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Abstract

Extract:

The Pakxe Project advocates a culture of peace in South East Asia. It was drafted in 1996 and legitimated by the UNESCO declaration of the period 2001-2010 as the International Decade for a Culture of Peace: in line with the concerns of UNESCO, it offers an alternative model to the clash of civilizations.

Keywords

Pakxe, peace-building, international relations

THE PAKXE PROJECT:

A contribution of the Lao People to the unity of South-East Asia and to World Peace

by Laurent Ladouce

The *Pakxe Project* advocates a culture of peace in South East Asia. It was drafted in 1996 and legitimated by the UNESCO declaration of the period 2001-2010 as the International Decade for a Culture of Peace (1): in line with the concerns of UNESCO, it offers an alternative model to the clash of civilizations. The *Pakxe Project* features Laos and its capacities for peace-building, highlighted by independent observers. Pakxe, the third city of Laos, would symbolize this vocation, and become an international city of peace, or "city on a hill" at the core of the South-East Asian mandala.

This paper will cover three frequently asked questions about this project: -

1. How does a city herald a culture of peace?
2. Can a culture of peace blossom in South-East Asia, a region exposed to natural risk, human insecurity, and geopolitical strife?
3. Laotians are a "gentle people", but theirs is a "forgotten country" (2), seeking international help. How can Pakxe rise as an international city of peace?

I - THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL CITIES OF PEACE

Two "international cities of peace" symbolize atonement for the scourges of world wars: Verdun in France and Hiroshima in Japan. Verdun represents the failed attempt to create the first "European union". At the Treaty of Verdun, in 843, the Carolingian empire founded by Charlemagne (the 'Emperor of Europe') was divided into three parts: *Francia orientalis* (later called Holy Roman Empire, then Germany), *Francia Occidentalis* (later called France), and *Lotharingia*, which gives us the noun Lorraine, a region which later became part of the Holy Roman Empire. Among the causes of the 'divorce' was the failure of the Carolingian emperors and the Roman popes to unite and realize the Christian ideal of the *City of God*.

During World War I, the *enfants terribles* of Europe (France and Germany) engaged in an awful 'war of attrition'; the main battle raged in Verdun, where the Treaty of division had been signed. It resulted in 700,000 casualties. In 1984, chancellor Kohl and President Mitterrand held each other's hand in a ceremony at Verdun. This gesture of good will of the Franco-German "couple", which is supposed to steer the European Union, sealed the reconciliation among the "twin nations". Today, the former battlefield hosts a *World Peace Centre*, or peacefield. "Peace implies a greater courage than war ..." Ernst Jünger said. This German hero of World War I (wounded 14 times) and author of *Storms of Steel* had become a militant of peace.

Verdun symbolizes the infernal World War I; Hiroshima sealed the apocalyptic end of World War II. Following the first nuclear attack of history, Japan capitulated, giving up its imperialist ambitions. Japan had for centuries rejected Western influence; but the Hakodate Treaty (1854) imposed by US Commodore Perry forced Japan to open to trade. Repudiating the shogunate, Japan undertook a quick modernization, heeding Fukuzawa Yūkichi's advice to "Leave Asia, Chinese Thought and Confucianism, and positively accept Western Thought".(3) Its ambitious rivalry with the Western model of development spurred Japan's imperialism; after its victory over Russia in 1905, it annexed Korea and later Manchuria,

and much of China. With the ideology of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere and the slogan 'Asia for Asians', Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941 and conquered all of South-East Asia, except Thailand. It was the first modern unification of the region. Convinced that the ambivalent Japan could transform itself, General McArthur prophetically commented in his speech after the signing of the Instrument of Surrender:

We stand in Tokyo today reminiscent of our countryman, Commodore Perry, ninety-two years ago. His purpose was to bring to Japan an era of enlightenment and progress, by lifting the veil of isolation to the friendship, trade, and commerce of the world. But alas the knowledge thereby gained of western science was forged into an instrument of oppression and human enslavement. Freedom of expression, freedom of action, even freedom of thought were denied through appeal to superstition, and through the application of force. . . .

The energy of the Japanese race, if properly directed, will enable expansion vertically rather than horizontally. If the talents of the race are turned into constructive channels, the country can lift itself from its present deplorable state into a position of dignity.

To the Pacific basin has come the vista of a new emancipated world. Today, freedom is on the offensive, democracy is on the march. Today, in Asia as well as in Europe, unshackled peoples are tasting the full sweetness of liberty, the relief from fear.(4)

After 1945, the USA and Japan weaved the strongest bilateral relation in the world. Japan became a model of development in East Asia. Hiroshima symbolizes the 'conversion' of Japan 'from a horizontal to a vertical expansion'; the city holds a commemorative ceremony every year, on August 6, during which a declaration for World Peace is issued. The 2002 declaration said,

In the 'spiritual home for all people' that Hiroshima is building grows an abundant Forest of Memory, and the River of Reconciliation and Humanity flowing from that forest is plied by Reason, Conscience and Compassion, ships that ultimately sail to the Sea of Hope and the Future.(5)

Verdun and Hiroshima are cities of peace which teach about 'conversion' or 'metanoia'. The message of reconciliation and brotherhood appeals to our hearts in places which once were the "ground zero" of hatred. Those actors who once were bitter foes later became partners for a greater good. Germany and France have invested their creative energy to build Europe. Likewise, the United States and Japan have worked to make the Pacific Ocean a *mare nostrum* where East and West would peacefully work for a common prosperity.

Pakxe is neither Verdun nor Hiroshima. The rationale for making it an international city of peace is different. Pakxe never experienced total devastation like Verdun or Hiroshima. Thus, the healing dimension will not be central in its vocation for peace. It will not be absent either. Pakxe city is located near the *Ho Chi Minh* trail built by the Vietcong during the Vietnam War, in order to infiltrate South Vietnam. Laos became "the wart on the hog of Vietnam" (Dean Rusk, then secretary of State). Laos itself originally wanted to stay neutral in the Cold War, but partly because of its own civil war between the Pathet Lao and the royal army, its territory was used and abused by the rival powers. As a result, "for a decade from 1964 to 1973, Laos was subjected to the most savage warfare in the nation's history." (6)

Moreover, as a result of the American sorties, Laos is today ranked as the world's most heavily bombed country. Two thirds of the country is still contaminated with unexploded ordnance (UXO), which continues to cause death and injury as well as deny the use of land. Therefore, part of the vocation of Pakxe as an international city of peace will be to teach us about the Cold War, just like Verdun teaches about World War I and Hiroshima about World War II. Yet a legacy of past failures and of unspeakable atrocities is not enough to promote a culture of peace. Pakxe will convey a future-oriented and more positive message. The lesson of Verdun did not prevent World War II; the lesson of Hiroshima did not prevent the bombing of Nagasaki three days later. To tell us that war is hell will only be a secondary task for Pakxe. As a primary mission, it will provide a foretaste of the future concord in South-East Asia. It is time to break away from a culture of disenchantment where evil and tragedy remain aesthetically more fascinating than goodness, and where we learn to progress only through disaster followed by catharsis.

Therefore, an even better model for Pakxe is probably San José, the capital of Costa Rica. Through various turning points, this small country without many resources became a moral power rewarded with peace and prosperity. It illustrates how a whole nation can radiate a culture of peace.

