

The study deals with the problem of relations between ethnic minorities and central governments in Laos. It analyses mechanisms of the mountaineers' social and military mobilisation in historical perspective from the beginnings of the French colonial administration until the present. The main discussed topics are: the ethnic situation in Laos, ethnic relations, and the Lao government's ethnic policy.

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) is an ethnically complicated and weakly researched territory. Ethnic minorities comprise approximately 70 % of the total population of the country. This makes Laos one of the most ethnically diverse countries in Asia. Although the Lao government claims 49 ethnic groups, recent anthropological surveys revealed 236 ethnic groups belonging to four ethno-linguistic families: Tai-Kadai, Austro-Asiatic (Mon-Khmer), Hmong-Mien (Miao-Yao) and Sino-Tibetan (Tibeto-Burman). Many of the minorities inhabit rural areas, which are amongst the most poverty stricken areas in the country. The high degree of ethnic diversity, coupled with the high percentage of the total population belonging to national minorities, has an important impact on the social and political situation in Laos. Minorities have been playing specific (frequently decisive) roles in the life of the country.

In the first part, the study analyses the criteria of national censuses in various historical periods and gives a brief overview of ethnic groups in Laos. The traditional threefold categorization of the population into Lao Loum (literally lowland Laotians), Lao Theung (literally midland Laotians), and Lao Soung (literally highland Laotians) is discussed as well.