

Millennialism, Charisma and Utopia: Revolutionary Potentialities in Pre-modern Lao and Thai Theravāda Buddhism

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ABSTRACT *With reference to (mainly Pāli) textual imaginaries and historical data on outbreaks of millennial movements in southern Laos and parts of Thailand around the turn of the twentieth century, this essay discusses the revolutionary potentialities embedded in Theravāda Buddhist thought and its localised cosmologies. The essay begins with an examination of the various sources of charisma and the roles of charismatic leaders in these movements, focusing on the tension between institutionalised state Buddhism and peripheral figures such as lay ascetics, holy men or forest monks who are more likely to be involved in millennial movements. Next, eschatological visions of the decline of the dhamma, utopian imaginaries of renewal and the (re-)instantiation of righteous kingship are discussed. I argue that many of these movements can be understood as forms of ‘restorative millennialism’. In order to better understand the rebellious and revolutionary features of the cases presented, in the final section I discuss theories relating to potentialities and messianic time, and suggest that the activation and actualization of millennial imaginaries are – despite failure and disenchantment – always immanent to society and reflect the friction between its actual and virtual dimensions.*

The very idea that the dawn of the millennial kingdom on earth always contained a revolutionizing tendency, and the church made every effort to paralyze this situationally transcendent idea with all means at its command.

– Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1936), p. 211

In traditionalist periods, charisma is *the* greatest revolutionary force.

– Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), p. 363

Introduction

The question of under what specific circumstances rebellions and revolutions evolve has been of interest to both social scientist and political activists. In the Marxist tradition, this question also took on tremendous practical importance: When is the right moment

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for the seizure of power, and when are the conditions ripe for the emergence of a revolutionary movement? Lenin coined the famous notion of the 'revolutionary situation', according to which a 'revolution is impossible without a revolutionary situation; furthermore, it is not every revolutionary situation that leads to revolution'. Like Marx before him, and many theoreticians and active revolutionaries after him, he was aiming to detect the general 'symptoms of a revolutionary situation'.¹ In order to give answers to this complex set of questions, many social scientists and historians have looked at peasant rebellions and the role of religion in these movements, especially focusing on their millennial characteristics that often entail eschatological and utopian features. Eric Wolf and Eric Hobsbawm are representative of a generation of left-oriented historians and anthropologists who dealt explicitly with these topics. Wolf compared pre-industrial peasant rebellions in six different societies with the aim of determining their similarities and differences.² Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic forms of Social Movements in the 19th and 20th Century* looks at social bandits and Italian and Spanish millennial movements. He concludes that millennialism 'is present, almost by definition, in all revolutionary movements of whatever kind'.³ Although both their analyses are obviously sympathetic to these movements, they nevertheless reflect the Marxist stance in which these rebellions are depicted as a kind of primitive and embryonic forerunner of 'true revolutions'. The latter appear as a product of modernity, while rebellion and millennialism are classified as relatively unorganized, pre-modern symptoms of the revolutionary situation.⁴

Since the 1990s, interest in these larger questions has waned somewhat. Besides the decline of existing socialism, the reasons for this change in research orientation might also be linked to the boom of resistance studies in the 1990s, largely initiated by James Scott's work on peasant societies in Southeast Asia. Scott turns away from large-scale rebellions like millenarian movements and justifies this change by pointing out that 'attention to large-scale peasant insurrection was, in North America at least, stimulated by the Vietnam war and something of a left-wing academic romance with wars of national liberation. [...] In a larger sense one might say that the historiography of class struggle has been systematically distorted in a state-centric direction'.⁵ His focus (and that of many others following him) is rather on 'everyday acts of resistance' and the 'weapons of the weak' beyond collective movements. Anthropologist Sherry Ortner, critically taking stock of the 'resistance boom', criticizes Scott for this lack of attention to religion and larger social movements with millennial characteristics.⁶ However, one cannot claim that research on millennialism has entirely lost its dynamics. The phenomenon continues to attract a tremendous amount of research; Hillel Schwartz estimates that over 3000 studies on the topic have been produced.⁷ Moreover, handbooks, collected volumes and ethnographies of contemporary movements attest to the continuing relevance of the topic.⁸

¹Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, 'The Collapse of the Second International' in George Hanna (ed), *Lenin Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), vol. 21, p. 212.

²Eric Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

³Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic forms of Social Movements in the 19th and 20th Century* (New York: Norton, 1959), p. 57.

⁴Bülent Diken, *Revolt, Revolution, Critique: The Paradox of Society* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011), p. 12.

⁵James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 28.

⁶Sherry Ortner, 'Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 37:1 (1995), p. 181.

⁷Hillel Schwartz, 'Millenarianism' in Lindsay Jones (ed) *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., vol. 8 (New York: MacMillan, 2004), p. 6037.

⁸Two excellent volumes have been published recently: Catherine Wessinger (ed), *The Oxford Handbook on Millennialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Richard Landes, *Heaven on Earth: The Varieties of the Millennial Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). For an ethnography of contemporary millennialism,

But can a category as broad as millennialism be applied to all instances of rebellion? Furthermore, can rebellion be subject to comparative examination across cultures and historical periods? Albert Camus, in his *L'homme révolté*, is rather sceptical:

But, to sum up, are not rebellion and the values that it implies relative? Reasons for rebellion seem, in fact, to change with the times. It is obvious that a Hindu pariah, an Inca warrior, a primitive native of Central Africa, and a member of one of the first Christian communities have quite different conceptions about rebellion. We could even assert, with considerable assurance, that the idea of rebellion has no meaning in those actual cases.⁹

Although I do not share Camus's existentialist notion that the world is essentially 'meaningless' and 'absurd', I think his general idea that revolt and rebellion evolve when humans become disenchanted by, and enraged about, injustice can actually be transferred to many cases in which rebellions draw on concepts and ideas that have been subsumed under the rubric of millennialism.

The question whether Buddhism in general, or more specifically Theravāda Buddhism,¹⁰ has millennial characteristics with revolutionary implications has been discussed by a variety of authors. Max Weber contrasts Hinduism and Buddhism with messianic ancient Judaism and notes, with reference to their shared theodicy of rebirth and the supposedly static implications of the caste system, that 'these religions lack virtually any kind of social-revolutionary ethics'.¹¹ Kitsiri Malalgoda examines the topic from the perspective of Theravāda Buddhism and, despite his balanced analysis, states that 'innovations of this [i.e., revolutionary] sort are scarcely to be met within the histories of Theravāda Buddhist countries. In Burma, they are very much a recent phenomenon'.¹² Malalgoda also refers to Peter Worsley's classical study of cargo cults in Melanesia. Extending his analysis beyond Melanesia, Worsley states that Buddhism 'had little attraction for those who looked for an activist solution to man's problems' and claims that it 'offered no such hope to the many [... ;] it could not appeal to a rebellious peasantry'.¹³ Weber, Malalgoda and Worsley mainly refer in their works to a narrow selection of textual Theravāda Buddhism, understanding it as a salvation religion of individual ascetics. For them, there seems to be no *social* utopia in Buddhism, but merely an *individual* utopia of bliss located inside a person reached, for example, by meditative states of mind. In contrast, Steven Collins has devoted a good deal of research on the topic of millennialism and utopia in what he calls the 'Pāli imaginaire' and comes to a much more complex and multi-faceted conclusion in relation to texts and their embeddedness in Buddhist history.¹⁴

see, e.g., James Faubion, *The Shadows and Lights of Waco: Millennialism Today* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁹Albert Camus: *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), pp. 19–20.

¹⁰The description of a specific school of Buddhism as Theravāda is by no means unproblematic. See Peter Skilling and Jake Carbine (eds), *How Theravāda is Theravāda? Exploring Buddhist Identities* (Bangkok and Taipei: Dharma Drum Publications, 2011), for a critical review of this classification. For the sake of generalization, I use Theravāda here for textual Buddhism and the societies in mainland Southeast Asia. However, I also problematise these distinctions of various elements of a religious tradition in the context of charismatic movements.

¹¹Max Weber, *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism* (New York: Free Press, 1962), p. 122.

¹²Kitsiri Malalgoda, 'Millennialism in relation to Buddhism', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 12:4 (1970), p. 430.

¹³Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of Cargo Cults in Melanesia* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1957), p. 223.

¹⁴For Collins, the Pāli imaginaire refers to a non-material, imaginative world constituted by texts, especially works of art and literature. For him, 'such worlds are by definition not the same as the material world, but in so far as the

Moreover, studies adopting a social history or anthropological approach reveal a very different picture, especially for Theravāda traditions of Southeast Asia.