Central America as a whole conjures up human insecurity and violence. The hope for sustainable development remains fragile; the special case of Costa Rica offers the only paradigm shift in the rather pessimistic approach of the region. Facing the same handicaps as its neighbours, the nation has found better solutions; as a result, it is a very creative country building a culture of peace. Though the context is different, Costa Rica may offer valuable solutions for the desired future of the Lao people.

Costa Rica seems to illustrate two cardinal ideas expressed by the historian Arnold Toynbee:

1. Civilizations arise by the response of creative individuals to challenges in difficult situations;
- 2 Progress in civilization consists in meeting difficulties by responding in creative ways that are internal and spiritual rather than external and material.(7)

The history of Costa Rica exhibits all the ingredients that are allegedly responsible for most of Central America's backwardness: discovered by Christopher Columbus, it experienced long Spanish colonization, had to solve the thorny agrarian issue, experienced dictatorship and corruption; moreover, it was strongly dominated by the most demonized corporation *United Fruit Co.* The company is often blamed for neocolonialism and described as the archetype of the influence of a multinational corporation on the 'banana republics'.

Costa Rica made a difference through its unique attitude at turning points of its history. First, the Spanish colonials had to till the conquered land by themselves, because the Indians had fled in the mountains. The independence of 1821 was gained without shooting any bullet. Wise reforms could solve the agrarian problem, which was so painful elsewhere. In exchange for huge concessions to *United Fruit*, it obtained the construction of a railway from its Pacific to its Atlantic coast. As early as 1882, the death penalty was abolished.

Favouring reform instead of revolution, Costa Rica was still the most backward country of Central America in the 1940s. The year 1949 is the major turning point of its contemporary history. Following an electoral fraud, a civil war killed 1,000 people. After restoring law and order, J-M Figueres Ferrer took the unlikely decision to abolish the army as a permanent institution and to transfer its budget to national education. The new Constitution allowed for a separation of powers and the non-re-election of the president. Women could vote, a universal social security system was established: education for all became the priority. In the 1950s, Costa Rica had another prophetic turning point: facing the depletion of its biodiversity, it multiplied the national parks, thus connecting peace and the preservation of the environment. Later, Costa Rica established international peace parks with its neighbours. Laos should do the same, especially with the provinces of Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia which surround Pakxe and the Champassak province.

1983 was yet another turning point for Costa Rica. Threatened by the violence which devastated Central America, the country made a proclamation of perpetual active neutrality. Taking responsibility for the regional situation, President Oscar Arias showed his talent for conflict resolution and was awarded with the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987. Created in 1980, the UN sponsored the creation of the University of Peace with its headquarters in Costa Rica,(8) an institutions which trains students from around the world to become 'peace doctors'. Likewise, the creation of a University of South-East Asia in Pakxe would further these goals regionally and internationally.

Costa Rica today is the most advanced Central American nation. A moral covenant ties together creative elites and a population famous for its public-spiritedness and sense of responsibility. San José, the capital

of this revolutionary nation, could well be called the "city on the hill" of the Central American Dream.

Verdun, Hiroshima and San José provide case studies of cities promoting a culture of peace. ASEAN (the Association of South-East Nations) is now at a critical turning point and needs a covenant between creative elites and the civil societies of its ten member-States. A city of Peace in Pakxe is not a pacifist chimera. It will send a signal that the new Asia says no to past divisions and yes to a full cooperation of all. Verdun and Hiroshima teach us that atonement and catharsis are needed to make a new start and to 'save succeeding generations from the scourge of war'.⁽⁹⁾ They illustrate the responsibilities of major people who could have united for a common good at a certain time of history, and whose descendants later paid a heavy price for the peace that their forefathers had not achieved. San José teaches the small countries facing adversity that their moral responsibility is not to give in despair, resentment, self-justification or fatalism, but to take their destinies in their own hands in order and to set an example for others.

Major Powers should support the atonement aspect of the Pakxe Project; the citizens of Pakxe can collectively become the enlightened builders of a "city on a hill" encapsulating the dreams of ASEAN.

II - THE SOUTH-EAST ASIAN DREAM

But is there such a thing as the South-East Asian dream? What kind of dream can it be? If ASEAN is to realize the goals of its *Vision 2020*, what will be its most salient values? Before we study the contribution of Pakxe to a culture of peace, let us contrast the South-East Asian dream with the American dream and the European dream.

The *American Dream* as coined by James Truslow Adams in his *Epic of America* (1931) is mostly a dream of achieving worldly happiness through freedom and hard work, opportunity and trust, endeavour and reward. Yet it would be wrong to equate this pragmatic quest of happiness with just a materialist crave of the middle class. First, the American dream is a legacy of the puritan tradition. The Pilgrim Fathers, having reached the new world, wanted to build the sanctuary of a chosen nation. This moral responsibility, later called manifest destiny, is the root of the American dream. Second, the fruit of this dream is in the pioneering of new frontiers and the spearheading of constant modernization. As a land of promises and a melting-pot, the USA could integrate all races and creeds. Yet, despite its attractiveness, the American dream alone cannot exhaust all human aspirations; other regions are to add their contributions to the big dream.

Today, another dream is emerging, which the American author Jeremy Rifkin calls 'the European dream'.⁽¹⁰⁾ He praises the European Union for building a new model of governance exalting universal values. After the traumas of the European nightmare (two World Wars), the birth of the European Union was far from being glamorous. But through the steadfast efforts of dedicated leaders, an idea became a project, and then a vision. That which transformed the vision into a utopia was the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, which is the founding myth for the new Europe. Europeans seized the chance offered by this event to build an efficient model of freedom, peace and prosperity. So efficient that it took only 15 years to achieve the great feat of integrating the enemies of the past. On May 1, 2004, former nations of the Warsaw Pact joined the union, including even some former republics of the Soviet Union. During these 15 years, several nation-States abolished their borders and gave up their currency to adopt the Euro. These are unprecedented steps in human history. The European dream thus appeals to many. In contrast with the American Dream, Rifkin contends that, "for Europeans, freedom is found not in autonomy but in embeddedness. To be free is to have access to many interdependent relationships. The more communities one has access to, the more options one has for living a full and meaningful life. It is *inclusivity* that brings security - belonging, not belongings. The American Dream emphasizes economic growth, personal wealth, and independence. The new European Dream focuses more on sustainable development, quality of life, and interdependence."

