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Plumeria Pens Are Mightier than Swords: Intersecting Colonialism, Literature, History, and the Last Known Book of French-Language Traditionalist Poetry Ever Published in Laos

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Abstract

During the era of imperialism, official direct-rule policies throughout the French Empire deemed existing peoples, cultures, and religions as inferior when compared to France. However, colonial officials in French-Laos governed differently. France's administrators there actively promoted Lao values by encouraging local writers to (re)imagine themselves and their ancient culture through the production of literature. This distinctive style of colonialism by way of literary works was implemented as a defence strategy to protect and unify Laos against any threats to France's colonial hegemony in Southeast Asia. Paradoxically, that same French-sponsored policy with respect to promoting Lao sociocultural mores through the publication of literature also contributed to the rise of nationalism and independence. During the post-colonial era, Lao authors nonetheless continued to write literary works in that same colonialist manner. Poems, books, and stories highlighting the virtues of conservative Lao culture were now published to protect a politically divided country whose stability and survival were being undermined by a growing communist insurgency. That method of traditionalist writing was especially emphasised by Lao-Francophone poet Somchine Nginn in his book *Dok Champa*, which is the last known collection of original French poetry ever published in Laos. This paper historically examines pre-and post-colonial Laos by deliberating on how literature and Nginn's *Dok Champa* were used to (re)form, preserve, and protect Lao values against political and cultural menaces during the tumultuous eras prior to the country's transition to Marxism.

Keywords: Laos; French colonialism; literary colonialism; literature as a weapon; Southeast Asia; Somchine Nginn; Lao PDR; Lao Nhay; resistance literature; Francophonie; Francophone Southeast Asia; Lao culture; Lao literature

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1. Introduction

In terms of scholarly work relating to Southeast Asia, the small, landlocked country of Laos is frequently overlooked. One reason for this can be traced back to the era of colonialism in the region. At that time, the French paid little attention to their Lao colony. Few investments were made in Laos until France's regional hegemony was threatened by neighbouring powers (notably Siam/Thailand). Lacking a realistic defence structure to protect the totality of their *Indochine* possessions, the French employed unique governing strategies in Laos that were designed to defend, unify, and control the Lao people. This meant that instead of instituting France's usual colonial approach to governance that concentrated on assimilation and/or cultural erasure of subjugated populations, officials in French-Laos championed local customs via a literary and sociocultural movement named "Lao Nhay."

Lao writers were therefore encouraged to (re)imagine themselves as a people with an exceptionally perceptible history and culture, albeit one that was now fully protected under the aegis of a sympathetically paternalistic, yet "compassionate" France. An unintentional outcome of this anomalous project was the creation of a nationalist assemblage known as "Lao Issara," a movement that stimulated the colony's independence.

Following the liberation of Laos, the same style of traditionalist writing continued under the new royal government, but with some key distinctions. Literary works whose previous desideratum promoted Lao virtues as a defence against Thailand metamorphosed into ideological warnings designed to support the monarchy and counteract an emerging communist threat. That continuance of "Lao Nhay" style writing is especially present in *Dok Champa*: *Fleur de frangipani*, which is the last known book of traditionalist poems ever published in French in Laos. The collection was authored by Somchine Nginn, a Lao-Francophone intellectual whose contributions to language, literature, and grammar remain historically significant. However, despite that remarkable legacy, Nginn's publications in French have all but disappeared from scholarly view and his importance has been resolutely minimised. This is principally due to his ties to the colonial era and the monarchy that followed. Once the royal government fell and Laos transitioned to the Lao People's Democratic Republic in 1975 (Lao PDR), most vestiges linked to colonialism and the French language were either downplayed or forgotten. Yet, despite being dismissed or relegated to the dustbin of history, French-inspired written publications pre-and-post independence were essential elements that helped motivate the sociocultural and sociopolitical (re)creation of modern Laos.

Thus, the objective of this paper is to discuss these eras in Laos by historically deliberating on how French-sponsored Lao literature that focused on traditional values was designed to unify, insulate, and protect Laos from all internal and external menaces. Because most readers may be unfamiliar with France's former role in Laos, this study begins with an elemental historical overview to explain how and why literary works were employed by French officials to preserve their colonial space. Subsequently, the second ambition of the present research introduces Somchine Nginn's *Dok Champa*, a book of French-language poetry that continued to follow pre-established colonialist methods of writing to protect the Lao monarchy in the 1960s. As political strife deeply divided Laos during the early-Cold War, Nginn's traditionalist poetry written in French represented an updated literary defence mechanism in a country that was increasingly being challenged by global geopolitical events. Following a historical summation of these periods, a few poems from Nginn's *Dok Champa* are presented in a non-stylistic manner to demonstrate how his writing *en français* supported a conservative Lao society that was rapidly fading and changing.

2. Laos from the Lan Xang to France

Notwithstanding a long history of migratory movements of people throughout Southeast Asia, a small yet feisty Lao kingdom known as the Lan Xang (Land of a Million Elephants) once dominated the land that is now defined as modern Laos. Throughout its history, this ancient Lao-ruled *royaume* faced repetitive external challenges. For more than a millennium, the borders dividing the Lan Xang from the powerful kingdoms of Burma and Siam were fluid and constantly in flux, which created much tension for the less dominant Lao people (Stuart-Fox 1995, 1997; Lockhart 2006; Ivarsson 2008). Furthermore, domestic relations within the Lao-dominated spaces were also not always harmonious. Territorial partitions of the Lan Xang territory that occurred in 1707 and 1713 led to the formation of three separate Lao kingdoms, each with their own agendas, allies, and enemies (Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Champassak). Additionally, forced alliances and/or continuous conflicts with the neighbouring and more aggressive Siamese resulted in constantly chang-

ing structures of governance in all three Lao monarchies (Ivarsson 2008). As such, countless wars and skirmishes occurred between the Lan Xang and their more powerful rivals in Siam. Whenever Lao sovereigns responded to intermittent Siamese dominance, they were often humiliated, enslaved, displaced, and/or treated as vassal states. When France first entered the Lao region in the late 1800s during their colonial project, they quickly became cognisant of that long tumultuous history (Stuart-Fox 1995, 1997; Ivarsson 2008; Rehbein 2007; Rust 2012).

After first conquering the kingdoms of Annam, Tonkin, Cochinchina (i.e., present-day Vietnam) and the Khmer lands (i.e., present-day Cambodia) in the late 1800s, arriving French colonisers sought new routes that would bring them to the busy markets of Hunan in southern China (Stuart-Fox 1997). To accomplish this, ambitious explorers such as Ernest Doudart de Lagrée and Francis Garnier travelled up the Mekong River, where they encountered the Lao peoples residing on both sides. This important waterway divides the Lao regions in half geographically and culturally, with mountains located on one side and a vast agricultural plateau on the other. Numerous "*muangs*" (small, governed communities) made up the Lao areas on both shores and many of these villages were surveyed by Auguste Pavie in 1893. Following these initial expeditions, the French signed commercial deals with leaders of the more dominant Lao "*muangs*" along with the monarchies governing them (Stuart-Fox 1995, 1997). As the new coloniser in this part of Southeast Asia, France wanted to send a message to the neighbouring Siamese that the ancient Lan Xang region of the Lao would soon be restored (Ivarsson 2008). One of the ways that Pavie convinced the most powerful Lao royals in the Luang Prabang kingdom to allow for French protection and co-operation relates to his role in allegedly saving King Oun Kham from capture and death at the hands of invading rebels. Pavie describes this event and the agreements that emerged from it in compassionately affable terms. For him, French sovereignty over Laos was achieved via a "conquest of hearts," which occurred after he won the trust of the Luang Prabang monarch (Pavie 1903; Stuart-Fox 1995, 1997). However, recent research conducted by Wolfson-Ford (2020, 2024, 2026) and others has since challenged that French-described heartfelt narrative by questioning France's true role and plan in that event. No matter, after the Pavie expeditions, France unified the entire territory into a single entity by dividing it into three zones under the name of "Laos."[1] The royals of Luang Prabang retained a degree of autonomy as a French "protectorate" whilst all other "*muangs*" and regions were governed directly by France.

