

# The unbearable heaviness of being Kri: house construction and ethnolinguistic transformation in upland Laos

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Kri people in central Laos traditionally engage in ‘heavy’ practices, including a stipulation that houses must be relocated and the flooring discarded upon a death in the family. Such ‘heavy’ practices are considered ‘real Kri’, and they are not adhered to by those who identify as Kri Phòongq. This article examines the adoption of more enduring housing construction among the Kri, and the dynamics of ethnic identity implied by the dilemmas raised for individuals and families who must choose between (a) maintaining the heavy life of real Kri, (b) innovating new and less heavy solutions, or (c) changing identity entirely.

## The heaviness of being Kri

In the upland Lao village of Mrkaa, in an ethnolinguistically diverse valley inside the Nakai-Nam-Theun Biodiversity Conservation Area, we are talking with Vòk Sam, a senior elder of the community of Kri, who today number well under a thousand. Vòk Sam is a man who embodies and represents the spiritual traditions that define what it means to be *Kri Tàn*, ‘real Kri’, as he puts it, in a rapidly changing world. Atop the veranda of his rickety house made from light timber, palm leaves, and split-bamboo panelling, Vòk Sam is explaining to us the most important defining feature of being Kri: *rìp nnangq*, ‘heavy traditions’. Kri are known by their many neighbours in the area for their uniquely ‘heavy’ cultural practices, which put a noticeable burden on people in their daily existence.<sup>1</sup> Nearby Saek, Bru, Lao, and Vietnamese-speaking people often comment upon this when the subject arises. Vòk Sam gives us some examples of these heavy burdens. Kri should eat only fish, no red meat. Meanwhile, their environment is teeming with wildlife that most other groups in Laos eat. Kri women who are menstruating should not set foot on the floor of their raised homes, instead staying *quu qatak*, ‘on the ground’, resting and sleeping in purpose-built menstruation huts. And in case of a death in the family, Kri households should abandon their homes and relocate. They may reuse old building materials, but the flooring of the old house must be discarded for good. A new floor is made and installed. These are just a few of the ‘heavy’ injunctions that define the Kri condition.

Why is it that only the Kri – at least, the ‘real Kri’ – must abide by these heavy traditions? Vòòk Sam explains with an origin story:

One day, a tiger went to the water to find something to eat. It found a clam, which opened up and said: ‘Come here, Tiger, put your tongue in here and eat me up’. Suddenly, the clam shut its shell tight on the tiger’s tongue. The tiger walked to a nearby Kri village to ask for help. The Kri villagers just laughed and said, ‘It serves you right!’, and sent the tiger on its way. The tiger went to another village, where villagers of a different ethnic group helped it to release the clam. The tiger returned to the Kri village. ‘You didn’t help me. In return for that, from now on you have to follow these heavy taboos. If you don’t, I will attack you and eat you.’

Tigers were once a genuine danger to villagers, certainly when Vòòk Sam was a boy, when colonial French Indochina was still formally in place. Anyone who so much as saw a tiger in the distance was considered contaminated and would fear grave consequences in the form of illness. The antidote was ritual cleansing, performed by qualified spirit mediums, either Kri or of neighbouring ethnicities. The same fear of illness may arise today if a Kri villager contravenes more mundane stipulations of heavy tradition. Thus, upon a family death, discarding the floor is not only the right thing to do, it is a necessary protection against spiritual and physical malaise.

Today, tigers are no longer seen or heard. And the heavy traditions that they once enforced are beginning to abate. But the process is not one of simply fading away. In today’s Kri community, every individual, every family, is faced with dilemmas, dangers, and opportunities implied by their life choices. Here, we explore the implications of a new dilemma for Kri – the question of whether to upgrade from split-bamboo panelling to timber planks in constructing the family home – in light of inextricable links between people’s artefactual environment, their spiritual and linguistic identities, and their physical well-being.

### The puzzle

In his study of the dynamic social system that Shan people and Kachin people shared in the Kachin Hills of Myanmar in the 1940s and 1950s, and which is still typical throughout the Zomia region (Scott 2009), Edmund Leach emphasized the intertwined nature of ethnic groups’ interdependent social subsystems in upland mainland Southeast Asia. Social systems in the area have ‘no stability through time’, Leach suggested. What we observe instead is ‘a momentary configuration of a totality existing in a state of flux’ (1954: 63, emphasis in original; cf. Nimmanahaeminda 1965: 9). Ethnic categories were so porous that it was possible to speak of ‘Kachins becoming Shans or of Shans becoming Kachins’ (Leach 1954: 61). This phenomenon is observed across mainland Southeast Asia, where intergroup boundaries are more like low fences than walls,<sup>2</sup> more historically, socially, and linguistically porous than neat classifications would suggest (see, e.g., Barth 1998b [1969]; Condominas 1990; Evans 2000: 267; Jonsson 2011; Kammerer 1990; Keyes 1979; Lehman 1967; O’Connor 1995; Scott 2009; Tooker 1992).

Accounts of interethnic fluidity, such as Leach’s about ‘Kachins becoming Shans’ and vice versa, often use ethnic labels generically to gloss what are in fact individual life-course decisions. But how, in the experience of living people, people with names, families, and homes, does a person ‘become something else’? What must be weighed up, what must be endured, and how is it lived through?

We answer this question by considering the implication of house construction for ethnic identity. We focus on house construction, especially the construction of floors,

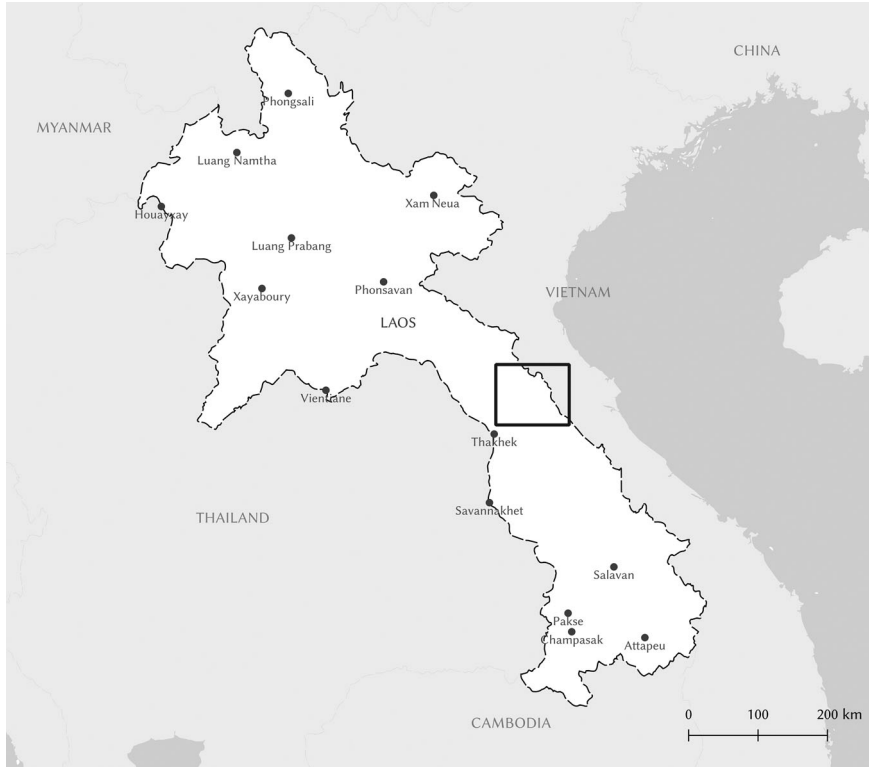
in part because the house is so salient and important for Kri people. It is a subject they frequently raise and consider as they discuss their aspirations and their fears.<sup>3</sup> But we also focus on house construction because the issue – and the way people discuss it – so aptly captures the stakes of ethnic identity for Kri, and what is motivating some to change who they are. As Frank Proschan writes: ‘Among the most obvious and persistent material markers of difference among the ethnicities of highland Southeast Asia are their diverse dwellings’ (2001: 1023).