From Dream To Nightmare

The emergence of ASEAN (first founded in 1967) as another regional power was evidenced throughout the two decades 1975-1997: though the communization of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos in 1975 was threatening the security of the entire region, the five founding members of ASEAN (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) showed a clever reaction, and later played a decisive role in the settlement of the Cambodian issue. Their economic growth was steady. Brunei joined ASEAN in 1984, which then went on to achieve the first peaceful unification of South-East Asia: Vietnam joined in 1995, Laos and Burma in 1997, Cambodia in 1999. Not only that, but the whole region had achieved its goal of freeing itself from foreign interferences: Russia and the USA had withdrawn most of their forces, and the threat of China was not of a military nature. Additionally, the Nobel Peace Prizes of Aung San Suu Kyi (Burma) and Belo and Ramos-Horta (Timor) brought a moral prestige to South-East whereas Mahathir bin Mohamad and Lee Kwan Yew did a lot to enhance its political prestige. Heralding Asian Values at Davos or in *Foreign Affairs*, the two leaders of Malaysia and Singapore became stars of world politics. In Kuala Lumpur, on December 15, 1997, the ASEAN Vision 2020 charted the map of a bright future.(11)

The South-East Asian dream triumphed in 1997. But ASEAN then tasted a nightmare: shortly after forest fires and the 1997 financial crisis had devastated Indonesia, the Suharto regime collapsed. In the following years, political instability, ethnic strife, fights among Muslims and Christians, the secession of Timor, the growing anger in Aceh and Irian Jaya, and the terrorist attack in Bali revealed the feet of clay of the giant and the powerlessness of its Pancasila ideology. The Philippines were likewise unable to solve the Mindanao issue and to cast out the old demons of cronyism. Mahathir left power in a poisoned atmosphere. Burma gave false hopes. The economic crisis of 1997, the epidemics of SARS and the epizootics of bird flu, as well as the tsunami of Christmas 2004, exposed the same fundamental weakness of the region: as a crossroads of influences between two oceans and two continents, South-East Asia is unable to control globalization. Whatever effects the region has global consequences; whatever is global has a strong regional impact. The region has a vision and a noble dream, but seems to lack the institutional framework to substantialize itself. Siska Lund offers a more internal diagnosis in "A Mandala for the Southeast Asian International System". The setbacks of ASEAN right after its triumph should be seen as 'mirror events', not as completely negative occurrences. "Credibility and international standing have suffered as a result of series of unfortuitous *mirror events* since 1997. The questions that arise are, do the lessons from these events support the notion of creating a regional *mandalic* community? Can these *mirror events* serve as driving forces for further integration within ASEAN?"(12)

Of course, ASEAN hopes to be an Eldorado of abundance and prosperity; and also hopes that its natural and cultural ornaments will make it ever more attractive for millions of tourists; moreover ASEAN hopes to be a strong regional actor in a multipolar world. All of these, however, only reflect the external aspirations of the South-East Asian people, and not the regional dream which will make them one, truly one internally and externally. As a "city on a hill", Pakxe should build a sanctuary of the South-East Asian dream, which is not just economic and political - it is essentially a spiritual and moral dream, the dream to build an exemplary civilization.

An area, an idea, a project

What kind of civilization will it be? Before the Second World War, the term "South-East Asia" was used without exactly coinciding with what is now South-East Asia. Some authors called the region "Further India". The Japanese talked about the "Greater East Asia" to include countries of South-East Asia. They controlled the region for four years, hoping to create the Asian sphere of co-prosperity.

The term "South-East Asia" is credited to the Indian historian K.M. Pannikar. His *Future of Southeast Asia*, published in 1943 was a landmark. South-East Asia became the second theatre of World War II after Europe, and remained a front line throughout the Cold War. The wars on Indochina resulted in a partition of the region, especially after 1975; this was all the more dangerous that the Soviet-American rivalry was coupled with a Soviet-Chinese strife. No wonder the region is still perceived as a concept of geostrategy, and many doubt its possible unity. Yet, some experts challenge this interpretation. Rodolphe

de Koninck reminds us that South-East Asia was always a distinct geographic and '*historico-cultural* region'. (13)

Elisée Reclus and Paul Mus called the place the 'Angle of Asia'. Indeed, the region was never the theatre of a single civilization but was always a crossroads of diverse influences. Called *Nan Yang* ('countries of the Southern Sea') by the Chinese, *Suvarnabhumi* ('the golden area') by the Indians, 'The Golden Chersonese' by Ptolemy, South-East Asia is an area as well as an *idea* (Hugues Tertrais). But what kind of idea is it?

With its immense geological and climatic complexity, its biogeographic abundance, its unique ethnolinguistic wealth, its unbelievable accumulation of influences and local blends, this cultural delta, this arc of circle covering land and sea, is definitely a central region.(14)

During the transition of the Cold War, the *idea* of South-East Asia fathered the blueprint of a *project*. With the birth of the ASEAN in Bangkok in 1967, a geographic and historical legacy was to become a political destiny. The project took shape, and after 32 years of existence, the regional union called ASEAN managed to coincide with the geo-historical South East Asia. South East Asia is now responsible for changing its image. This region has the potential to be more than a buffer region, coveted by powerful neighbours in their political, economic and military rivalries: it has to usher in a flourishing civilization contributing to world peace.

Something new has emerged East, which can now have a chance for peace, just like Europe, provided the citizens are more involved as the actors of regional construction. Several factors converge to make South-East Asia a region fit for a culture of peace. The *Pakxe Project* offers a paradigm to reinforce unity and peace in the region.

Undeniably, South-East Asia is extremely heterogeneous. If we were to define its destiny, it would be as a crossroads of Asia, as suggested by Bruneau and Taillard:

South-East Asia is an outcome of Asia, its tail as it comes in contact with the ocean. It is also a place of convergence, a synthesis, a prolongation of Asia which spreads itself in the oceanic expanse. It can be defined by its richness and its complexity which result from its position. On the one hand, it occupies the term of Asia; on the other hand, it is a crossroads and a centre between two oceans, between the continental mass and the maritime dispersal.(15)

The terms used here - convergence, synthesis, crossroads, centre, transition - call for a vocation of South-East Asia as a centre of civilization and a possible peace-maker. The two authors then add:

More than the term of expansionist waves - Chinese, Indian, Muslim, European, or even Japanese, South East Asia has been and remains a place of convergences (. . .) Trends accumulated in several layers, which are intertwined and sometimes clash with each other. South East Asia appears, beyond its internal divisions, as a world in itself, a centre of unequalled richness and complexity, particularly on the biogeographic and ethnographic levels.(16)

The uniqueness of South-East Asia was for long a cause of its predicament. But this can be the starting point of a precious role for world peace, as we enter the Pacific Era. Indeed, South-East Asia has two predispositions and a vocation to be a peace-maker:

- A predisposition for being a 'world in itself', and mediator between two worlds; these predispositions are the geographic and historical legacy of South East Asia.
- A vocation for being a crossroads and centre of harmony. The vocation is what South-East Asia will do with its unique legacy. South-East Asia can use these factors as assets for world peace.

THE PREDISPOSITIONS OF SOUTH EAST ASIA

The microcosm of diversity

A microcosm is a 'little world', or 'world on a small scale'. South-East Asia is just that. It is 'unity in diversity' as well as diversity in unity. Since almost everything that exists on earth is present in this area, its emergence as a cultural, political and economic unit has much meaning for all humankind. To preserve its biodiversity and ethnic diversity are of paramount importance in the new millennium. No other region in the world concentrates such a natural and cultural diversity as South-East Asia. Numerous natural and cultural migrations have resulted in the creation of a unique museum. It is fascinating and calls for practical conclusions. This diversity should serve a culture of peace. Let us have an overview of this diversity.

A Geographic Microcosm

South-East Asia is a Chersonese (*Chersos*, continent, *nesos*, island). The interpenetration of earth and sea provides many features of the South East Asian culture. Goerge Coedes talked about a "cosmological dualism contrasting the mountain and the sea, the winged creatures and the aquatic animals, the hill tribes and the lowland tribes." Alain de Sacy reminds us that "Malay traditions and languages use *tanah air*, literally 'earth and water', to describe the archipelago, the homeland, the nation."(17)

Human beings live in three types of environments: continents, islands and peninsulas. The three coexist in South-East Asia. Therefore, the usual description of South-East Asia as dual - continental in the North and insular in the South - is inaccurate. Rather than dual, South-East Asia is triune.

