampin, who is said to have become a nun and to have studied Tham language (Evans 2009).

the needs of women? In what ways are women curtailed, how can they gain institutional recognition, and will formal recognition yield substantial advantages or merely further restrictions?

Our conversations with nuns in these isolated communities reveal several baffling contradictions. On the one hand, women have nothing to gain materially or socially from becoming ordained. At present, nuns can only look forward to a life of poverty and estrangement from a society that regards them as desperate for have taken such a step. On the other hand, laypeople acknowledge that the nuns' intentions in living a monastic life may be purer than those of the average novice monk who enters the order simply to fulfill the expectations of their parents or to get a free education. Many nuns participate in intensive meditation training and some nuns, such as Maekhao Kaek at Wat Sila Salalam Pokam and the nuns of Wat Phou Takai, are respected as meditation teachers. Regardless, the higher religious status of monks, seen as fields of merit for the laity, assures them of higher social status and more generous material support. The lower religious status of nuns, still commonly regarded as laywomen with shaved heads, results in their low status on the margins of Lao society, with few material benefits. The nuns seem fully aware of the glaring disparities between their living standards and opportunities and those of even young novices, yet the *maekhaos* remain humbly, unswervingly dedicated to their chosen path. Monks receive full public support, even if they are temporary monastics without much interest in *Dhamma* teachings and practice. By contrast, *maekhaos* receive meagre private support, even if they are permanent monastics and keenly devoted to the *Dhamma*. The contradiction is striking and self-perpetuating. As long as renunciant women are poorly supported and lack access to Buddhist education, few young women will view monastic life as an attractive option. Surely there should be a way for women to pursue the path of *Dhamma* with a pure heart *and* have opportunities for Buddhist knowledge and support?

Assumptions about male superiority are evident in the high esteem accorded to monks simply by virtue of their male monastic status, an esteem that does not extend to female renunciants. Some will argue that the monks are worthy of greater respect because they observe the 227 precepts of a *bhikkhu*, whereas the nuns observe only the eight to ten precepts of a *maekhao* rather than the 311 precepts of a *bhikkhunī*. This argument does not explain why even a male child novice is generally accorded more respect than a *maekhao*.

Arguments can be made on both sides of the issue of full ordination for women. Some scholars are of the opinion that Theravāda nuns are not interested in *bhikkhunī* ordination, but the question is more complex than it at first appears. Certainly not all Theravāda nuns are willing to formally receive the 311 *bhikkhunī* precepts, especially those over a certain age for whom the additional precepts might pose a hardship. Even though most Theravāda nuns already observe the majority of the primary ten precepts, including the injunction to refrain from taking solid food after midday, at present most do handle money. One vital concern is: If Theravāda nuns become *bhikkhunīs* and are no longer permitted to personally receive monetary donations to buy and cook their own food, will they receive enough alms to sustain themselves? Another concern is equally practical. Theravāda nuns are widely respected for the humility and contentedness, qualities that are especially prized in women. If they begin to advocate

for *bhikkhunī* ordination, they risk stirring up controversies, as has occurred in Sri Lanka and Thailand, and being accused of seeking power and prestige. The initiative to introduce *bhikkhunī* ordination is strongly opposed by many monks in Theravāda societies and has resulted in personal attacks and even imprisonment. Most nuns are very reluctant to challenge the *bhikkhus* upon whose largesse they depend. What use would high status be if it were to jeopardize their solitude and serenity?

Those who support *bhikkhunī* ordination argue that nuns' subordinate status erodes their spiritual and social potential. If Theravāda Buddhist women had access to *bhikkhunī* ordination and were recognized by the *Bhikkhu Saṅgha* and their governments, it is likely that they would also gain greater respect, better support, and access to educational opportunities that would eventually enable them to take more visible and active roles in the renewal of Buddhism in their societies. The benefits of nuns' increased participation in social service and Buddhist religious life due to the re-emergence of a *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* in Sri Lanka are already evident.

One conclusion is certain: any pat generalization about Theravāda nuns in general is likely to be off the mark. Close similarities exist in the dress, liturgy, attitudes, and lifestyle of nuns in Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and other Theravāda countries, but the historical and cultural context of each is unique. The nuns of Laos share many similarities with nuns of Thailand, but significant, constructive changes have occurred for Thai nuns in recent decades. As their educational opportunities improve, nuns in Thailand are becoming more numerous, visible, and influential in Thai society, in part due to growing disillusionment with the *Bhikkhu Saṅgha* (Brown 2001, 112). Lao nuns, by contrast, are fewer in number, less educated, practically invisible, and as yet relatively inconsequential in Lao society.¹⁸ In recent years, Thai nuns have gained greater autonomy and a measure of legitimacy through the efforts of the Institute for Thai Maechee (Brown 2001, 111–115), Khunying Kanitha (Brown 2001, 34–36; Tsomo, 2004), Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (now Bhikkhunī Dhammananda; Kabilsingh 1991), and others. The Theravāda nuns of Sri Lanka have even managed to re-establish the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha*, despite major opposition from many quarters, through the efforts of Sakyadhītā Sri Lanka, Kusuma Devendra (now Bhikkhunī Kusuma), Ranjani de Silva, and others.¹⁹ Similar gains are yet to come for Lao nuns and they are not without controversy. Some argue that legitimization from the *Bhikkhu Saṅgha* and the government comes at a price: conformance with rituals, regulations, appearances, and hierarchical ordering that may be deemed spiritually deadening. The diversity of opinion that exists within Theravāda nuns' communities concerning the potential advantages and disadvantages of gaining greater legitimacy and religious authority mirrors the diverse backgrounds and expectations of the nuns themselves.