The French chose the ancient city of Vientiane to serve as their administrative capital, even though it was virtually empty at that time (Stuart-Fox 1997). One reason for the scarcity of people can be traced to a war with Siam that was started by former Vientiane King Chao Anouvong in 1826–1827. Due to his frustrations concerning the various degrees of Siamese domination over his kingdom (by which he first expressed his pettiness vis-à-vis Siam by building a prominent temple[2]), Anouvong united with his son Prince Nyô of the monarchy of Champassak (where Nyô ruled as vice-King), after which they devised a plan to usurp the suzerainty of Bangkok. In addition to gathering military forces to carry out the attempted coup against the Siamese, Anouvong and Nyô anticipated obtaining crucial assistance from the British since they were present and expanding their own dominance in Southeast Asia at the time (Ngaosyvathn and Ngaosyvathn 1998). However, when attempting to invade the Siamese capital militarily, Anouvong and Nyô's rebellion was crushed, and the expected British stayed away from the conflict. Furthermore, the rebellious Lao King Anouvong was captured, paraded in a cage around the city, and ultimately imprisoned. Forces associated with Siam went on a vengeful counter offensive and soon incinerated Vientiane, aside from temples (Stuart-Fox 1997; Ngaosyvathn and Ngaosyvathn 1998; Ivarsson 2008). As for Prince Nyô, he was also incarcerated; later

meeting his own demise after falling from the roof of a temple during a thwarted attempt to escape from confinement (Ngaosyvathn and Ngaosyvathn 1998). Thus, for the French colonisers, the choice of Vientiane as their colonial seat of governance represented a subtle symbol that the ancient capital would be reinstated under France's control (Stuart-Fox 1995, 1997). Apart from this gesture (and to gain support amongst the Lao peoples), the French colonial government invested huge sums of money to restore sacred temples and sites that either fell into disrepair or were sacked by Siam over centuries (Kourilsky 2018).

Notwithstanding these investments, Laos was never settled in the same way as France's profitable Vietnamese territory. For this reason, the colony remained notoriously underdeveloped in terms of infrastructure and minuscule investments were made (Ivarsson 2008; Rust 2012). Apart from that, French *colons* and officials wrote fondly about this faraway corner of the world. Laos was seen through France's colonial lens as an exotic place that "titillated French travellers" and civil servants viewed Lao people as "naïve, charming, indolent, and childlike" (Stuart-Fox 1997, pp. 41–42). Stuart-Fox (1997, p. 41) further mentions how the Lao people were viewed "with a mixture of affection and exasperation." These types of characterisations fit into Stoler's work on colonial anxiety where pejorative descriptions of colonised subjects were often seen as essential tools of maintaining empire and control (Stoler 2002, 2009). In his book entitled *Orientalism*, Edward Saïd builds upon that imperialistic mindset by discussing how and when the French and British Empires (amongst others) engaged in colonialism, they did so by distinguishing the peoples inhabiting the conquered spaces as the "other" (Saïd 1978). Even when depictions put forth by colonialists lacked more outright racist monikers, Saïd's arguments with respect to, and a fascination with, one's otherness can be applied to Laos. Additional research supporting Saïd's theories maintains that arriving European civil servants in Africa and Asia described their subjects as being exotically enchanting, innocent, or childlike (Bhatti et al. 2023). These belittling characterisations were designed to conflict from the more self-described and supposedly civilised European models of living. As such, Western cultures were deemed more ambitious, industrious, and superior. As Saïd's extensive work denotes, negative representations of a subservient space were often devised through literature, art, and cartography, all of which placed colonised Eastern cultures into a singular, misleading representation when compared to the West.

Likewise, the French depicted the Lao people as kind simpletons who were "lazy" and incapable of administrative work (Stuart-Fox 1997, pp. 41–42). To offset their bias about the Lao people's labour capabilities, colonial administrators encouraged thousands of Vietnamese to move into Laos to staff offices and work in the new industries being introduced. French officials aggressively encouraged migrants from Vietnam to reside in Lao cities, which they did in large numbers (although rural areas remained overwhelmingly Lao). Over time, so many people from Vietnam arrived that they soon outnumbered the Lao in several urban centres (notably Paksé, Savannakhet, Thakhek, and Vientiane). Were it not for later events that altered the trajectory of colonialism in Southeast Asia (e.g., World War II, the re-establishment of French control afterwards, and Vietnam's declaration of independence), the Lao would have been outnumbered in their own country (Stuart-Fox 1997, p. 51). Political representation of Lao people in the French colonial structure was also delayed. When analysing this, Stuart-Fox (1997, p. 43) writes "the educated élite was small enough and dependent enough to be convinced by French arguments that the primary need was for modernisation under French direction, not political representation." As such, the training of Lao individuals for these tasks did not increase above minimal levels until the late-1930s.

Pejorative characterisations at the hands of a conqueror were nothing new for the Lao people because discrimination directed towards them predated the arrival of France to

Southeast Asia. As such, Saïd's post-colonial thesis is neither exclusive nor entirely applicable with respect to Laos. Quite often, the Siamese and others described the Lao in a similar fashion as the French (or often worse) by using similar anecdotal portraitures as reasons for their own regional pursuits (and enslavement of the Lao) over the course of many centuries (Stuart-Fox 1997; Ivarsson 2008). Moreover, even within the Lan Xang kingdoms, the more powerful Lao groups in power frequently subjugated numerous ethnocultural minorities under their control, notably the Hmong, the Khmu, and other Hill Tribes (Enfield 1999; Goudineau 2015; Schlemmer 2017; Ivarsson 2008).[3]

Arguably, the most valuable area of the Lao space consisted of the vast arable plains located on the west bank of the Mekong River; a vast flatland known as the Khorat Plateau. Because France did not have the means to protect Laos in the early years of their colonial project in Southeast Asia, defensive measures were needed to safeguard and cushion their profitable Vietnamese territory from outside encroachment (Stuart-Fox 1997; Pholsena 2006; Wisaijorn 2022). To placate the powerful Siamese, various treaties were signed between France and Siam, most of which re-drew or delineated borders. As a result of these agreements (one of which was forced on Siam by a strong French naval presence in Bangkok), the lands that once made up the historic Lan Xang kingdoms were divided between them. In one such deal with King Rama V of Siam, all territorial claims to the east of the Mekong were given to France (aside from a riverside de-militarised zone), and the entire left bank was officially ceded to the Siamese (i.e., the Khorat Plateau). In addition, the French signed an *entente-cordiale* with the British in terms of officially recognising one another's regional zones of influence across Southeast Asia (Stuart-Fox 1997, p. 26). The end result of these French-forced diplomatic agreements with Siam and the United Kingdom meant that France now controlled the Mekong River from its Vietnamese delta north into China. For their part, the Siamese obtained a huge, agriculturally fertile region ripe for their exploitation, which they quickly renamed "Isan."

This territorial exchange was a fatal blow to the descendants of the Lan Xang because millions of ethnic Lao were cut off from the geographic totality of their ancestral territory. Even worse, the newly created Isan-Lao would soon face harsh discrimination and marginalisation from their Siamese overlords. The consequences of this land swap still resonate today: Over 80% of the world's Lao speakers reside in the Isan region of Thailand and not in Laos (Ivarsson 2008; Wisaijorn 2022). Not everyone agreed with the new arrangement. Several French colonial officials expressed unhappiness that France's negotiators did not press the Siamese more forcefully with respect to keeping the entirety of the Lao peoples together with French-Laos (Stuart-Fox 1997, pp. 27–28). As such, these political treaties were neither expected nor desired to be permanent for France (Stuart-Fox 1997; Pholsena 2006). Despite assurances to the king of Siam that no further colonisation would occur, officials ensconced ulterior motives because the French and British both desiderated Siam (Stuart-Fox 1997, p. 20; Wisaijorn 2022). In a widely regarded study concerning the history of Laos during the colonial era, Stuart-Fox (1997, p. 20) argues that France coveted the Khorat Plateau as a desired starting point concerning any further attempts to colonise as much of Siam as possible (before the British moved to do the same from their Burmese and/or Malaya colonies). For the moment, the British favoured Siamese control over the Isan-Lao as a way in which to minimise French power in the Southeast Asia (Stuart-Fox 1997, pp. 28–29).

Simultaneously and treaties notwithstanding, Laos remained a vulnerable space for the French due to sociocultural and linguistic similarities between the Siamese and Lao. That proximity made France anxious (Stuart-Fox 1997). When examining the topic of anxiety felt by administrators of Western colonialism, archives of that era indicate how structural decisions such as these were often fuelled by the unstable knowledge of their occu-

pied regions (Stoler 2002, 2009). In terms of French uneasiness, France's representatives in *Indochine* understood that further protective tactics were imperatively essential because agreements and treaties made with the Siamese contained potential flaws (Stuart-Fox 1997; Ivarsson 2008).

