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Research Article

Muslim Minorities in Laos: Identity and Integration

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Abstract. This article explores the complex processes of social and political identity formation among Muslim minority communities in Laos, a country marked by its ethnocultural diversity and governed under a single-party socialist regime. These communities—including descendants of South Asian and Southwest Chinese immigrants, Cham-Khmer Muslims from Cambodia, as well as indigenous converts from groups such as the Lao Loum, Khmu, and Hmong present a compelling case for understanding minority integration in a politically and religiously restrictive environment. Drawing on more than six years of fieldwork, the author utilizes qualitative data collected through interviews, focus group discussions, and site surveys to examine the lived experiences, challenges, and evolving identities of these under-researched populations. The study was conducted under significant constraints due to limited access to official demographic data, shaped by national security policies and restrictions on the dissemination of religious information. Furthermore, the data collection period overlapped with the COVID-19 pandemic, adding considerable obstacles to field research. The article pursues two primary objectives: (1) to investigate the construction of social identity among Muslim minorities in Laos, and (2) to analyze how their political identities are shaped in relation to the Lao state. It highlights the interplay between internal factors (such as ethnicity, religious practices, political regime, and demographic policies) and external influences (including transnational Islamic discourse, media

exposure, and socio-economic conditions) in shaping identity formation. The diversity of ethnic origins is shown to produce varied expressions of Islam, while the concept of the *Ummah* fosters a shared sense of belonging across different jurisprudential traditions. This work offers a foundational contribution to the limited body of knowledge on Muslim minorities in Laos and aims to support future academic inquiry into the religious, political, and social dynamics of ethnic and religious minorities in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Social Identity, Political Identity, Integration, Muslim Minority, Laos, Ethnicity

INTRODUCTION

In today's interconnected world, the fluid exchange of ideas, cultures, and traditions has significantly influenced how minority communities perceive and assert their identities. Laos, a landlocked nation in Southeast Asia, exemplifies this dynamic through its rich tapestry of ethnic groups. The government classifies its populace into three main categories: Lao Loum (lowland dwellers), Lao Theung (midland dwellers), and Lao Soung (highland dwellers). Within this diverse societal framework exists a small yet distinct Muslim minority, comprising ethnicities such as Tamil, Pashtun, Yunnanese Chinese, Khmer-Cham, and indigenous converts from the Lao Loum, Khmu, and Hmong communities. These Muslim groups navigate their religious and cultural identities within a one-party socialist state that emphasizes national unity, often limiting overt expressions of religious distinctiveness. The interplay of internal factors ethnicity, political structures, religious practices and external influences like economic opportunities and media representations shapes their integration and identity formation. Despite their limited numbers and the challenges posed by a system with constrained space for pluralism, these communities endeavor to preserve their heritage and beliefs. Research on Muslim minorities in Laos remains scarce, hindered by restricted access to data due to governmental controls and national security policies. The COVID-19 pandemic further impeded fieldwork, limiting comprehensive studies. Nevertheless, this article seeks to provide an initial exploration into the identity politics and lived experiences of Muslim minorities in Laos, laying the groundwork for future, more in-depth research as academic interest in Southeast Asia's ethnic and religious diversity continues to grow.

Country and People Geography

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (Laos) is a landlocked country in Southeast Asia, bordered by Myanmar, Cambodia, China, Thailand, and Vietnam. It covers a total area of 236,800 square kilometers¹, with Vientiane as its capital. About 70% of Laos is mountainous, dominated by the Annamite Range in the east and northeast, and the Luang Prabang Range in the northwest. The country's highest

¹ Sisouphanthong, B. Atlas of Laos, the Spatial Structures of Economic and Social Development of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. National Statistical Centre, State Planning Committee of Lao PDR. 2000. pp.12.

peak, Phou Bia in Xiangkhouang Province, reaches 2,820 meters above sea level.² These rugged landscapes shape much of the country's terrain and influence its settlement patterns and infrastructure development.

