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XĀT LAO

Imagining the Lao nation through race, history and language

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Introduction

The notion of *Xāt Lao* (ຊາດລາວ) engrossed the minds of the Lao elite at the very moment they envisioned the Lao nation (Katay 1953, 9). In this line of thinking, there existed Lao people divided up and living under the rule of Thai, French, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Burmese and Chinese states. They inhabited lands formerly ruled by Lan Xang (1353–1707), the Lao kingdom which disintegrated for centuries after 1707. While scholars have seen it in spatial terms, this Greater Laos (ລາວໃຫຍ່) was based on modern notions of a Lao race (Ivarsson and Goscha 2007). In pre-colonial Laos, ethnicity was relatively plastic, but after over half a century of French colonial rule (1893–1945), itself predicated on racial hierarchy, Lao elites no longer perceived ethnicity as changeable (Wolfson-Ford 2017). They saw instead the world divided up among mutually antagonistic races locked in a struggle for survival for land and resources. This eventually crystallized into the virulently nationalist idea of a Lao race that shaped the first post-colonial Lao state amid the Cold War as both the Royal Lao Government (RLG) (1945–1975) and the Pathet Lao fought to free the country from foreign forces. This chapter examines the influence of race on Lao nationalism. Contrary to existing scholarship, Laos did not suffer from a lack of nationalism, but from an overabundance of it, to the point that armed groups emerged fighting to rescue the nation (ກູ້ຊາດ). This chapter explores competing forms of nationalism – exclusionary and inclusive – and why the exclusionary form, centering on a Lao race, won out.

The idea of a Lao race greatly influenced Lao nationalist thinking, signified by the word *Xāt*, which in the twentieth century meant both "race" and "nation." As early as the 1930s, the Lao elite invented the nation, with both positive and negative French influences, which formed the basis for popular nationalist movements since the 1940s. After 1945, an inclusive multiethnic nationalism was gradually abandoned for a virulently nationalist notion of a Lao race. In doing so, Lao intellectuals made distortions, evasions and manipulations to embrace a purely Lao nation, which had serious repercussions for decades. While the elite's invention of the nation was creative and served to unite the country, some Lao elite papered over their own diverse backgrounds. The national culture they forged drew from non-Lao sources (Thai, Khmer, the West). Alongside these intellectual processes, were intense nationalist

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feelings generated by rivalry and hatred of Vietnamese, French and Thai, at the root of which lay a fear of impending Lao racial extinction.

There was also a precarious, hybrid identity rising to mediate with the West. The French-Lao identity was fraught with difficulties – cultural alienation and cultural dislocation – but it nonetheless represented different ways of being Lao unique to the period. Homi K. Bhabha wrote that such hybrid identities can disrupt colonialism (1994). Lao who were French-educated grew incensed when relegated to subordinate roles in the colony by the French, fueling anti-colonial desire. The contradiction between a stridently nationalist Lao race and a multiethnic French-Lao identity was only resolved after a lengthy process of intellectual searching to bring many diverse signs under the unitary sign of "Lao." Rejecting cultural alienation, the idea of a Lao race won out over more inclusive notions of Lao nationalism better suited to the country's ethnic diversity. Nationalism came to Laos as questions of identity affecting real people as their lives were shaped by dramatic, global events. Culture, ideas and politics met at a powerful juncture in history. While separated in time, the French-Lao identity parallels the Lao People's Democratic Republic's (LPDR) (1975–) own brand of multiethnic nationalism and suggests the ways in which the contradiction between the two poles of Lao identity has never been resolved (Tappe 2013). This inclusive nationalism too fragile, even its adherents could not resist the appeal of Xāt Lao, mirroring the decline of multiethnic nationalism (and reassertion of ethnic Lao hegemony) in Laos today.

The idea of Xāt Lao captured the minds of the Lao elite at a crucial turning point in the development of Lao nationalism in the 1930s–1940s. In their writings, Lao elite used a word with some ambiguity, *Xāt* – ຊາດ, but in their French and English writings, they always used the word "race." In fact, race and nation were so linked in Lao thinking that when writing in French the elite often wrote "our nation, our race"; they truly could not separate the two. French colonialism stressed the idea that the Lao racial declining, threatened with extinction, and must be saved (Ivarsson 1999). It traced back to the first French explorations of the Mekong when French marveled at decaying Lao ruins (destroyed by Thai). Lao were on the verge of extinction as Jules Harmand saw it: "we can count upon the Annamites… to colonize a great deal of the valley of the [Mekong] river to our benefit, and where they will quickly supplant the left-overs of the decrepit races which inhabit it" (Gunn 2017). One French historian claimed Lao racial decline began in the seventeenth century:

> The Laotian feeling protected by a feared sovereign [Soulinyavongsa, r.1638–1694], cultivated his native carelessness resulting both from the moderation of his desires and from the fertility of his soil. Living without needs, for him everything was a matter of joy.
>
> *(LeBoulanger 1930)*

This invited invasion and rule by Thai, Burmese and Vietnamese. France used this trope to assert racial superiority and justify colonialism. However, Lao already had their own ideas of ethnic superiority, especially vis-à-vis ethnic minorities. There are signs Lao ethno-nationalism began emerging in 1890s northern Laos. Western notions of race overlapped with the existing pre-colonial Lao political order. Race was also introduced by American missionaries who opened a printing press in 1892 in Chiang Mai. They disseminated huge volumes of tracts; one was recently rediscovered at the Library of Congress. Since it was written in Tham script – used in Lao and Northern Thai manuscripts – it was a unique vehicle to disseminate Western thinking, including the notion of a world divided into races (Wolfson-Ford 2019).