My observations have led me to conclude that sidelining or excluding women from vital facets of Lao religious life is a great loss for women, for society, and for the well-being of the Lao Buddhist tradition. I have further concluded, however,

18. The situation of Lao nuns is paralleled by *donchees* in Cambodia and *maesilas* in Bangladesh in these respects. See Heike Loeschmann (2000) and Tsomo (2000b).

19. See, for example, Ranjani de Silva (2004, 2006).

that women's exclusion from mainstream monastic life is more a matter of historical neglect than discriminatory intent. It is therefore possible that, by drawing needed attention to the inconsistencies between Buddhist theory and contemporary social praxis, obstacles to women's full inclusion can be overcome. The extent to which Lao Buddhist women take up this challenge will be the decisive factor.

At present, many obstacles still stand in the way of Lao women's religious empowerment. Much more research is needed to ascertain the relative merits of the various solutions that have been proposed, especially in the eyes of the nuns who are most intimately concerned. The option of higher ordination may seem somewhat abstract and idealistic to nuns who are dealing with elemental issues of survival. Yet it would be disingenuous to dismiss the possibility of introducing *bhikkhuni* ordination for Lao women as an 'imported political agenda'. There is nothing ethnocentric about working for gender equity and women's religious rights, which are ensured under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, to which the Lao Republic was an early signator (1980). On the contrary, it would be patronizing to assume that Lao women are incapable of recognizing the gender disparities that exist in their society and defeatist to discount the possibility of working for constructive changes in Buddhist institutions. Nor is gender equity inherently antithetical to spiritual practice.²⁰ Besides, to discount the possibility of Lao women's liberation would be to doubt the Buddha's affirmation of women's spiritual capabilities as recorded in Buddhist texts.

Meanwhile, small communities of *maekhaos* inhabit spaces on the periphery of Buddhist temples throughout Laos and quietly pursue their goal of spiritual liberation on the margins of Lao Buddhist society. Although Lao nuns are largely dependent on monks for food, shelter, and formal approval for venturing out, they are respected for their humility and their daily meditation practice. They are free to receive their own followers, teach them informally, and serve as spiritual counselors to others, inspiring some to take up the renunciant life. Some *maekhaos*, like those at Wat Sila Salalam Pokam and Wat Phou Takai, have initiated small communities of sincere renunciants dedicated to intensive *samatha* and *vipassanā* meditation practice. Although these nuns lack official recognition by the Lao Buddhist *Saṅgha* or the government, they are free to attend meditation courses and to practise as much as they like, without interference from either worldly or monastic officials. It may even be argued that their position on the margins of Lao society allows the *maekhaos* to move more freely than if they were constrained by formal religious authority or bound by the eight weighty rules that subordinate fully ordained nuns to monks.²¹ Despite their lack of structured religious education and meagre tangible support from the lay community, Lao nuns enjoy an enviable social independence that is consonant with their spir-

20. Hiroko Kawanami disagrees: 'Western Buddhist nuns have also promoted their own political agenda for equal rights and empowerment for nuns through their active involvement. However, their enthusiasm, based on liberal values in line with those of the tradition of European Enlightenment, is not shared by many Asian Buddhist nuns, whose priorities lie in fulfilling their religious duties and serving the community' (2007, 242). This assessment implies that the empowerment of nuns somehow contravenes fulfilling religious duties and serving the community.

21. These rules are discussed in Kusuma (2000, 5–13).

itual goal of liberation. It remains to be seen what the *maekhaos* might gain and what they might lose by entering the mainstream of Lao Buddhist institutional authority.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply indebted to Beate Pinisch, without whom this research could not have been completed. Her linguistic skills, knowledge of Lao social structures, cultural sensitivity, and personal contacts made this project not only possible, but immensely rewarding. We both hasten to express our appreciation to all the nuns, monks, and laypeople who extended their gracious hospitality and shared their knowledge and insights with us. We warmly recall the police officer who forgave a traffic violation because there was a foreign nun in the car and the anxious man who tried to drag us from the women's washroom, having mistaken a nun for a monk.