Demography

As of April 6, 2025, the population of Laos is approximately 7,845,677 people.³ The ethnic composition of Laos is complex, sharing borders and ethnicities with its neighboring countries. While the Lao Front for National Construction estimates a total of 160 ethnic tribes subdivided into 49 ethnicities, some analysts believe the actual number of ethnic groupings exceeds 240. These groups collectively speak 82 different languages. The main ethnic group is the Lao (or Lao Loum), who constitute 53% of the population, with the majority adhering to Theravada Buddhism. The Laotian government does not officially use the term 'indigenous peoples,' referring to non-Lao individuals as 'ethnic minorities.' However, the government increasingly prefers the term "Lao" for all its citizens.⁴

Aside from the Lao Loum, other ethnic minority groups present in Laos include Khmu, Hmong, Tai, Chinese, and Vietnamese. A significant portion of the Lao population resides in rural areas, with over 80% engaged in agriculture, primarily rice cultivation, and facing economic challenges. Laos operates as a single-party communist nation with notable influence from the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the Vietnam People's Army. For administrative purposes, the Lao government classifies its people into three broad ethnolinguistic categories: Lao Loum, Lao Theung, and Lao Soung. The Lao Loum⁵, or "Lao of the Plains," constitute around half of the national population and are predominantly Theravada Buddhists. They are closely related to Northeast Thais and are regarded as the ethnic majority whose language and culture have been institutionalized as the national standard. Within this category are also other Lao-Tai subgroups like the Tai Dam, Tai Daeng, and Tai Khao, who typically inhabit higher altitudes and practice dry rice farming. The Lao Theung, or "Lao of the Hillsides⁶," form the second-largest group, making up about 15% to 20% of the population. Descendants of Mon-Khmer peoples, they dwell in mountainous areas and practice animistic religions, speaking mutually unintelligible languages from the Mon-Khmer branch of the Austroasiatic language family—none of which have written scripts. They are often economically marginalized. The Lao Soung, or "Lao of the Mountain Tops⁷," represent roughly 10% of the population and reside in high-altitude regions exceeding 1,000 meters, particularly in northwestern Laos. They migrated from southern China within the last two centuries, and their

² Phou Bia, <https://www.peakbagger.com/peak.aspx?pid=10962> Retrieved April 23th, 2022.

³ https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/laos-population/?utm_source=chatgpt.com#google_vignette Retrieved April 10th, 2025.

⁴ Rakow, R. M. Lao and Laotian. Center for Southeast Asian Studies School of Hawaiian, Asian and Pacific Affairs University of Hawaii 1992. pp.32

⁵ Ovesen, Jan. (2019). Indigenous Peoples and Development in Laos: Ideologies and Ironies. Moussons. (p.69-97). URL: <http://moussons.revues.org/2589>, pp.69-97.

⁶ Factsanddetails.com., Lao Theung. Source: https://factsanddetails.com/southeast-asia/Laos/sub5_3c/entry-2963.html. Retrieved 6 November 2020.

⁷ Henley, D. (2001). Muslims of Vientiane. Aramco World, Volumes 48-49, pp. 45-47.

languages share linguistic traits with Chinese, Tibetan, and Burmese. This group includes ethnic minorities like the Hmong, Akha, Lisu, and Lahu, who primarily adhere to animism, with some identifying as Christians or Muslims.

Religion

Theravada Buddhism is the predominant religion in Laos, practiced by approximately 64.7% of the population. Christianity is followed by about 1.7% of Laotians.

A significant portion, 31.4%, report having no religion, which may include animist beliefs. The remaining 2.1% adhere to other religions or did not specify their affiliation. Ethnic Lao, constituting 53.2% of the population, predominantly practice Theravada Buddhism. The diverse range of beliefs reflects Laos's rich cultural tapestry, with various ethnic groups contributing to the country's religious landscape.⁸

Religious Freedom and Mosques in Laos

Laos, officially the Lao People's Democratic Republic, the country is predominantly Buddhist, with approximately 64.7% of the population adhering to Theravada Buddhism. Religious minorities include Christians (1.7%), animists (31.4%), and other faiths such as Islam (0.01%). Despite its communist political system, the Lao government officially recognizes Islam within its 1991 constitution, granting Muslim citizens the freedom to practice their faith. This commitment to religious freedom is further underscored by a decree issued on July 5, 2002, which permits all individuals in Laos, including non-citizens and foreigners, to practice their religion in designated places of worship such as temples, churches, or mosques.⁹