In our example, the process of ‘becoming’ applies to the distinction between *Kri Tàn*, ‘real Kri’, and another local ethnic identity that Kri-speakers describe as a kind of ‘Kri lite’: *Kri Phòòngq*. While the notion of ‘ethnicity’ long ago ‘joined the list of deconstructed concepts in anthropology’ (Levine 1999: 165; cf. Lilley 1990), these identity categories are important local concepts (cf. Barth 1998b [1969]; Brubaker 2004: 18), even as their significance is both unstable from interaction to interaction and undergoing a major shift. The growing popularity of timber boards in house construction is a key part of this broader ongoing sociosemiotic transformation, in which Kri are decoupling linguistic and ritual identities, and shifting towards more physically and temporally stable forms of residence. While it is tempting and no doubt partially accurate to view this transformation as a response to outside forces – such as the Lao state’s wrangling of villagers into more permanent, governable settlements, or the increasing influence of nearby Vietnamese and Lao towns and cities – we find that Kri housebuilders narrate their choices in house building in terms of a uniquely Kri problem of needing to square the dangers of a cumbersome ‘heavy’ tradition with their desire for new material conditions. For more and more Kri people, the timber plank, with its patent material, economic, and semiotic value, is evidently worth the risk.

### Mrkaa village and Kri territory

Mrkaa village is a cluster of three hamlets located along the upper reaches of the Nam Noi River (called *Nrong* in Kri) in Laos’s Nakai-Nam-Theun National Biodiversity Conservation Area (Fig. 1; see Shoemaker & Robichaud 2018). The hamlets – known as Upstream Mrkaa, Middle Mrkaa, and Downstream Mrkaa (Fig. 2) – are a day’s walk uphill from the reservoir created in 2008 by the World Bank-funded NT2 Dam. Mrkaa is just 40 kilometres from the Vietnam border near the district of Hương Khê, Hà Tĩnh province. Surrounded by protected forests, Mrkaa is without gridded electricity, running water, or roads. To get there without a helicopter requires walking at least some of the journey.

The NT2 watershed is ethnolinguistically diverse, with numerous languages spoken by people with distinct cultural practices. Kri is a language of the Vietic subbranch of Austroasiatic (Enfield 2018; Enfield & Diffloth 2009; Zuckerman & Enfield 2020). Other Vietic languages are represented in the area, though in smaller numbers. The two resident speech communities with greater numbers than Kri are speakers of Saek, a Northern Tai language, and Bru, a Katuic language of the Austroasiatic family. Kri villagers are in constant and intensive contact with Saek-speakers, who live an hour’s walk from Downstream Mrkaa, and they are also in regular contact with Bru-speakers, whose villages are concentrated around the port area where all watershed villagers gain access to the reservoir to reach the nearest district centre in Laos: Nakai. In addition to their neighbouring residents of the watershed, Kri are in regular contact with native speakers of Lao (e.g. teachers, police, soldiers) and Vietnamese (e.g. traders, travellers,



**Figure 1.** Laos; the Nam Theun 2 (NT2) watershed area is within the box. (By Angus Wheeler, reproduced with permission.)

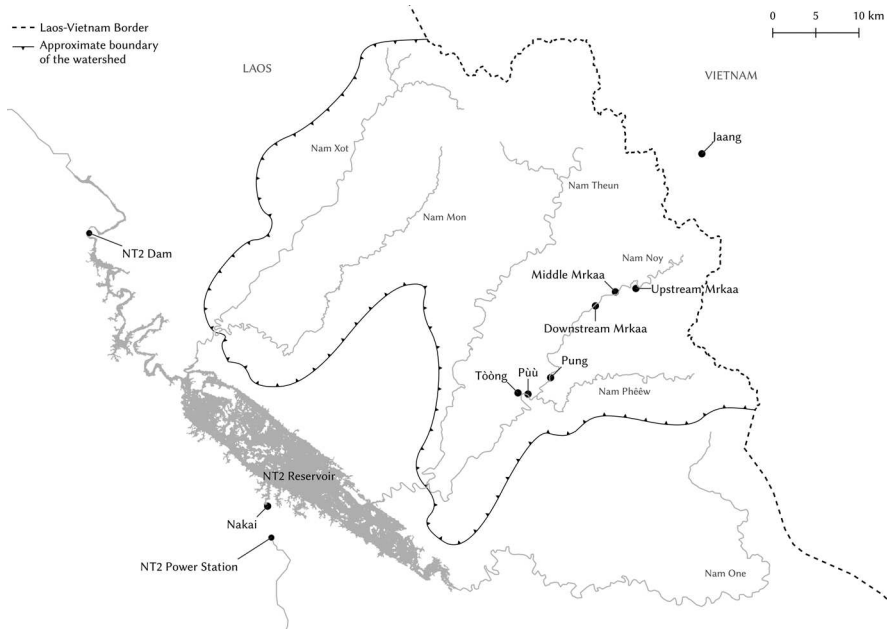
and some Kri Phòongq who live in Vietnam), the two national languages in their immediate vicinity.

The NT2 watershed features a form of ethnic pluralism, in which the people in these groups are in intensive contact but maintain distinct languages and traditions (Enfield 2011), a recognizable situation in mainland Southeast Asia (Izikowitz 1960), where ‘poly-ethnic social systems’ abound (Barth 1998a [1969]: 16-17).

### House construction, old and new

In 2004, when we first visited Mrkaa, every house in the village was constructed from light timber, split-bamboo panelling, and palm-leaf thatching (Figs 3–4). These houses were mostly built according to a common template (Enfield 2009), consisting most importantly of a central living area with a hearth in the centre, used for cooking (Fig. 5).

But a decade and a half later, more than two-thirds of households in the Mrkaa hamlets have eschewed split-bamboo flooring in favour of timber boards. Figure 6 shows an example of the new trend in house building, with key distinguishing features: (1) timber planks for wall panelling and floorboards; (2) a separate kitchen structure (in this case, built from the split-bamboo panelling featured in Fig. 3); and (3) a corrugated iron roof on the main house. The separate kitchen structure has the important effect of separating the fire (and smoke) from the central living/sleeping area of the house.



**Figure 2.** The NT2 watershed area; villages with significant Kri populations are marked. (By Angus Wheeler, reproduced with permission.)



**Figure 3.** Exterior of a Kri traditional house in Upstream Mrkaa, 2018, made with machetes, using plant materials available in the forest neighbouring the village. (Photograph by Charles Zuckerman.)



**Figure 4.** Split-bamboo flooring on outdoor veranda, Upstream Mrkaa, 2004. (Photograph by Nick Enfield.)

There are many variations on these newer home designs, depending on the owner's preferences and means. But the timber flooring is a priority. Several homes in Mrkaa are traditional in every other respect but the floor. Adding to this basic construction, new houses may feature ceramic tile roofing, bright-coloured exterior house paint, concrete pillars, and even porcelain tiled flooring on ground level.