By drawing on textual, historical and anthropological sources, this essay examines the relevance of millennialism and millennial movements to Lao and Siamese (now Thai) Theravāda Buddhism in pre-modern Southeast Asia. My primary intention is not to present new data in order to re-evaluate and criticize the numerous works that have been produced on this topic. Instead, the essay examines, reviews and supplements some of these accounts in order to focus on what I call 'revolutionary potentialities'.¹⁵ With reference to charismatic leadership, visions of the decline of the Buddhist *dhamma* (eschatology) and utopian renewal, I specifically focus on pre-modern forms of millennial Buddhism that arose in Laos and some peripheral regions of Thailand around the turn of the twentieth century. I will here employ an approach that comprehends the emergence of such movements as a complex interplay of concrete historical situations, Theravāda Buddhist cosmologies and localized forms of Buddhism. In this context, Buddhist narratives, eschatologies and visions of utopia are conceptualized as potentialities and 'cultural resources'. These can be activated or actualized by millennial movements and their charismatic leaders, but can also be subject to contestation by the state, colonial regimes and the institutionalized monastic order (*sangha*). I propose that a specific form of millennialism, namely restorative millennialism, is best suited to understand these movements because they often aimed at a return to an imagined and idealized social order that was supposed to re-emerge after the decline of the *dhamma*. In the final part of the essay, I focus on the concept of 'potentialities' and its significance for thinking through the latency and immanence of revolution and rebellion. I will here refer to the specific cases discussed in the essay, but will also try to go beyond these by critically reviewing some recent philosophical writings on potentiality and messianic time.

Millennialism and Charisma in Theravāda Buddhism

The introduction to this special issue already referred to the definition given by Thomas DuBois, who describes Buddhist millennialism as a branch of utopianism.¹⁶ This also resonates with the broader, cross-cultural definition provided by Hillel Schwartz, who locates millennialism between eschatology and utopia:

Millenarianism, known also as millennialism, is the belief that the end of the world is at hand and that in its wake will appear a New World, inexhaustibly fertile, harmonious, sanctified and just. The more exclusive the concern with the end itself, the more such belief shades off towards the catastrophic. The more exclusive the concern with the new world, the nearer it approaches the utopian.¹⁷

Maitreya (Pa. *Metteyya*), the future Buddha-to-come, has an essential role in Buddhist imaginaries of catastrophic decline and utopian renewal. He 'appeared in almost every

material world is thought and experienced in part through them'; they are still regarded as efficacious. When dealing with texts in this essay, I understand them efficacious in this sense. Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pāli Imaginaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 73. For Collins's treatment of millennialism, see the next part of this essay.

¹⁵I do not here employ revolution as a concept of modernity, but use the term in the widest sense – including rebellion and critique. See the introduction to this special issue for an overview and various definitions of revolution.

¹⁶Thomas DuBois, 'Maitreya' in Robert Buswell (ed) *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Buddhism* (New York: Macmillan, 2004), p. 538.

¹⁷Schwartz, op. cit., p. 6028

manifestation of the Buddhist tradition¹⁸ and despite differences in interpretation in various Buddhist traditions, he is usually perceived as a saviour and redeemer who initiates through his descent from Tuṣita heaven a new age, in which a world of misery and injustice is transformed into a realm of abundance, righteousness and moral perfection.¹⁹ His appearance is intimately linked to Buddhist views of history and various predictions that announce the disappearance of the Buddhist *dhamma* after 5000 or 2500 years.²⁰

Although the significance of Maitreya in, for example, Southeast Asian peasant rebellions has been researched by numerous scholars, there is considerable variation and confusion regarding his concrete manifestations and roles in millenarian movements. Sometimes researchers postulate an equation of (mostly peasant) leaders of millennial rebellions with the future Buddha himself, while at other times he is understood as a coming Buddhist king, as a Buddha accompanying a righteous ruler, or simply as a 'proper' future Buddha who descends from heaven.²¹ I think that for understanding the larger ideas surrounding Maitreya – such as, for example, the cosmological visions of dystopia and utopia – it is necessary to examine how his manifestations become actualized in claims of concrete persons, narratives and forms of leadership within millennial movements. In this context, Charles Keyes thinks that the question of 'whether Theravāda Buddhist beliefs are susceptible to millennial interpretation is a false issue'. Instead, he insists that 'these interpretations throw into sharp relief a concern about power'.²² Power in millennialism, as we shall see, often rests on charisma. Charismatic leaders, their claims for leadership, and the unfolding of their (frequently subversive) potentials often have direct or indirect references to Maitreya and his role as a saviour. Before examining these questions in greater detail, I first want to refer to the conditions that can give rise to charismatic leadership in millennial movements and then examine the sources of charisma in Theravāda Buddhist thought and its localized manifestations in Laos and Thailand.

Despite a variety of typologies and the great numbers of works on millenarian movements, two major schemes of explanation seem to have evolved. In the first, millennialism is understood as a sign of crisis caused by increased poverty, deprivation, radical changes of the political and social order and insecurity. According to the second scheme, millenarian movements evolve in 'culture clash' contexts in which one culture is often politically hegemonic and technologically much more advanced.²³ Both explanations can be brought into correspondence with Max Weber's conceptualization of charisma, which according to his view evolves in situations that are marked by transition, insecurity and open-ended processes of social change. In short, charisma results from collective 'anxiety and enthusiasm' amid 'unusual, especially political or economic situations, or from extraordinary psychic, particularly religious states, or from both together'.²⁴ In moments of crisis or great social

¹⁸DuBois, op. cit., p. 538.

¹⁹On Maitreya and the different narratives and rituals associated with him, see Alan Sponberg and Helen Hardacre (eds), *Maitreya: The Future Buddha* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

²⁰There are various textual sources with different accounts of Maitreya's coming. See Jan Nattier, 'The Meaning of the Maitreya Myth: A Typological Analysis' in Sponberg and Hardacre, op. cit., pp. 23–47.

²¹Steven Collins has detected a kind of self-perpetuating truism in research on Buddhist millennialism and Maitreya: '[I]t is habitually said – usually without citing any evidence – that their leaders claimed to be Metteyya; and then this claim is seen as continuous with the allegedly traditional identification of kings with Metteyya [...] but the texts are always clear that this is an analogy, signaled explicitly by the word *viya*, 'just like' or 'as if', or implicitly (but nonetheless clearly) by the context'. Collins, op. cit., pp. 381–382.

²²Charles Keyes, 'Millennialism, Theravāda Buddhism and Thai society', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 36:2 (1977), p. 302.

²³Catherine Wessinger, 'Millennialism in Cross-cultural Perspective', in Wessinger, op. cit., pp. 3–24.

²⁴Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretative Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 1117, 1121

change, there is often a desire for figures that draw their power from the ‘otherworldly’, and therefore crisis offers ‘an opportunity for claims to charismatic authority’.²⁵

Regarding the sources of charisma, it makes sense to connect it to Buddhist notions of ‘power’, or better: potency.²⁶ Obviously, there are a variety of sources of charisma in different Buddhist cultures, but from the general perspective it can be claimed that despite (or indeed, because of) its strict monastic code Theravāda Buddhism has developed strong notions of charismatic authority.

In Laos and Thailand monks as well as laypeople value dedication to the precepts, acquiring Buddhist knowledge, and ordination and meditation practice as potential sources of merit (Pa. *puñña*, Thai/Lao: *bun*) that can increase one’s agency and control over events. Although the correlation between merit, social status and potential charisma is not always completely congruent, laypeople can ‘accumulate’ merit through everyday practices such as giving (Pa. *dāna*).²⁷ Taking the gradual perfection of virtues of the Buddha as an ideal, practices such as giving contribute to build ‘perfections’ (Pa. *pāramitā*) and enable one to move up the social and karmic ladder.²⁸ Moreover, a plethora of techniques are often wrongly understood as ‘magical’. Objects such as amulets and statues, and Buddhist formulas in the form of protective chanting (Pa. *paritta*) or protective diagrams (Sk. *yantra*) are also sources of power, and can be indicators and multipliers of charisma when owned and used by specific people.

In the Lao and Thai context, the link between amount of merit, charisma and leadership in millennial movements is also indicated by the words used to describe these persons. The most common word is *phu mi bun* (‘person having merit’) and they are often said to have ‘built perfections’ (Lao/Thai: *sang pharami*) – like the Buddha himself in the *Vessantara Jataka*. The term *phu wiset* (‘person with extraordinary/magical power’) alludes to the magical capacities of specific persons. *Wiset* derives from Pāli *abhiññā* (‘supernatural powers’).²⁹ Although in practice the line between these is

²⁵Lorne Dawson, ‘Charismatic Leadership in Millennialist Movements: Its Nature, Origins, and Development’, in Wessinger, op. cit, p. 121. Recent studies of millennial movements have pointed to the role charisma can play in moments of transition, but they also critique Weber’s account as being too focused on persons. For China, Stephan Feuchtwang and Wang Mingming postulate: ‘Charisma is not so much a personality as a message which has been recognised because it resonates with and gives authority to follower’s expectations and assumptions. The inspirational leader conveying the message is selected in situations where expectations of great change have been boiling up or have been frustrated’. Stephan Feuchtwang and Wang Mingming, *Grassroots Charisma: Four Local Leaders in China* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 16.