Western notions of race cast a long shadow over twentieth-century Lao history. As the Lao elite attended French schools in ever greater numbers, they became deeply exposed to these ideas. France used the narrative of racial decline to legitimize colonial rule, claiming that they had saved the Lao from extinction. Yet, the Lao elite appropriated this narrative to prefigure a Lao nation politically and culturally. They wrote of their race and nation seeking to redeem it from French racist myths of lazy and docile Lao. They appealed to the notion of a Lao race to engender an imagined unity which was crucial for preparing a new political union. Simultaneously, they generated and unified a single Lao history, culture and language from diverse sources, inventing a Lao tradition. And, intriguingly, some Lao elite were so enamored by the idea of a Lao race they set aside their own diverse backgrounds to embrace the new identity. Finally, rewriting history and questions of language became pronounced after 1945, in the wake of the Issara, the Lao independence movement. Using Lao elite writings, this chapter considers the elite's background before examining the invention of a Lao tradition in the 1930s and considering key developments after 1945.

While not as well-known, a greater Lao race is comparable to the greater Thai race prevalent in Thailand at the time (Barmé 1993). Likewise, Lao nationalist fears of racial extinction at the hands of powerful neighbors parallel Cambodia (Kiernan 2008). But until recently, scholars thought Lao nationalism was insignificant, if not non-existent. Some saw Laos as nothing more than a collection of tribes, utterly devoid of nationalism (Brown and Zasloff 1985). If anything, Laos did not suffer from a lack of nationalism, but an overabundance of it. Recent research has provided an increasingly more complex picture. Geoffrey Gunn wrote the first monograph studying Lao nationalism but did not see it as a force before 1945 (1988). Soren Ivarsson investigated Lao national awakening during World War II among Francophone Lao elites via a French-sponsored Lao Renovation Movement (Ivarsson 2008). Simon Creak expanded on this by revealing the movement concerned not just the mind, but the body, too (2015). Both noted the prevalence of a racial discourse in different ways. Yet, most scholars take Xāt to only mean nation, when it also meant race; by neglecting both senses of the word, one misses crucial dimensions of Lao nationalist thinking. Moreover, Lao nationalism did not suddenly arise in 1941. As this chapter shows, the elite had already been working on it behind the scenes for over a decade. Their works provided the blueprint for Lao Renovation and other 1940s mass popular nationalist movements. While neglected, the 1930s was a crucial time when Lao intellectuals first cultivated the idea of a nation, influenced by French education. It was when a distinctly Lao language, history, poetry, calendar and Buddhism were first articulated.

In previous works, Lao agency has not been fully appreciated, while historians were too wedded to French sources appearing to show French playing a leading role in creating Lao nationalism. This chapter argues that it was the Lao elite who played the leading role in fashioning Lao nationalism, in both its cultural and political forms, in the 1930s–1940s. Proper appreciation of Lao agency can recast Lao history so that Lao are active participants. In this regard, Chairat Polmuk has undertaken a sophisticated study of literature in the development of nationalism in the 1940s, involving a careful analysis of multiple genres of texts (2014). Chairat allows us to enter the mental world of key nationalist Lao intellectuals at a pivotal moment. Yet, Lao elite cultural works had both positive and negative French influences, as they admired and reviled being taught exclusively French history and culture. They drew from many sources when articulating a standard Lao culture. Their insight was to link their cultural works to political claims. The Lao elite were not limited by the constraints of French empire as they envisioned the nation, especially in light of its racist, repressive nature which often excluded and oppressed them.

After 1945, these issues culminated in the clash of the Issara's stridently nationalist, anti-colonial and anti-French writings with loyalist (those who supported France's return after August 1945) writings struggling with identity questions. Loyalists rapidly developed a unique hybrid French-Lao identity, embracing inclusive views, but struggled with how to be Lao in a society still dominated by France. As they learned French, they lost fluency in Lao. And they debated whether to say "Lao" or "Laos," the final "s" aligning with French pronunciation. Confronting difficulties, multiethnic nationalism was discarded for the alluring Xāt Lao, even among loyalists. Meanwhile, Issara authored the first nationalist account of Lao history by interrogating Auguste Pavie's colonial myth of the "Conquest of Hearts," denouncing it as a lie, claiming that Pavie had engineered Luang Prabang's destruction in 1887. The Ho (overland Chinese) were reviled by Lao nationalists for this act, but the Issara redirected that feeling against French. In the process they fought to free Lao history from control by French scholars. The Issara introduced strong anti-French elements to Lao nationalist thinking (later taken up by Pathet Lao). Events in the 1930s and 1940s reveal the pivotal role of intellectual processes in Lao nationalism's development and the Lao elite's central role as they seized the opportunity to steer events in a new direction.