**Figure 5.** Interior with split-bamboo flooring, partly covered by pandanus mats; note cooking hearth in central living space, not in a separate kitchen area (Upstream Mrkaa, 2004). (Photograph by Nick Enfield.)

### **Material economies of construction**

The two forms of house depend on distinctly different material economies. Here, we focus on the material used for flooring, for it is the floor that presents the core dilemma for a Kri person whose ‘heavy’ traditions would stipulate discarding the material for good.



**Figure 6.** Timber house (Middle Mrkaa, 2018): at right, timber planks are used for wall panelling and floorboards; at left, a separate kitchen is constructed using materials normally used in a single-space Kri house (see Figs 3–5). (Photograph by Charles Zuckerman.)

Split-bamboo flooring is made from a middle-sized species of bamboo. Bamboo species grow plentifully in the forests throughout Mrkaa. When people need bamboo poles for construction, they harvest it using machetes, travelling on foot (Fig. 7). Split-bamboo panels are made by taking long tubes of bamboo, using a machete to make splits along the entire length of each tube, then opening the tube out flat (see Fig. 8). The result is a long panel with splits along its length (see Fig. 4). In house interiors, pandanus reed mats will be laid on top, to keep wind and dust from coming through (see Fig. 5). The labour of harvesting, processing, and installing bamboo flooring is only partly dictated by gender: both men and women may harvest bamboo and process it by splitting it and flattening it out into panel form, but the work of installing the panels into huts and houses is regarded as men's work, along with the harvesting and processing of timber, such as used in house pillars and floorboards.

Split-bamboo flooring costs nothing more than the manual labour that goes into it: walking to the forest, harvesting, transporting back to base, processing, installing. Split-bamboo is not bought or sold in the Mrkaa area (though it is a commodity in lowland Laos). Nor are people paid to harvest, process, or install split-bamboo panelling.

By contrast, timber boards have been commoditized in Mrkaa and neighbouring villages. Planks are bought and sold, and male labourers are paid to produce and install them. To fell, transport, and mill the large trees needed for planks is a major undertaking. Male Saek villagers have long done this using axes and two-man hand saws, but Kri people have not. Today, all timber milling in the watershed is done using chainsaws (Fig. 9). This work takes skill, and there are risks of injury and of damaging the expensive chainsaws.

The cash and labour economy around milling planks must be understood in the context of decades of lumber trade, much of it illegal. The Nakai Plateau, now flooded





**Figure 7.** A couple returning to Middle Mrkaa with bamboo lengths for building, 2018. (Note machete in woman's right hand.) (Photograph by Charles Zuckerman.)



**Figure 8.** Processing bamboo for split-bamboo flooring (Middle Mrkaa, 2006). (Photograph by Nick Enfield.)



Figure 9. Mrkaa villagers milling planks, 2018. (Photograph by Charles Zuckerman.)

by the NT2 hydroelectric dam reservoir (see Shoemaker & Robichaud 2018), was the site of intensive timber production during the 1980s and 1990s. The watershed that feeds into the reservoir is part of the Northern Annamites Rain Forests area, one of 867 terrestrial ecoregions recognized by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF; ecoregion code IM0136; ADB 2004: 68-9) and one of the Global 200 subset of ecoregions that are ‘outstanding examples of biodiversity’ in the world (ADB 2004: 72). Mrkaa villagers have long known that the trees within this ‘treasure trove of biological diversity’ (WWF 2020) have cash value to outsiders. Over the last decade, the most lucrative illegal timber trade has been in rosewood (*Dalbergia cochinchinensis*), now rare in the forest due to over-extraction. The rosewood ends up in furniture, ornate carvings, display panelling and trinkets, sometimes reappearing in urban Lao settings ranging from luxury homes to government offices. Some villagers have enjoyed an extraordinary economic windfall from selling rosewood pillars that they happened to use in building their homes in the past. A Kri Phòngq man in Pung village sold the rosewood posts of his old house to a dealer from outside the watershed for a reported 500 million LAK – more than US\$50,000 at the time, well over the median gross annual salary in the developed world. While forest trees are not bought and sold in situ, ownership of not-yet-cut trees is sometimes marked, and occasionally contested. This does not happen with bamboo, which is a free good.

Because Mrkaa is in a National Protected Area, sale of timber is legally regulated. Villagers may own chainsaws, but they are stored securely with village officials and are signed out when used. Unlike with bamboo, the requirements for procuring timber planks create a form of structural inequality. Few Mrkaa villagers own chainsaws or have the skills for using them. Worried about breakage, injury, or wasting petrol, some are hesitant to learn. Their only option is to pay outsiders – Vietnamese, Bru, or Saek – to mill and install the boards (cf. Stolz 2021: 821). The price of planks introduces a new

economic imperative, as with petrol, liquor, clothing, MSG, and salt. The need for cash gives people an incentive to conduct illegal logging and wildlife hunting, as well as to participate in paid initiatives with NGOs, researchers, and government programmes.

As flooring materials, planks and split-bamboo panels serve the same practical function, but their values are radically different. For one, planks, insofar as they require petrol to be produced, inevitably cost money; split-bamboo panels do not. This is mirrored by how they are measured: planks are bought and sold in metres, the units of the market, while bamboo is measured in *plaajh*, ‘armspans’, and *kàt*, ‘cubits’. Stemming from both this price and a contemporary consensus about architectural aesthetics, timber floorboards have secondary, indexical qualities. The boards are treated as essential to a beautiful house: if you have them, people can see that you are upwardly mobile. Tellingly, when Mrkaa school students were asked to draw houses using their imaginations, the pictures depicted the new sturdy, painted, planked houses, with detached kitchens and concrete foundations.

Going beyond aesthetic concerns, Kri people speak of the utility and material qualities of timber floorboards: they are simply *khàk hoon*, ‘better’. They can last a lifetime, while split-bamboo panels will degrade within a few years (cf. Archambault 2018: 698). In local ideology, their use value is laminated onto their exchange value. When we asked people with split-bamboo flooring why they didn’t use timber, we thought some might explain why split-bamboo flooring is actually *better* on some measures. But the most frequent answer was *dêêh kooq prak*, ‘[We] don’t have money’. Even when we pointed out possible advantages of bamboo houses versus other kinds (e.g. cooler, better ventilated), timber flooring was thought better, and most said they would upgrade if only they could. But as we shall now see, matters are more complicated, given the relation between a house’s material constitution and the spiritual constitution of the person who lives in it.

### Being Kri

It is a truism in modern anthropology that ethnolinguistic identities do not label simple objective realities.<sup>4</sup> They do, however, serve as locally strategic narratives – whether self-directed or other-directed, conscious or unconscious, theoretical or practical, lived or scholarly – that help make sense of a rich historical overlaying of wave upon wave of movement and contact over many centuries, intensifying in colonial and postcolonial times (see Enfield 2021: chap. 1). As conceptual and rhetorical tools, ethnolinguistic terms are widely used by people of mainland Southeast Asia. They are flexible devices for social and political stance-taking. People use them to generically abstract about different groups of people and different ways of speaking, and to identify instances of those kinds, putting individuals and instances of speech under specific ethnolinguistic descriptions (Zuckerman 2020; 2021a; 2021b).

The boundaries and terms that would neatly separate people and languages are in fact polysemous and polyfunctional. This makes them potentially useful for members but unfit as uncritical units of scholarly analysis (Gal & Irvine 1995; Hymes 1968). Moreover, ‘languages’ have no direct mapping to ‘cultures’ or ‘societies’ (Bauman & Briggs 2000; Gal & Irvine 2019; Rosa 2019; Rosa & Flores 2017). When language and ethnicity cohere, they do so dynamically, through local ideological processes (Eisenlohr 2004).