3. Literature and (Re)Constructing Laos

Due to the fragmented structure that historically divided the Lao territory into small "*muangs*" spatially located in a trio of kingdoms juxtaposed with centuries of external conflicts, literature in all forms was largely confined to Buddhist temples (Phinith 1970; Peltier 1988; Kourilsky 2018). When discussing this topic, Phinith (1970, pp. 240–41) argues that this type of fragmentation meant that a teeming literary scene was mostly absent from Laos until the arrival of the French colonisers. That said, significant literary works did exist. Many of these important stories were written on palm leaves and lyrically recited via Lao *Morlam* music. Amongst them is *Phuen Viang* (ພື້ນວຽງ), an epic poem that chronicles the story of the war between Siam and the kingdom of Vientiane (Peltier 1988; Koret 1999). Another poetic text worth mentioning is *San Leup Pha Sun* (ສານລົບພະສຸນ, or *Extinguishing the Brilliance of the Sun*). This mystical tale was written in the 19th century, and it discusses social and political turmoil by employing Buddhist themes to conceal and disguise covert messages of defiance against foreign aggressors (Peltier 1988; Koret 1999).[4] Apart from literature written on palm leaves, an oral tradition of performance-based narrative retelling by troubadours and travelling theatre groups has also been an integral aspect of Lao culture for centuries. However, if one concentrates solely on published works, Phinith (1970, pp. 247–48) posits that most were almost exclusively designated for religious purposes. These types of writings in Pali mainly focused on Buddhist themes, and they were held within the space of temples or monasteries and/or were used by the various kingdom courts (Chamberlain 2005; Peltier 1988; Koret 1999). When discussing the formation of Lao literature, Phinith (1970, pp. 247–48) argues that books did not serve as a form of entertainment for the general populace. In contrast, a dynamic and flourishing literary culture thrived in neighbouring Siam, particularly during the early 1900s, a time marked by heightened Westernisation driven by Siamese kings King Rama IV and V as a political strategy to evade European colonisation (Phinith 1970; Peltier 1988; Stuart-Fox 1997; Enfield 1999; Rehbein 2007; Wisaijorn 2022).

In the 1930s, Siam experienced significant political turmoil that permanently changed the country. As a result, the governing structure of the Siamese kingdom was re-organised after a series of *coup d'états* aimed at ousting the monarchy. Following centuries of absolute rule, military and conservative élites forced King Rama VII to relinquish the throne, after which he fled to Switzerland. Once reconsolidating power in their favour, the armed forces who seized control renamed the country "Thailand," after which a vigorous campaign for cultural and national unification began. Stuart-Fox (1997) posits that this was necessary because the new Thai government viewed the Isan-Lao as a danger to the nation's existence. To deal with that potential problem, a large-scale "Thaification" initiative was subsequently enforced upon them. To divert attention towards Bangkok and away from French-Laos, several road and rail infrastructure projects were completed to and from Isan. Additionally, the Thai élite harboured their own expansionist motives concerning the Lao people under France's control. As such, the Bangkok government redoubled its efforts to convince people living in Isan as well as the French-Lao that their true ancestral connections were associated with Thailand (Ivarsson 2008; Wisaijorn 2022). To advance this pan-Thai-Lao strategy, schools were constructed, and the Isan-Lao were instructed to read, write, and communicate solely in Thai. However, this heavy-handed assimilationist approach had limited success because it did not reduce the number of Lao speakers, nor

did most cultural forms decrease across Isan (e.g., poetic storytelling via *Morlam* music, styles of dress, cuisine, etc). That said, the "Thaification" campaign did augment feelings of belonging to the Thai nation amongst the Isan-Lao by substantially increasing literacy in the Thai language (Ivarsson 2008; Gunn 2019; Wolfson-Ford 2020; Wisaijorn 2022).

The assimilation campaign in Isan alarmed France considerably because it was feared that the French-Lao could also be enticed by Thailand (Ivarsson 2008; Wisaijorn 2022). This trepidation was facilitated by increasingly available Thai media sources along the heavily populated Mekong valley, coupled with the fact that the Thai and Lao languages are mutually comprehensible (Enfield 1999). For France's colonial officials, these realities along with Thailand's larger population were dubiously troublesome. From the viewpoint of Thais, similarities between the two groups (Lao and Thai) outweighed any differences, particularly those imposed by external forces (i.e., France). Initially, French administrators were under the impression that the Isan-Lao would be readily attracted to France's more conventional emphasis on conservative Lao traditions over the push towards Westernisation that was being encouraged by the Bangkok government (Ivarsson 2008). As such, it was assumed that this distinction might encourage the Isan-Lao to cross the Mekong River and reunite with their French-Lao cousins to preserve their culture. Stuart-Fox (1997, p. 129) described these initial thoughts by stating "the French anticipated that the superiority of European administration amongst the Lao of the West Bank (Isan) over Siamese arrogance" would somehow "lead to a flow of population" to migrate across the Mekong. However, the Isan-Lao were primarily sustenance farmers who did not wish to leave their fertile land despite being subjected to official discriminatory policies that significantly marginalised them in Thailand. Therefore, other tactical strategies were needed to protect the Lao from the Thais.

The most effective defence advocated by France's colonial administrators was to elevate Lao sociocultural traditions as being distinct from Thailand through literary and religious initiatives. In terms of French colonialism that existed at that time, this method was unique. Elsewhere, the French way of life reigned supreme over that of all subjugated peoples in the empire. France's global colonies were ruled in such a way that local traditions were deemed culturally subsidiary by administrative decree. In both French-Africa and the French-Caribbean, official policies nullified existing societies as being inferior and local languages were never taught in schools. Eventually, young intellectuals from France's African and Caribbean colonies would rebel and express themselves against that colonial mindset as an act of defiance. Thus, at the very same time when colonial officials in Laos were promoting Lao culture to (re)construct *une identité laotienne*, a group of African and Caribbean students in Paris started to resist the French colonialist mindset by creating a style of resistance literature that eventually became known as *La Négritude*. Put another way, whereas official French policies dismissed African and Caribbean peoples as *pas civilisés*, elsewhere in the same empire, Lao traditions received full administrative support, albeit in ways that best served the interests and primary goals of *l'Empire* (Stuart-Fox 1997; Phoeurng 2010).

Thailand and Laos have a common religious background of Theravada Buddhism. Because of that, French-led restorations of religious sites across Laos increased more substantially, as this gesture would demonstrate a deep cultural commitment to the Lao people. Colonial administrators designated considerable amounts of funding to renovate several of the most sacred Buddhist temples across Laos, especially those related to former conflicts with Siam. Amongst them was Wat Phra Kaew in Vientiane, which was the former home of the sacred Emerald Buddha. That hallowed relic was previously looted and hauled to Bangkok by Siamese general Chao Phraya Chakri in 1779 during one of Siam's many incursions in Vientiane.[5] France's renovation of this particular temple would convey

a nuanced message to the French-Lao and especially to Thailand. Additionally, officials funded the printing and mass distribution of Buddhist texts written in the Lao language to encourage literacy, with a secondary aim to combat the influx of Thai religious literature that was being disseminated in the colony (Stuart-Fox 1995, 1997; Peltier 1988; Kourilsky 2018; Wolfson-Ford 2020).

After the onset of the Second World War in 1939, France was occupied by Germany. Following an armistice agreement with the Nazis, France re-organised itself under a conservative government led by Maréchal Philippe Pétain and the seat of power was relocated to Vichy in the centre of the *République*. The new regime placed a heavy emphasis on traditional, religious, and pastoral life under the guise of a *Rénovation nationale*. This sociopolitical shift in Europe is important to denote because France's overseas colonies were also affected by this realignment and shift to conservatism. In the case of Southeast Asia, collaborating French officials were supervised by Japan since that Axis power was allied with Germany. Because traditionalist themes were favoured by Vichy, France's colonial administrators in *Indochine* proceeded more forcefully with their literary initiatives, albeit with Japanese approval (Stuart-Fox 1997, p. 54; Ivarsson 2008). That agreeing nod was essential given that Japan tacitly supported Thai ideas of expansionism. In one instance, France was forced to cede some territory to Thailand: The province of Xayaboury and portions of Champassak west of the Mekong. Moreover, the Japanese presence in Laos further motivated the Bangkok government to strive for the unification of all groups sharing a "Tai" linguistic and cultural foundation (which included all of the Lao peoples). Ivarsson (2008) and Wisaijorn (2022) highlight that by stressing these cultural and ethnolinguistic resemblances, the Thais were leveraging Japan's occupation to further their own territorial objectives.

4. The Lao Nhay Writers

Due to these geopolitical shifts, French officials immediately understood that far more intensive counteractive measures were needed to protect and preserve their possessions in Southeast Asia. Updated French plans in Laos would now be led by Governor-General Admiral Jean Decoux. Although Decoux's initiatives for the *Indochine* colonies under his supervision did not create, nor invent longstanding traditional norms in Laos, they reoriented them to establish the framework for a dynamic new national literature; one fully distinct from that of Thailand (Stuart-Fox 1995, 1997; Ivarsson 2008; Wolfson-Ford 2020). Consequently, a movement referred to as "Lao Nhay" (Great Laos) was established through official administrative decree. In 1941, a *Résident supérieur* named Charles Rochet was appointed by Decoux to move things forward. Rochet was a good choice because he was already fulfilling the role of Minister of Education in Laos. Moreover, he was fluent in the Lao language and passionate about the local culture. Due to these strong ties, Rochet quickly identified a select group of French-trained local élites who could collaborate with him. As was the case in other regions of *l'Empire français*, one of the secondary measures for governing colonies directly involved the use of local individuals trained in French educational institutions via a Westernised curriculum. Before the French arrived, the education system in Laos predominantly adhered to the traditional Theravada Buddhist curricula, which meant that lessons were characterised by a conventionally religious methodology (Kourilsky 2018). Gradually, France augmented its investment in Laos by constructing several schools and *collèges* aimed at identifying a limited number of students for education (Stuart-Fox 1997; Ivarsson 2008).