School days in colonial Laos

French schools were a locus of nationalism in colonial Laos. There, the elite could begin to imagine the Lao nation. Many came from diverse backgrounds: a Lao-Cambodian, Pierre Somchine Nginn, a Lao(-Vietnamese?), Katay Don Sasorith, an Isan-born Lao-Thai, Sila Viravong. But all embraced a single national culture with dreams of sovereignty in the wings. The first generation of French-Lao also included Prince Phetsarath Rattanavong, King Sisavang Vong, Thao Nhouy Abhay, Prince Souvanna Phouma and Prince Souphanouvong. They were the first to mediate with the West while remaking their traditions to conjure the nation. They traveled across Laos, Indochina and France for education gaining exposed to Western culture, which was greatly influenced by racism, fascism and on the verge of World War I even as their worldview broadened encountering communism, democracy and diverse people. It was a uniquely generative moment for modern Lao history. Considering elite backgrounds, one can see how some manipulated their identities to conform with an idealized form of the Lao nation embodied by the idea of a Lao race.

Phetsarath was the first to receive a French education. In 1897, his father, Chao Boun Khong, sent him to study at a French school, in Luang Prabang, before continuing in Saigon ("3349" 1978). Many other elites followed, where they witnessed lively politics and a freer press than in Laos (where no press was allowed). Sisavang Vong came two years later before going on to the École Colonial in Paris in 1900. In Saigon, Phetsarath studied, with French students, separately from Vietnamese. In 1905, he went to the École Colonial where he confronted his French teachers whose instruction was inappropriate for Lao students. In 1907, he began studying English, and next year spent the summer in England. He became enamored with England, returning many times, with trips to London. Studying in Europe for nearly a decade changed Phetsarath. When he briefly returned to Laos, he recalled ordaining as a monk as "sheer suffering." In 1914, he returned to work for the French, becoming the highest-ranking Lao official. In his duties he traveled widely, being one of the first to envision the new Lao nation spatially. Phetsarath was the leading force in convening an assembly in 1923 of Lao from all regions, which one French official said was the first of its kind since 1707. His growing influence led to a cadre of followers coalescing around him. By the 1930s, he viewed the Vietnamese as "the 'cruelest of imperialists' who 'sought to exterminate the Lao race'" (Gunn 1988).

Phetsarath's path contrasts with "Pierre" Somchine Nginn. Nginn's father, a Cambodian man, worked for Auguste Pavie before settling in Luang Prabang and marrying a Lao woman. Nginn wrote his name multiple ways, but complained that Lao heard his given name and assumed that it meant "mixed with Chinese" (Nginn 1971). He retained his nickname, "Pierre," from a Paris lycée all his life. He too attended the first French school in Luang Prabang in 1897 before going to study in Vientiane in 1901. Nginn fondly recalled his teachers' praise and still knew by heart French poetry at the age of 79, suggesting the deep impression his education made on him. He continued studying in Saigon in 1905 at the Collège Chasseloup-Laubat before going to France in 1906. He was given a scholarship to study at the École Colonial by Pavie. While there, he, Phetsarath and other elites studied the same evening courses as future French colonial administrators in addition to their regular courses in the day. When traveling to France, Nginn wanted to write his parents, but could only write them in French, for he had never studied Lao in school. Confronting this conundrum, he went on to become a Lao language instructor for decades afterward. In his memoirs, he wrote at length about the wonderful sights across France, but said little about school beyond the fact that "we were well housed and well fed. We could go out on Saturday night and all day on Sunday" (Nginn 1972). Being in France deeply influenced him. He kept in contact with people he met for years after, including a woman that "had considered me in France as her own child." He recalled his affection for France: "despite nearly forty years of separation, its memory and its image are still in my heart and my thoughts."

Katay Sasorith was not as forthcoming about his heritage. He saw himself as Lao even though his father, who ran a bistro serving French, was reportedly Vietnamese. Katay even wrote disparagingly of "little Annamite school boys," like most Lao nationalists of his time (Katay 1958). He recalled French boyhood friends speaking Lao better than French, who became thoroughly Lao in some ways – perhaps to overcome his heritage. He and his Lao and French friends founded the first football team in Pakse. Despite close bonds with French, Katay did face discrimination. His school did not allow French students. He flaunted his superiority in French, teasing Frenchmen about grammar in ways echoing his own trials. He criticized French but saw beyond their ethnicity to see their shared humanity. While noting French brutality, he also recalled deep attachments with others. He dedicated his memoir to his French teacher. He was illiterate until the age of 10 when, meeting a new teacher, he learned to read French, but Lao as well, using Thai textbooks since there were no Lao ones. Katay played a key role in the anti-colonial movement by co-founding the Lao Issara. He wrote prolifically, so his writings came to embody the movement. As noted below, Katay's rewriting of Lao colonial history created the first truly nationalist history. Like others, he espoused the idea of a Xāt Lao, which mirrored his own embracing of his identity as Lao. He quoted approvingly a French scholar who wrote of a pure Lao race: "The Laotian (Lao)… is of all the Thais the one who has preserved the purest [blood], with however a proportion of Aryan blood much more considerable than in the other varieties…" (Katay 1948b). In the same work, Katay divided the country into Lao, "Kha" and "Meo," which was the same racial classification used in RLG statistics. In 1958, the ultra-nationalist Committee for the Defense of National Interests also praised the purity of the Lao race.