Currently, there are two established mosques in Laos, both located in the capital city, Vientiane. The first, the Jamia Vientiane Mosque, was constructed in 1970 by migrants from the Indian subcontinent. Situated near the Nam Phu Fountain, it is the oldest mosque in Laos. The second mosque, the Azhar Mosque, was founded in 1986 by Cham-Khmer Muslim immigrants from Cambodia and is located in the Chanthabouly District. Additionally, within the suburbs of Vientiane, specifically in Ban Dan Xang and Ban Ilai Tai, there are two Muslim communities that maintain prayer halls (Musalla). These communities are largely comprised of Khmer, Khmu, Lao Loum, and Hmong Muslims.

Beyond these established mosques, smaller Muslim communities exist in various parts of Laos. In Savannakhet province, for instance, there is a historical Muslim cemetery, and as of 2025, a mosque construction project is underway. The Muslim communities in this area, which include Lao Loum, Phou Thai, and Tai individuals who have married Indo-Pakistani Muslims, typically gather in private homes for Friday prayers and Eid celebrations. In the northern province of Oudomxay, two discreet prayer halls (Musalla) have been established on land

⁸ https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/laos/?utm_source= Retrieved January 30th, 2023.

⁹ Sasongko, Agung. (2017). Muslim Laos Bertahan di Tengah Rezim Komunis. Source: <https://republika.co.id/berita/oqchx2313/muslim-laos-bertahan-di-tengah-rezim-komunis>. Retrieved 22 May 2019.

belonging to Khmu Muslims, with support from Muslims in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. The first, Masjid Quba in Ban Ngue, Hun District, was erected and opened in 2017 and serves a community of around 40 Khmu Muslim converts. The second Musalla, built in Ban Thin, Xay District, in 2018 in a mosque-like style with a green dome, faced challenges. Local authorities quickly closed it down, prohibiting prayers and religious gatherings. Subsequently, the dome was removed and replaced with a water tank, and the building was repurposed as a Muslim house.

History

The Lao people trace their origins to the Tai-Kadai tribes of southern China. By the 13th century, they had migrated southward to the borders of the Khmer Empire. In 1353 AD, a major turning point occurred when King Fa Ngum established the first unified Lao kingdom, Lan Xang "The Land of a Million Elephants." Its capital, Muang Sua, was later renamed Luang Prabang in honor of the revered Prabang Buddha statue. Lan Xang thrived as a powerful Southeast Asian kingdom until 1707.¹⁰ The death of King Souligna Vongsa in 1694, without a clear successor, led to fragmentation. Internal divisions and external pressure resulted in the split of Lan Xang into three separate kingdoms: Luang Prabang in the north, Vientiane in the center, and Champassak in the south. These kingdoms, often in conflict, became vulnerable to Siamese influence and military intervention by the late 18th century.¹¹

In the 19th century, as Siam (modern-day Thailand) sought to consolidate its own territorial claims, it eventually ceded the Lao kingdoms to French Indochina. France reunited the three Lao territories under a single protectorate called "Laos" in 1893. During this process, Siam retained the region of Isaan in present-day Northeast Thailand, where many Lao-speaking communities still reside resulting in more ethnic Lao living in Thailand today than in Laos itself. Laos remained under French colonial rule until 1945, with a brief interruption during World War II when it was occupied by Japan. After the war, the French reasserted control in 1946, granting Laos limited autonomy by 1950. Full independence as a constitutional monarchy was achieved in 1954.

However, Laos soon became engulfed in a civil war between royalist forces and the communist Pathet Lao. During the 1960s and early 1970s, the country was drawn into the Vietnam War, suffering extensive U.S. bombing campaigns aimed at disrupting the North Vietnamese supply lines running through Lao territory via the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Estimates suggest that more bombs were dropped on Laos during this period than on Europe during all of World War II. In 1973¹², a ceasefire divided the country, but in 1975, the Pathet Lao seized the capital, abolished the monarchy, and established the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). King Savang Vatthana was forced to abdicate and later died in captivity. The Lao People's

¹⁰ Grant Evans, *A Short History of Laos: The Land in Between* (Chiang Mai: Silksworm Books, 2002), pp. 25-30.