To establish France's ambitions to link Lao traditional culture with literature, intellectuals recognised by Rochet began to publish in both Lao and French. From this point forward, many of these same authors would form the rubric of Lao society and government

for decades. In addition to constructing more schools and strengthening the élite *Collège Pavie* in Vientiane, one of the first things Rochet did was to create a committee called the *Comité Littéraire Lao* (ກັມມະການອັນນະຄະດີລາວ). This gathering was henceforth responsible for publishing pamphlets, journals, and newspapers (one of which shared the movement's name *Lao Nhay*). A publishing house dedicated to these initiatives was soon founded in Vientiane. Editions contained news, poems, art, and short stories. Almost all features within the Lao Nhay-sponsored periodicals were written in Lao, although a small number of entries were *en français*. A French-language newspaper named *Le Nouveau Laos* was created and it also contained articles and short stories that celebrated the virtues of traditional Lao sociocultural norms. Chamberlain (2005) and Polmuk (2014) denote that many articles (often accompanied by artistic images) published in the various Lao Nhay newspapers frequently criticised numerous Western values that were becoming more prevalent in Thailand. This is perhaps ironic because a European country (France) was funding the Lao Nhay campaign. Since the major goal was to promote literary creation, Rochet's *Comité littéraire* funded various competitions in both the Lao and French languages. From 1941 to 1945, several contests took place, all of which garnered the interest of educated Lao writers residing in the colony (Chamberlain 2005). Those authors and artists who won the *concours* had their work published in Lao Nhay periodicals and many were also awarded scholarships for further studies (Peltier 1988; Koret 1999; Ivarsson 2008).

The Lao Nhay era significantly contributed to raising awareness of Lao culture by greatly enhancing a sense of unity among the educated class within the colony (Peltier 1988; Ivarsson 2008). Many poems, bilingual dictionaries, and short stories were subsequently produced during this time. Amongst them were some of the first publications to codify the rules of the Lao alphabet by emphasising its differences with Thai (Enfield 1999; Koret 1999). This was followed by another well-received book entitled *Alphabet et écriture lao*, authored by future politician Katay Don Sasorith (1943), which was also released by the Lao Nhay press. In addition to that publication, Sasorith was a master writer of puns and humour in his work via Western literary elements to establish a unique Lao identity.

Notably, Sasorith was part of a collective of writers (and future political figures) from the future Lao ruling class who became quite visible during the Lao Nhay era. Other important Lao-Francophone authors from this period deserving mention are Nhouy Abhay, Maha Sila Viravong, and Somchine Nginn. Nginn and Abhay (1956) served as editors of many literary journals and committees. Starting from the Lao Nhay era until his death in 1963, Abhay maintained his presence in artistic and literary circles in Vientiane, where he continued to publish additional works, mostly focusing on cultural or religious tropes (Ivarsson 2008). Amongst them is *Aspect du pays Lao*, a short book that discusses a variety of sociocultural themes. As was the case with many visible individuals from within his privileged social class, Abhay held several ministerial positions with the newly formed Lao government following independence, which included a stint as a shadow Prime Minister to his brother Kou (Stuart-Fox 1997; Ivarsson 2008).

Maha Sila Viravong hailed from Roi-Et in the Isan region of Siam/Thailand before relocating to French-Laos. Regarding his biography, Viravong first trained as a monk and studied Pali, history, and religion in Bangkok. Later, he worked as the personal secretary to French-educated Lao Prince Phetsarath. Both men would later become active in Lao nationalism. Viravong was extremely passionate about language, literature, and structure (especially relating to religious themes). Along with Abhay and Nginn, he tirelessly worked to modernise the Lao alphabet. Throughout his life, Viravong was a leading intellectual in Laos, and his multiple publications cover topics relating to linguistics, as well as Lan Xang and Buddhist history (Ivarsson 2008). Since Viravong was the longtime director of the Buddhist Institute and academic council, much of his scholarly work focuses on

Lao kings as the traditional patrons of Buddhism in Laos. Polmuk (2014) discusses how Viravong extensively published subjects pertinent to Lao culture, in particular situating his work within a nationalist and historical linear opus. Even after the transition of Laos towards State communism in 1975, Viravong remained respected enough to be invited to work with the new regime.

Somchine Nginn was chosen by Charles Roquet to serve on his *Comité littéraire*, and his work often appeared in the newspaper *Sia Yuttitham* ("ເສືອຍຸຕິທຳ" or "*The Tiger of Justice*"), published by the Lao Nhay press. Perhaps Nginn's most important publication during this period was his short story entitled "ພຣະພຸທຮູບສັກສິດ" ("*Phaphutthahuup Saksit*" or "*The Sacred Buddha Image*"), which is the first novel ever written in Lao. Before its release, no non-religious novel had ever been published in that language (Peltier 1988; Koret 1999). Furthermore, Nginn worked in cultural and political circles throughout his life, and he persistently advocated for the maintenance of strong diplomatic and cultural ties with France (Ivarsson 2008). Following Lao independence, Nginn served as the editor of several literary journals and high-profile committees (including one in French), and he was the founder of the *Académie Royale du Laos* (ຣາຊບັນດິດສະພາລາວ). Along with Viravong, Nginn was also consistently praised for his tireless work standardising the Lao language (Koret 1999; Enfield 1999).

Nginn and Abhay collaborated to write a condensed French translation of the ancient 16th–17th century epic poem *Sinxay* (ສ້າງສິນໄຊ), originally authored by Pangkham. *Sinxay* is considered one of the three masterworks of Lao literature and the story remains famous in both Laos and Thai-Isan. The story narrates the tale of a protagonist named Sinxay (ສິນໄຊ) who embarks on a journey to save his aunt Soumountha (ສຸມຸນທາ) because she was kidnapped by a demon (named Nyak Koumphan, or ຍັກກຸມພັນ). Additionally, both authors also translated into French other Lao poetic and historical narratives, such as several famous folktales about a prince named Chanthakhat. Those stories pertain to a previous incarnation of Buddha by providing significant lessons to readers regarding kindness, karma, and the victory of good over evil.

Abhay, Nginn, and Viravong each worked together or separately to create or modernise a national school curriculum at various times. Collectively, their many books regarding grammar and stylistics were important follow-ups of work previously carried out by Kap San Vilasimi, a French-trained writer who initially established the guidelines of Lao versification in the 1940s (Peltier 1988; Enfield 1999; Koret 1999). Forward from the Lao Nhay period, Abhay, Nginn, and Viravong were prominent writers for newspapers and journals at different intervals, along with being actively engaged historians.

5. Lao Nhay to Lao Nationalism

The French-led Lao Nhay campaign inspired more than just pride in Lao culture. Another aspect of this literary nationhood that came into fruition during this period was a growing sense of Lao nationalism. During the Lao Nhay era, the first national flag was created by Maha Sila Viravong alongside a unifying anthem entitled "ເພງຊາດລາວ" or "*Xât Lao*." One important aspect about the Lao national hymn is the use of the word "*Xât*," which translates as "race" or "nation." Wolfson-Ford (2020, 2024, 2026) points out that this was the intentional purpose because nationalism was solidifying into an exclusive notion of a unique Lao race. Numerous artistic, cultural, and even sports-related pursuits were aggressively promoted by the French, and the first all-Lao military units known as "*les Chasseurs lao*" were also formed at this time.

Because nationalism was increasing, several authors of Lao Nhay publications were coming to the realisation they no longer wished to see further French colonialism in Laos (Gunn 2019; Wisaijorn 2022; Ivarsson 2008; Wolfson-Ford 2020, 2024). Independence-

minded voices such as Abhay, Viravong, and others grew louder as World War II entered its waning phase, and the Japanese were cognisant of that evolving sentiment (Stuart-Fox 1997; Ivarsson 2008; Gunn 2019). After years of tacitly supporting liberation movements in Southeast Asia, in spring 1945 Japan decided to seize the Indochinese colonies for themselves. This was done under the guise of freeing them from European colonialism. As Stuart-Fox remarked (Stuart-Fox 1997, p. 56), this move aimed to "destroy what remained of the illusion of French might" in terms of prestige and power. The French had little military support to resist the Japanese. Although the king of Laos fled into hiding at the end of the war, he was soon forced by Japan to declare the independence of Laos. That statement of sovereignty was supported by Lao Prince Phetsarath, who was the son of the viceroy Bun Khong, a distant cousin of King Sisavang Vong. Internal turmoil such as this stimulated the ambitions of Lao nationalists, as was Japan's intention. When the war finally ended in August 1945, France quickly moved to re-assert control in *Indochine*. After some internal civil conflicts between Lao nationalists and royalists dissipated, the king soon agreed to become re-associated with the French in exchange for greater autonomy in several matters of political administration. This move caused a major schism in Laos and divisive politics would define and undermine Laos for decades (Wolfson-Ford 2026).