Actually, three great areas can be distinguished: the continental part of Indochina penetrates very deeply in the oceanic mass through the Kra isthmus, prolonged by the peninsula of Malacca. It is a key to build a culture of peace. If South-East Asia was dual, it would be much more arduous to achieve its unity. The Isthmus of Kra is important for several reasons:

- a. Though Burma and Thailand are mostly continental, both penetrate into the isthmus till the border with Malaysia. On the other hand, the Federal State of Malaysia has its main part on the peninsula, and is then prolonged by the two States of Sarawak and Sabah, located on the North of the Kalimantan Island, which is shared by two other States: Brunei and Indonesia. This geography forces the various States to seek their regional integration and interdependence.
- b. The Isthmus of Kra, with peninsula extensions reaching all the way from Bangkok to Singapore, has been the backbone of a steady political, economic and social development for decades. Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore thus have a central responsibility to create a model for the entire region. This isthmus reminds us of the European corridor stretching from Rotterdam to Milan, formerly called Lotharingia: an outcome of the Carolingian empire, Lotharingia is the backbone of the European construction. Similarly, the urban peninsular corridor connecting Bangkok to Singapore is where South-East Asia has been the most successful, nurturing democracy and prosperity. In comparison, the development of continental South-East Asia and of Insulindia (with the exception of Java), remains more chaotic or slow.
- c. Whereas the Continent is predominantly Buddhist and Indonesia predominantly Muslim, the peninsula is mixed. The Thai who live on the isthmus are mostly Muslim. On the other hand, Malaysia consists of 55% Malay who are Muslim, and about 30 % Chinese who are either Buddhist-Confucianist or Christian. There is also an Indian community. Singapore is multicultural and multireligious.

The South-East Asian peninsula is thus the *bridge* connecting the continent and the islands, and the gate between the Indian and the Pacific Oceans; its successful diversity is a model of development for the

whole region.

A Microcosm of Biodiversity

South-East Asia was a crossroads for the migrations of species, and then a crossroads of human migrations. "A remarkable setting of biogeographic convergence, South-East Asia is a cradle of a great richness of fauna and flora."⁽¹⁸⁾ Surveys have evidenced over 60,000 plant species. The geological and botanical history has generated this richness. The naturalist Alfred R. Wallace (1823-1913) identified two biogeographic domains, separated by an imaginary line between the Borneo and Sulawesi islands: the West side is the Asian domain, the East side is the Australian domain. The tropicity in South East Asia is indeed special because the maritime expanse is vast and the entanglement of seas and of high lands has resulted in a unique ecological richness. Near the equator, the variations of altitudes create wide gaps of temperatures allowing for a great variety of species on limited surfaces.

A Microcosm of Ethno-linguistic diversity

South-East Asia hosts hundreds of different ethnic groups, speaking various families of languages. Experts generally distinguish five ethnolinguistic groups, 'and this makes South-East Asia one of the richest regions'.⁽¹⁹⁾ These groups are the Austronesian group, the Austro-Asian group, the Tai-kadai group, the Sino-Tibetan group and finally the Papuans of Irian Jaya. Among these languages, half use romanized scripts, others have their own alphabets. We should also mention the presence of around 20 million Chinese in South-East Asia, (4% of the total population). Moreover there are still Indians in certain States, but many left at the time of independence.

No other area of the globe displays such a diversity of ethnic groups. 'Miraculously' a political and economic entity is emerging despite such obstacles. Hopefully, many new and ongoing projects can help unite this diversity. South-East Asia can be a model in an increasingly multicultural world, provided it offers a common hope to all these people.

A microcosm of socio-economic conditions

South-East Asia has another feature: almost all the stages of socio-economic development are represented. Singapore is an industrialized country with a high index of human development. Brunei also offers a very high standard of living to its inhabitants. Thailand, Malaysia and Philippines are in the process of industrialization, which could also be the case for Indonesia with a better governance. At the other end of the spectrum, Cambodia and Laos have low levels of human development. Finally, South-East Asia has several aboriginal minorities, which were probably the original people of the region.

A general feature of the region is the split that appeared among the various people as flows of migrations kept coming. "The ethnic groups which form the majority and hold the political power, occupy the lowlands, the deltas and the central river basins, pushing away the weaker ethnic minorities in the higher regions, which are marginal, peripheral and less densely populated. The ruling groups practice a sedentary agriculture based on irrigation and create towns and cities, the ruled minorities practice slash and burn agriculture."⁽²⁰⁾ In several countries, modernity concerns only the urban population of the lowlands and coasts, whereas much of the population remains in self-sufficiency. The fact that nations with such uneven rates of human development have managed to unite in a time of adversity (the Cold War) suggests that strong bonds tie the people of the region.

A Microcosm of Political Regimes

Almost all types of political regimes coexist in South-East Asia. Only Thailand was never colonized. This constitutional monarchy aims at becoming a stable parliamentary regime. The evolution of society is scrutinized by the army and local oligarchies. The class of technocrats is more influential than in other countries. The political systems of South-East Asia vary greatly:

- After a long period of messianic socialism, Myanmar has for years been ruled by a junta quelling democracy under the opaque label of *State Law and Order Council* (SLORC) and then changed to *State Peace and Development Council* (SPDC).
- The Philippines have tried to implement a stable presidential republic based on the American model, but are facing a serious Muslim turmoil in the South as well as a profound social crisis. The nation offers similarities with Latin-American societies. Whenever the political class failed to steer the nation, the army sought to intervene.
- Indonesia remains a secular presidential regime despite the overwhelming Muslim majority. Its political crisis is multifaceted. An ideological, institutional and moral confusion coincides with economic difficulties, separatist tendencies and the rise of fundamentalism. Soekarno, the father of Indonesia, had tried to fulfil the oath pronounced by the youth of the Indonesian Nationalist Party: "One nation, Indonesia, one people, Indonesian, one language, Indonesian." This motto kept its meaning for decades, granting the unity of the immense archipelago. It inspired the ideology of Pancasila (21) and legitimized the authoritarian and technocratic regime of President Suharto. This ideology has lost its spirit and the new generations want more autonomy.
- Malaysia is a federal State and a constitutional monarchy. The monarch is elected every five years among the sultans of the 9 federal States. Former prime-minister Dr Mahathir ruled his country with vision and ambition, being a talented architect of its modernization.
- Singapore is a city-State and a parliamentary republic. This 'non-viable small island' (22) has turned into an 'intelligent island' and then a 'global service centre' by former Premier Lee Kwan Yew who "played the global card to secure the durability of the region . . . and the card of ASEAN to secure the continuity of Singapore".(23)
- Brunei is a sultanate and a kind of city-state, though it covers 2,226 square miles. This Far-East Kuwait owes much of its wealth to oil resource, and the family of the sultan controls the nation. *Melayu Islam Beraja*, the ideology of the ruling family, is a mixture of religion, cultural traditions and absolute monarchy.
- The three nations of former French Indochina have all been subjected to communism. Vietnam and Laos are still People's democracies, which legitimize themselves with Marxist-Leninist revolutions. Despite reforms which gradually restore private ownership and market economy, 'democratic centralism' steers the society. After a tragic period of genocide and chaos, Cambodia restored the constitutional monarchy in 1993, and now has the facade of multiparty system. The communist Hun Sen remains the strong man.
- East Timor is a newly independent state which still relies heavily on international help.