Here we thus treat ethnicity-like concepts as both flawed analytics and important communicative resources. That Kri Tàn and Kri Phòongq are often used in conflicting

ways across interaction does not lessen their local utility as shorthands for recognizable clusters of people, customs, linguistic patterns, material goods, and spaces. The porous nature of these categories does not lessen their power for individuals and governments.

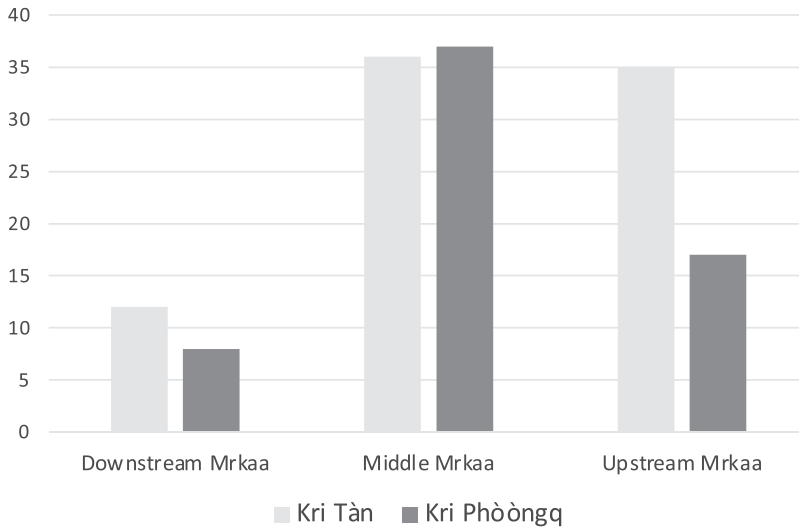
It is impossible to pin down the sense and reference of the term *Kri*, and the distinction between *Kri Tàn* or ‘real Kri’ and *Kri Phòòngq*. But it is possible to describe how Kri people use these terms in the narratives that account for their decisions about where and how they live. We find that people increasingly identify as Kri Phòòngq in their ritual practices but continue to speak the ‘heavier’ language of Mrkaa, associated with Kri Tàn identity. This separates linguistic and ethnic dimensions of the categories.<sup>5</sup>

The word *Kri* (pronounced [ka’ri:]) is an autonym. In the Kri language, it is homophonous with the word for ‘growl’ and is cognate with the word for ‘growl’ in neighbouring Bru (Enfield & Diffloth 2009: 6-7). It is possible that the term *Kri* began as a Bru exonym – for ‘the growlers’ – which Kri then took ownership of.<sup>6</sup> Neighbouring languages today use other terms for Kri: *qaréém* in Bru,<sup>7</sup> *ghaw5* in Saek,<sup>8</sup> and *khaa5* in Lao.

The word *Mrkaa* primarily denotes a location, the Mrkaa stream, a tributary of the Nam Noi at the site of the Upstream Mrkaa hamlet. Kri Tàn are often referred to and refer to themselves as Kri Mrkaa (we use Kri Tàn here to refer to ‘real Kri’ rather than Kri Mrkaa to avoid confusion with Mrkaa as a geographical location; *tàn* means ‘real, true’ in Kri). The word *Phòòngq*, unlike Mrkaa, does not appear to have any other reference. In the multilingual watershed, Kri Tàn and Kri Phòòngq have become prototypical ethnonyms that can serve as modifiers that distinguish kinds of persons, spirits, languages, places, inherited taboos, and social systems. In certain ways, Kri Phòòngq is considered less Kri than Kri Tàn – and less ‘heavy’.

The distinction between Kri Tàn and Kri Phòòngq is overlooked by most outsiders, including Lao officials (cf. Evans 1999; 2003). Villagers sometimes design their own ethnic ascriptions with this in mind. For example, when Lao government census questions required statement of the ‘ethnicity’ (*son2 phaw1*) of each villager, we observed that all Kri people in Mrkaa village, whether Kri Tàn or Kri Phòòngq, were recorded as *Makòòng3*, a government-sanctioned ethnonym typically used for Bru-speakers living in a broad area of central and southern Laos.<sup>9</sup> Outside of such formal contexts, we have never heard *Makòòng3* used by anyone in the NT2 watershed area. The (local) census takers evidently expected that the label *Kri*, and the distinction between Kri Tàn and Kri Phòòngq, would be meaningless and irrelevant for the Lao government’s distal and inscrutable purposes. From their interactions with police, soldiers, and other state officials, Kri have good reason to think this. These officials know almost nothing about Kri people and tend to call them *khaa5*. This Lao word, literally meaning ‘slave’, is widely used to refer – mostly pejoratively (Proschan 1996) – to the poorest ethnic minorities of Laos (Evans 2000: 270; Sprenger 2009: 947).<sup>10</sup> The word, like its glosses in other languages (including *Kri*), may also refer to peoples of other (non-Vietnamese) Vietic groups, and may be extended to refer to any ethnic group who is seen as maximally indigenous and minimally developed within the context of modern Laos,<sup>11</sup> or even beyond.<sup>12</sup> The upshot of all of this is that the terms Kri Tàn and Kri Phòòngq, with their locally contrastive linguistic, geographical, and spiritual dimensions, are not distinctions for the state. They are local distinctions for Kri-speakers’ purposes.

In the spatial domain, people speak of Kri villages, Kri forest, and Kri land. The Upstream Mrkaa village is regarded as the geographical centre of Kri territory. In



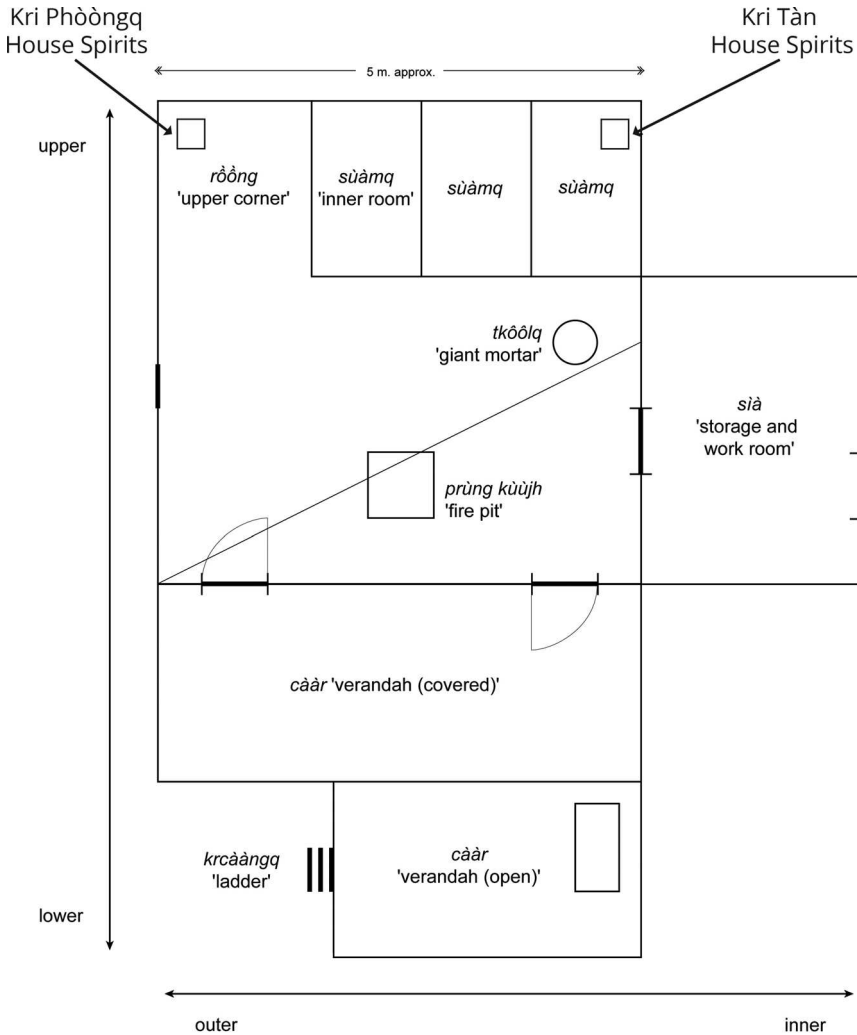
**Figure 10.** Numbers of heads of households in the three Mrkaa village hamlets identified as Kri Tàn ('real Kri') versus Kri Phòòngq. (Figure by Charles Zuckerman and Nick Enfield.)