Several writers once aligned with France during the Lao Nhay years now openly opposed this renewed type of colonialism. This meant that Lao nationalism further grew in stature as a genuine political force. For intellectuals such as Abhay, Viravong, and others, France was no longer wanted or needed in terms of moving Laos forward because of what had happened during the war (Wolfson-Ford 2024, 2026). To echo this changing disposition towards France, Stuart-Fox (1997, p. 59) argues that the "triumphant French" were unable to "disguise their humiliating defeat" by Japan. After the war, the same cultural and religious forms of nationalism that were strongly advocated by the Lao Nhay movement metamorphosed into something more politically oriented. Within the Lao royal court, Prince Phetsarath was a very visible promoter of this new nationalist perspective, and infighting amongst royals stymied any concordance on how to move forward (Stuart-Fox 1997). Thus, the unintentional secondary influence of the French-sponsored Lao Nhay movement helped form a more political dimension of Lao nationalism. From this, intellectuals calling for the independence of Laos organised themselves into a liberation movement that became known as the "Lao Issara" (Free Laos). Yet not all Lao Nhay writers backed these new ideals. Although supportive, unlike his contemporaries, Nginn remained more cautious in terms of severing ties with France (Wolfson-Ford 2020, 2024). One might associate Nginn's feelings with Bhabha's expanded theory of mimicry that centres on the imperfection of imitation; one that results in an "ambivalence" of the colonised towards the so-called superiority of the coloniser (Bhabha 1994).

Eventually, the French had to confront the new reality to which their Lao nationalist literary movement gave birth. As worldwide pressure was being placed on the powers of Europe to liberate their overseas colonies in Africa and Asia, France offered various types of autonomy to its global possessions within a *Union Française* that replaced the old empire. Although the king of Laos favoured the modernised ties and relationship, Prince Phetsarath argued that France's capitulation to Japan voided any further associations (Stuart-Fox 1997). After several attempts to create a coalition government that accommodated all views ended in frustration, the prince and those writers supporting the Lao Issara fled into exile in Thailand. From there, the nationalist movement re-organised as a sort of government-in-exile, and it aggressively sought sympathy from the Thais. However, that notion of Thai support was short-lived due to political instability in Bangkok (Stuart-Fox 1997; Ivarsson 2008).

The trajectory of Thai endorsements concerning the Lao dissidents shifted dramatically in 1947 after yet another military coup in Bangkok. From that point forward, Thailand became an important American ally with respect to resisting growing Marxist sentiment across Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the Lao Issara movement itself soon disintegrated because of significant discord amongst its prominent leaders, particularly between Prince Souvana Phouma and Prince Souphanouvong (Wolfson-Ford 2020, 2024, 2026). Consequently, as France provided additional autonomy to Laos within the new imperial structure of the *Union Française*, numerous Lao Issara dissidents returned home to pursue their struggle for independence from within.

In addition to the growing tensions, a liberation struggle in Vietnam led by French-educated intellectual Hồ Chí Minh soon manifested into a full-fledged war in which Laos played a major role in terms of sending fighters and key supplies. Eventually, French forces in Vietnam were defeated at Điện Biện Phủ, thereby ending the postwar struggle against colonialism in Southeast Asia. After much deliberation about the future of the *Indochine* colonies, Vietnam was cut into two parts (north and south) whilst the borders of Cambodia and Laos remained intact. Further negotiations resulted in Lao independence, and the king based in Luang Prabang gained control over the entire territory. Laos became a constitutional monarchy named the *Gouvernement royal du Laos* (GRL or "Royal Government of Laos"). To move the new country forward, the king appointed three of his princes to represent the trio of existing political ideologies that were dominating Lao political discourse. These factions were represented by way of an elected assembly, summarised as such: Conservatives closely associated with Prince Boun Oun and the monarchy favoured close diplomatic relations with France, a left-of-centre group now known as the *Pathet Lao* was led by Prince Souphanouvong (who was inspired by Vietnam), and a neutralist faction managed by Prince Souvanna Phouma who attempted to work with the other competing ideologies (this prince was formally aligned with the Lao Issara but he became more neutralist following independence). Over the subsequent two decades, all three princes would serve in high-ranking political positions such as party leaders, Prime Minister, President of the National Assembly (etc.). However, any consensus between them and their followers in Laos remained elusive, aside from a common distrust of Thailand (Christie 1979; Ivarsson 2008; Rust 2012; Wisaijorn 2022). Threats posed by regional communist expansionism (acutely influenced by the Vietnamese) continued to garner support in Laos during the 1950s and 1960s, including within the royal family. Prince Souphanouvong's involvement with the Pathet Lao revolutionaries soon earned him the nickname "The Red Prince." With the encouragement of Hồ Chí Minh and Việt Minh communists in North Vietnam, these leftist insurgents were gaining territory in Laos. That situation resulted in heightened involvement in Southeast Asia by both the United States and Thailand, which was aimed at mitigating growing regional Marxism (Christie 1979; Deuve 1984; Pholsena 2006; Rust 2012; Gunn 2019).

Despite the intense political discussions and intensifying civil war waging in the Lao countryside, the publication of literary works persisted. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, poems, short stories, and novels that reflected the same conventional, traditional, cultural, and religious motifs used during the Lao Nhay movement were continuously published. Thematically, both Abhay and Nginn remained loyal to previous types of French-inspired principles in their literary works. This means that instead of promoting a new form of Lao distinctiveness in literature, conservative writing remained dominant. One motivator for this continuance was the growing Pathet Lao communist insurgency within Laos, as the emerging revolutionary views threatened both the monarchy and traditional Lao values. For his part, Somchine Nginn published a book of French-language poetry that mimicked the themes prevalent in the Lao Nhay period.

6. Dok Champa and a Changing Laos[6]

Pierre Somchine Nginn was the son of a Cambodian father (François Nginn) and a Lao mother. The elder Nginn worked as a translator for French explorer Auguste Pavie during his expeditions and the family were members of the Luang Prabang élite. Somchine Nginn attended secondary school in Vietnam before being selected to attend the prestigious *École coloniale* in Paris. By his own admission, Nginn's years in France affected him profoundly and throughout his life that endearment never waned. In his memoirs, Nginn reflected on this, stating: "*La France est un puissante et généreuse. Nous l'aimons parce qu'elle est notre patrie d'adoption, parce qu'elle nous a donné l'appui de sa richesse, les bienfaits de la civilisation*" (Nginn 1971, p. 205).[7] After his studies in Paris, Nginn returned to Laos, where he started his professional career as a teacher at the *Lycée Tafforin* in Vientiane whilst also working for the colonial *Surêté* as an official translator. Yet, despite his legacy as an important Lao intellectual alongside Nhouy Abhay and Maha Sila Viravong, Nginn's *Dok Champa* is virtually unknown. For example, the book is archived in only six academic libraries globally (none of which are in Laos) and his other literary publications in French are equally difficult to locate.[8]

Although not widely circulated, *Dok Champa* remains historically notable with respect to its views of a bygone era because it pays homage to a Laos whose pastoral traditions were being upended by a growing internal civil conflict led by the Pathet Lao. Amongst others, Wolfson-Ford (2024, 2026) argues that Nginn was committed to the success of the GRL. As such, he dedicated his book "*en hommage à son Excellence Thao Kou Abhau*," the *Président du Conseil* of the king in the 1960s. As mentioned, life in France and the Lao Nhay period deeply impacted Nginn from his youth well into old age. In the *Avant-Propos* of his book of French-language poems, he writes at length about this affection by emphasising his former studies in versification. The poems within *Dok Champa* are accompanied by illustrations by Khampheui Silavong, a former student of Nginn's in Vientiane. Included drawings depict a variety of scenes that showcase conservative Lao life. The *Préface* of *Dok Champa* was written by Nginn's literary contemporary and friend Nhouy Abhay.

In terms of structure, there are 16 poems included in *Dok Champa*, all of which are followed by a final section featuring several famous Lao proverbs translated into French. Each of the poems is written in the classical poetic styles in which Nginn was trained during his studies. Throughout the book, French-inspired Lao Nhay themes of nostalgia are prevalent and manifested by using symbolic, allegorical, and emblematic analogies, all of which would have been culturally and politically unacceptable to the communist insurgents committed to the complete restructuring of Lao society. Thus, *Dok Champa* reflects Nginn's archaic sentimentality about a rapidly changing country and Lao culture that were under communist threat.