Bibliography

- Adams, K.L. and T.J. Hudak, eds. 2010. *Multidisciplinary Perspectives in Lao Studies*. Tempe: Center for Asian Research, Arizona State University.
- Breaux, J.J. 2008. *The Laotian Civil War: The Intransigence of General Phoumi Nosavan and American Intervention in the Fall of 1960*. Morrisville, NC: Lulu.
- Brown, S. 2001. *The Journey of One Buddhist Nun: Even Against the Wind*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Conboy, K., with J. Morrison. 1995. *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos*. Boulder, CO: Paladin Press.
- Cone, M. and R. Gombrich. 1977. *The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara: A Buddhist Epic*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- De Silva, Ranjani. 2004. 'Reclaiming the Robe: Reviving the *Bhikkhuni* Order in Sri Lanka'. In *Buddhist Women and Social Justice: Ideals, Challenges, and Achievements*, edited by K.L. Tsomo, 119–135. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- . 2006. 'The Training and Education of Nuns in Sri Lanka'. In *Out of the Shadows: Socially Engaged Buddhist Women in the Global Community*, edited by K.L. Tsomo, 90–93. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications.
- Evans, G. 1999. *Laos: Culture and Society*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- . 2009. *The Last Century of Lao Royalty: A Documentary History*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- Falk, M. L. 2008. *Making Fields of Merit: Buddhist Female Ascetics and Gendered Orders in Thailand*. Copenhagen/Washington: NIAS Press and University of Washington Press.
- Grant, B. 2008. *Eminent Nuns: Women Chan Masters of Seventeenth-century China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Guthrie, E. 2007. 'In Defence of the Nation: The Cult of Nang Thoranee in Northeast Thailand'. In *Buddhism, Power, and Political Order*, edited by Ian Harris, 168–181. London and New York: Routledge.
- Ireson-Doolittle, C. 1999. 'Gender and Changing Property Rights in Laos'. In *Women's Rights to House and Land: China, Laos, Vietnam*, edited by Irene Tinker and Gale Summerfield, 145–152. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner.
- Issacs, A., G. Hardy, M. Brown, et al. 1987. *Pawns of War: Cambodia and Laos*. Boston, MA:

- Boston Publishing Company.
- Kabilsingh, C. 1991. *Thai Women in Buddhism*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press.
- Kawanami, H. 2007. 'The *Bhikkhuni* Ordination Debate: Global Aspirations, Local Concerns, with Special Emphasis on the Views of the Monastic Community in Burma'. *Buddhist Studies Review* 24(2): 226–244. doi:10.1558/bsrv.v24i2.226
- Kusuma, B. 2000. 'Inaccuracies in Buddhist Women's History'. In *Innovative Buddhist Women: Swimming Against the Stream*, edited by K.L. Tsomo, 5–13. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press.
- Loeschmann, H. 2000. 'The Revival of the Don Chee Movement in Cambodia'. In *Innovative Buddhist Women: Swimming Against the Stream*, edited by K.L. Tsomo, 91–95. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press.
- McGehee, R. W. 1983. *Deadly Deceits: My 25 Years in the CIA*. New York: Sheridan Square.
- Mohr, T. and J. Tsedron, eds. 2010. *Dignity and Discipline: The Evolving Role of Women in Buddhism*. Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications.
- Phap, L. 2004. 'Forging Friendships: Three Traditions of Vietnamese Buddhism'. In *Bridging Worlds: Buddhist Women's Voices Across Generations*, edited by K.L. Tsomo, 166–168. Taipei: Yuan Chuan Press.
- Swearer, D.K. 1995. *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Tsai, K.A. 1994. *Lives of the Nuns: Biographies of Chinese Buddhist Nuns from the Fourth to Sixth Centuries: A Translation of the Pi-ch'iu-ni chuan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Tsomo, K.L., ed. 2000a. *Innovative Buddhist Women: Swimming Against the Stream*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press.
- . 2000b. 'Factions and Fortitude: Buddhist Women of Bangladesh'. In *Innovative Buddhist Women: Swimming Against the Stream*, edited by K.L. Tsomo, 42–57. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press. Tsomo 2000a:
- . ed. 2004a *Buddhist Women and Social Justice: Ideals, Challenges, and Achievements*, Albany: State University of New York Press.
- . 2004b. 'Khunying Kanitha: Thailand's Advocate for Women'. In *Buddhist Women and Social Justice: Ideals, Challenges, and Achievements*, edited by K.L. Tsomo, 173–179. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- . ed. 2004c. *Bridging Worlds: Buddhist Women's Voices Across Generations*, Taipei: Yuan Chuan Press.
- . ed. 2006. *Out of the Shadows: Socially Engaged Buddhist Women in the Global Community*, Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications.
- Viravong, M. 1999. 'Reforming Property Rights in Laos'. In *Women's Rights to House and Land: China, Laos, Vietnam*, edited by Irene Tinker and Gale Summerfield, 153–62. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner.
- Warner, R. 1996. *Shooting at the Moon: The Story of America's Clandestine War in Laos*. South Royalton, VT: Steerforth Press.
- Zago, M. 1972. *Rites et Cérémonie en Milieu Bouddhiste Lao*. Rome: Universita Gregoriana Editrice.