¹¹ Nathan, L., Butterfield & Robinson. In *Deep: a (Brief) History of Laos* Source: <https://www.butterfield.com/get-inspired/deep-brief-history-laos>. Retrieved 25 June 2021.

¹² BBC News, Laos Profile – Timeline. Source: <https://www.Bbc.Com/News/World-Asia-Pacific-15355605>. Retrieved 9 June 2021.

Revolutionary Party (LPRP) became the sole ruling party, led by Kaysone Phomvihane as the nation's first prime minister.

In the years that followed, Laos undertook a "socialist transformation" of its economy. Despite its one-party political structure, the country gradually opened up to international engagement. In 1997, Laos joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and by 2008 began the process of joining the World Trade Organization (WTO), achieving full membership in 2013¹³. Today, Laos participates in various international organizations, including the United Nations. These memberships have required the government to align with global treaties and norms, including commitments to human rights and sustainable development. As a result, Lao society is experiencing increasing political awareness and economic transformation, along with rising aspirations for broader participation in governance and development.

Muslim in Laos

Muslim Ethnic Groups

The Scarce Documentation of Laos's Muslim Minority is one of the great obstacles in study about the Muslim population in Laos. An assessment of existing literature reveals a notable gap in comprehensive information regarding the Muslim population in Laos. While some studies offer a foundational overview of their arrival and basic demographic details, there is a clear lack of extensive and up-to-date material. In-depth analyses exploring the nuances of the social and political identities of Lao Muslims are particularly scarce.

Significantly, the Laotian government does not maintain official records on the number of Muslims within the country. However, available estimates suggest that they constitute a very small minority, approximately 0.01% of the total population. A 2019 study focusing on Indigenous Peoples and Development in Laos provided an estimate of around 1,000 Muslims residing in the country. This study further indicates that this small community is primarily composed of refugees with diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The limited and often dated information underscores the need for further research to better understand the social and political realities of Muslim minorities in Laos.¹⁴

The Diveres Typestry of Lao Muslims

In the mid-1960s, the Muslim population in Laos, predominantly of Indian origin, was estimated to be around seven thousand. However, this number began to decline during the Indo-China War (Vietnam War) leading up to 1975, when the Lao Communist Party took control of the capital and established a communist state. By 2012, the Muslim population in Laos was reported to consist of approximately 650 individuals of Indian descent (around 35 families), 48 families of Pakistani origin, and

¹³ Hogan, J. P. (2005). Cultural identity, pluralism, and globalization Vol. 1 Cultural pluralism and democratic freedom. Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, pp. 287-239.

¹⁴ Ovesen, Jan. (2019). *Indigenous Peoples and Development in Laos: Ideologies and Ironies*. Moussons. (pp.69-97). Source: <http://moussons.revues.org/2589>. Retrieved 10 May 2019

about 116 new converts from native Laotian ethnic groups, in addition to around 61 families of Cambodian Muslim heritage.¹⁵

Presently, estimates suggest that the Muslim population in Laos numbers between 700 and 1,000 individuals, representing approximately 0.01% of the country's total population of 7,379,358¹⁶. The people of Laos today include a small Muslim minority, largely comprised of refugees from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Based on ethnicity, the Muslim community in Laos can be broadly categorized into two main groups: (1) Immigrant Muslims and (2) Native Laotian Muslims.

Laos's Muslim community is composed of two primary groups:

Immigrant Muslims

Chin Haw Muslims From Yunnan Province, China

Within the small Muslim minority in Laos, distinct communities exist, each with its own unique history and background. One of the oldest and most established groups is that of the Yunnan's Chinese Muslims, also known as Chin Haw. Their presence in Laos is rooted in a long history of caravan trading that connected China and Burma (Myanmar), a network active as far back as the early century. The Chin Haw has a significant history of settlement in Laos, with evidence suggesting their presence in the region dating back to the 8th century. This deep historical connection makes them the first established Muslim community within Laos.¹⁷