Inventing tradition at the Vientiane Buddhist Institute

Lao elite first envisioned a cultural nation – prefiguring a political one – at the Vientiane Buddhist Institute. This library and Pali school opened in February 1931 under the leadership of Prince Phetsarath Rattanavongsa assisted by Sila Viravong, who never went to Europe

for education, unlike his peers. It created a modern cultural nationalism holding sway even to the present in some respects. As Creak observes, Laos, like Ireland, had to realize its own independent culture before it could seek political independence (2015). The cultural works produced provided a blueprint for mass movements, including Lao Renovation, which was permitted by French authorities as they warily lifted the political repression that had kept such pent-up feelings hidden below the surface.

Lao elites were concerned, for the first time, with creating a distinct Lao history, literature, grammar, poetry, calendar, religion, architecture and language. They reacted against their French education which taught them French history, culture and language, but not their own. They created a standardized culture uniting many diverse conceptions under the nation, thereby paving the way for popular nationalism. Lacking mass media, which undergird Lao Renovation, elites in the 1930s wrote the overarching cultural script that was distilled and popularized in the 1940s. Their works, appearing in journals and monographs, were the antecedent to the first popular nationalism witnessed during Lao Renovation.

Phetsarath actively participated in the invention of Lao tradition, writing the first modern Lao astrology textbook, which explained how to calculate calendars according to Lao methods (2011 [1951]). His project contained serious tensions, revealing central problems in the elite's cultural nationalist project: nationalists might revive culture, but only in a distorted fashion in which the original was irrevocably lost. For example, the "Lao" calendar Phetsarath sought to revive was itself based on an earlier Mon system. Phetsarath's project rejected the French calendar and wider colonial project of assimilation. Yet, Phetsarath had Western influences. In England, he stayed with an astronomy teacher:

> Mr. Lemon knew that I was interested in astronomy and often took me up on the roof to look at the sky and to see the movements of the planets through his large telescope. My great interest in astronomy after returning to Laos was the product of Mr. Lemon's advice about these matters.
>
> *("3349" 1978)*

Phetsarath was driven to revive Lao astrology, yet drew on diverse sources. In his preface, he claimed that astrology was a lost science. No one could be found who knew it anymore, which he linked to the decline of Laos since the fall of Lan Xang. Phetsarath faced a serious problem: how could he revive Lao astrology if there was no one left to teach him?

> When I did see the difficulties to make oneself a new calendar and the lack of understanding in calendar texts like this, then [I] had even more of an interest, wanting to study the science of ancient astrology more greatly. But were [one] to seek a teacher, a person who understands this science, [they] were rare, or [one] might even say that there was not any [teacher] at all. I thus needed to seek, research [and] learn by myself, according to the texts of the Lao, Khmer and Thai ancestors. These texts also might bear good fruit. Yet, in these texts there was no explanation for the basis of various principles. Anyhow, I still hold that the texts of the three races [Lao, Khmer, Thai] are good teachers for me.
>
> *(2011 [1951])*

Striving to recover a distinctly Lao calendar, Phetsarath found that he was too late. What he was searching for was already lost. Filling in the gaps, he relied on Thai and Cambodian works. Phetsarath was not simply recovering old Lao traditions, nor merely preserving them,

but recreating and re-inventing them. Before modern times, no Lao had ever thought of making a "Lao" calendar, only a Buddhist one. Phetsarath carved out a Lao Buddhism in the process, transitioning from a universal religion to a national one, a uniquely nationalist endeavor. An authentic Lao culture, where it had been lost, was created by cultural geniuses among the elite.

Sila Viravong, Phetsarath's secretary, wrote the first Lao grammar in 1935, thereby staking a claim to the independence of the Lao language. He also wrote a treatise codifying Lao poetry, explaining it distinctiveness from Thai poetry. Like Phetsarath, Sila did not have any teacher when he codified the rules of Lao poetry and had to make up the verse rules, inevitably drawing from Thai (Koret 1999). By then Sila was becoming an important intellectual among the Lao elite, but this was not inevitable. Born in Roi-et, Northeast Thailand, to a farming family, he trained to become a Thai judge before quitting after being racially abused in Bangkok for being Lao. He recounted this pivotal episode:

> I read a book called… "The Suppression of the Rebellion of Ai Anou of Vientiane"… [where] they called King Anou "Ai" Anou and his wife Queen Khamporng was called "Ee" Khamporng. [Finishing] this story, I felt extremely hurt and angry, and the idea of national liberation arose very strongly. From that time on, I urged my fellow monastics… to form a group to liberate Laos, even though we had no power or knowledge of politics, only anger and resentment.
>
> *(2004)*

Ai (ไอ้) means "bastard" or "fool," so the offense Sila felt is obvious. It is also how adults address children, portraying Lao as helpless wards of Thai. Westerners in Bangkok recorded that speaking Lao would cause Thai to call them monkeys. The Lao Renovation newspaper printed political cartoons mocking Thai as monkeys. Such antagonism was formative in the development of Lao nationalism. Until this point, Sila tried to assimilate to the dominant Thai culture, but after being subjected to racist abuse awakened to the cause of Lao nationalism, in youthful anger.