This great variety of political regimes makes ASEAN a laboratory of political experiment. Political scientists should pay attention to this group of nations which have been colonies of Britain, France, Spain, the Netherlands, Portugal and the United States, where one can find monarchies, parliamentary or presidential republics, sultanates, city-States, communist regimes. The rise of a regional union in this political landscape should interest political experts worldwide and inspire more research.

A Microcosm of the major religions

The most distinctive feature of South-East Asia is that it is a crossroads of the major religions. No other region displays the same pattern. First, South East Asia has received an animist and shamanist heritage that goes back to the dawn of times but is still vigorous in most subregions and is part of the wider cultural system. Thereafter, major religious systems have entered and developed within the region:

- For approximately 2000 years, traders coming from India spread Hinduism. This is the first universal heritage of the region and the origin of its classical age comparable to Hellenism in the Mediterranean region.
- Later, Buddhism brought a spiritual renewal, succeeding Hinduism or cohabitating with it. Vietnam is a special case in the region. Whereas the North was for centuries a vassal to China, receiving Confucianism and Taoism, the South was under Hindu influence. The Vietnamese people moved to the South, annexing the kingdom of Champa and reaching the delta of the Mekong to create a centralized State, of Chinese heritage.
- The Mongolian invasions hastened the decline of the Silk Road. As sea trade was developing, Islam penetrated Insulinidia, bringing monotheism into the picture as well as the beginning of a urban and merchant civilization.
- Last but not least in the region, Christianity came to the Philippines with the Spanish in the 17th century, and 90 % of the nation is Roman Catholic. East Timor is almost entirely Catholic. French missions brought the Gospel to Vietnam in the 17th century. Catholicism is still an actor on the Vietnamese scene. Important Christian minorities can also be found in Myanmar and Indonesia.

The four major or universal religions have thus shaped the spiritual history of South-East Asia, the region of the world where they have all reached the limit of their expansion and have met, comparatively peacefully. Hinduism today concerns only Bali and the Hindu minorities of Singapore and Malaysia, but its cultural influence is strong in languages, arts and architecture. Theravada Buddhism permeates the Northern continental part (Indochina), and the south of Burma represents, together with Sri Lanka, the current Southern limit of the expansion of Buddhism, though smaller enclaves exist elsewhere. Buddhism encompasses around 29% to 32% in total of the South-East Asian population.(24)

Approximately 39% of the population of South-East Asia embraces Islam, mostly in the Malay world, while Indonesia is the biggest Muslim country of the world. Islam has always been more tolerant here than in other areas. In Malaysia, a Muslim majority was able to modernize the nation and follow the rule of law within a multi-religious society. Dr Mahathir decided to create income without staking everything on oil. Other industries were developed. He modernized the political life without challenging the social order and traditions too quickly. Islam was given a leading role without discriminating against other religions. The Muslim scholar Siddiq Fadil enthusiastically declared, "Malay Islam will spearhead the Muslim revival coming from the Pacific shores." He further projected that in the 15th century of the Hegira, the Malay world will become "the future centre of world Islam."(25) Malay people, says François Raillon, feel that they are "living in an extraordinary and promethean era, during which the Muslims of South-East Asia enjoy a prosperity which is reminiscent of the glorious past of the Malayo-Indonesian empires."(26)

Christians account for 19% of the region. The Philippines were long the far-east limit of the world expansion of Christianity, before it reached Oceania. Today, it is the most Christian Asian nation, predominantly Roman Catholic. Vietnam and Indonesia also have strong Christian minorities.

South-East Asia and the dialogue of cultures

The blending of ethnic groups, the succession of religions, the diversity of the colonial heritage, have created in South East-Asia a mosaic of cultures with no equivalent. The two giants of Asia (India and China to a lesser degree) brought the primary and probably decisive influence. They brought the region into its 'classical' era, which we admire in Pagan, Angkor Wat, Borobudur or Hue. When Arab conquerors and traders brought Islam and the urban culture, South-East Asia then entered the turbulences of world history. Integration in political and economic modernity was achieved through diverse colonizations. Finally, we need to consider the ideological influences during the Cold War. Such a

diversity of influences could have split South-East Asia apart. It was not the case. Rather, the emergence of this region is about to mobilize all these legacies under a common design.

South East Asia can be conceived as an accumulation of sediments or ... of successive strata. These sedimentary layers were not just superimposed in the course of centuries but they were also (...) intertwined, the sum of external influences being considerable in the region. (27)

A centre of accumulation and synthesis

The richness of this region has important consequences: the four main religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity) have converged in this 'Mediterranean of Asia' and reached the limits of their expansion. Three masses have finally emerged and face each other: Indochina in the North concentrates the first Buddhist population of the world, Indonesia in the South has the biggest Muslim group of the globe, the Philippines in the East are the first Christian nation of Asia, while Hinduism is no longer a living indigenous religion except in Bali. Moreover, seven colonizations came to the region: British and French on the continent and the peninsula where Buddhism prevails. Dutch and Spanish have occupied the archipelagoes of the South and the East, which are respectively Muslim and Catholic. Moreover, Americans, Portuguese and Japanese have also brought their contribution. The remarkable thing in this region is the will to have a common goal: "This is the challenge of ASEAN: the possibility to create a community where all the great cultures would be massively represented."(28)

Mission impossible for ASEAN then? Far from it. Geographically and historically speaking, these diverse cultures have interacted rather harmoniously so far. Therefore, "South-East Asia is less a place for division than a centre of accumulation and synthesis."(29) Let us now sketch broadly the genesis of this cultural legacy. Four layers can be observed in South-East Asia, representing four ages of its cultural history.

The animist legacy of South-East Asia

The oldest stratum is also the most marginalized population of South-East Asia. 'Minorities' is the name commonly given to people who were expelled from fertile lowlands by successive migrations. Forced to live on the heights, they practice slash-and-burn agriculture; their animist beliefs and rituals represent the oldest cultural heritage of the region: "There is some sort of unity in the conceptions prevailing before Indianization: for instance, the worship of the deities of the earth, the ancestors worship and the importance of funerary rituals, the sanctification of mountain tops as centres of the Earth and of communication with Heaven."(30)

Indianization

Indianization marked the 'classical age' of South-East Asia (9th-13th AD); the cultural and political influence of India gave rise to the Hinduized States or agrarian kingdoms. Borobudur, Pagan, and Angkor Wat marked the high point in art and architecture. "The Indian legacy includes Hinduism, Buddhism,, . . . epic literature, mathematics, architecture, the deification of hereditary centralized monarchies."(31) The two epics of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, translated in the local languages, are a vivid link of classic culture among the people of the region.