The historical trade routes that brought the Chin Haw to Laos also led them to settle in neighboring Myanmar and Thailand. Their presence in these regions was further augmented by a significant wave of migration following the Chinese Communist revolution in 1950 AD. This event spurred a new influx of Chin Haw Muslims into Laos, where they joined the pre-existing communities and contributed to the expansion of Chin Haw settlements into new areas within the country. This later migration reinforced the already established presence of this distinct Muslim group in Laos.¹⁸ During the period of French colonization in Laos, the Chin Haw represented the oldest and largest Muslim community in the country. Their long-standing presence and established networks made them a significant part of the social fabric. However, the landscape shifted dramatically with the Communist Revolution in 1975. This pivotal event triggered a large-scale emigration of Chin Haw Muslims from Laos. Many sought refuge and new opportunities in neighboring countries like Thailand and Myanmar, while some also chose to resettle further afield in places like the United States. This exodus significantly altered the demographic makeup of the Muslim population in Laos.¹⁹

¹⁵ Mr. Ahmadokhan Ungary a former vice president of the Muslim Association of Vientiane once gave an interview on the Muslim TV program from Thailand (22/05/2013).

¹⁶ "Laos Population (2025)," Worldometer, Retrieved: 11/10/2019,
<https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/laos-population/>

¹⁷ Wang, L. (2006). Hui Yunnanese migratory history in relation to the Han Yunnanese and ethnic resurgence in northern Thailand. *Japanese Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 44(3), 337-358.

¹⁸ Maluleem, I. (1995). Ethnic groups in Thailand, Thai Muslims of Pathan descent. Sirindhorn Anthropology Center, pp.5-9.

¹⁹ Soontornpasuch, S. (1998). The Heterogeneity of the Muslim World. *Songklanakarin Journal of Social Science and Humanities*. Vol.4 No.1 Jan-Apr (1998), pp.48-49.

South Asian Muslim Immigrants:

Following the long-established Chin Haw community, the next significant group within the Muslim minority in Laos consists of immigrants from the Indian subcontinent. This migration began during the French colonial era with the arrival of Tamil-speaking Labbai and Rawther individuals from Puducherry (formerly Pondicherry) in Southern India, who were brought to the region by the French. This initial wave was followed by subsequent migrations of Pashtun, Bengali, and other ethnic groups originating from what are now India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Driven by the pursuit of new economic prospects within French colonial Indochina, these Muslim immigrants initially settled in Vietnam before moving further inland to Cambodia and eventually Laos. This influx added another layer of diversity to the developing Muslim population in Laos²⁰

As noted by scholar Yoginder Sikand, the integration of Indian Muslims into Laotian society, in terms of formal citizenship, appears limited. His observations suggest that fewer than 100 Indian Muslims residing in Laos hold Lao citizenship. While some possess employment or residency licenses, these often require annual renewal, indicating a temporary or less permanent status. Furthermore, the demographic profile of this community seems to skew towards young males, with many leaving their wives and children in India. Additionally, Sikand's work highlights instances of Tamil Muslim men who have married Lao women while still maintaining marital ties in India, further illustrating the complex social and familial connections within this community.

Cham-Khmer Muslims From Cambodia:

Another significant segment of the Muslim population in Laos comprises Cham and Khmer immigrants from neighboring Cambodia. Their initial arrival in Laos began approximately 40 years ago, with individuals seeking opportunities as laborers and small-scale traders. This migration saw further increase after the mid-1980s, coinciding with the tumultuous period of Khmer Rouge rule in Cambodia, which likely prompted additional individuals to seek refuge and new beginnings in Laos. Demonstrating their community cohesion, Cambodian Muslims established the Azhar Mosque in Vientiane in 1986, which serves as a central point for their religious and social activities. Today, many Cambodian Muslims in Laos are engaged in small businesses, often trading in herbal medicines sourced from Cambodia, and they are primarily concentrated in Vientiane, the capital city.²¹

Native Laotian Muslims:

A more recent and increasingly significant development within the Muslim community in Laos is the emergence of native and indigenous Laotian converts from

²⁰ Farouk, O., & Yamamoto, H. (2008). Islam at the Margins: The Muslims of Indochina. *Center for Integrated Area Studies, Kyoto University Kyoto: Japan*, pp.80-82.

²¹ Sikand, Y. (2008). Beyond the Mekong: Indian Muslims in Laos.