The opening entry entitled *Champa: Fleur du pays lao* ("Champa: The flower of Laos") pays homage to the national flower that is the symbol of Laos: Frangipani plumeria flowers (Nginn 1961, pp. 5–6). As with all the poems within the book, it is divided into two thematic sections. The first evokes nostalgia by traditionally emphasising Lao culture, which in this case concerns the flower's resilience as a historical allegorical personification of Laos. Many verses in *Champa* where Nginn speaks of white plumerias (frangipanis) represent metaphors for days past. These flowers are addressed directly to remember memorable circumstances from his youth. The use of the word "*champa*" in the book's title (along with the first poem) has deep meaning for Laos. For those unfamiliar, when these plumerias dislocate and fall from the branches of the trees where they grow, they stay remarkably intact. As such, it is not uncommon to see Lao women fashionably adorning their hair with detached "*champas*." Furthermore, when these flowers tumble into waterways, their petals do not separate as the flower floats away. Because plumerias remain exceptionally

pristine and undamaged when they detach from trees, they are thought to represent life itself thanks to this renaissance. Nginn denotes this uniqueness by stating how a "*vent capricieux*" (capricious wind) can carry these flowers to points beyond their birthplace, which he describes as representing a type of "*espoir renaît*" (reborn spirit) that continues to "*domine les destins amers*" ("dominates bitter destinies," p. 6). Nginn continues to address the *champa* flower that is analogous to Laos in the poem's subsequent verses, but in doing so he shifts his tone by speaking in a more celebratory manner that mirrors an ode: "*toi qui parles d'amour aux filles, de retour à l'exilé*," and "*toi qui fournis aux Vat* (temples) *les humaines soboles, toi qui meurs et nais chaque jour"*(p. 6).[9] The final lines of this poem continue to pay homage to this ancient symbol of Lao culture. Examples of this are when the poet states "*depuis quand règnes-tu sur cette terre ancienne*," which is followed by verses denoting the flower's "*Ô vision du passé! Promesse d'avenir! Fleur qui chérit toujours la nation laotienne*" (p. 6).[10] The second thematic focus of this and all poems in *Dok Champa* reminds the Lao people of their unique cultural norms. In this first entry, those customs are represented by the white plumerias by highlighting how they serve as metaphoric temples and guardians for all of Laos. Because *Champa* is the initial poem of Nginn's book, it is a good representation of what readers can expect as they peruse the other entries of the collection to understand the evocative symbolism of a conservative Laos that was being torn apart by political divisiveness in three different ways.

All poems in *Dok Champa* evoke various themes of emotional and historical memory for locations throughout Laos. This includes the ancient city of Luang Prabang, the Mekong River, and the capital of Vientiane. Each of these these places are featured in several entries of the collection, including in the poems *Souvenirs* ("Remembrance"), *Le renouveau de la nature* ("The Renewal of Nature," pp. 14–15), and *Le That Luang de Vientiane* ("Pha That Luang of Vientiane," p. 20). The latter poem pays homage to the Pha That Luang temple in the capital city, which is the most sacred national monument and symbol of Laos. Traditional objects such as the "*khène*" (an instrument used in *Morlam* musical storytelling), gold vases, holiday courtship rituals, dance, and Buddhist temples are mentioned in others, notably in the poems *Cour d'amour* ("Court of Love," p. 17) and *La détente* ("Relaxation," p. 22). In a poem entitled *Coucher du soleil sur le Mékhong* ("Sunset on the Mekong," pp. 12–13), the Mekong River's historical importance at sunset is particularly highlighted, along with Nginn's denoting the importance of Vientiane's ancient temple Haw Phra Kaew. As stated earlier, this sacred place was fully renovated by the French and once was the home to the Emerald Buddha before the Siamese sacked the city and seized this ancient relic (something that remains a contested subject between Laos and Thailand).[11] That revered Buddha is referred to in *Coucher du soleil sur le Mékhong* as "*Une âme errante*" (an errant soul) who is searching for his previous home. The poem ends by denoting the tragic consequences of "*le renouveau fatal*" ("the renewed fatalism") that is the Emerald Buddha's continued absence from Laos (p. 12).

Numerous poems of *Dok Champa* place great emphasis on various antediluvian values. One entitled *Un peuple paisible* ("A Peaceful People") represents this conservative outlook by detailing the same traditional home life once promoted by France during the Lao Nhay era (p. 7). Nginn writes about how village homes are places where "*Tout est calme et tiède au foyer familial*," and where "*la maman au marché va faire ses emplettes*" and the father "*va, souriant se mettre au travail matinal*" (p. 7).[12] Children are described as being obedient with respect to their schoolwork. Lao people are characterised as being "*foncièrement loyal est tranquille*" whilst also being "*conciliant, plein de miséricorde*" (p. 7).[13] In the poem, no one questions the conservatism of that lifestyle. These depictions mirror the same ways that French colonisers also previously characterised Laos as being "naïve and indolent," incapable of serious labour (Stuart-Fox 1997, p. 42). Nginn describes Lao people in a similar

manner as the French colonisers by concentrating on their "*sourire si doux*" ("sweet smiles," p. 7). Although innocence about the Lao and their traditions could be considered as positive traits, a more critical reasoning from a Marxist perspective deconstructs these portrayals more negatively. For the Pathet Lao communists who sought to move Laos away from the colonialist mentality of conservative obedience, the thematic *naïveté* featured in this poem and throughout *Dok Champa* is pejorative, and verses with the word "*sourire*" (smile) are particularly problematic. Bucolic lines such as these merely echo previously discussed colonialist tropes that would have distinguished Nginn from most Lao people during that contentious time period.

Nginn was thematically ignorant of those types of radical arguments. For example, in another poem entitled *La joie de vivre* ("Joys of Life") readers are implored to work for the general good, not to complain, and to be cognisant of the sacrifices and joys that accompany whatever job in which one engages in within impoverished Laos because "*la satisfaction en est le bénéfice*" ("satisfaction is beneficial," p. 24). This fully contradicts the aims of the Pathet Lao insurgents who were attempting to convince the Lao people to reject nostalgia by eliminating the old system of obedience first promoted by France and its Lao enablers. Nginn further writes: "*Vivre c'est rire, aimer, haïr tout malefice, admirer, s'efforcer d'atteindre l'idéal*" (p. 24).[14] However, perhaps to address those sympathetic to the growing Marxism in Laos, he also argues that one should "*vivre modestement, non en oiseau de proie*," as this is the means with which to alleviate boredom, by maintaining that "*c'est adoucir l'ennui qui peut se presenter*" ("it's when one overthinks, the boredom may come," p. 24).[15] Although these are essential Buddhist teachings, Nginn also writes "*la vie est pour nous tous la divine étincelle*" ("life is the divine spark for all of us"). These verses reject a revolutionary restructuring of Lao society (p. 24). Buddhism is highlighted in other entries of *Dok Champa*, such as in the poems *Prière à Bouddha* ("Prayers to Buddha," pp. 18–19), *Le renouveau de la nature* (pp. 12–13), *La joie de silence* (p. 23), and *La joie de vivre* (p. 24). Each of these poems can be interpreted as warnings not to overhaul Lao society. Verses in *Prière à Bouddha* ask Buddha to show pity on all peoples in the country: "*Du peuple du Lao Xang, ayez donc pitié"* ("Show pity on the Lao Xang people," p. 19). To appeal to emotions more directly, this plea uses the ancient term "Lao Xang" to represent all Lao people on both sides of the Mekong (p. 19). This nod to the sacredness of the ancient kingdom is an intentional literary entreaty to preserve the nostalgic traditions by rejecting communism and the ideals of the Pathet Lao.

Additional poems in *Dok Champa* also promote longstanding popular Lao cultural tropes to evoke emotions of the past. Amongst them are *Le Pi-May* (or "Lao New Year," pp. 8–9) and *Le Baci* ("Call of the Soul," pp. 10–11), with the latter being dedicated to "*au poète, à l'ami Somchay"* (to my friend and poet Somchay). This is notable because "Somchay" is the *nom-de-plume* of a French colonial administrator named Jean Gilbert who was instrumental in the pastoral Lao Nhay movement, during which he was tasked by Admiral Decoux to identify young students to receive scholarships to study in France (Nginn 1971). Gilbert was a man of letters who was fluent in Lao, a language for which he avidly advocated literary production. Thus, he was a person of great importance for Nginn (Nginn 1971). Both poems describe important cultural and religious festivals that have been a part of traditional Lao culture for centuries ("Le Pi Mai" is the Lao New Year and the "Baci" ceremony in Lao Buddhism good luck and harmony).