The agrarian kingdoms "organized in cast systems, and with divine right monarchies, gave rise to the concentric rice-growing kingdoms. Agrarian cities, centred on temple-mountains, were built at the centre of vast hydraulic systems."(32) These kingdoms are the embryos of the actual States and the root of their national identities. "They all have in common the primacy of rice-growing, the same ubiquity of the royal civil servants, the emissaries of the central will, as well as the role of Buddhist, Sivaite or Vishnuite orders, which, like the Cistercians in Europe, often took the initiative to open the forest . . . The individual *per se* did not exist, each member of the group being caught in the web of reciprocal relations, from suzerain to vassal, elder to younger, master to servant."(33)

In the Indian worldview, the notion of space is mostly cosmological; the city of man is a microcosm of the divine cosmos. An emblem of this worldview is the geometry based on the four cardinal points, the city-mandala (Angkor, Chiang Mai, Jogjakarta, Mandalay), as well as in the structure of some temples.

The contribution of Islam

Several factors brought the South-East Asian Middle Age to an end: the Mongol invasions pushed the people of Southern China toward the Mekong lowlands, the Silk Road declined, and Muslim merchants came via the sea. At the dawn of modern times, while Indian influence faded, China extended its sway, the Thai power emerged, and Muslims began to proselytize. A new social order emerged after the regional balance was broken.

Islam mostly took over the South of the region. The system of the Malay sultanate developed (Malacca, Aceh, Macassar, Banjarmasin etc). The era of international trade started, and Malay became the *lingua franca* of the archipelago. "Similar to Venice or Genova, these port cities connected, via the maritime networks, with the overseas powers, than with the neighbouring territories." (34) The port and the market became the central places of the cosmopolitan cities. The notions of time and space changed. "Space was no longer cosmological, but geographical, the map replaced the mandala and, with the idea of the Umma centred on Mecca, their minds opened to foreign worlds. Time progressively became linear. Islam brought the idea of a Creation of the world and Last Judgment." (35) With the arrival of Islam, the region moved from the somewhat timeless medieval classicism toward the beginning of modernity. In 1415, the Hindu prince Parameswara who had come from Srivijaya to found Malacca accepted Allah, the God of his wife. Alain de Sacy talks of a turning point:

This is the great shift - *Djanam balik boeno* in old Javanese: the cosmos, *boeno*, is turned upside down, *balik*, and it is the world which emerges. The syncretist Hinduist-Buddhist-animist civilization gave place to a religion revealed by a unique God, with a universal vocation, bearing . . . different values. Men started to have a soul and the souls had a road to the holy place, which promised paradise, and men were forever free from the cycle of reincarnations. (36)

The turning point of 1415 may have played in the history of South-East Asia a similar role as the role played by Reformation and Renaissance for the people of Europe. With the arrival of Islam and the new secularized time and space, history had yet to be written. It was no longer written in advance by Heaven. It would be the role of politics to write it. The *Ummah* (community of Muslim believers) and the pilgrimage to Mecca were offering new horizons to the people of the region, thus increasing its links with the West.

The colonizations

The fourth influence on South-East Asia came from the Europeans, who explored the region during the Renaissance. At first, only the Iberians started a colonial adventure, the Portuguese in Timor, and the Spanish in the Philippines. They evangelized the population and tried to urbanize them. The USA, acting initially as liberators, took the Philippines from Spain in 1898, hoping to open the gates to China.

At first, the other European powers mostly wanted to secure the straits for the trade of spices, open trading posts there, and create their plantations near these trading posts. That was the case with the Dutch East Indies Company in Java. Later, the Dutch State took over the company and directly colonized all Indonesia. The British focused on the Malay Peninsula and opened ports. They took control of Malacca (1795) and Singapore (1819). In 1830, the *East India Company* negotiated the *Straits Settlements*. Later on, the British directly ruled over Malaysia, while from 1819 to 1823 Singapore expanded rapidly. Burma was occupied by force because it entered in conflict with the economic interests of the British. Burma became an administrative province of the Empire of India till 1937.

While England and the Netherlands fought for control of the maritime expanse, the continent was disputed by the British colonial Empire and the French Empire. Through a logic of colonial and political

control, the long-term strategy was to penetrate China from the South-West. It is this ambition which prompted the French colonization of Indochina in the 19th century. Using the pretext of defending the Christians, France colonized Vietnam, taking Tourane in 1858 and Saigon in 1860. A protectorate was offered to Cambodia, which became a buffer state between Siam and Vietnam. In 1884, France forced the Emperor in Hue to accept the French protectorate on Annam and Tonkin (Cochin China was already a colony). Laos, which was about to be engulfed by Siam, also became a French protectorate in 1893, due to the mediation of Auguste Pavie (a French explorer and diplomat). The Indochinese union was born.

Only Thailand escaped colonization. Under Mongkut, the former kingdom of Siam followed a policy of modernization which is reminiscent of Japanese efforts during the Meiji era. Japan did not occupy Thailand during World War II.

A unique legacy that has to be enhanced

So far, no systematic effort has been done to enhance these predispositions. They are the outcome of a long religious and cultural history. This outcome can be decisive as this region is one component of the Pacific Basin, the future centre of world civilization. The *Pakxe Project* intends to enhance the unique configuration of South-East Asia; one may think of a Mandala connecting the four gates of South-East Asia. Since the North-South axis Hanoi-Djakarta and the West-East axis Rangoon-Manila intersect near Pakxe, we see this city as a symbol of a culture of peace in South East Asia. This axis can be further explored:

- Hanoi is the Northern gate of South-East Asia, the gate to China. A symbol of the Confucianist Chinese civilization, it also represents the French colonial presence.
- On the other side of the vertical line from Hanoi, Jakarta is the Southern gate of South East Asia, the gate to Oceania. The city symbolizes Islam in South-East Asia, in the largest Muslim country of the world. The old Batavia also represents the period of Dutch colonization. The Hanoi-Jakarta vertical represents the transition from Asia to Oceania.
- Rangoon is the Western gate of the region, its gate to India and to the Indian Ocean. Rangoon and other Burmese cities are shining symbols of Theravada Buddhism. Rangoon also symbolizes the British colonial presence in South East Asia.
- At the other end of a West-East axis, Manila is the Eastern gate of South-East Asia, the gate toward the Pacific Ocean. Manila symbolizes Christianity in the Far East. The city also represents the Spanish, then American presence in the region. The Rangoon-Manila line is the link between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean.

SOUTH-EAST ASIA AS A MEDIATING REGION

South-East Asia can become a peacemaking actor thanks to its predisposition as a microcosm, but also because of the mediating function which geography and history have given to this region. A place of intermixing of ethnic groups, the region is also a crossing point, a place of transition. Rodolphe de Koninck gives a good overview of this double vocation of museum and of crossroads between two worlds:

Located between the Chinese world and the Indian world, being connected to both and distinct from both, South-East Asia represents the outcome of Asia. It is also a place of convergence, a crossroads, a synthesis of Asia: this synthesis however also marks a transition, or more precisely a continuation of Asia beyond the continental area ... the region is defined as much by its location, in a position of bridge, as by its position of centre, axis or pivot, between two oceans, between the continental mass and the oceanic expanse, between Asia and Australia.(37)

Mediator Between two major powers

This region is also a **mediator between China and India**, the two most populated nations of the world, homes of old and rich civilizations. Indochina first offers a geographic and cultural mediation, a gradual transition from the Hindu-Buddhist civilization (Rangoon) to the Buddhist-Confucianist civilization (Hanoi). It also offers a political and economic mediation which will be reinforced within the framework of ASEAN projects, e.g. the ASEAN Regional Forum and the newer East Asian Summit process. The Northern part of South-East Asia is also where the political and economic development remains difficult, except in Thailand. On the map, we mark this arc of a circle by the letter (A).