Tradition was invented by the Lao elite at the Vientiane Buddhist Institute for political purposes. The nationalist movement would have been impossible, or very different, without it, but it also drew on diverse sources. French sponsored elite cultural works, but they suppressed any political element or emerging Lao nationalism. French colonialism maintained divisions within Laos, especially north and south, while assimilating Lao and denying any political rights, and even largely excluding Lao from the administration, employing Vietnamese instead. Some French suggested that Lao use Thai script or that Vat Sisaket be made into a museum, arousing opposition from Phetsarath, who was never a docile colonial subject.

Elite cultural nationalism cannot be separated from the mass popular nationalism promoted by the Issara independence movement (1945–1949), among others. Elsewhere, such a dichotomy may have existed, but in Laos, Phetsarath led the Vientiane Buddhist Institute and the Issara. Illustrating the connection, Issara printed broadsides on the back of Lao Renovation papers. Finally, according to Katay, a close follower, in the 1930s, Phetsarath already dreamed of an independent Laos as he "saw taking shape the future Lao state of which he passionately wanted independence and of which he molded the foundations with his hands" (*Lao Hakxa Sat* 1959). While Lao nationalism first took shape as cultural works, those working in the 1930s were not apolitical, and had serious differences with France that became all too obvious after World War II.

Loyalists: multiethnic nationalists?

World War II (1939–1945) was a pivotal moment when the French-sponsored Lao Renovation (1941–1945) spread nationalism to the masses for the first time. While the French tried to steer it to imbue loyalty to France, it unleashed nationalist forces that could not be controlled. One participant recalled, "we were well disciplined which gave us the feeling that Lao can rule themselves rather than the French or the Vietnamese" (Halpern 1964). After the War, the Issara declared independence, establishing the first post-colonial Lao state. Sisouk Na Champassak wrote, "the first awakening of a true Lao consciousness dates from 1945" (1961). On March 9, 1945, the uneasy truce between Japan and France ended in Indochina. Japanese jailed the French, while some Lao nationalists responded positively as others sided with France. The co-founders of Lao Renovation, Katay Sasorith and Nhouy Abhay, cooperated with Japan and joined the Issara. Nhouy ran a newspaper calling for "yellow races" to unite against the white race. Both he and Katay feared Vietnamese in Lao cities seeking to unite with a resurgent Vietnam.

When the Lao Issara emerged (1945–1946), Lao nationalists split between those loyal to France, the loyalists and those seeking immediate independence, the Issara. The resulting struggle lent a partisan edge to questions of nationalism. The Issara embraced the idea of an exclusionary Lao race seeking unity against France, while some loyalists espoused a multiethnic nationalism. Among loyalists, Nginn and Nhouy Abhay (who joined the loyalists in 1946) produced many works on Lao culture. When not publishing in *France-Asie* or *Sud-est*, they wrote in *Kinnari*, a French-Lao cultural review. Yet, their vision of nationalism confronted serious problems of cultural alienation and questions of identity. This raised doubts among loyalists and ultimately led them to reject the nascent inclusive nationalism in favor of the exclusionary one.

Loyalists were more likely to champion cross-cultural currents of their time. They did not often invoke Xāt Lao, as the Issara did, but spoke of a multiethnic country, as an anonymous author writing under the pseudonym "Lao Blood" (ລືອດລາວ) did:

> Since ancient times a country might have people of the same race [Xāt], but in the present it is not like that because communication connects [peoples] back and forth together easily. Clever countries that have exceedingly powerful weapons can collect small, tiny countries to unite them and keep [them] with itself. Therefore, in the present [one] does not see any country at all in the world that may be entirely of a single race living together.
>
> *(1947)*

This inclusive view, while perhaps a product of a colonial discourse legitimizing foreign domination, promised an inclusive, albeit fragile nationalism compared to the idea of a single Lao race and nation. This nationalism addressed the multiethnic realities of the country far better than the ultra-nationalist Issara who tended to deny any minorities even existed.

Loyalists are demonized for promoting French culture at the expense of their own. Some LPDR history works have even referred to this period as one of French "cultural pollution" (Souneth et al. 2000). Loyalists were perceived as forgetting their culture in their fascination with the West. Their willingness to transgress cultural boundaries was reviled by Issara, who felt themselves so deeply Lao. In one appeal to loyalists, Issara went so far as to say, "never forget you are Lao" (Katay 1948a). Issara were Westernized too, but their political demands buttressed by anti-colonialism delineated important boundaries which loyalists

lacked. Loyalists confronted deep contradictions. Could one support French rule and still be nationalist? Could one speak French fluently and still promote Lao language and culture?

Loyalists feared that Issara were too close to the Vietnamese. Both were strongly anti-Vietnamese. They resented that their cities and colonial administration were dominated by Vietnamese to the point they felt like second-class citizens in their own country. But Issara strategically allied with Vietminh to resist French rule. Loyalists feared that Issara would deliver Laos to Vietnam and sought French protection. Loyalists had their own brand of nationalism regardless of political entanglements with France and belief that Laos was not ready for immediate independence. Yet, loyalists still maintained a French-Lao Friendship trope to frame their works. Cultural studies appearing in Kinnari exhibited French influence. Kinnari contributors were proud heirs of French culture and learning, but tensions remained. The name of the magazine suggested this. Maha Phoumy Chitaphong referred to a *kinnari* as a being whose "head is Vietnamese, chest is Lao, body is French…one may not say with certainty, truly what it is" (1946). Loyalists faced tensions between essentialist notions of Lao nationalism juxtaposed with more transgressive views. They raised questions suggesting the limits of multiethnic nationalism. They debated whether to call the country "Lao" or "Laos" while questions of identity emerged from French-Lao pupils.