Themes of having and possessing a peaceful mindset based on Buddhist principles of peacefulness without conflict or questions are noteworthy prevalent in the poem *La joie de silence* (The Joy of Silence). Nginn emphasises this by writing "*le silence aussi donne un plaisir divin*" ("Silence is also [a type of] a divine pleasure"). Additionally, this entry places a moral importance on education by juxtaposing it with Buddhist principles (instead of

secularised or revolutionary values). This is shown when the Nginn writes "*Du silence ont besoin le lecteur, l'écrivain*" ("silence needs readers and writers"). Further lines of the poem denote how joy produced by silence is both "vivid" and "pure." Those sentiments are enunciated with a dramatic pause in the poem's final line via the insertion of two commas after the word "and" ("*et*") as well as "I believe" ("*je crois*") for dramatic effect ("*la joie est la plus vive et, je crois, la plus pure*.") Despite the Buddhist undertones in *La joie de silence*, Nginn's status as a highly educated member of the élite class in Laos is evident, which perhaps labels him as out of touch with most people in Laos at that time. As such, "purity" as emphasised in this poem contradicts the aims of Pathet Lao revolutionaries; a group whose stated ambitions concerning Lao political liberation from the ground up opposed concepts of Buddhist silence without social justice and action.

Women are presented in a few poems of *Dok Champa*, starting with the sonnet *La phousao lao"* ("Lao Girl," p. 16). This title can be translated a few ways, but normally "*phousao*" refers to a girl or woman who is quietly beautiful, yet strong and independent in character. This poem centres on more traditional tropes of family and social life where women were limited to the home. *La phousao lao* characterises them as "*coquette et souriante*" ("flirty and smily") who also "*vous salue avec grâce en faisant les doux yeux*" with "*une voix suppliante*" (p. 16).[16] Nginn describes women by using the adjectives "*séduisante*" and "*bien modeste*" ("seductive" and "modest") along with "*bien sage*" ("very knowledgeable"), written alongside more conservative nouns such as a "*casanière*" who might "*s'occupe à son plaisant foyer*" ("housewife" who "occupies a happy home," p. 16). These types of delineations are also represented in countless descriptions of Laos by French officials during the colonial era. Stuart-Fox points out that in many French-authored novels that were set in Laos, love was the principal theme. When women were described, they were frequently depicted sensually as being "adorable, soft, and playful" (Stuart-Fox 1997, p. 42)." Nginn writes about how bold are elegantly and conservatively attired in traditional "*sin maykham*" skirts (p. 16). Perhaps interestingly and despite the more liberal ethos of the contemporary Lao PDR, women working in government spaces are still mandated by official policy and decree to wear the "*sin maykham*."

The collection's final two entries address the Lao people directly as unnamed friends. When speaking to readers, Nginn writes in precise and personally undeviating language/tone. As such, he utilises more informal subject pronouns and determiners, such as "*tu*" (you) and "*ton*" (your) instead of the more formal terms that apply to their contextual uses (e.g., "*vous*" and "*votre/vos*"). The first of these last poems is entitled *À un pessimiste* ("To the Pessimist") and its lines speak precisely in a personally undeviating tone, which could be attributed to Nginn's views of the Pathet Lao and those being wooed by them (p. 25). The poem's addressee is chastised in verses that speak directly to the character of this unnamed "*ami*" ("friend") in a physical and mental sense (p. 25). Lines of this poem mention "*la bouderie*" ("sulking") of their facial expression brought upon by an attitude that produces a "*mauvaise humeur*" ("bad mood"), which is further characterised as being "*vainement des cris et des clameurs*" ("in vain cries and shrieking," p. 25). The *ami-pessimiste* is then queried: "*Ami, dis-moi, d'où vient cette bizarrerie*? ("Friend, tell me, where does this oddity come from?") This is followed by "*penses-tu qu'ici bas tout te porte malheur? Te considères-tu comme un souffre-douleur*" (p. 25).[17] The line "*tous ces penseurs, crois-moi, ne sont que tromperie*" is curious due to the narrator's personal feelings concerning the advice being given (p. 25).[18] The "*pessimiste*" in question is advised not to doubt the future and "*travaille dans la joie, aussi dans l'espérance*" (p. 25).[19] The final verses of *À un pessimiste* demand readers to: "*Sois fier! Donne-toi donc un bel effort final* (…) "*Tu te mettras à l'oeuvre*" (p. 25).[20] Given the extreme political tension occurring in Laos during this time, this poem is encouraging readers not to give up hope.

The closing poem of *Dok Champa* is entitled *À un sceptique* ("To the Sceptic") and it is also directed towards the Lao people (p. 26). For example, one can conceivably excogitate that the lines of this poem analogously address anyone who might have been confused regarding the intense discussions occurring between the liberal, centrist, and conservative political factions vying for control of Laos. Verses remind readers of their own apolitical humanity by stating "*tout ce qui nait meurt, c'est la loi de la nature*" ("everything that is born dies, for this is the law of nature," p. 26). Although Nginn describes life as "*pénible et bien dure*" ("arduous and very difficult") by advising one to "*travaille, fais le bien, progresse, etc.*" ("work, be well, advance yourself, etc."), he also admonishes negativity by insisting "*Malheureux ici-bas sont les gens sans culture*" ("unhappy are those people without culture," p. 26). This line represents a subtly veiled, yet sharp criticism of the Pathet Lao communists whose popularity was substantially increasing across Laos in the 1960s.

The end section of *Dok Champa* contains several Lao proverbs and idiomatic expressions, none of which were created by Nginn. Entitled *Quelques dictons lao* ("Some Lao Proverbs"), the original Lao script is not provided, nor is their context explained (p. 27). Nginn's translation of these emblematic sayings adds poetic harmony to them, whereas the original Lao pronunciations are not rhymical. An example of this is shown in one of the included proverbs, an expression that remains widely heard across contemporary Laos: "*Lorsque dans un panier un poisson est pourri, les autres à leur tour deviendraient tout meurtri*" (p. 27).[21] Nginn's translation does not match the original use of the saying in Lao because this "*dicton*" does not rhyme in its original form: ປາທີ່ໜ້ຳເປື່ອຍ່ຳໂຕດງອເຮັດໃຫ້ກະຕ່າເປື່ອຍບ່ດີ (transliteration: "pa thi neoa peuony otdiav hedhai kata peuony bodi"). Although the interpretation of this and the other *Dictons lao* is wholly left to readers, some significantly valuable conclusions can be made. *Dok Champa* focuses on traditional aspects of Lao culture at a time when those ideals were under threat by Vietnamese-sponsored Marxist rebels. As such, Nginn understood that old proverbs and idiomatic expressions would eventually evolve since Laos was undergoing rapid societal and political changes that threatened the traditional norms illustrated in his traditionalist poetry. One such proverb that feasibly represents a literary jab at communism states: *"Le travail enrichit, oui, mais l'argent qui rentre plein le plateau ne vaut pas l'esprit plein le ventre"* (p. 27).[22] The choice of the word "*plateau*" instead of the more commonly used "*assiette*" ("plate") is notable and supports an argument against the Pathet Lao because of its specific geographic meaning in Laos. During the postwar era when royalists were fighting to remain in power, control of the Lao plateaus meant political and economic domination of the country. Therefore, this and the other proverbs included within *Dok Champa* serve as warnings of what lay ahead for those supporting the Pathet Lao insurgency (versus Nginn's arguments in favour of the maintenance of the GRL). Whereas the French language and literature once sought to protect Laos from Thailand, Nginn uses the same methodology to save his country from encroaching Communism.

7. Sunset on the Mekong and Potential Further Study

This study provides a historical analysis of the pre-and post-French colonial period in Laos by discussing some of the ways in which literature functioned to uphold and defend traditional values during the most turbulent phases of Lao history prior to the nation's shift to the Lao PDR in 1975. In contrast to other regions within France's global Empire during the colonial era, the current paper discusses how France's colonial authorities in Laos actively encouraged local authors to (re)envision their distinct culture by highlighting conservative principles aimed at safeguarding and unifying the space from internal and external influences that threatened Lao and French hegemony. Ironically, this very literary emphasis ultimately contributed to the country's independence from France. In the

post-colonial period, literary works that echoed previously traditionalist Lao Nhay motifs continued to be utilised as they metamorphosed into a poetic resistance against Communism and the Pathet Lao insurgency that threatened the monarchy and conservative social order. That sort of colonialist-inspired thematic writing was notably employed by Somchine Nginn in his French-language poetry collection entitled "*Dok Champa*." Despite the political and cultural legacy of Nginn and that era of Lao literature, the significance of literary publications with respect to the formation of the modern country of Laos is a topic that has not received adequate scholarly attention (in French, English, or otherwise).

In terms of literary analysis, the present work is preliminary. In other words, this study is neither comprehensive, nor intended to be read as a detailed *commentaire de texte* of Lao Nhay texts and Somchine Nginn's *Dok Champa*. For that, future literary scholars are strongly encouraged to analyse and juxtapose those publications with more Western/French poetic forms to deconstruct how the use of poetic devices functions more stylistically. Researchers in the field of literature might also examine Laos and the Lao Nhay period and *Dok Champa* by comparing them to the work of Vietnam's Pham Van Ky and other Southeast Asian Francophone authors during that time. Additionally, engaging in a contextual analysis by considering Giang-Huong Nguyen's overview of *Littérature d'expression française* in Indochina may also represent a good starting point in this regard. Historians and political scientists of Laos and Francophone Southeast Asia might investigate the chaotic bureaucratic and/or civil side of Lao literature by expanding on Ryan Wolfson-Ford's vast research that centres on the three-way quagmire that defined the turbulent political era of Cold War Laos and the GRL. Finally, researchers in all academic and scholarly disciplines might be inclined to examine various literary works in the Lao language that were published during this postwar and Lao royal era by intersecting them with politics, history, and culture.