surveys done in 2018 in the Mrkaa area – generally considered Kri Tàn – heads of household who identified as Kri Tàn made up more than two-thirds of the group in Upstream Mrkaa, but less than that in the middle and downstream settlements of Mrkaa (see Fig. 10), which comprise the entire range of places generally considered Kri Tàn.

Geographical centres of Kri Phòòngq are at lower altitudes than Mrkaa, either downstream to the west on the Lao side (in the villages of Pung, Pùù, and Tòòng) or over the border on the Vietnamese side in the east, in Jaang village, about 40 kilometres away from Upstream Mrkaa. These comprise the entirety of villages with significant Kri Phòòngq populations.

Kri-speakers also use the terms Kri Tàn and Kri Phòòngq to draw a linguistic distinction between two varieties of the Kri language (referred to in Kri as *mèèngq kariì*, where *mèèngq* means 'mouth').<sup>13</sup> They say that Kri Tàn sounds 'heavy', while Kri Phòòngq sounds 'light' (see Enfield & Diffloth 2009; Enfield & Zuckerman in press; Zuckerman & Enfield 2020). This heavy/light distinction parallels the distinction between Kri Tàn and Kri Phòòngq cultural practices, with Kri Tàn being 'heavy', as we've seen.

The terms Kri Tàn and Kri Phòòngq are also used to characterize distinct kinds of ritual obligations. House spirits are a feature of family life for members of all ethnic groups in the watershed, and throughout Laos. Every Kri individual comes under a specific house spirit. Your spirit might live in the house where you live or it might reside in your father's house. A house without spirits is not called a house (*krnooq*) at all, but a *tuup*, 'hut'. This would include, for example, a rest hut by a garden or field, a menstrual hut, a birthing hut, or the home of a young couple who have recently moved out of their family homes but do not yet have their own house spirits (Enfield 2009). House spirits are propitiated via regular offerings such as food and liquor, and with special rituals in times of sickness or trouble, when they may be asked to decontaminate (*apirrh*) an individual or household (recall the example of sighting a tiger) under their purview. Kri



**Figure 11.** Position of Kri Tàn versus Kri Phòongq house spirits in Kri houses. (Figure by Charles Zuckerman and Nick Enfield, after Enfield 2009: 59)

Tàn and Kri Phòongq house spirits are located in different parts of the house (Fig. 11; see Enfield 2009).

Kri relations with house spirits are inherited. According to stated norms, a child comes under the house spirit of his or her father upon birth. But this holds only if the parents have conducted the formal ritual obligations of marriage. Often a couple will have children before marriage, in which case the child comes under the same house spirits as their *mother*. The result is a hybrid matrilineal/patrilineal system, with earlier-born children frequently in the mother’s line, and later-born children in the father’s line.<sup>14</sup>

Norms around house spirits are similar among Kri Tàn and Kri Phòongq, but there are numerous significant differences in cultural practice between the groups that, taken

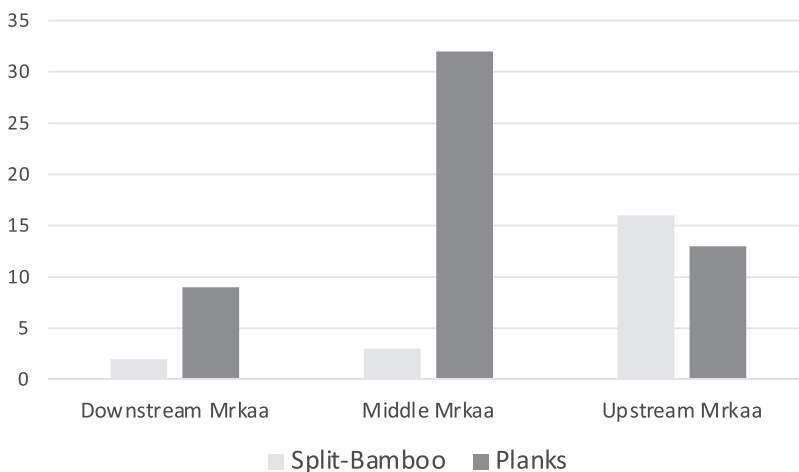
together, contribute to the view that Kri Tàn traditions are *nnangq*, ‘heavy’, in relation to those of Kri Phòòngq. Only Kri Tàn women are normatively required to remain *quu qatak*, ‘on the ground’ (i.e. in huts), while menstruating or giving birth, to avoid polluting the house. Only Kri Tàn people are normatively prohibited from touching the corpse of certain deceased people, a stipulation that brings complications for funerary and burial practices.<sup>15</sup> And only Kri Tàn are normatively required to discard the flooring of a house upon the death of a family member. This latter ‘heavy’ tradition poses a dilemma for any Kri Tàn person who would wish to upgrade to a timber house.

### Commitment to heavy traditions: a trade-off

In the whole of Mrkaa village, the proportion of houses with timber floorboards has gone from zero to nearly three-quarters in just fifteen years. But the rate of uptake is different across the three hamlets. As Figure 12 shows, Upstream Mrkaa, with its higher proportion of heads of household with Kri Tàn ritual obligations (see Fig. 10 above), also has the highest proportion of bamboo-floored houses (just over half).

The contrast between Upstream Mrkaa – as the ‘real Kri’ centre – and the other Mrkaa hamlets is signalled by numerous factors, including degree of poverty (Upstream = poorest), degree of isolation from the national centre (Upstream = most remote), and house material (Upstream = more split-bamboo than timber). For Kri, these contrasts index a simple distinction in ritual obligation and identity: Kri Tàn versus Kri Phòòngq.

An archetypal figure of being Kri Tàn is Vòòk Sam, the elderly resident of Upstream Mrkaa whom we mentioned at the start of this article (cf. Levine 1999: 169 on ethnic exemplars). Sam is regarded as an authority on Kri Tàn traditions and he speaks in the Kri Tàn/Mrkaa dialect. Both his living children reside in Mrkaa and are married to Kri Tàn people also born in the Upstream Mrkaa area. Vòòk Sam’s house (Fig. 13; see also Fig. 3) is classical ‘real Kri’: high off the ground but small in footprint, made of light timber, split-bamboo panelling and palm thatching, and without a detached kitchen. It is nevertheless a gathering place for many Mrkaa villagers. Vòòk Sam owns no tractor or motorbike. Like the Kri Tàn people, for whom he stands as a paragon, he is materially poor.