Source: http://twocircles.net/2008aug13/beyond_mekong_indian_muslims_laos.html. Retrieved 6 April 2020.

various ethnic groups. This includes individuals from the dominant Lao Lum group, as well as other ethnic minorities such as the Khmu and Hmong. The adoption of Islam by these groups began in the early 2000s. Following their conversion, a notable number of these individuals have sought higher education in Muslim-majority countries like Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia. These native Laotian converts are now considered to be among the most rapidly expanding segments of the Muslim population in Laos. Within these groups, Khmu Muslims currently represent the highest population density, followed by converts from the Lao Loum and Hmong ethnic groups.

Since 2016, there have been positive developments regarding religious freedom in Laos. The Lao PDR government has eased several restrictions and opened the country more widely to international engagement. This shift has had a beneficial impact on Muslims and adherents of other faiths, as Laos has gained popularity as a tourist destination. Furthermore, the establishment of diplomatic relations with several Muslim-majority nations, including Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Kuwait, and Turkey, has led to the opening of embassies and consulates within Laos. This increased international engagement may further contribute to the evolving landscape of religious communities in the country.²²

Native Laotian Muslims are individuals from various ethnic groups within Laos, including the Lao Loum, Khmu, and Hmong, who have embraced Islam in recent decades. Their conversions are influenced by intermarriage with Muslim communities and interactions with Muslim traders and educators. This has led to a diverse Muslim population in Laos, comprising several ethnic groups:

Lao Loum Muslims:

The Lao Loum, or lowland Lao, are the majority ethnic group in Laos. While traditionally practicing Theravada Buddhism, some have converted to Islam, influenced by intermarriage with Muslim communities. This group is relatively small, with estimates suggesting around 100 individuals, including those residing abroad.

Khmu Muslims:

The Khmu people are indigenous to northern Laos and have a history of animistic beliefs. In the early 2000s, some Khmu individuals began converting to Islam, influenced by interactions with Muslim peers and educational opportunities abroad. This group has grown significantly, with estimates indicating they constitute the largest segment of native Laotian Muslims.

Hmong Muslims:

The Hmong are an ethnic group with a significant presence in Laos. Islam was introduced to some Hmong communities in the early 2000s, primarily in northern Laos. Conversions occurred among secondary school students influenced by their

²² Gunawan, Hendra. (2012). Islam dan Masjid di Laos.

<https://bujangmasjid.blogspot.com/2012/10/masjid-azhar-vientiane-laos.html> (Retrieved on May 20, 2019).

Khmu peers. Today, the Hmong Muslim community is small, comprising fewer than 100 individuals.

Social and Political Identities Formation

The formation of social and political identities among the Muslim minority in Laos is shaped by both internal and external factors. These influences determine how Laotian Muslims navigate their religious, ethnic, and national identities within a predominantly Buddhist society.

INTERNAL FACTORS

Ethnicity And Background

Ethnic background plays a significant role in shaping the identity of Laotian Muslims. Laos is home to a diverse population, with many Muslims belonging to ethnic groups such as the Chinese, Vietnamese, and other indigenous Laotian communities. The ethnic makeup influences how Muslims relate to the broader population, as their integration and social positioning often depend on their ethnic background. For example, Muslims of Chinese or Vietnamese descent may have different socio-political experiences compared to those from indigenous Lao communities, who may face more barriers in terms of economic and social integration.

Nation-Building Principle and Population Policy

The Lao government has historically promoted policies that emphasize national unity, often through assimilation and cultural integration. While the country's constitution guarantees the equality of all citizens, including Muslims, in practice, the government's approach to nation-building often leads to challenges in the full acceptance of minority groups. The country's population policies focus more on homogeneity, which sometimes places non-Buddhist and non-Lao ethnic groups at a disadvantage in political and social spheres.

Islamic Teaching and Practice

Islamic teachings, particularly the concepts of **Ummah** (nation/community) and **Brotherhood**, are central to the religious identity of Laotian Muslims. These principles help forge a sense of solidarity, not only within their local communities but also with Muslims around the world. The importance of **Madhab** (Islamic sects) further influences the religious practices and political affiliations of Muslims. Different sects may adhere to varying interpretations of Islamic law and practice, shaping both personal and group identities. These religious teachings provide a sense of unity and direction for Laotian Muslims, helping them maintain their faith in a society where they are a minority.