Eight decades after independence, there is much to criticise regarding France's historical legacy in Laos. This includes but is not limited to the lack of effort in developing their former colony in any sort of realistic manner regarding infrastructure, the pejorative treatment of ethnocultural minority groups living in the Lao highlands, French favouritism and continued association with the élites linked to three royal clans at the expense of everyone else, and very few attempts by France to improve the lives of the Lao people. Furthermore, it should be remembered that French officials in Laos chose not to educate the masses since they merely regarded them as being charming simpletons who were incapable of any serious work or governance. This malaise and lack of interest in Laos by France until the onset of World War II, combined with the tumultuous era that followed it has since affected scholarly interest in the country. As such, Laos remains underdeveloped and understudied. All of that said, readers should be reminded of how the publication of literature before, during, and after the Lao Nhay period was extremely essential concerning the geographical and political formation and (re)creation of modern Laos. As such, the remaking of a pan-Lao cultural identity that is distinct from its powerful neighbours (especially Thailand) owes some or most of its existence to the legacy of French colonialism. Therefore, the tactical strategy of France's colonialist literary focus should not be dismissed or discounted. Even the principles put forth by Pathet Lao revolutionaries in their gradual rise to power were first motivated by the Lao Nhay movement, of which several Marxist leaders were once authors, artists, participants, and/or beneficiaries of a French curricular education. Poetry and stories published in both the French and Lao languages during the pre-and post-colonial era remains significant because of the ways in which it promoted and reemphasised traditional Lao sociocultural norms as a defence mechanism: First against Thailand, secondly against political instability and Communism. These French-inspired counter-narratives were essential to a rapidly changing Laos from the 1940s and beyond.

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Yet despite that noteworthy historical legacy, once the country transitioned to the Lao PDR, no known literature that echoed Lao Nhay-inspired traditionalist themes was ever again published in French. Today, it is nearly impossible to locate *Dok Champa* and/or other Lao-Francophone literature in Laos (or elsewhere, for that matter). As for Somchine Nginn, aside from his famous short story written in Lao for which he is recognised, his *invisibilité* in the French language means that he has not influenced any Francophone writers, whether national, regional, or global. Paradoxically, his contemporary Maha Sila Viravong remains an important studied figure in Laos due to his many historical and religious books. Concerning French, not until Laos became an active member of *La Francophonie* in the 1980s–1990s would it again be linguistically reconsidered as a political or cultural asset (Jennar 1997; Carral 2018). Since that time, French has seen steady growth and visibility in Laos and it is now studied across the country.

While Wolfson-Ford (2020, 2024, 2026) accurately asserts that a "benevolent" France is not entirely accountable or fully responsible for the transformation of modern Laos (nor should the French claim complete credit for the country's rebirth and subsequent establishment), it is nonetheless essential to acknowledge the significant influence that France's colonialist literary movements had in (re)shaping the re-emerged Lao nation and its cultural landscape following independence. Of course, if one were to analyse French colonialism in Laos from a purely hypothetical point of view without considering any of the threats emanating from Siam/Thailand that motivated colonial policies, perhaps the trajectory and approach regarding France's colonial project there would have been quite different (thereby mirroring French colonialism in Africa and the Caribbean).

Despite the absence of notable poetry or literature published in French following the establishment the Lao PDR, literary works were one of the most vital historical avenues that contributed to the emergence of contemporary Laos. Yet, as the country advances into the modern era, challenges related to external influences remain problematic. Amongst them, the Lao people are continuously confronted with an overbearing amount of powerfully assertive Thai cultural norms (especially those associated with Thai music, cinema, pop culture, social media, and new digital technologies). That reality is accompanied by growing Chinese involvement in social, political, and economic matters across all sectors of Laos. As such, defensive measures designed to protect Lao society may once again be necessary if those extrinsic threats further intensify. Thus, any future reactionary narratives that could be synonymously associated with the previous Lao Nhay era (and beyond) have yet to be crafted. Notwithstanding the provocations of today, connections with France and the global *Francophonie* persist and are augmenting, even as the era of Lao-Francophone literature that once revitalised and (re)defined the political and cultural space of Laos is disregarded or forgotten.

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Notes

1 One interesting ongoing debate refers to the spelling of Laos with a final letter of "s." As denoted, upon the arrival of the French to the Lao regions, there were several governing "*muangs*" in the area. Many of these "*muangs*" were themselves overseen by two or three *royaumes*, all of which were often governed by outside influences (notably Siam, especially via the Siamese vassal states such as the Lan Na). As such, it is said that the French defined the land of the Lao by using the plural "s" to signify that the newly conquered territory was the home of many Lao peoples living within the spaces under their control. Other debates centre on the plurality of the Lao kingdoms as to define the addition of the plural form of "Lao." To this day, Laos is made up of 49 officially recognised ethnocultural subgroups who speak over 80 languages, of which the largest are members of four Lao-speaking assemblages: The Lao-Tai, Tai Dam, Tai Daeng, and the Phu Thai. Major minority groups in Laos (then and now) include the Hmong, the Mon-Khmer, and the Khmu (amongst others).

2 One of the most famous temples in Vientiane is Wat Sisaket. This heavily touristed site was built by King Anouvong in 1824. Some might argue that his pettiness towards Siam is best exhibited at that site due to the temple's architectural orientation. For example, most Buddhist temples built along the Mekong in Vientiane are arranged parallel to river, which in turn establishes a west–east alignment (this means the central Buddha image looks eastward). This is not the case with Wat Sisaket. That temple is situated geographically at 40 degrees south of east, which directly corresponds to the direction of Bangkok. In other words, when people came to pay allegiance to the king or to pray, participants would then have their backs turned towards the Siamese capital.

3 To this day, ethnocultural minority groups are still not represented fully and equally across many sectors of Lao society.

4 Interestingly, in the 1980s the government of the Lao PDR adopted a political policy that pledged to enhance the liberalisation of Lao society by employing the same name of this famous story.

5 The famous Emerald Buddha moved around the region of contemporary Laos and Thailand considerably for centuries prior to arriving in Vientiane. The sacred relic resided in Vientiane for 214 years until Siamese invaders under Chao Phraya Chakri sacked the city and took the relic to Bangkok in 1779. Today, tourists and visitors can view the famous Emerald Buddha at Wat Phra Kaew in the Thai capital.

6 All translations from French to English were done by the author.

7 "France is a generous and powerful nation. We [Lao] love it because it is our adopted homeland and because it has given us the support of its wealth, the benefits of civilisation"

8 *Dok Champa* is currently archived in the *Bibliothèque Nationale de la France*, the *School of Oriental and Asian Studies in London*, *Cornell University, Yale University*, and the *University of Hawaïi* in the United States, as well as at the *Université de Sherbrooke* in Canada. Very notably absent is the book's location in the archives of any library located in the Lao PDR.

9 "*you who speak of love to girls, return to exile*," and "*you who supply the Vat (temples) with human soboles, you who die and are born every day*" (p. 6).

10 "For as long *as you have reigned over this ancient land*", which is followed by verses "*Oh vision of the past! Promise of the future! Flower that always cherishes the Laotian nation*" (p. 6).

11 Visitors to Haw Phra Kaew temple in Vientiane will notice an empty space that has never been filled, as to remind everyone that the Emerald Buddha is missing from the home where it sat for centuries.

12 "*Everything is calm and warm at the family home*," and when "*the mother goes to the market to do her shopping*" and the father "*goes, smiling and happily to start his morning work*" (p. 7).

13 "*fundamentally loyal yet quiet*" while also being "*conciliatory, full of mercy*" (p. 7).

14 "*To live is to laugh, to love, to hate all evil, to admire, to strive to reach the ideal*" (p. 24).

15 "*To live modestly, and not be like a bird of prey*," as is the meaning of the alleviate boredom, saying that "*it is to soften the boredom that may arise*" (p. 24).

16 "*Greet you with grace by making sweet eyes*" with "*a pleading voice*" (p. 16).

17 "*Do you believe that everything down here brings you bad luck? Do you consider yourself a scapegoat*?"

18 "*Believe me, all these thoughts represent nothing but deception*."

19 "*Work in joy, and also in hope*."

20 "*Be proud! Give yourself a good final effort* (…) "*You will get to work*" (p. 25)."

21 *"One rotten fish spoils the whole basket"*.

22 *"Yes, work is enriching, but money that fills the coffers does not worth [is not the same as] a full stomach and a full spirit."*

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