South-East Asian Links and Mediations

(base map courtesy of PCL map library via <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/index.html>)

Mediator between two oceans

South-East Asia represents the link between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. Insulindia was for a long time the route of trade and of the penetration of religions and cultures. This arc of a circle between two oceans, marked by the letter (B), runs from Bangkok to Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Brunei and Manila. The civilization is first continental (Burma, Thailand), then peninsular (Isthmus of Kra, Malacca peninsula), finally insular (north of Kalimantan and Philippines). This arc of a circle is the most mixed of the region, from the cultural and religious viewpoints: it marks the transition from Buddhism to Islam and from Islam to Christianity. This inter-linkage coincides with a greater modernization, political as well as economic. Along this arc of a circle, democracy has the support of the middle class. The prosperity of this 'mixed' corridor culminates in Singapore. This region also includes the busiest straits of the globe and represents a major strategic stake of world trade and of the balance of power. A quarter of world maritime trade goes through the Malacca strait.(38)

Mediator between two continents

Finally, South-East Asia is a mediator **between two continents**, Asia and Oceania. This arc of a circle (C) goes through the 13,000 islands of the Indonesian archipelago, from the North of Sumatra to Irian Jaya. Indonesia shares with Turkey (another secular Muslim State) the unusual feature of being across two regions. This third arc of a circle may seem to be more homogeneous and 'uniform' than the two others: it consists of islands only, mostly concerns one State - Indonesia, and one majority religion: Islam.

SOUTH-EAST ASIA AND THE CULTURE OF PEACE

Geography and history have given a unique legacy to the nations of South-East Asia. No other region of the globe displays such a microcosm of natural species, people, political, economic, and social regimes, of cultures and religions. Around 10% of the world population happens to be living in this region, which is a virtual microcosm of diversity. This region has achieved its diplomatic and economic unity for the first time in its history, and is searching for its goal. Some of its charismatic leaders have advocated a common ideology vaguely called the *Asian Values*. In reality, South-East Asia must unite around universal values and appear as a region where the culture of peace is given priority. As Rodolphe de Koninck puts it,

ASEAN has gradually become a tool of economic and commercial dialogue which benefits the countries of the region as well as a diplomatic forum which is equally efficient. South-East Asia is still far behind the European Union. But here also, the candidacy of countries wounded by the communist experience highlights how much South-East Asia represents, outside the major industrialized regions of the planet, the region which is most able to take advantage of the huge amount of its own legacies.(39)

Yes, South-East Asia has been rich in grandiose visions, and messianic dreams. What I suggest is to approach the dream of concord and lasting peace in a rational way and to empower the people in their daily lives for the creation of a culture of peace. All humankind should look to this region with great hope and expectation: should it succeed in consolidating peace, the fall-out of this *Shalom* would be felt around the globe. Then, in a region which was until recently a battlefield, what shall we do to develop the field of peace? A theatre of peace needs a good scenario and good actors. South-East Asia has many talented actors in all walks of life. And several scenarios are possible. It is possible to expound a scenario which highlights the role of culture. It gives an important role to an actor who had been rather neglected so far: Laos. Let us explain why.

III - LAOS AND THE CULTURE OF PEACE IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA

Ernest Renan once asked: "What is a nation?"(40) More than the physics of a nation (a body politic consisting of governing organs) he tried to grasp its metaphysics. Renan thus defined a nation as "a soul, a spiritual principle".

WHAT IS A REGION?

Now, we have several regional organizations and unions that are important players in global affairs; among them ASEAN is promising. *What is a region?* More than common markets for goods, can regions also be common sources of progress towards the good? If regional unions are to be "souls, spiritual principles" like nations, what will cement them together? It cannot be religious or philosophical dogmas, but rather a unifying impulse of the heart. "Two things make up for this soul, this spiritual principle," Renan said. "One is in the past and the other is in the present; one is to possess a rich legacy of memories. The other is the desire to preserve the undivided heritage we received."(41)

Renan saw glory and heroism as important components of the national sentiment, but the core was sacrificial love: "having done great things together and wishing to do more are essential conditions to make up a people. One's love is measured by one's sacrifices and hardships endured."(42) After decades of triumphs, South-East Asia faces a crisis which is at root spiritual and moral. More than money and know-how, heart and love are required. Descartes defined love as "an impulse of the mind such that one imagines a whole, where one is only a part and the loved one is the other." A new start of ASEAN entails a stronger imagination of the whole and a deeper selfless concern for others. Advocating true mutualism as the key to East Asian regionalism, Dr Ooi Kee Beng pointed out, "Mutualism is the key to peaceful co-existence, be it between states, nations or individuals. This idea is not new. We find it in the writings of wise men of all civilisations - from Confucius to Jesus, from the Prophet Mohamed to Buddha. But how central that idea is to peaceful human existence becomes most obvious only when disaster threatens."(43)

The *Pakxe Project* was drafted in 1996 and presented to leaders of the Lao government in 1997, including Vice Prime Minister Khamphoui Keoboulapha, and several ministers and vice-ministers. Spiritual leaders, scholars, NGO leaders later studied this project which urgently advocates a culture of peace in South-East Asia, for all the reasons mentioned above. When it was presented, ASEAN and Laos were in the euphoria which climaxed in the *Vision 2020* declaration of December 1997. The *Pakxe Project* urged Laos, in times of good fortune, to take the lead in the spirit necessary to strengthen the region. Instead of focusing only on its national identity, Laos should give precedence to its regional mission.

To see Laos as a peace-maker in South-East Asia may seem far-fetched, in view of the current reality: the only landlocked nation of South-East Asia, Laos ranks among the Least Developed Countries (LDCs). Contrary to its neighbours, it is underpopulated; its multiethnic population (where Lao people account for only 55% of the total) is spread across a mountainous land, with poor infrastructure. How can we advocate a sacrificial spirit in a nation burdened with numerous handicaps? The creative attitude of Costa Rica at critical turning points illustrates the value of a creative option after periods of turmoil.

THE NEW LAO PARADIGM

Laos has two great assets to promote a culture of peace in South-East Asia: one is the resource of its territory, the other is the resource of its people, its 'laoness'. The 'new Lao paradigm' as we may call it, no longer sees the geography of Laos as a national handicap, but as a regional solution. Laos possesses 31% of the Mekong, a major international river. Moreover, Laos is the nation which allows several nations to communicate with each other: China and Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand. The landlocked nation might become the 'landlink' nation according to the official rhetoric. These reasons and others prompted Yves Noug  r  de to talk of Laos as the adjuvant of the dynamics of peace in the region.(44) The geographer Christian Taillard observes a complete paradigm shift in Lao studies, because of the new geopolitical situation in the region:

In a new political context, Laos regains its situation of *intermediary space* at the crossroads of the peninsula which it occupied in the pre-colonial times. *A change in international relations has resulted in the transition from a logic of confrontation to a logic of cooperation.* In the new configuration, the buffer-State at the heart of the peninsula no longer separates potential enemies to grant peace, but connects partners. In the new *juncture*, Laos will impose itself by its political *function* ... it is the best *guarantee* of security for all and of peace in the peninsula.(45)

However, opportunity alone and a clever use of its territory cannot by themselves make Laos a herald of peace. More than security or convenience, peace is concord and friendship. Without a moral vision based on altruism, the new Lao paradigm will only be another imitation of peace, as illusory as neutralism once was. The Pakxe Project does contain precise guidelines for an ambitious policy of transportation using Pakxe as a hub, but it is to serve a moral goal, otherwise it will bring more corruption and dependency.