Writing about learning French, a Lao pupil raised profound questions about French-Lao identity. To him, a true meeting of Lao and French was impossible, each isolated, unable to access the other; and those who tried became dislocated and lost. His experiences showed limits for any nascent French-Lao identity. They suggest why so many Lao of his time sought out an essentialist, virulently nationalist idea of a Lao race, which promised an antidote to the rising cultural alienation among French-Lao who wrestled with questions of identity. In "Will Lao Be Learned?" Phouvong (Phimmasone?) gave a stark account of his experiences as a student in a French school (1947). He described the difficulty of studying in a bilingual context, torn between two languages:

> I feel a great difficulty to express myself in French, it not being my mother tongue. I often would like to write. I take the pen. I make effort to construct phrases. Ideas come to me, but vocabulary and ease I lack to make a useful work. Why then not write in Lao? The difficulty is still greater, when it comes to translating Lao thought by a truly Lao mind. For a Lao out of French-Lao schools, it is the habit to envision things according to the French mind. To express his ideas, he is obliged to make two efforts: to express himself first in French, then translate his ideas expressed in French into Lao. The task is not easy. We spend to this effect, twice the time.

Phouvong faced the unexpected dilemma of being unable to express himself in Lao as he became more exposed to French. He was not alone, as 36,716 Lao students entered French schools in 1949 (Kingdom of Laos 1961). If Phouvong spoke for the experiences of emerging French-Lao, it was an identity fraught with difficulties.

Phouvong's difficulties led to becoming alienated from his culture and language. Rendering his thoughts into a meaningful expression became difficult, even impossible, to express to Lao not touched by French learning:

> The translation of a French text to Lao is not often faithful. The ideas distort themselves more or less. One could maintain the French thoughts, but the Lao expression becomes defective and perfectly unintelligible for those who have not received French instruction. *(1947)*

If the French-Lao identity was distinct, then it is distinguished by alienation from other Lao:

> We learn to speak Lao correctly, avoid the habit, that seems a little ridiculous in the eyes of foreigners, of speaking gibberish mixing Lao with French. We speak French among Lao, we use French words to express certain ideas, because most often the Lao word does not come spontaneously to mind, [by] lack of frequent use. We joke, we mock ourselves. We search [for] means to remedy it.

Phouvong doubts whether French-Lao identity might ever become whole.

> The French mind does not conceive an idea [in] the same manner as the Lao mind. I cite an example: "d'où revenez-vous?" [Where are you coming from?] CHAO PAY SAI MA (you – to go – where – to come). It is a clear example of the phenomenon in question. Of the two sides, in French like in Lao, the notion of return (*render*) – that of return (*retour*) is the same …[while] French pay particular attention to the idea of the return (*retour*), Lao adopt on the contrary a different method, the chronological walk. [Lao] notions render one following the other in a chronological order. "Where is-you go for to return?" One could render the same idea by the same words: Chao Kap Ma Te Say (you return from where?). But it is bad Lao. This example shows that this is a general case, Lao and the French languages render the same ideas, not only by different words, but also by a difference of construction and by a different order, resulting in the difference of operations of the mind.

Phouvong's years of study led him to see many gaps between the two cultures. He no longer held the optimism that comes from naively regarding possibilities for cross-cultural contact. In his study, he had to give up his Lao mind, where it was incompatible with the French mind, to express himself in the new language. But doing so lost full access to his native tongue, leaving him stranded between two cultures, speaking utterly unintelligible pidgin phrases with un-Francophone-Lao. Finally, it was not a matter of different vocabulary or even grammar but of a different mind entirely, or as he put it "the Lao mind, to conceive things, follows a different route from that employed by Westerners."

The dilemmas confronting loyalists to bolster French-Lao identity was revealed by another author, T. N. Singharaj, who debated the issue "should we say *Laotien* or Lao?" (1947). First, Singharaj explained the French impact on Laos: "the first French [who] came to Laos would have certainly said the 'country of Laos,' but this did not affect Lao discourse until later." To find the original, authentic form, Singharaj went back to before French colonialism while marking how deeply it impacted Lao, symbolized by the addition of the "s" to their country's name. "Here it is, in a word, the origin of 'Laos', [of] purely French origin…" To Singharaj, the French, by adding the "s" and obscuring the true form, then introduced a question of authenticity, as many variants were introduced (Laocien, Laosien). France's arrival to the country introduced confusion and ambiguity about terminology, but to loyalists, it struck deeper to question their identity, symbolized by the cloud of uncertainty surrounding the proper appellation. This rupture introduced what could only be described as an identity crisis felt among loyalist Lao. Singharaj felt that it must be addressed.