²⁶Craig Reynolds highlights the ambiguities involved when translating the word ‘power’ into Pāli, Thai and other Southeast Asian languages. In his opinion, the word ‘potency’ is better suited to understand power in these contexts. Craig Reynolds, ‘Power’ in Donald Lopez (ed) *Critical Terms For The Study Of Buddhism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press), pp. 214 ff. The Pāli term that comes closest to charisma is *ādhipacca* (*ādhipateyya*), which denotes supreme rule, lordship, sovereignty, or power. See Thomas William Rhys and William Stede, *The Pali Text Society’s Pali–English Dictionary* (London: Pali Text Society, 1921–5), p. 115.

²⁷On the significance of merit for social status and power see Stanley Tambiah’s classic, ‘The Ideology of Merit and the Social Correlates of Buddhism in a Thai Village’ in Edmund Leach (ed) *Dialectics in Practical Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 41–121. For a more up-to-date study see Cornelia Ann Kammerer and Nicola Tannenbaum (eds), *Merit and Blessing in Mainland Southeast Asia in Comparative Perspective* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1996).

²⁸In Pāli the word *pāramitā* (perfection) signifies ‘that which goes beyond’, ‘transcendent’ or ‘having reached the other shore’. It has another Pāli etymology related to *parama* (highest, most excellent), but in Lao and Thai can also be used in the sense of ‘charisma’. See Patrice Ladwig, ‘Narrative Ethics: The Excess of Giving and Moral Ambiguity in the Lao Vessantara-Jataka’ in Monika Heintz (ed) *The Anthropology of Moralities* (Oxford and New York: Bergahn, 2009), pp. 138 ff.

²⁹See Ian Baird’s excellent article on the millennial movements in Laos and Thailand for further details on the concepts of *phu mi bun* and *phu wiset*: ‘Millenarian Movements in Southern Laos and Northeastern Siam (Thailand) at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: Reconsidering the Involvement of the Champassak Royal House’, *South East*

rather blurred, Walter Skrobanek points to the fact that they often constitute each other. A high amount of merit can lead to magical capacities, and magical skills can be a sign of significant merit.³⁰ Both *phu mi bun* and *phu wiset* may gain additional reputation by showing miraculous powers, by being invulnerable and by helping others through, for example, healing.

Millennial Movements in Southern Laos and Northeast Thailand at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century

The history of Laos and Thailand (and of the other Southeast Asian Theravāda countries) is full of events in which Buddhist holy men or other charismatic Buddhist figures initiated millenarian movements, formed local power networks in the periphery of kingdoms and thereby challenged the hegemony of the central or colonial powers. The 1901–2 rebellions that spread in southern Laos, Isan (northeastern Thailand) and parts of the southern Vietnamese highlands are perhaps the best-researched cases of Buddhist millennial movements.³¹ Spreading in French colonial Laos and in regions of Siam inhabited mainly by ethnic Lao,³² the context of the rebellions displays some of the characteristics we have mentioned before: The French colonized Laos in 1893, increased taxes and transformed traditional patterns of rule, imposing a colonial administration. Although neighbouring Thailand was never formally colonized, one could say that especially the Isan region was subject to Bangkok's 'internal colonialism', partially leading to effects similar to 'ordinary' colonialism.³³ Moreover, rice harvests were rather meagre in these areas in 1901. In most French colonial sources the revolts are labelled *phu mi bun* or *kha*-rebellions, as the centre of these movements was located in the area of Bolaven plateau, mainly inhabited by non-Buddhist ethnic minorities (*kha* is a somewhat pejorative term for ethnic minorities).³⁴ The 1901–2 rebellions were sustained by millennial leaders and groups of changing size and with fluctuating alliances, and represent only the largest outbreak among a whole series of movements beginning in the late seventeenth century. Minor millennial rebellions continued in Thailand until the 1950s, but were either crushed by the state or quickly lost their momentum.³⁵

Asia Research, 21:2 (2013), pp. 257–279. Baird draws on Patrick Jory's work on pre-modern concepts of power in Thailand and their link to Buddhist narratives such as the *Vessantara Jataka*. Patrick Jory, 'The *Vessantara Jataka*, Barami, and the Bodhisattva-Kings: The Origin and Spread of a Thai Concept of Power', *Crossroads*, 16:2 (2002), pp. 36–78.

³⁰Walter Skrobanek, *Buddhistische Politik in Thailand mit besonderer Berücksichtigung des heterodoxen Messianismus* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1976), p. 76.

³¹For extensive bibliographies and various interpretations of these revolts see Constance Wilson, 'The Holy Man in the History of Thailand and Laos', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 28:2 (1997), p. 345. Ian Baird (op. cit., pp. 257–259) also provides a detailed overview of the numerous works dealing with these rebellions. More works will be cited in the following sections of this essay.

³²John Murdoch points out that the rebellions in fact took place in one area beyond national boundaries. The fact that resistance to French colonialism played an additional role is undeniable, but the central Siamese state's politics also led to a marginalization of local elites. John Murdoch, 'The 1901–1902 "Holy Man's" Rebellion', *Journal of the Siam Society*, 62:1 (1974), pp. 47–65.

³³For the administrative and cultural 'integration' of northeast Thailand into the Siamese (Thai) state, see several contributions on the Isan region in Volker Grabowsky (ed), *Regions and National Integration in Thailand 1892–1992* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1995), pp. 105–191.

³⁴From the perspective of colonial history, François Moppert has focused on the ethnic minority side of these rebellions, *Mouvement de résistance au pouvoir colonial français de la minorité proto indochinoise du plateau des Bolovens au Sud-Laos 1901–1936* (PhD dissertation, Université de Paris VII, 1978).

³⁵Wilson, op. cit. p. 360–361.

Returning to the role of charisma, we discover in the accounts of the most important leaders of these movements clear signs of charismatic qualities. Especially interesting is the biography and role of Ong Keo, who was one of the major leaders of these uprisings. Originally from a non-Buddhist ethnic minority, he displayed his religiosity in rituals performed on a mountain close to his home village, initiated the building of temple-like structures and during festivals engaged in anti-colonial rhetoric. He quickly rose to popularity, and continued his struggle until killed by the French in 1910. His partner and successor, Ong Kommadan, survived persecution until 1936.³⁶

In an exceptional local chronicle (*tamnan*) from southern Laos (today Salavan province) composed between 1880 and 1920, we find an account of Ong Keo's background, his charismatic qualities and reputation:

It was widely spoken throughout the land that Nai Mi, an Alak Kha who lived in the far-off village of Chakam, was skilled and special. Known as Ong Kaew, he observed the precepts, and came to follow the conventions of Buddhism. Teaching many Kha and Lao, monks and novices gathered together, traveling to prostrate themselves before him continuously. A tremendous number of Lao, Phuthai, and Suay from the south and the far-away north traveled in great numbers [to see him]. With great excitement, people said that he was a [Man] of Merit, with a mastery of all of the skills. He had great power [as a result of his skills], and was in possession of precious and miraculous medicines, which could cure illness and make disease disappear instantaneously. No matter what type of dangerous illness might arise, [his medicine] could cure them all. A great *rishi* had taught him incantations and occult sciences.³⁷

As described in the source above, Ong Keo himself was originally from a non-Buddhist ethnic minority (the Alak, a Mon-Khmer group of southern Laos), but studied Buddhism and kept the precepts. Other sources reveal that he ordained for several years, was proficient in Pāli and the Buddhist texts of the region and had made a pilgrimage to Bangkok.³⁸ His reputation, charisma and skills brought him a wide audience, ranging from Buddhist monks to members of various ethnic minorities (here described as *kha*). The 'movement' he led together with others like Ong Kommadan clearly transcended the boundaries of the originally Buddhist groups such as the ethnic Lao and the Suay, and extended to a variety of (mostly Mon-Khmer) ethnic minorities living in the region of the Bolaven plateau. As the *tamnan* from southern Laos elaborates, from a *rishi* (hermit or wandering ascetic; Lao:

³⁶Ong Kommadan went into hiding for a long time, but after 1933 once again became very active and religiously inspired, announcing the coming of Maitreya and attempting to mobilize people in the region. See Geoffrey Gunn, *Rebellion in Laos: Peasant and Politics in a Colonial Backwater* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), p. 123.

³⁷Upahat Ba Noy, *Tamnan Muang Khamthong Luang: A Chronicle about Southern Laos*, ed. Michel Lorrillard, Khamsy Kionoanchanh and Kèo Sirivongsa, unpublished draft translation by Peter Koret (Vientiane: EFEO, 2012), p. 387. I am indebted to the staff of Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient Vientiane for making available the first draft of the translation of this exceptional document. The editors of this volume have adapted the translation (and the ones below) for English syntax and flow, and take responsibility for any inaccuracies. This *tamnan* of 1500 palm leaf pages was written between 1880 and 1920 by Upahat Ba Noy, who was first employed by the Siamese (at that time in control of the south of Laos) as a civil servant and then, after 1893 worked for the French colonial forces. Upahat Ba Noy ordained for over seven years and displays an immense knowledge of Buddhism in his recordings of the events that took place in this period in southern Laos. Being acquainted with Buddhist literature and prophetic works, the author sees signs of decay of the *dhamma* everywhere. As will be discussed later, millennial expectations are by no means exceptional in Lao Buddhist writing of this time.