**Figure 12.** Distribution of flooring types across Mrkaa’s hamlets in 2018. (Figure by Charles Zuckerman and Nick Enfield.)



Figure 13. Vòok Sam on his veranda in Upstream Mrkaa, 2019. (Photograph by Nick Enfield.)

By contrast, an archetype of Kri Phòòngq identity is Liiw, who has lived in Middle Mrkaa for more than a decade. He is spiritually Kri Phòòngq and speaks the Kri Phòòngq dialect. He is originally from the Kri Phòòngq village of Baan Jaang in Vietnam. He raised his children in Pung village, the Kri Phòòngq centre on the Lao side. Liiw is regarded as a prototype of being Kri Phòòngq. His portrayal of himself as different from other Mrkaa villagers foregrounds certain key aesthetic and socioeconomic connotations of being Kri Phòòngq as opposed to Kri Tàn.

Liiw is often seen meticulously tending to the ground around his compound (see Fig. 14). He told us that his fenced-off lawn was the one spot in Middle Mrkaa where one could go without the risk of stepping in faeces or debris. Of Liiw's four living children, all were raised in Pung village, the Kri Phòòngq centre, downstream from Mrkaa, and all have married people of other ethnicities, either Saek or Bru. Liiw's daughter Liang runs the only shop in Mrkaa, with her Saek husband, and they are the first family in the village to give up rice farming entirely, relying instead on cash income. Liang told us that she found Mrkaa village dirty and poor. Liiw's son, Lii, has one of the two most impressive houses in the village, which is tall and painted a vibrant purple. He is pioneering paddy rice farming in Middle Mrkaa, a method that is deeply associated with Saek and lowland Lao lifeways, and aggressively promoted by the Lao state (Kenney-Lazar, Suhardiman & Dwyer 2018). Among Kri Mrkaa villagers, Lii is also considered the most competent at using a chainsaw. The family's three homes (as well as the house of the village chief, Pan, another Kri Phòòngq man) are the venues of choice for Vietnamese traders and Lao officials to rest and lodge when passing through. Liiw and his family's homes symbolize being Kri Phòòngq in Mrkaa. They are the epitome of upward mobility.

### A life-course dilemma

The two archetypes present competing values that people might aspire to: a strict commitment to bearing the heaviness of being 'real Kri', and the spiritual security and ritual respect that accompanies it, on the one hand, and the more comfortable





Figure 14. Liw sweeping his compound, Middle Mrkaa, 2018. (Photograph by Charles Zuckerman.)

cosmopolitanism of being ‘Phòngq’, on the other. These values are in turn intertwined with other motivations that individuals might have, for example a desire for durable shelter and higher-yield, less laborious agriculture. When it comes to housing, seeing the options that are now available – specifically, the possibility of ‘upgrading’ from split-bamboo to timber boards – people are now faced with a dilemma, one that implicates ethnic identity directly. If you are ritually Kri Tàn, your heavy traditions mean that installing timber floorboards is a major personal risk. A financial risk. A health risk. A risk for your identity. How do individuals faced with this dilemma during the course of life evaluate that risk and act? Consider the following four cases.

#### *Qan and Quj*

Qan and Quj were a young married couple when we learned about their ongoing encounter with this question. Qan and Quj eschewed the traditional Kri house, building a sturdy home using timber planks for floorboards and wall panelling. This house is pictured in Figure 6 above. It has a detached kitchen, multiple verandas, a metal roof, small concrete supports resting on milled support beams, with walls and flooring made from chain-sawed timber floorboards. But, Quj told us, the house was making her ill. The sickness started after she gave birth – a pain in her leg. She could not walk much, or even sit up, and spent her days lying by the fire in the kitchen. When we spoke to them, the couple and their children had already moved out of the new house and were living in a freshly constructed traditional house with split-bamboo flooring and wall panelling (shown in Fig. 15). They had moved there out of necessity.

Qan and Quj explained that the problem stemmed from their ritual obligations. Qan was born Kri Mrkaa and Quj was born Kri Phòngq. As frequently happens in Kri society, they moved into their own family home and started having children before they were formally married. At first, they lived with their young children in the timber



**Figure 15.** Qan and Quj's replacement house, made from light timber, split-bamboo panels, and palm leaves, 2018. (Photograph by Charles Zuckerman.)

floorboarded house and followed Quj's Kri Phòngq customs. Then they got formally married, which meant that their house spirits became Kri Mrkaa, and they began to follow Kri Mrkaa practices. When Qan's mother died, her Kri Mrkaa spirit also moved into their house. This is when the trouble began. Qan and Quj suspected that Qan's Kri Mrkaa spirit – inherited from Qan's mother – did not like being there, that those years of the couple living according to Kri Phòngq custom had polluted the house. Quj became sick. And so they abandoned their costly house and brought Qan's mother's spirit to a traditional home with flooring from split bamboo. Solemnly, Qan told us he would never go back. The problem was in the timber.

#### *Khaa and Qiw*

Khaa estimates he has moved houses more than twenty times in his life. For each move, he and his family built their houses anew, gathering light timber for support posts, bamboo for flooring and wall panels, and *culoo* palm leaves for thatching (usually *Livistona spp.*). Sometimes they moved because they wanted to. Sometimes they moved because their house was falling apart. Three times, they moved because someone in the family died.<sup>16</sup>

Khaa said he and his wife Qiw could now probably afford to build a house from durable timber planks, but he feared that when inevitable tragedy struck their family, they would need to move homes and discard the planks, despite their precious durability. So, he chose to build with the softer, weaker materials of split-bamboo panels and palm thatching. He chose to bear the heaviness of being real Kri.

#### *Nòngq and Qòm*

Nòngq took another path. He paid for a house of boards, milled by Vietnamese labourers for 5,000 Kip per metre (around US60¢) and constructed by Bru labourers

from nearby Thong Nòòj village. Not long afterwards, Nòônq's daughter grew sick. Nòônq went a few hours away to Vang Khwaaj village with some of his daughter's clothes to have a medium divine what might have caused the illness. When he was gone, his wife, Qòm, went to defecate in the woods. She died as she squatted there. Hours later they found her hunched over herself and brought her body back into the house. Several men had to hike to Vang Khwaaj to tell Nòônq what happened. As he told us, the irony was not lost on him: he went to take care of a sick daughter and returned to find a deceased wife. He stressed that his daughter's sickness improved almost immediately after his wife died, implying that the cause of her death was spiritual. He was devastated. He had lost his wife and thought he would also have to lose his new house. He recounted that Qòm had foreseen this. She had once told him casually that when she died she would die outside the house. That way, she hoped, he would not need to abandon its timber structure.

Nòônq decided that he would stay in the house, with its timber floorboards in place, as Qòm hoped he would. But he remained committed to his belief in consequences of contamination entailed by his Kri Tàn identity. He dealt with this by innovating an alternative. Rather than discard the floorboards, he spent a day scrubbing every inch of them clean with a sponge, boiling water, and laundry detergent. With the house cleaned physically, he then paid the spirit medium living in Vang Khwaaj to cleanse it spiritually, with the usual ritual apparatus of upland Laos: candles, flowers, a boiled chicken, and some rice alcohol.

Two years later, Nòônq mused about his choice to stay. He said that his health had been good, but he would continue to wait and see what came of it. If he got sick, he would move, but for now, it seemed fine. The washing of the floorboards appeared to have worked.