External Factors

Social And Economic Opportunities

Equality Among Individual And Ethnic Groups

While the Lao constitution ensures equality for all citizens, in practice, social and economic disparities persist, especially among ethnic groups. Muslims, especially those of Chinese, Vietnamese, or Lao Loum descent, may have better access to economic and social opportunities due to their educational background or stronger connections within elite social circles. However, indigenous Laotian Muslims, such as those from the Khmu or Hmong communities, often find themselves marginalized in terms of education and employment opportunities. Despite the Lao government's official stance on equality, class and ethnic divisions remain deeply entrenched in the social fabric, influencing the opportunities available to Laotian Muslims.

Acceptance From Society

Acceptance of Muslims in Lao society can be influenced by ethnic background as well as religious affiliation. Muslims who share cultural similarities with the dominant Lao Loum, such as those of Chinese or Vietnamese descent, may experience less discrimination and greater acceptance. In contrast, Muslims from ethnic minority groups, particularly those associated with agricultural or labor-intensive sectors, often face more challenges in terms of social integration. While there is no widespread religious discrimination against Muslims, their social acceptance can be hindered by deep-rooted ethnic prejudices.

Media

The media plays a significant role in shaping the perceptions of Muslims in Laos. Although Laos has a controlled media environment, the portrayal of Muslims in local news, television, and online platforms can influence public opinion. In a nation where Buddhism is the dominant religion, any misrepresentation of Islam or Muslims could fuel negative stereotypes. However, there is limited coverage of Muslim issues in Laos, which contributes to a lack of understanding of their cultural and religious practices. As such, Laotian Muslims often face challenges in asserting their identity in the face of limited visibility and media representation.

Lao Muslims and the Integration to the Lao Society

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) is a multicultural nation where the Muslim minority, though small, contributes significantly to the country's diverse social fabric. Comprising various ethnic backgrounds, languages, and cultural practices, the Muslim community in Laos reflects a rich tapestry of histories and traditions.

There are Several interconnected factors influence the integration of Lao Muslims into Lao society:

1. Ethnic Composition And Historical Migration

The Muslim population in Laos is notably diverse. Historically, Tamil-speaking Muslims from South India arrived during the French colonial era, primarily working as guards and laborers in Vientiane. They were later joined by Pashtu-speaking Pakhtun Muslims from what is now Pakistan, many of whom had served in the British army and were stationed in neighboring Burma during the First World War. Additionally, Chinese Muslims, known as Chin Haw, migrated from Yunnan Province,

engaging in trade and commerce. The 1970s saw an influx of Cham Muslims fleeing the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, further enriching the Muslim demographic in Laos.

While the precise details and scale are not widely documented, reports suggest that some indigenous individuals and communities in Laos, including those from the Lao Loum, Khmu, and Hmong ethnic groups, began converting to Islam in the early 2000s. This development represents a relatively recent introduction and growth of Islam within these specific indigenous populations, who traditionally followed other spiritual practices like Buddhism or animism. Inter-marriage with existing Muslim communities in Laos is cited as a contributing factor to these conversions.

2. Cultural Practices And Religious Observance

Despite their varied origins, the Muslim communities in Laos have maintained their distinct cultural and religious practices. The establishment of mosques such as the Jamia Masjid and the Azhar Mosque in Vientiane serves as focal points for religious activities and community gatherings. These mosques not only facilitate daily prayers but also host educational programs, fostering a sense of unity among the diverse Muslim populace. The Muslim Association of Laos plays a pivotal role in overseeing community affairs and liaising with the government, ensuring that religious practices are upheld and respected.

However, the integration of Lao Muslims occurs within a specific legal and socio-religious context. The Constitution of Laos grants the right to believe or not believe in a religion. While the government officially recognizes Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the Baha'i Faith, **Theravada Buddhism holds a predominant position and is actively promoted by the Lao government as a key aspect of national culture and identity.** This promotion can manifest in various forms, including state support for Buddhist institutions and the incorporation of Buddhist rituals into state functions.