Singharaj believed that Lao discourse remained unaffected by French, or even Thai: "Whatever this term 'Laos' be imposed in the administrative and international milieu, it does not prevent the Lao and their neighbors of the right bank of the Mekong of saying between them and always 'MUONG LAO' (country of Laos)." To him, Lao remained unaffected

after being colonized and divided up to live under numerous states. He saw an eternal, unchanging identity, a Xāt Lao which survived, immutable and expressed in the local vernacular, not elite but popular, which excluded French, Thai, Vietnamese and Chinese. Its appearance in Kinnari suggests its ubiquity in Lao thought of the time. Singharaj continued:

> It is right therefore for a new Laos that is organized and to which the liberating French come to grant generously democratic liberties, to fix, for all time, the choice of the one or the other term. SHOULD WE SAY LAOTIEN OR LAO?

He concluded: "Finally, the wish dearest of all, this would be to see used only the term 'Lao' to designate the inhabitants of Muong Lao, both by the [French] as by foreign nations…"

The dilemma was for Lao to accommodate French, and submit to using Laotien, or for French to follow Lao usage. Raising the question was a subtle way to query whose interests would predominate after 1945? Singharaj called for Laos to be called Lao, embracing the idea of a single Lao race, which did not address the problem of inclusivity in a multiethnic state. Singharaj was too concerned with confronting foreign powers to consider a more inclusive form of nationalism, much less worry about non-Lao minorities living within the territorial boundaries. This was a common mistake made by many Lao nationalists of the time who were concerned with resisting foreign power at the cost of thinking through the implications their conception of the nation had for the one of the most diverse countries in the region. Some loyalists called for a more inclusive vision of the nation. They also raised serious questions about the prominence and spread of French culture. Simply because they decided to remain in Laos after French reconquest, and to participate in the postconquest government, did not preclude them from expressing anti-French views. Thus, even loyalists embraced the idea of Xāt Lao while struggling with questions of identity and cultural alienation in a cosmopolitan milieu.

The appeal of Issara anti-colonial nationalism

The Issara embrace of Xāt Lao by the anti-colonial route was rather easier. They resisted French influence. Writing in exile (1946–1949), they sought to reclaim their history from French colonial historians. This produced the first nationalist Lao history ever written. The loyalists were not the only ones to continue the cultural studies started in the 1930s. The Issara in exile, having broken from France, charted a new direction in cultural nationalism, going beyond what was possible living under French rule, yet clearly building on earlier experiences. Rather than working in the spirit of French-Lao friendship, the Issara, led by Katay, began to seriously question the role of the French in Lao history. The works of French colonial historians, whom the loyalists cited approvingly, were mercilessly interrogated by Katay, who wrote many Issara works. The Issara sought to decolonize the mind and culture of the Lao. They saw that it was not just a matter of getting the French to physically leave the country, but that Lao, to safeguard true independence, must view themselves differently than they had under French rule. To them, the idea of a Lao race was a clarion call to unite the country and throw out the foreign invader.

Issara questioned the founding myth of colonial Laos, Auguste Pavie's so-called "Conquest of Hearts" (Katay 1948a). In this event, Pavie traveled to Luang Prabang in 1887 to serve as the French vice-consul, and while there, reputedly saved King Oun Kham from an attack on the palace led by the son of the ruler of Muang Lai, Deo Van Tri (who killed the Luang Prabang Viceroy among others). Afterward, Pavie said that the King asked for French

protection. Katay was the first to question this account and was critical of the "commonly accepted version" given by French colonial historians. He knew of the event's importance because it was repeatedly invoked by French to legitimate their rule. Moreover, in the "Conquest of Hearts" story, Lao were portrayed as willing subjects of France, since it was the King himself who had called for protection. The myth portrayed all French-Lao relations under the halo of "friendship," casting France as unassailably benevolent. Katay complained that even French anti-colonists were won over by Pavie's "Conquest of Hearts," thereby insidiously concealing French domination. His revisionist views were aptly conveyed in the pamphlet's title:

> The truth of the sack of Luang Prabang by Deo Van Tri in June 1887 – the Machiavellian role of Auguste Pavie in this historic event which decided the fate of Laos, by bringing the country under the protection of France.

Katay alleged that Pavie was responsible for engineering the attack on Luang Prabang, which positioned him to "save" the Lao king, thereby winning a foothold in Laos for French colonialism. He questioned the "commonly accepted account" which "only comes from the account of Auguste Pavie" and which no historian has tried "to verify." He presented a "second version" of events based on investigations by the princes of Luang Prabang, who collected information from the family of Deo Van Tri and the people of Muang Lai. He also questioned the "old people" of Luang Prabang about Pavie's version of events. He tried to "examine objectively and impartially the facts, to reconcile" the different versions and concluded that the version given by Pavie was "strongly subject to caution."

Katay investigated Pavie's own accounts, especially as he recorded them in the *Mission Pavie*. By doing so, Katay re-read the colonial-era documents to create a counter-narrative of events. He quoted Pavie's journal where Pavie wrote: "the idea, which I am enamored – to make Laos – a French country…" to claim Pavie was an imperialist. He went beyond colonial records, relating that many people in Luang Prabang were already suspicious of Pavie ("*thane nam oy*," or "Mr. Sugar Cane") even before the disaster. He pointed to entries in Pavie's journal which he said proved that Pavie planned to destroy Luang Prabang, such as an entry from days before the attack recording a Thai official in the city accusing Pavie of arming Deo Van Tri's men. In other places, Katay outright denied certain entries in Pavie's journal, such as Pavie's claim to have offered to defend the town before the impending attack, saying "this assertion is formally denied by the old people of Luang Prabang."