Others have taken this path, innovating and experimenting with alternatives to discarding the flooring and working with the same spirit medium to ritually cleanse the wood they saved (cf. Kammerer 1990: 284-5; Sprenger 2017: 297). A Mrkaa villager named Lam Phòòn, for example, removed his floorboards and let them soak in the river for two days before reusing them in a new location. The logic of physically cleaning polluted wood is the same, but both men described their decision as an idea that occurred to them independently.

The emerging economic value of planks travels alongside their ability to be washed of social significance. The value of planks is a force in separating houses from the people who live and die atop them. Split-bamboo flooring is never washed and saved. When it is polluted by ties to the spirits of those who have died, it is discarded and replaced with no cost and little effort. Planks, in this sense, are treated as classic commodities (Carrier 1995), with severable indexical ties to their producers and their owners.

### *Mèèngq*

Like Khaa and Nòônq, Mèèngq wanted to upgrade to a milled timber house, but his way of dealing with the potential spiritual pitfalls was to change himself. He changed his relation to the house by changing his ethnic identity and, through this, his spiritual commitments. Mèèngq chose to become Kri Phòòngq, eschewing the heavy traditions of Kri Tàn. He and his family told us that the 'real Kri' ways of being – the continual relocation, the prohibition on women being in the house while menstruating or giving birth, the prohibition on carrying the dead – were just too heavy to bear.

Mềềngq achieved this change by means of his wife, a Kri Phòòngq woman. Rather than formally marrying her, which would involve paying bridewealth and thereby adopting her into his own Kri Tàn house spirits, Mềềngq kept her in a state of prolonged engagement, meaning that all of his children came under Kri Phòòngq house spirits (through their mother's line), and thus, in time, the entire household became Kri Phòòngq, along with him.

Mềềngq's decision to discard his spiritual obligations and convert to Kri Phòòngq is unusual among Kri men – we only heard of one other case – but it is not unusual for women who marry into Kri Phòòngq families to adopt Phòòngq obligations. Mềềngq's decision was criticized by some. Vòòk Sam, a Kri Tàn spiritual authority, told us that Mềềngq's choice 'wasn't great – you can't just *not* follow the spirits'. But good or bad, it works in terms of the accepted logic of Kri marriage rules. And it makes sense within a broader shift in ethnicity that is evidently underway across the population of Mrkaa.

Recall that it is only when a marriage is formalized – when a man pays bridewealth – that his wife and yet-to-be-born children come under his house spirits. This interacts with the fact that Kri Phòòngq bridewealth is more costly than Kri Tàn bridewealth. Suppose that a man partners with a Kri Phòòngq woman. If he wants to ensure that his children are Kri Tàn, he will have to pay the bridewealth first. Consequently, more children from mixed marriages where the father is Kri Tàn and the mother is Kri Phòòngq end up being Kri Phòòngq, rather than Kri Tàn like their fathers. These interethnic marriages are not rare. They account for sixteen of the sixty-eight marriages we documented in the villages, or about a quarter of them. Thus, even though few men choose, as Mềềngq did, to abandon their Kri Tàn ritual obligations, a shift is underway.

### *Choices*

These four stories embody different ways of resolving the same dilemma. Other Mrkaa residents have taken one or another of these paths. Some, like Khaa, choose to maintain their 'heavy' ways, while others, like Nòònq, experiment and innovate with rituals, and, as noted above, at least one other man we know of switched dramatically from Kri Mrkaa like Mềềngq did. Mềềngq did not conceive of himself as maintaining or bending his ethnic obligations, but as abandoning them, like a Kri Tàn man might abandon his house after tragedy. These stories represent logical possibilities for dealing with Kri spiritual obligations in a time when people's opportunities and obligations are rapidly evolving.

Khaa feels that people are growing less likely to stick with heavy Kri tradition, as he chose to do. 'Real Kri' culture is on its way out, as young people move away from it. This was neither a neutral nor an emotional fact for Khaa, but rather one with spiritual consequences. He saw the negative effects of this change around him: deaf, blind, and 'crazy' people, he told us, were now being born. People didn't used to have these problems, he said. Khaa pointed to Qan and Qui's ill-fated attempt to adopt the new form of house construction. Their casual approach to spiritual obligation had direct consequences in Qui's bodily well-being. Khaa also mentioned Mềềngq. While Mềềngq confidently told us that nothing bad had come as a result of his changing ethnicity, Khaa was convinced that something had. Mềềngq's youngest child, born after he had abandoned Kri Tàn ways, was born with Down's syndrome, and Khaa implied that this was caused by Mềềngq's change – because he neglected his duties as a 'real Kri' person. Khaa would like a house with timber floorboards like Mềềngq has. Anyone would. He

also recognizes that it would be easy to live without his heavy traditions. But doing so, he told us, would be too great a risk.

### Conclusion

Current trends suggest that within a decade there will be few if any split-bamboo panel homes in Mrkaa, in line with the norm for Laos more broadly. Even as such changes are happening across the nation under the banner of economic development, Kri-speakers narrate their experience in terms of individual and family-level choices. They describe themselves as weighing the risks and benefits of their actions, and they frame the resulting ethnic shift in a way that is uniquely Kri, using local categories of identity largely unknown to outsiders. A broad, state-centric narrative might emphasize the commonalities between the Kri experience and the many other instances of assimilation, acculturation, and change observed across the nation and region.

Also writing on upland people of mainland Southeast Asia, James Scott (2009) interprets diverse responses to state-sanctioned change as small acts of resistance or evasion. In the watershed, this alternative narrative to the local tension between Kri Mrkaa and Kri Phòongq identity would foreground the interventions of the state: the promotion of paddy rice cultivation over upland swidden farming; a political aesthetics of clean, orderly, permanent houses (Elinoff 2016); a distaste for 'superstitious' practices such as birthing and menstrual huts and animism (Ladwig 2013; Sprenger 2017: 286); and the legal regimentation of concentrated and permanent village settlements (Hanks & Hanks 2001: 210). In truth, all of these pressures play a role in Mrkaa. But the different narratives we allude to here are alternative framings of the same state of affairs, not alternative claims about what is happening. For the Kri whose narratives we foreground in this article, as with many people across the region (e.g. Sprenger 2017: 287; Stolz 2021: 826-7; Turton 2000: 20), current changes in living conditions are framed as the outcomes of individual dilemmas, choices, and innovations.

Some choose to act like Nòdnq, the floor-washer, motivated by desire to keep the things they have built and bought for themselves. They experiment. They wait and see whether their choices might bring them harm or go unnoticed by the spirits in their homes. Some, like Khaa, do not take the risk. They live under the burden of taboos, sometimes reluctantly, because they fear what would happen if they were to abandon them. And yet others change *themselves*, setting aside Kri taboos as a way forward. Viewed from the outside, these choices are unseen, below the surface of a wholesale shift, away from one form of ethnolinguistic identification and towards another, as Leach saw in 'Kachins becoming Shans or of Shans becoming Kachins'. But statements at that level elide the experiences and choices of individuals and families during the life course. Those experiences and choices are a key locus of human agency in developments that are ultimately national and global in scale.