³⁸Geoffrey Gunn, 'A Scandal in Colonial Laos: The Death of Bac My and the Wounding of Kommadan Revisited', *The Journal of the Siam Society*, 73:1/2 (1985), p. 43.

phaluesi) he had also learnt magical incantations (probably *parittas*) and other ‘occult techniques’ with which he was able to cure sick people. The ability to cure is a typical feature as ‘most millenarian prophets claim therapeutic powers that extend from the ailing human body to the ailing body politic’.³⁹ A report from a Thai government official about another *phu wiset* from Laos, Ong Man, points to very similar characteristics as in the description of Ong Keo.⁴⁰ Ong Keo’s knowledge, reputation and skills primarily draw on Buddhism, but he also seems to transcend a more narrowly defined set of Buddhist practices. On the occasion of inaugurating a wooden temple-like structure, Ong Keo held a festival that in the words of a colonial official was composed of a ‘bizarre religious mélange of Buddhist cults and gross and bloody Alack rites’.⁴¹

What the example of Ong Keo shows is that what falls under the label ‘Buddhism’ often comprises a plethora of cultural influences from textual Buddhism, folk religion, local cults and religious practices from neighbouring groups. That Buddhism only exists in localized form and includes a multitude of cultural influences is taken for granted today. However, for the case of millennial movements one can claim that religious and ethnic boundaries can in fact become even more flexible. This is rooted in the nature of charisma and charismatic leadership, which is highly personalized, affective and generally not oriented towards doctrine – and often heterodox in the sense that the personality and teachings of the charismatic leader are not bound to institutions. Some social scientists and historians, including Max Weber himself, portray charisma as irrational, superstitious and magical in the context of millennialism.⁴² Weber writes that ‘charismatic authority is specifically irrational in the sense of being foreign to all rules’.⁴³ And Walter Skrobanek somewhat pejoratively describes the *phu mi bun* of the 1901 rebellions and certain leaders of other heterodox messianic movements in Thailand as ‘religious fanatics, cheaters in white robes of rishis and mentally disturbed enthusiasts who steer the population into a religious fever’.⁴⁴ While such a value judgment might contain some truth, it obscures the expansive and creative force of charisma. This irrationality of charisma is in fact one of the keys to explaining its effectiveness; charisma can (at least temporarily) transgress boundaries of, for example, ethnic affiliation and religious traditions. This openness due to a lack of rules is important for the integrative and mobilizing potential of charisma, which rests on spontaneity, innovation and context flexibility. Millennial movements are sometimes compared to diseases that ‘infect’ and ‘contaminate’ followers, and emotionally siege people (Skrobanek’s ‘religious fever’). Due to the fact that charisma arises in moment of crisis, the

³⁹Schwartz, op. cit., p. 6031.

⁴⁰Man called himself Ong Prasatthong. Charles Keyes (op. cit, p. 297) quotes from a document that a Thai local government official wrote about Man after his arrest: ‘He claims to be a *phu wiset* and has gone about demonstrating his powers by keeping the (Eight) Precepts, meditating in caves and in the hills, and making sacralized water. He deceives the populace that he is a *phu wiset* who can cure various illnesses with magic, sacralized water and enchanted medicine’.

⁴¹This is a description of the French colonial governor Jean-Jacques Dauplay cited in Gunn, op. cit, p. 50. Concerning his name, *ong* is in Lao a classifier for sacred persons and things, usually reserved for holy persons or people of very high rank such as monks and kings. He also took on the name of Pha Ong Keo; *pha* is usually a prefix for monks and holy objects. Also interesting is the fact that Ong Keo used a title of a former king of Luang Prabang in northern Laos. See *ibid.*, p. 43.

⁴²Weber contrasts charisma with other forms of *Herrschaft*: ‘bureaucratic authority is specifically rational in the sense of being bound to intellectually analyzable rules’, whereas charismatic authority lacks this rationality. Weber, *Economy and Society*, op. cit., p. 244.

⁴³*Ibid.*

⁴⁴Skrobanek, op. cit., p. 78. Otherwise, Skrobanek’s work, based primarily on Thai sources and theoretically sophisticated, stands as one of the best-researched accounts of Buddhist millennial movements. However, due to the fact that it is only available in German this work has probably not received the recognition it deserves.

emotional interaction of a leader and his or her audience becomes crucial for invoking and redefining affect with the aim of fostering and expanding a group.⁴⁵ In short, while it may be perfectly legitimate, for example, to describe a phenomenon like millennialism as ‘Buddhist’ or ask whether Buddhism is a millennial religion, one also has to recognize that by its nature charisma tends to blur these distinctions significantly. Discussion of the relationship between ‘great and little traditions’ and on syncretism has filled many books; and although these questions remain important, when applied to millennial movements with charismatic qualities these categories become over-extended and enter a field of indeterminacy.

Let me refer to another feature of charisma that was already identified by Max Weber. Although there are cases in which monks from inside the Lao or Thai Buddhist *sangha* developed charismatic features, in the context of millennialism there is a tendency for these figures to emerge outside of organized religious structures. The example of Khru Ba Sriwichai (1878–1938) is quite telling as a case in which charisma is ascribed to a monk from inside the Thai *sangha*. Khru Ba Sriwichai was a tremendously popular monk from the Chiang Mai area. He is still venerated today as a ‘holy man’ or ‘saint’ (*nak bun* or *nak ton bun*) of northern Thailand (Lanna) and is associated with the revival of northern Thai culture. When the number of his devotees sharply increased, especially in the 1920s and 30s, rumours began to spread that he was a *phu mi bun*, capable of magical acts. Many Shan involved in an uprising against Siamese authorities in Phrae in 1902 also venerated him. Charles Keyes remarks: ‘His popularity greatly troubled the Thai officials in the north for it was feared that Khru Ba Sriwichai was potentially a leader of a millenarian movement with revolutionary implications’.⁴⁶ In 1920, the Sriwichai case became so important that the threat of a schism in the Thai *sangha* became apparent. He was accused of being a *phu mi bun*, of violating the monastic code of conduct, forbidden to leave his monastery and finally brought to Bangkok for trial. Although he was not heavily punished, the case shows how great the threat from a charismatic monk can become – but also how strong the reaction from the central *sangha* and political authorities can be. These reactions are also grounded in the efforts of the Bangkok-based government to gain greater control over northern Thailand (Lanna had been independent kingdom for hundreds of years) – including its religious institutions.

Khru Ba Sriwichai’s case exemplifies the tension between institutionalized Buddhism and personal charisma that in Weber’s theory corresponds to the contrast of the free, fluctuating and personalized nature of charisma with institutionalized religion and bureaucratic structures. As already outlined in the introduction, the alliance between *sangha* and rulers rests on an ambivalent symbiosis in which rulers act as patrons of Buddhism, while the *sangha* contributes to the legitimation of kingship. However, due to the ‘the continuing tension in Theravāda between the wheel of power (*anacakka*) and the wheel of righteousness (*dhammacakka*)’,⁴⁷ the popularity of charismatic monks is often perceived as a threat to the conflict-ridden symbiosis of rulers and *sangha*. From a general perspective charisma can appear in two different scenarios, with different responses. Fearing critique of rule and potential secession within institutionalized Buddhism, charismatic monks like Sriwichai can be subject to pressure, threatened with disciplinary measures or even exclusion

⁴⁵Patricia Wasielewski, ‘The Emotional Basis of Charisma’, *Symbolic Interaction*, 8:2 (1985), pp. 207–222.

⁴⁶Charles Keyes, ‘Buddhism and National Integration in Thailand’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 30:3 (1971), p. 557. More information on Sriwichai and his charisma can be found in Stanley Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulet: A Study in Charisma, Hagiography, Sectarianism, and Millennial Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 302 ff.

⁴⁷Gananath Obeyesekere, Frank Reynolds and Bardwell Smith, *The Two Wheels of the Dhamma: Essays on the Theravāda Tradition in India and Ceylon* (Chambersburg, PA: American Academy of Religion, 1972), p. 1.

from the *sangha*. However, when charisma develops around persons who have already left the *sangha* (after an extensive period of training) and who practice Buddhism completely outside the confines of an increasingly ‘domesticated’ Buddhism,⁴⁸ such measures are less likely to be effective, as the *vinaya* (code of conduct for monks) cannot be reinforced and control through hierarchically stratified religious institutions is largely absent.