The most serious accusations focused on Pavie's activities leading up to the attack in April–May, when Pavie toured the Nam Ou valley and Muang Ngoi, which were both on the invasion route taken by Deo Van Tri. Katay accused Pavie of contacting Deo Van Tri to plot the attack. Katay alleged that even though Pavie was warned of the danger of bandits in the area, he still traveled north with some unspoken goal. Katay suggested that Pavie wanted "precise information" on Deo Van Tri's troops. Katay focused on a ten-day period Pavie spent at Muang Ngoi, when Pavie was already returning to Luang Prabang. Katay observed that Pavie's journal was kept so "meticulously," yet gave no reason for his stay there nor what he did in the intervening time. In other places, Katay openly accused Pavie of inciting Deo Van Tri to attack Luang Prabang:

> It would be at the instigation of Auguste Pavie that Deo Van Tri undertook the sack of Luang Prabang. Auguste Pavie had said (or made to be said) to Deo-Van-Tri that his brothers and brother-in-law were taken in secret to Luang Prabang to the house of the

> Phaya Muang Saen (an official of the court), [and] that he must hasten to free them if he did not want to see them taken to Bangkok, that the city of Luang Prabang, emptied of all its young elite…was no longer able to defend itself, that it contained treasures sufficiently important to cover the cost of an armed expedition etc.

When the final attack came, Pavie's assistant was "miraculously" ready to intervene to succor the King in a boat ready and waiting. This assistant woke up early in the morning and waited near the palace. Katay called this a "well planned scenario."

Katay noted further that Pavie never returned to Laos after he left in September 1895. To Katay, it showed that Pavie never really cared about the country, but only saw it as a gift to bestow to imperial France. Katay even suggested that Pavie did not return because he was ashamed and feared that Lao would figure out his deception. At any rate, "many Lao, young and old, are convinced" of the truth of Pavie's role in the destruction of Luang Prabang. The Issara did not limit itself to writing critiques. Even before gaining power in 1945, they boasted of having torn down a statue of Pavie in Vientiane "the day after the entry of Japanese troops." Later, they destroyed another Pavie statue in Luang Prabang when seizing it in November 1945. The statue in Vientiane had stood in the garden of the Résident-Supérieur's residence since 1932 to commemorate Pavie's death. Katay concluded that it was likely that Pavie had incited the attack of Deo Van Tri and thus, "the French occupation of Laos is vicious in its origin. So that the 'unanimous consent of Laos to place themselves under the protection of France' does not arise in truth from a will freely determined…" Katay argued that the colonial bond was never based on anything but deception and violence. He saw the French not as saviors of Lao, but as enemies of the nation. Finally, a new nationalist sentiment was visible in Katay's writings that could not be openly expressed under the French as his work was dedicated: "To the memory of all those who heroically fell for the Cause of Lao National Independence." Katay's veneration for the unknown soldier sought to inculcate a willingness to die for the nation which is nationalism par excellence.

Conclusion: two visions of Lao nationalism

Modern Lao nationalism has been haunted by two visions: a virulently nationalist Lao race symbolized by Xāt Lao or a more inclusive multiethnic form of nationalism. Even today there remains a fundamental tension between the founding of the LPDR to free Laos from foreign influence, and its claim to a multiethnic Lao nation. The very act of rooting out foreign influence to purify the nation inevitably raises questions about who belongs in the nation and who is foreign. This risks tearing at the fabric of an ethnically diverse society like Laos. The French-Lao, as much as they are vilified by LPDR histories, presaged LPDR multiethnic nationalism founded on the "multiethnic Lao people" in as much as at times they saw themselves not just as a single race, but as an inclusive, multiethnic nation. To the degree that the LPDR fails to live up to promises of ethnic equality, it too has been captured by the hyper-nationalist idea of a Lao race just as had its old foe, the RLG. Pride in Lao culture and history can quickly devolve into ethnic chauvinism in Laos, like anywhere else in the world. But between these two poles of identity, it must be admitted that the Lao elite played a leading role in crafting their vision of the nation.

Nationalism did not suddenly appear in 1941 with the French-sponsored Lao Nhay campaign. Indeed, it reached back to the 1890s when ethno-nationalism first appeared. It developed in many stages. One key formative stage was the invention of a Lao tradition at the Vientiane Buddhist Institute. While this was a French colonial institution, the French were

both positive and negative influences on Lao nationalism; positive as a model, and negative as racist, oppressive and denying equality or political freedom to Lao. One did not need to be a communist to be anti-French. At a time when communism in Laos was almost entirely a Vietnamese affair, the Lao elite developed unique forms of nationalism. Even though multiethnic nationalism failed to hold Lao attention, study of its failure is important for revealing how and why Lao nationalism developed as it did; and how it became captured by Xāt Lao – a virulently nationalist idea of a Lao race.

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