It is not surprising that these issues are visible in the materiality of the house; nor is it surprising that Kri so frequently mention them in discussions of ritual obligations or their dreams of the future. In Mrkaa, houses are the ritual centre of family life. In contemporary Kri-land, the stability, cleanliness, and beauty of one's house has also come to be seen as a marker of prestige, social mobility, and sophistication, as is the case in lowland Laos (Zuckerman 2018: 186), where, similar to many other parts of the world, 'aspirations of progress and prosperity find their expression in striving for good houses' (Stolz 2021: 815; see also Archambault 2018; Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995). In Mrkaa, markers of distinction in houses include things that are costly and hard to

obtain: concrete pylons, fresh paint, high-quality timber beams, ceramic roof tiles, a separate kitchen area. There is no ceiling to what a distinguished house might feature, but there is something of a literal floor: a distinguished house requires, at the very least, a floor made of milled timber boards.

All Kri are wrestling with the material, economic, semiotic, and spiritual values of their homes. Taboos on staying in a house after sickness or death bring these different values together. In part, they allow Kri villagers like Khaa to justify why they live in bamboo houses that stand as signs of their poverty. As 'real Kri', they accept the burden of heavy taboos. They are subject to the hard work of constantly relocating, and to the weight of ritual constraints. These taboos account for poverty in a way that people like Khaa find compelling. They transform it from something that might be denigrated, as it often is in Laos, as an index of laziness, or backwardness, into something that evinces a more virtuous way of life.

But the heaviness of being Kri Tàn is also something that many Kri-speakers find uncomfortable, if not unbearable. Many would like to set this heaviness aside. We expect that the numbers of people who identify as Kri Phòongq in Mrkaa will continue to grow. Inter-marriages between the two ritual ethnicities will increase, and marriage payments will go unpaid, effecting a population-wide 'lightening' of Kri practices, and perhaps even a merging of the two identities entirely. Choices in household construction play a key role in this transformation. They reveal the sorts of micro-level, agentic processes that can drive ethnolinguistic shift, the kind of shift that has characterized the dynamics of human diversity across mainland Southeast Asia for millennia.

### Acknowledgements

We thank our Kri hosts and consultants first. For discussion, we also thank Marlena Lutz-Hughes, Judith Irvine, Paul-David Lutz, John Mathias, Weijian Meng, Ryan Schram, Jack Sidnell, Rosalie Stolz, and Angus Wheeler. Angus also provided the maps of the area, for which we are extremely grateful. This article was first drafted for an Anthropology of Language in Mainland Southeast Asia workshop at the University of Sydney, and along with the participants there, we especially thank Alan Rumsey, our paper's discussant. This article also benefited from comments received after a presentation at the University of Sydney's Department of Anthropology, for which we thank the audience and particularly Holly High, for her organizational efforts and incisive comments. Our research was funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant (DP170104607) and a Sydney Southeast Asia Centre (University of Sydney) Workshop Grant.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Compare Kammerer (1990: 283; 1996) on Akha in Thailand and Myanmar.

<sup>2</sup> This phrasing comes from Hanks & Hanks's description of Lahu who had submitted to the Chinese: 'Leaping across ethnic fences, these people exchanged one kind of poverty for another' (2001: 58).

<sup>3</sup> Another salient heavy taboo, which implicates a host of parallel issues to those we raise here, but which would require more space to address thoroughly, is the taboo that women in labour or menstruating be not in the home, but 'on the ground' (see Enfield 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Proschan writes: 'There are few problems that have presented greater difficulties to students of the history, ethnography, and linguistics of Mainland Southeast Asia than that of ethnonyms – the terms by which various ethnic groups designate themselves and their neighbors' (1996: 391). Following Moerman's classic, 'Ethnic identification in a complex civilization: who are the Lue?' (1965), scholars of Mainland Southeast Asia have asked, 'Who are the Tai?' (Keyes 1995), 'Who are the Karen?' (Lehman 1979), 'Who are the "Khaa"?' (Proschan

1996), and, again, 'Who are the Lue?' (Keyes 1992). Of the Philippines, Eder (2004) asks, 'Who are the Cuyonon?' (see also Moerman 1965: 1217; Proschan 1997; Taylor 2001).

<sup>5</sup> People still tend to associate Kri Mrkaa dialect with Kri Tàn identity.

<sup>6</sup> This is pure speculation. Alternatively, Ferlus (2006) speculates that *Kri* is cognate with the ethnonym *li/hlai* for Tai people.

<sup>7</sup> Angus Wheeler (pers. comm., 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Weijian Meng (pers. comm., 2020).

<sup>9</sup> The number of official ethnicities changed in Laos from forty-nine to fifty in 2019 when the government recognized 'Bru' ethnicity, previously encompassed under 'Makòng' (Phouthen Pasaxon 2019).

<sup>10</sup> On ethnonyms in Laos, see Schlemmer (2017) and Zuckerman (2012).

<sup>11</sup> One Kri-speaker used *kariì dakchong*, 'Kri of Dakchung', referring to a Katuic-speaking upland group in Dakchung district, two provinces to the south.

<sup>12</sup> When a Kri man saw the cover of the book *The evolution of culture* (Dunbar, Knight & Power 1999), he asked: *mleeng qa-nii kariì tuqêê?* 'What Kri people are these?' The image shows women in Cameroon, bare-breasted and ritually adorned. This ad hoc extension of the usual sense of *Kri* is revealing of the word's connotations.

<sup>13</sup> We can call Kri a language because it is not mutually intelligible with other known linguistic varieties, and we can refer to dialects (also characterized as *mêêngq* in Kri) because the two varieties in question are mutually comprehensible yet have clearly defined lexical and phonological differences.

<sup>14</sup> Spirits themselves, which come to inhabit one's home, are also inherited. In a Kri Tàn family, the spirit of the first parent to die is said to go to the eldest male's home, where it will then serve as the umbrella spirit for his offspring, and the spirit of the second parent to die should go to the next eldest. If the two parents die in the same year, then both spirits go to the same house. Women cannot be the primary caretakers of Kri Tàn spirits. But in a Kri Phòongq family, by contrast, the spirits of a mother and father are always held together, in the house of their eldest son (or eldest daughter if there are no sons). In a case of trouble or sickness, a person will often consult their house spirits, which may mean travelling.

<sup>15</sup> In a conversation on his veranda, Siang Thaj, a Kri Phòongq man in Upstream Mrkaa, tried to count the bodies of the people he had carried to bury – always as part of a two-person team, sometimes for his Kri Phòongq friends and family, sometimes for Kri Tàn people who could not do it otherwise and paid him for the service. For more than a minute he listed the names of those he could remember burying. He got to fifteen before giving up. He described how the many bodies he buried were a simple consequence of the Kri Tàn taboo: 'Real Kri don't touch corpses, that's taboo for them.'

<sup>16</sup> See Stasch (2009: 62) on narratives of transient housing.

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## L'insoutenable lourdeur d'être kri : construction de maisons et transformation ethnolinguistique dans les hautes-terres du Laos

### Résumé

Les kri dans le centre du Laos se livrent traditionnellement à des pratiques « lourdes ». Ils doivent notamment, quand un décès se produit dans une famille, déplacer sa maison et en jeter le plancher. Ces pratiques « lourdes » sont considérées comme « vraiment kri » et ceux qui s'identifient comme Kri Phòongq n'y adhèrent pas. Le présent article examine l'adoption par les Kri de constructions plus durables pour leurs maisons et la dynamique de l'identité ethnique qu'implique le dilemme soulevé pour les individus et leurs familles, qui doivent choisir entre (a) perpétuer la vie lourde des vrais Kri, (b) inventer de nouvelles solutions moins lourdes et (c) changer complètement d'identité.

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