The case of Ong Keo and those of numerous other leaders of similar movements shows that it was rarely monks from the state-organized *sangha* who evolved as leaders of millennial rebellions. I think it is reasonable to state that while these leaders drew heavily on Buddhist symbolism, texts, narratives, ritual practices – and, in general, on their past monastic training – many of them were at the time of their emergence as charismatic leaders not formal members of the *sangha*.⁴⁹ Although the degree of integration into the stratified national *sangha* administration was very diffuse (especially in the southern parts of Laos and northeast Thailand), institutional centralization had already begun.⁵⁰ As Craig Reynolds has argued, a state-integrated *sangha* is intrinsically connected to royal power as ‘the monastic hierarchies and establishments created by monarchies in pre-modern Southeast Asia societies facilitated the extension of monarchical authority through its power of appointment’.⁵¹ Following a similar line of argument, Hermann Kulke attests that for Burma ‘monastic institutions [...] provided imperial kings and their courts with an additional infrastructure [...] This infrastructure] allowed the imperial courts, perhaps for the first time, a permanent and in some cases even a direct access to the sphere of local matters even outside the limited nuclear area which was under their direct political control’.⁵² The integration into monastic and monarchical patterns of rule therefore offered much less opportunity for the emergence of heterodox or even rebellious Buddhist leaders coming from inside the *sangha*. It comes as no surprise that institutionalized state Buddhism has ‘long regarded millenarianism as a disguised attack on codes of behavior that are meant to govern faith and cult. Rulers and their bureaucracies have regarded millenarianism as a ritual mask worn by crafty rebels’.⁵³ Karl Mannheim attests something similar for Christianity, and postulates that ‘the very idea of the dawn of the millennial kingdom on earth always contained a revolutionizing tendency, and the church made every effort to paralyze this’.⁵⁴

Constance Wilson locates these holy men acting external to institutions in more localized forms of Buddhist tradition, contrasting this with the established forms of state-controlled

⁴⁸For the idea of the ‘domestication’ of the *sangha* see Ivan Strenski, ‘On Generalized Exchange and the Domestication of the Sangha’, *Man*, 18:3 (1983), pp. 464–477.

⁴⁹Justin McDaniel states: ‘there is simply no evidence that links Buddhism to rebellion in Laos’. With reference to ‘the isolated local rebellions lead holy men (*phu mi bun*)’ we have discussed above, he thinks ‘these holy men were not teachers or students in monasteries’. I am not certain that this is the case for all leaders, however, as Ong Keo seems to contradict this argument. Moreover, the question of where to draw the line between organized state Buddhism and its ‘outside’ is disputable. Still, I think that McDaniel is generally right to locate these figures outside the *sangha*, at least for the case of Laos. Justin McDaniel, *Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words: Histories of Buddhist Monastic Education in Laos and Thailand* (Washington: University of Washington Press, 2008), p. 63.

⁵⁰Through various *sangha* acts and the founding the *thammayut nikay* in 1833, Bangkok’s hegemony in political and religious matters was already underway at the time of the rebellions. See Peter Jackson, *Buddhism, Legitimation, and Conflict: The Political Functions of Urban Thai Buddhism* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989).

⁵¹Craig Reynolds, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

⁵²Hermann Kulke, *Kings and Cults: State Formation and Legitimation in India and Southeast Asia* (Dehli: Manohar, 1993), p. 292. For the role of Buddhism and monasteries in increasing political and economic centralization see also Prapod Assavavirulhakarn, *The Ascendancy of Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asia* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2010), p. 19.

⁵³Schwartz, *op. cit.*, p. 6033.

⁵⁴Mannheim, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

Buddhism that spread with the religious reforms carried out under King Mongkut (1804–1868) and King Chulalongkorn (1868–1910). With regard to the background of some of the leaders of millennial movements in the region discussed above, Wilson writes:

The state now supported an extended Sangha organization devoted to textual orthodoxy and discipline, leaving little room at the top for the syncretic forms of popular Buddhism practised by most of the population. Like the peasants and the rural chiefs, the holy men had limited opportunities for upward mobility; their status had changed because the social order had changed. Now, faced with a formalized ruling elite and an orthodox Sangha, the holy men were left with few choices. If they did not want to work within the established religious order, they could become wandering forest monks (*thudong kammathan*) within Buddhism, or they could become self-proclaimed holy men [...] If circumstances encouraged such activity, holy men could find a role as leaders of protest movements.⁵⁵

Now I will discuss a final category of persons who stand somewhere between institutionalized state Buddhism, the figure of the holy man and millennial movements. Buddhist charisma in Laos and Thailand is intrinsically linked to ascetic *dhutaṅga* practices,⁵⁶ which are largely part of the forest-monk tradition (Pa. *araññavāsī*), to be distinguished from the *gāmaṇvāsī* tradition of town-dwelling monks.⁵⁷ Such ascetic practitioners – or *phathudong*, as they are called in Laos and northeast Thailand – make up a very small minority movement within Theravāda Buddhism and often move at the periphery or outside the institutional realm of organized state Buddhism. Due to their seclusion, meditation practice (Pa. *kammaṭṭhāna*) in forests and caves, wandering lifestyle and ascetic training in all or some of the 13 *dhutaṅga* outlined in Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* they have often been attributed higher powers (Pa. *iddhi-vidhā*) or even supernatural powers (Pa. *abhīññā*) by Buddhist laypeople.⁵⁸ In the religious imaginary, their powers often extend beyond the capacities attributed to the domesticated and organized Buddhism of towns and villages. Similar to forest monks in Sri Lanka, the *phathudong* of Laos and Thailand 'embody the ideals of asceticism and moral purity which are constitutive of the *sangha*';⁵⁹ they are ideal figures of the cultivation of virtue and purity and therefore represent extremely virtuous role models. Due to their purity and other-worldliness, they have at times recruited large followings and are highly venerated as charismatic leaders.

⁵⁵Wilson, op. cit., p. 351.

⁵⁶The term *dhutaṅga* has taken on a variety of meanings, but essentially consists in a voluntary and gradual intensification of the renunciations already laid out in the code of conduct for monks, the *vinaya*; e.g., taking special vows, more strictly regulating one's food intake and habituating the wilderness or a charnel ground. For Wilson it is clear that in Theravāda Buddhism 'those who follow ascetic practices enjoy tremendous prestige'. Liz Wilson 'Ascetic Practices' in Robert Buswell (ed) *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Buddhism* (New York: Macmillan, 2004), p. 33.

⁵⁷See Stanley Tambiah, *Buddhist Saints*, op. cit., p. 259 for an overview of *araññavāsī* and *gāmaṇvāsī*. These two traditions have in most Theravāda countries been co-existing for a long time. With the modern nation-state demanding a more resident lifestyle, however, the distinctions between them often became a cause for conflict. See the excellent description of the conflicts that evolved between Bangkok's modernized Buddhism and the Isan-based forest monks in Kamala Tiyavanich's *Forest Recollections: Wandering Monks in Twentieth-Century Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), pp. 173 ff. This conflict was often regulated through giving out new *sangha* regulations. See Jackson, op. cit.

⁵⁸*Visuddhimagga: Path of Purification*, trans. Bhikkhu Nanamol (Seattle: Pariyatti Publishing, 2003).

⁵⁹Michael Carrithers, *The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka: An Anthropological and Historical Study* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 139.

In a sense, they could be described as mobile carriers of charisma, because they often change their locations and are less bound to specific monasteries than other monks. According to Stanley Tambiah, *dhutaṅga* monks act as peripatetic teachers who leave behind cells of pupils that ‘can constitute, if systematically expanded, a formidable system of charismatic influence and presence that is very different from the ecclesiastical system or the political authority with its patrimonial bureaucratic attributes and weaknesses. In fact, it can come to be an *alternative grid of power and mode of mobilisation* to the established systems’. Moreover, their networks and charismatic influence are ‘*suitable for mobilising the peasantry*’.⁶⁰ Here again, charisma can develop subversive and revolutionary attributes. It does not come as a surprise that over the last 100 years the forest monk tradition has been partially absorbed by the institutionalized Thai *sangha*. This is in line with the anti-charismatic mainstreaming processes of Thai politics of religion as described above in the case of Khru Ba Sriwichai, but is also linked to the disappearance of wilderness and forests in Thailand.⁶¹ Despite these rather negative conditions, the tradition has survived in Thailand and some monks (mostly ex-*phathudong*) continue to enjoy great popularity in Thailand.⁶² However, in Laos this tradition has completely disappeared since the communist revolution of 1975.⁶³

In this section I have discussed several ideal types of charismatic leadership that connect to specific forms of Buddhism. Despite their varying levels of integration into institutional Buddhism, the boundaries between of these types of holders of charismatic authority are fluid because holy (lay)men (*phu mi bun* or *phu wiset*), wandering ascetics and hermits (*rishi* or *phaluesi*), and forest monks (*phathudong*) can draw on similar sources of charisma, acquire merit and reputation, and in specific situations become leaders of movements with millennial, subversive and revolutionary implications. The claim that charismatic leaders ‘are likely to arise in societies with some kind of traditional cultural support for such claims of authority’⁶⁴ can therefore be affirmed for these figures. And at least for the movements and the historical period that have been discussed so far, Max Weber’s claim that ‘in traditionalist periods, charisma is the greatest revolutionary force’⁶⁵ also seems to hold true.