Furthermore, **religious practices in Laos are subject to government oversight and regulations.** Decree 315, issued by the government, outlines rules for religious practice, requiring religious groups to register with the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) and to seek permission for various activities, including building houses of worship and organizing religious gatherings outside of recognized religious properties. Annual plans for religious activities often need to be submitted for approval. These regulations, while intended to ensure social harmony and national unity, can pose challenges for religious minorities, including Muslims, in freely practicing and expanding their religious activities. While the Muslim community in Laos is generally allowed to practice their faith, they operate within these existing legal frameworks that prioritize the promotion and oversight of religion, with Buddhism holding a central position.

3. Challenges and Integration Into Lao Society

Integrating into the predominantly Buddhist society of Laos presents ongoing challenges for the Muslim community. While the constitution guarantees religious freedom, its application, especially in rural areas, can be inconsistent, with reports of

local authorities imposing restrictions on religious activities, hindering the construction and maintenance of mosques, limiting gatherings and outreach, and creating bureaucratic hurdles through regulations like Decree 315. Subtle social pressures and the strong promotion of Theravada Buddhism as a central aspect of national identity further complicate the integration process for this religious minority.

Despite these obstacles, the Muslim community in Laos actively practices its faith, centered around mosques like Jamia Masjid and Azhar Mosque, and contributes significantly to the nation's economy through trade, business, and professional engagement. Organizations such as the Muslim Association of Laos play a crucial role in navigating government regulations and advocating for the community's religious rights. While facing the complexities of integrating into a society where Buddhism holds a dominant and officially supported position, Lao Muslims continue to strive to maintain their distinct cultural and religious identity while participating in the broader social and economic life of the nation.

4. Political Recognition and Representation

The Lao government's official recognition of Islam as one of the four permissible religions in the country marks a foundational level of political acknowledgment for the Muslim community. The establishment of the Muslim Association of Laos serves as a crucial formal channel for communication and engagement between the community and governmental bodies, facilitating dialogue on religious affairs and community needs. Furthermore, the inclusion of Muslim individuals in national-level discussions and consultative bodies, albeit within the framework of the existing political system, signifies a degree of political visibility and a recognition of the Muslim population as a constituent part of Lao society. This acknowledgment can translate to a platform for articulating community concerns and seeking consideration within state policies, particularly those related to religious practice and cultural preservation.

However, the one-party political system in Laos inherently limits the avenues for direct political representation and the formation of independent political organizations based on religious or ethnic identity. While Muslim individuals may participate within the existing political structures, the absence of a multi-party system restricts the potential for the community to coalesce around specific political platforms or advocate for distinct political agendas solely based on their religious affiliation. Consequently, while a level of political acknowledgment and formal engagement exists through designated channels and individual participation, the actual political influence and direct representation of the Muslim community remain circumscribed by the overarching political framework of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. The focus tends to be on engagement through established state-sanctioned organizations rather than through independent political mobilization.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Muslim minority in Laos presents a compelling case study of cultural preservation and adaptation within a unique socio-political context. Their

internal diversity, stemming from historical migrations of Tamil, Pashtun, Chin Haw, and Khmer-Cham communities, alongside more recent indigenous conversions among the Khmu, Lao Loum, and Hmong, creates a vibrant tapestry of Islamic expression within the nation. This rich internal complexity shapes their social interactions and the nuances of their religious practices. The external political environment, defined by a one-party socialist system prioritizing national unity, significantly molds the parameters within which these communities can openly practice their faith and maintain their distinct cultural heritage. Government policies and the overarching emphasis on a unified national identity require careful navigation by religious minorities in expressing their beliefs and traditions.

Despite the inherent challenges of being a religious minority within a predominantly Theravada Buddhist and socialist state, the Muslim community in Laos has demonstrated remarkable resilience and a commitment to their faith and cultural heritage. The establishment of key religious institutions like mosques, coupled with the proactive work of community organizations such as the Muslim Association of Laos, provides vital platforms for religious observance, education, and communal solidarity. Through consistent engagement with the broader Lao society and the political landscape, the Muslim minority actively contributes to the evolving multicultural identity of the nation, striving to maintain their distinctiveness while fostering peaceful coexistence and integration within the larger social fabric.

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