The second asset of Laos is the resource of its people. Often called "the gentle people", Laotians are fundamentally non violent. Henri Mouhot, who explored Laos in the 19th century wrote, "Laotians are not made for war."(46) In 1911, the novelist Jean Ajalbert beautifully phrased impressions often felt by foreigners in Laos: "Over there, time is as straight as a die, like the seamless fabric which women wear over their waist. Time merges with space ... delicious and breathtaking Laos."(47) Indeed such impressions from foreigners can be misleading. But a deeper knowledge of Laos often confirms them. The ethnologist Yves Goudineau writes, "the absence of major violence among the different populations has been a striking feature throughout history. Conflicts had a limited impact and the traditional territories of everyone were generally respected." (48)

Paradoxically Laos, with a long tradition of non-violence, also happens to be the most heavily bombed nation. Despite their desire for neutrality, Laotians have experienced a tragic history. Their historical fate has forged their resiliency. But they have often felt dispossessed of their history and identity. Today, the search for "laoness" is intense among Laotians worldwide.(49) The *Pakxe Project* sees laoness as a key factor for a culture of peace. Laoness should not limit itself to the search of ethnic roots making the Lao identity distinct. It has to become a future-oriented virtue, which can altruistically serve the region. It has to express the 'love' which imagines the whole and embraces others.

Yves Noug  r  de has captured some features of laoness: "Culturally the Lao soul is the sanctuary of many philosophies, practices and religions. If Buddhism is central, it also involves a degree of rationalism. The unspoken is important in Lao communication. It is expressed through norms and codes which save the face of the other. This epicurian society of poets and musicians, above all endowed with an innate sense of moderation, always minded not to hurt others. This set of values makes the Lao personality extremely flexible in adapting to the most innovating situations and remain detached in hardships."(50)

OUTLINE OF THE PAKXE PROJECT

Embodying Laoness and the new Lao paradigm, the City of Pakxe could spread a culture of peace in South-East Asia, thus offering a contribution of the Lao people to the unity of South-East Asia and World Peace. These contributions would cluster around five linkages:

1. Peace and Spirituality. Pakxe, located near the intersection of the Hanoi-Djakarta axis and Rangoon-Manila axis, could host a world forum of religions united for peace. Spiritual leaders representing Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam, the four religions which shaped the spiritual heritage of South-East Asia will offer their fervent rituals for world peace. They might also explore together the common responsibilities of religious traditions to create a culture of peace. Every year, the nations of South-East Asia could send young volunteers representing these religions and others to work together for 12 months in interreligious projects of development in the vicinity of Pakxe. Once a model is created, the Pakxe label will be used elsewhere. Moreover, the association of the alumni of Pakxe might then form the 'legion of peace' of South-East Asia.

2. Peace and Culture. Located near the Wat Phu, which is a UNESCO world heritage monument, Pakxe could host a University of South-East Asia. Pakxe should host a small campus, and the neighbouring cities of Hue (Vietnam), Stoeng Treng (Cambodia), and Ubon Ratchatani (Thailand) can hold other campuses. Their mission will be to train students with a regional mind and to stimulate research on the heritage of South-East Asia and its contribution to human history. The writing of an Encyclopaedia of South-East Asia will be

among its main tasks. International artists should work on an opera and other cultural projects of South-East Asia.

3. Peace and communication. In order to foster a South-East Asian conscience and feeling, a media group might also operate out of Pakxe. A daily newspaper in English should start, with weekly supplements in Bahasa Indonesia, Vietnamese, Thai and Chinese. TV programs should also be started. A South-East Asia audio-visual festival should take place every two years in Pakxe, with a film festival, concerts and dances.

4. Peace and transportation. Located at the intersection of the axis Hanoi-Ho Chi Minh and Bangkok-Danang, Pakxe symbolizes the unity of Indochina from sea to sea. All the resources of the Lao territory and of 'Laoness' could make Pakxe a pleasant city of transit and exchange, and promote friendship. Pakxe will symbolize the freedom to travel from North to South and from East to West on continental South-East Asia. The highroad N°13 should be upgraded and become an international highway from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh and Phnom Penh via Pakxe. This itinerary will be much quicker than the coastal road of Vietnam. Moreover, the road from Bangkok to Pakxe should be extended until Da Nang. When the Pakxe Project was presented to the Lao authorities, one of its urgent proposals was to create a bridge in Pakxe on the Mekong River. Though many Western experts deemed the project unrealistic, the bridge was completed by the Japanese and is now in service. In the future, we likewise suggest that the railroad from Bangkok to Ubon Ratchatani be extended till Pakxe and Da Nang. And a new railroad should connect Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh via Pakxe. The international airport of Pakxe and its harbour should be upgraded. People around the world will thus come to Pakxe by air, by the river, by road or by train. And Pakxe will send back peace-makers to the world.

5. Peace and Prosperity. Champassak is already one of the most dynamic provinces of Laos and several international joint ventures are thrusting its development. Agriculture and tourism are the main sources of income. But prosperity should be strongly guided by a moral vision and by the wisdom of creative leaders, as in Costa Rica. Located at the junction of the Mekong and Sedone rivers, Pakxe is overlooked by two plateaus. On the Boloven plateau, which culminates at 5,000 feet, the microclimate is favourable to agriculture. Commercial coffee production is growing fast, and other products will develop with the proper infrastructure. The University of Pakxe would be actively involved in research on sustainable development and human development in this region. Moreover, Pakxe, Ubon Ratchatani and Stoeng Treng should build a growth triangle. Pakxe should create international peace parks with the neighbouring provinces of Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia.

It can be seen then, that in the 21st century, Pakxe and Laos have the geographical, social and cultural resources to become a new axis for regional development, a goal congruent with ASEAN, Asia-Pacific and global imperatives for a more peaceful and cosmopolitan world system.

Endnotes

1. Guidelines about the decade are available on <http://www.unesco.org/cpp/uk/declarations/2000.htm>
- 2 Two famous nicknames of Laos.
3. "Datsu-A Ron", published in 1885.
4. A copy of part of this speech can be found at <http://www.citizensmedal.com/DouglasMacArthur.htm>

5. Tadatoshi Akiba, mayor of Hiroshima, August 6, 2002, <http://www.city.hiroshima.jp/shimin/heiwa/pd/pd2002e.html>
6. Martin Stuart Fox, *A history of Laos*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 136.
7. Such concepts were developed in a number of Arnold Toynbee's works including his multivolume *A Study of History*, London: Oxford University Press, 1935-1961.
8. <http://www.upeace.org/>
9. The preamble of the charter of United Nations
10. Jeremy Rifkin, *The European Dream*, Cambridge: Polity, 2004.
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