Eschatology and Utopia

In the previous section I stated that charismatic men of merit (*phu mi bun*) and other leaders of millennial movements in Laos and Thailand have appeared in times of crisis and that in many cases they act as harbingers of the decline of the Buddha’s teaching, the *dhamma*. This decline of the *dhamma* and the coming of a new era are bound up with Buddhist views of time and history that I will now discuss in more detail. Does it make sense to speak of Buddhist eschatology, and what are the potential revolutionary implications of such apocalyptic scenarios?

⁶⁰Tambiah, *Buddhist Saints*, p. 334, my emphasis.

⁶¹See James Taylor, *Forest Monks and the Nation-State: An Anthropological and Historical Study in Northeastern Thailand* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1993).

⁶²For one spectacular example of such a forest monk see Peter Jackson, ‘The Enchanting Spirit of Thai Capitalism: The Cult of Luang Phor Khoun and the Post-Modernization of Thai Buddhism’, *Southeast Asia Research*, 7:1 (1999), pp. 5–60.

⁶³On the absence, but continuing desire for Buddhist (millennial) charisma in contemporary Laos see Patrice Ladwig, ‘Haunting the State: Rumors, Spectral Apparitions and the Longing for Buddhist Charisma in Laos’, *Asian Studies Review*, 37:4 (2013), pp. 509–526.

⁶⁴Dawson, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

⁶⁵Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), p. 363.

Richard Landes postulates in his classification of various end-time scenarios that ‘eschatology anticipates a complete end to history’.⁶⁶ Jan Nattier asserts that eschatology proper – as the complete end of history – cannot be applied to Buddhism due to the notion of cycles of time (*samsāra*).⁶⁷ Taking into account that Buddhist eschatologies differ from those of monotheistic religions, James Apple also points to the repetitive processes in which past and future Buddhas appear and suggests that in the case of Buddhism we deal with ‘relative eschatologies’.⁶⁸ Important for understanding the connection of millennialism, dystopia and utopia is the fact that Buddhist views of history conceptualize these cycles also as a decline of the *dhamma*. Timothy Barrett writes that ‘from very early times, it now seems, Buddhism incorporated into its outlook not simply conceptions of cycles of time vast enough to relativize radically all human strivings, but also pessimistic notions of the ultimate fate of Buddhist belief in the wake of the Buddha’s disappearance from our world’.⁶⁹ Richard Landes labels these narratives of decline *cataclysmic apocalyptic scenarios*, which ‘foresee enormous destruction preceding the advent of God’s kingdom [... and] often involve staggering levels of violence and destruction – rivers of blood, plagues, earthquakes, floods, famines, the devastation of war, and natural calamities’.⁷⁰

Returning to the millenarian movements that spread in Siam and Laos around 1901–2, we see that the advent of a new, future Buddha and Buddhist utopia was preceded by a scenario of cataclysmic apocalypse. In the Lao Salavan chronicle, the author describes one of these events as follows:

There could be no peace. There were a great number of thieves. At that time people conspired together to cheat and defraud. [...] There was robbing, stabbing, and killing without cease. The eleventh day of the waxing moon in the fifth month, a Saturday, was the day of the new year, [when the world] entered the zodiac of Aries. It was the day of *Loka Phinat* (World Destruction). [...] It was truly *ubat* (inauspicious); [violent] winds arose during that year. The wind rattled the earth; in many places, houses were destroyed. The wind thrashed; on some occasions, people collapsed. People became hurt from having their heads thrashed and broken by the wind. It was widely spoken that that year was different from past times. *Ubat* (inauspicious occurrences) truly arose in the land of Lao. Cows and buffalo were continuously dying from epidemics. This was the hardship that hindered the people (of Laos) at that time.⁷¹

After this description of the inauspicious events that are indicative of the decline of the world, the author of the chronicle refers more explicitly to the decline of the *dhamma* through external forces such as the French colonialists.

I am only fearful that *ubat* (inauspicious happenings) will occur in Laos in the future because the [French] have come to rule over the land of Laos in many places, destroying [the Buddhist] religion. [They] do not have faith in it. Hard-headed and arrogant, they do not listen to the dharma of the Buddha. The religion

⁶⁶Landes, op. cit., p. 18.

⁶⁷Jan Nattier, ‘Buddhist Eschatology’ in Jerry Walls (ed) *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 151.

⁶⁸James Apple, ‘Eschatology and World Order in Buddhist Formations’, *Religious Studies and Theology*, 29:1 (2010), p. 110.

⁶⁹Timothy Barrett, ‘History’ in Lopez, op. cit., p. 130.

⁷⁰Richard Landes, op. cit., p. 31.

⁷¹*Tamnan Muang Khamthong Luang*, book 4, p. 82.

has reached the later period of its era; demons have arisen. There is an excessive amount of work to be done. Good people will fall on hard times. At that time, evil people will come to govern [the land]. Tax will be collected from monks and novices. In the latter years [of the Buddhist era, we] will see the arising of great *yak* (giants). One should resign oneself [to an acceptance of the state of the world] and take the dharma as one's refuge. Do not furtively conspire to cheat and oppress the commoners.⁷²

The rise of threatening demons and giants, the seeming inevitability of the decline and disappearance of Buddhism and the ethical steadfastness needed during this phase of decline are characteristic of a specific kind of Lao prophetic literature. Peter Koret has examined this genre of Lao literature and concludes that from the nineteenth century onwards, many works of Lao literature became filled with prophecies of catastrophe that 'can be understood as a reflection of and reaction to the social and political turmoil of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries'.⁷³ The political and social conditions at the time of millennial rebellions of 1901 have been briefly described above, and the chronicle is indeed filled with numerous other descriptions of brutal events; its author sees signs of decay everywhere. Charles Keyes also looks at the content of some of the manuscripts that circulated in the region at the time of the millennial uprisings. Despite the different titles of the manuscripts, the 'content was very similar everywhere. All versions begin with the prediction of an imminent dramatic catastrophe. The message continues with the prediction that associated with the holocaust will be the coming of a savior'.⁷⁴ Most of these narratives were widely known in the region and were indeed used by monks in sermons or sung by traditional performers such as *mo lam* singers.

Regarding the identity of the saviour and the role of the leaders of millennial movements, the documents and historical accounts present a very diversified picture. The men of merit that appeared in southern Laos were not necessarily equated with Maitreya or understood as bodhisattvas. In the Salavan chronicle, the author describes them as forerunners or announcers of the coming future Buddha and Lord of the Dharma. The chronicle reads: 'Great turmoil will arise, one [bad event] following another. Altogether, there will be up to one hundred and one [Men of Merit] before we will encounter the [Future Buddha], who will come to spare [humanity]. The Lord of the Dharma will emerge'.⁷⁵ In other cases, the saviour is understood as Maitreya himself (*Phra Si Ariya Mettrai*), or as a man of merit who takes on the name of Maitreya.⁷⁶ Moreover, some saviours or *phu mi bun* are manifestations of glorious Buddhist kings from the past, for example of Laos or Ayutthaya. Manuscripts like *Phraya In* (King Indra) and *Phuen Mueang Krueng* (The Old Capital) identify the saviour as Lord Indra himself, or declare that Indra prepares the coming of the *Phraya Thammikorat* (Lord Righteous Ruler). In some cases, *Phraya*

⁷²Tamnan Muang Khamthong Luang, book 1, p. 388.

⁷³Peter Koret, 'Past, Present and Future in Buddhist Prophetic Literature of the Lao' in Ian Harris (ed) *Buddhism, Power and Political Order* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 146.

⁷⁴Keyes refers to four different written versions known to exist, with titles such as 'Lord Indra's Book', 'The Book of Lord Dharmikaraja', 'The Book of the Meritful Persons', and 'Local Accounts of the Capital'. See Keyes, op. cit. p. 295. Peter Koret provides more details on these prophetic texts, their roles in millennial movements and their violent, destructive descriptions. Koret, op. cit., pp. 149–152.

⁷⁵Tamnan Muang Khamthong Luang, book 4, p. 13.

⁷⁶Skrobanek, op. cit., p. 81 refers to two *phu mi bun* in the Isan region who were called Ong Mettrai and Ong Ariya Mettrai Kaen—their names pointing to an association with Maitreya.

Thammikorat is said to enter the body of a person, who is then transformed into a *phu wiset*.⁷⁷

The Salavan chronicle gives us a description of the state of society and the *dhamma* after the great destruction and the arrival of the Lord of the Dharma:

One should be steadfast in one's observance of the dharma that the Buddha has preached. And one will certainly encounter the Lord of the Dharma. People will be subjects of [the Lord of the Dharma] everywhere. Even the cities of the people in the sea with their foreign rulers. People from all of the four continents will pay respect. [...] At that time, no one will be poor. Everyone will be wealthy. This is because [people] will be shielded by the [power of his] merit (*parami*). There will be no fierce thieves. There will only be meritorious people, people who follow the precepts every night. Everyone will observe the eight and five precepts. I am speaking of the coming of the Lord of the Dharma to spare us. Commit this to memory and do not forget it in the future.⁷⁸

Although I cannot confirm that these descriptions of a new dhammic-era-to-come have a direct reference to Pāli texts, the *Cakkavatti-Sihanāda Sutta* (The lion's roar on the turning of the wheel) describes after the degeneration of mankind the birth of the wheel-turning king Sankha in the city Ketumati, a righteous monarch of law who has established the security of his realm. Moreover, it mentions the arrival of Metteyya who will teach the *dhamma*.⁷⁹ The descriptions of Buddhist felicities found in the *Anāgatavaṃsa* (The sermon of the chronicle-to-be, with versions from Cambodia, Burma, Sri Lanka) show even stronger similarities to those found in Lao *tamnan*. The *Anāgatavaṃsa* describes the golden age of the future when, in the time of Metteyya, kings, ministers and people will live according to the *dhamma*, dwelling in a society of bliss and abundance.⁸⁰

In other parts of Lao mythology we find similar allusions to a perfected state of society after a downfall. Gustavo Benavides compares the role of rice and economic activities as described in the *Aggañña Sutta* with the story of Nang Pa Kosok found in Laos, Thailand and Cambodia. As in the *Aggañña Sutta*, the political, moral and physical degeneration of the world is connected to rice and the economic sphere:

In the *Aggañña Sutta* we encountered a story of greed, increasing materiality, sex, and rice; on the other hand, in the Laotian, Thai, and Cambodian versions of the tale, we find that after appearing as the result of meritorious acts, rice grows as long as Buddhism spreads. Despite these differences, the two myths involve a process of degeneration, both in terms of the length of the lives of the Buddhas and the size of the grains of rice.⁸¹

Benavides alludes to the role of storage and exchange and the parallel decline of the *dhamma*. In the Southeast Asian version of the rice-myth we see that after the appearance of several Buddhas such as Kukusanto, Kassapa and Gautama, an unjust king comes to rule who allows the exchange and storage of rice. The rice grains get shorter and shorter, and the

⁷⁷See Skrobanek, op. cit., pp. 83–84 for a highly interesting testimony of an arrested *phu mi bun* who fell in trance and was then possessed by *Phraya Thammikorat*.

⁷⁸*Tamnan Muang Khamthong Luang*, book 1, p. 109.

⁷⁹For a translation of these passages see Collins, op. cit., pp. 612–613.

⁸⁰For a translation from a Sinhalese version, see John Holt (ed), *Anāgatavaṃsa Desanā: The Sermon of the Chronicle-to-be*, trans. Udaya Meddegama (Motilal Banarsidass, 1993).

⁸¹Gustavo Benavides, 'Economy' in Lopez, op. cit., p. 80.

rice-body of Nang Pa Kosop is split up into a variety of kinds of rice. This process of gradual differentiation and decline corresponds to the increased weakening of the Buddhist *dhamma*. The fragmentation of the social, political and economic order results in a 'longing for primordial unity'. This longing is fulfilled only 'when the Buddha of the future, Maitreya, appears, abundance and oneness will return, the body of Nang Kosop will recover its original form, and the varieties of rice will be reunited'.⁸²

Many features of the saviour are linked to the return of a righteous Buddhist king (a *dhammaraja* or *cakkavatti*-like figure), the coming of Maitreya and the arrival of a morally and materially perfected society after the catastrophe. Although Pāli Buddhist narratives like the *Aggañña Sutta* and *Cakkavatti-Sihanāda Sutta* are only partially invoked in the local narratives that have been discussed, both associate the return of the future Buddha with the return of a righteous king. The arrival of a new era can also be interpreted as a renewal of the social contract as depicted in the *Aggañña Sutta*.⁸³ Mahasammata is the first king to be elected by humans in order to overcome anarchy, and social order is only established with the introduction of kingship. The reinstatement of the *dhamma* after its gradual decline can be seen in a similar light.

We see here that the utopian aspirations of millennial movements are essentially of a restorative nature. In his analysis of charismatic monks, amulets and millennialism in Thailand, Stanley Tambiah argues that millennial Buddhism 'is a totality of beliefs, expectations and practices that have as their object the reconstitution of an existing social order in terms of an ideal order, a future utopia which is at the same time a return to an ideal and positive beginning'.⁸⁴ This form of millenarian thought is subsumed under the genre of restorative millennialism. According to Landes, this form 'has a great deal in common with normative aristocratic ideologies. [...] Alone a strong king can keep chaos at bay'.⁸⁵ Buddhist millennial movements rest on the belief that the world and the teachings of the Buddha are in decline and the world is in demand of catharsis. This imaginarity can become activated in situations of crisis, and in combination with the emergence of a charismatic leader, may transform into an apocalyptic scenario. Can the radical devaluation of the world as depicted in these narratives and understood by millennial movements be interpreted as having a revolutionary potential?

In his analysis of mythological and modern eschatologies in the West, Jacob Taubes refers to the revolutionary potential of these narratives:

Apocalypticism is at first non-concerned with changing the structure of society, but directs its gaze away from this world. If revolution were to mean only replacing an existing society with a better one, then the connection between apocalypticism and revolution is not evident. But if revolution means opposing the totality of this world with a new totality that comprehensibly founds anew in the way that it negates, namely, in terms of the basic foundations, then apocalypticism is by nature revolutionary.⁸⁶

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³To what extent the *Aggañña Sutta* can be understood as a social contract is discussed in the following two essays: Andrew Huxley, 'The Buddha and the Social Contract', *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 24 (1996), pp. 407–420; Steven Collins, 'The Lion's Roar on the Wheel-turning King: A Response to Andrew Huxley's 'The Buddha and the Social Contract'', *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 24 (1996), pp. 421–444.

⁸⁴See Tambiah, *Buddhist Saints*, op. cit., p. 319. Constance Wilson mentions that such movements were also drawing on local *tamnan* that depicted the past as a golden age in which righteous rulers were in power. Wilson, op. cit, p. 362.

⁸⁵Landes, op. cit., p. 25.

⁸⁶Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 9.

Although I am not entirely certain what Taube means by ‘direct[ing] its gaze away from this world’, I think that the basic premises of his idea can be transferred to the cases discussed above. Although millennial movements certainly have an agenda of replacing an existing order with a better one, the radical nature by which the contemporary world is rejected also speaks to the applicability of Taubes’ thesis outside of Jewish messianic thought. Concepts and motifs such as the end of a cycle of dharma, the process of increasing catastrophe, and sublimation through destruction do indeed have revolutionary potential when they appear within millennial movements.

Conclusion: Revolutionary Potentialities

Although radical social change, transition periods and oppression certainly have a role in the formation and growth of rebellions, these alone represent insufficient criteria for interpreting the rise of these movements. Richard Stahler-Sholk remarks that ‘since revolt was so much more scarce than misery, it was evident that something other than (or at least in addition to) misery was needed to explain dramatic struggle for change, and social scientists became adept at identifying structures and moments that furnished opportunities’.⁸⁷ How, then, can we understand these ‘structures’ and ‘moments’? In this final section, I pick up a few points that can help us to theoretically elaborate what might be understood as revolutionary potentialities in the material and ideas discussed above.

From a comparative historical and sociological perspective, Shmuel Eisenstadt examines the revolutionary potentials of civilizations. He proposes that great revolutions can only occur in societies when they build on ‘the eschatological and utopian components of these civilizations’.⁸⁸ As discussed in this essay, the utopian aspirations of millennial movements were deriving part of their power and attraction from the ideas and cosmologies present in the Pāli imaginaire and localized forms of Buddhism. The millennial movements in Laos and Thailand around the turn of the twentieth century all foresaw the decline of the *dhamma* and the end of the world as announced by prophecies (the ‘relative eschatologies’ of Buddhism), followed by a return of new righteous rulers and the future Maitreya who reinstatiates the Buddha’s teachings. These visions express a longing for a return to an older, primordial social order under the righteous rule of a king as described both in the sources of Pāli Buddhism as well as in the local narratives. These cosmologies can fuel the rise of charismatic leaders and in turn be used by them. Eisenstadt understands the existence of such cultural resources in terms of an ‘elective affinity’ between the revolutionary process as a form of mobilization and certain cultural and institutional premises:

[S]uch mobilization presupposes the existence of, first, wide-ranging, free floating – not embedded in ‘traditional’ ascriptive communal or corporate frameworks – material and political resources, commitments and loyalties. In other words, a crucial condition for the development of revolutionary potentialities, or patterns of change in a revolutionary direction, is the concomitant development within the respective societies of a large extent of ‘free resources’ and of multiple competing elites, capable to mobilize such resources in the revolutionary direction.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Richard Stahler-Sholk, ‘Revolution’, in Nils Smelser and Paul Baltes (eds) *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (Oxford: Elsevier, 2001), p. 13299.

⁸⁸ Shmuel Eisenstadt, *The Great Revolutions and the Civilizations of Modernity* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), p. 17.

⁸⁹ Eisenstadt, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

In this essay, I have discussed some of these ‘free-floating’ elements to be found in Theravāda Buddhism. With reference to the tradition of various holy men in Laos and Thailand, I argued that it was rarely members of the state organized *sangha* who led millennial movements, but more often persons holding a peripheral or outsider position. Men of merit, magicians, hermits and forest monks were chosen as examples of charismatic leaders who promoted millennial ideas. Not being fully embedded into clerical hierarchies enabled these figures to express their agenda in Buddhist-inspired language, symbolism and practices without the constraints implied by monastic life. Although the line between state-organized Buddhism and more free floating, charismatic Buddhist leaders is flexible and permeable, the reactions of the established *sangha* and the ruling elite towards these leaders are telling, as the example of Khru Ba Sriwichai showed. Resistance and millennial leaders can indeed arise from inside the *sangha*, but are often met with the threat of exclusion and oppression.

Eisenstadt’s allusion to competing elites and mobilization in the quote above is also a feature of many millennial situations. One explanation for the rise of millennial movements discussed above – the confrontation of a culture with another one that is politically and technologically superior – can therefore also be connected with Eisenstadt’s point: for the Lao case, we saw that the rise of millennial movements was rooted in the colonial situation. Increased taxes, disestablished elites and French missionary activity were in the eyes of the author of the Salavan chronicle correlated to the decline of the *dhamma*, the rise of men of merit and the subsequent renewal of the *dhamma* through the coming of a future Buddha and a righteous king. In the case of Thailand, the intrusion of the Bangkok-centred state into the northeast of the country – were many of these revolts took place – was interpreted as a form of ‘internal colonialism’. The abolishment of older patterns of rule, a loss of status on the part of the traditional elite and the forces of economic marginalization unleashed a power struggle. Charismatic leaders can in this context also be understood as aspiring rulers who try to take hold of the gaps in a destabilized social order with crumbling political hierarchies.

I will finish this essay with some more general thoughts on potentiality and revolution. In recent social theory, there have been efforts to theorize potentiality. Building on the work of Giorgio Agamben⁹⁰ and Gilles Deleuze, Bülent Diken has proposed that every society has two basic dimensions: the actual and the virtual. According to this idea, ‘every society has an actual existence and is stabilized in some way, while at the same time it contains within itself potentialities for change, which links it to the domain of the virtual’.⁹¹ Rather than simply follow the dichotomy inherent in this model, Diken proposes that the surface between the actual and the virtual dimension of society is the place where things are negotiated: ‘Society is not reducible to its virtual or actual dimension. What matters is the surface between the actual and the virtual. One presents lack while the other presents excess – it is always in disequilibrium and makes revolution possible’.⁹² Although the more philosophical interpretation of this stance might seem hard to operationalise for understanding revolutionary potentialities,

⁹⁰Going back to Aristotle’s concept of potentiality, Giorgio Agamben remarks that ‘To be potential means: to be one’s own lack, to be in relation to one’s own incapacity. Beings that exist in the mode of potentiality are capable of their own impotentiality; and only in this way do they become potential. They can be because they are in relation to their own non-Being’. Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 182. Transferred to the social sphere, millennial ideas can be read as a process of becoming aware of one’s incapacity and impotence, which results in a transformation into potentiality through the imagination of utopia.

⁹¹Diken, op. cit., p. 3.

⁹²Ibid.

I think it is possible to transpose this concept onto some aspects of the historical contexts of the rebellions discussed above. For example, we can understand the crisis and misery out of which these movements grew as an actual state of existence marked by lack. Charisma rises in moments of disappointed expectations and social upheaval; i. e., society in a state of disequilibrium. Followed by violence and decline, millennial movements then move into a virtual, utopian realm that is marked by bliss, abundance and righteousness; i.e., utopian excess.

Regarding Buddhist views of history as depicted in parts of the Pāli imaginaire and in local chronicles, there is a further parallel to be found within contemporary social theory. In a stream of thought that takes its inspiration from Walter Benjamin's messianic philosophy of history, we find an interesting conceptualization of messianic time:

Whereas our representation of chronological time, as the time in which we are, separates us from ourselves and transforms us into impotent spectators of ourselves [...] messianic time, an operational time in which we take hold of and achieve our representations of time, is the time that we ourselves are, and for this very reason, is the only real time, the time we have.⁹³

Although again difficult to apply to concrete scenarios of millennial movements, the urgent tone of some of the narratives discussed, the intense descriptions of the coming catastrophe, and also the charismatic and eschatological features of these movements, could be interpreted as a temporary overcoming of impotency. The emotional intensity of charisma, the dawning of the end, the longing for healing of sickness (of bodies and society) are certainly features that differentiate 'normal', chronological time from the remaining time as represented in Buddhist millennial movements. What has often been perceived as irrational, superstitious and epidemic emotional agitation within millennial thought might from this perspective on messianic time be seen as a necessary precondition for transcending the quotidian in order to reach for a utopian world in which humans become 'full' in a material and ethical sense.⁹⁴ In messianic time, millennial movements enter a kind of temporary state of liminality in which the world is – like in some rites of passage – inverted, set in limbo and stripped off its normal qualities. In short, liminality – 'the creation of a tabula rasa through the removal of previously taken-for-granted forms and limits'⁹⁵ – can here be said to correspond to the eschatological dimension of millenarian movements. The destruction of the world, with its previous forms and inadequacies, creates the possibility of a new start. In anthropological theories of ritual, liminality implies a phase of what Victor Turner calls *communitas*: an intense form of positive sociability beyond the structures of everyday life.⁹⁶

But millennial visions and charisma also have an ephemeral nature. Millennial movements are, one could say, doomed to fail, as they either get crushed by central authorities or colonial administrators, lose their verve due to the death or change of the charismatic leader, or simply because apocalypse and utopia do not arrive as expected. Millennial movements share this problem with modern communist revolutions. There is a gap 'between

⁹³Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 68.

⁹⁴Cf. Albert Camus's well-known remark: 'I revolt, therefore we exist'. Camus, op. cit., p. 22.

⁹⁵Arpad Szokolczai, 'Liminality and Experience: Structuring Transitory Situations and Transformative Events', *International Political Anthropology*, 2:1 (2009), p. 148.

⁹⁶For liminality and *communitas* in ritual theory see Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine, 2008). For an application of liminality to crisis in large-scale societies due to catastrophes, revolutions or wars see Bjørn Thomassen, 'The Uses and Meanings of Liminality', *International Political Anthropology*, 2:1 (2009), pp. 19–21.

revolution qua the imaginary explosion of freedom, the magic moment of universal solidarity when “everything seems possible”, and the hard work of social reconstruction which is to be performed if the enthusiastic explosion is to leave its traces in the inertia of the social life itself.⁹⁷ Marx and other revolutionaries such as Lenin recognized this problem as well, but identified it as a fundamental difference between pre-modern rebellions and revolutions. Marx famously proposed that in rebellions, people ‘anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and customs’ in order to promote the new in ‘borrowed language’.⁹⁸ Marx suggests that these repetitions (as in the case of restorative millennialism discussed above) do not constitute ‘real’ revolutions and insists that communist revolutions do not require recollections of the past. I think that the Marxist ‘professionalization’ of revolution and the respectful, but nevertheless rather patronizing attitude towards pre-modern rebellions is in itself a hidden way of conjuring up the spirits of the past under the mask of a seemingly rational modernity. Indeed, Marx is himself representative of a long eschatological tradition in Western thought. He constantly searched for omens of the decline of capitalism, in much the same way that the author of the Buddhist Salavan chronicle tried to identify omens of the decline of Buddhism and the *dhamma*.⁹⁹ Marxism itself has strong millennial, religious and utopian undercurrents.¹⁰⁰

So is the agitation that millennial movements and revolutions bring about in the end simply a way of dissipating energies – or in the worst case, merely a form of collective, violent hallucination? Are these movements just a temporary flare of possibilities that then simply evaporate without having effect? I don’t think so. The bonds that are created during such events do not last for long. Hopes are quickly betrayed and new divisions arise. However, they leave traces, and these traces remind us that revolutionary possibilities are always immanent, and can in the future become effective – even when flaring up only temporarily. The bonds created in such situations might not last, but their memory and the sheer possibility of them surfacing again will keep millennial movements alive.

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⁹⁷Slavoj Žižek, ‘Introduction: Between Two Revolutions’ in Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (ed) *Revolution at the Gates: Selected Writings of Lenin from 1917* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 7.

⁹⁸Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Moscow: Progress, 1977), p. 10.

⁹⁹Jacob Taubes, op. cit., pp. 186f.

¹⁰⁰Ernest Tuveson, ‘The Millenarian Structure of The Communist Manifesto’ in Constantinos Patrides and Joseph Wittreich (eds) *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 326–327.

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