The Partitioning of Laos: Lost Voices from both sides of the Mekong River in 1893 and the creation of modern Laos

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Abstract

Most views of Laos at important moments in its modern history are seen from foreign perspectives (using foreign sources) to the neglect of Lao or other local perspectives (and sources). One example is the colonial "invention" of Laos in 1893 by France. However, a Lao view (one of many possible local views) on 1893 reveals something quite different. To Lao historians, 1893 was a partitioning of Laos between Thai and French states. Previously the Mekong had always connected Lao. Now it was taken as the border between larger Thai and French states so as to permanently divide the people of Laos. Nonetheless the idea of a greater Laos continued to survive afterwards, and reemerged at pivotal moments, like 1945. This paper offers a variety of Lao sources on 1893, starting with an examination of contemporary accounts (including a chronicle) of the reception at Luang Prabang of French control of Laos. It also examines Lao scholars who sought to explode the French myth popularized by Auguste Pavie of the "conquest of hearts" by noting the French takeover of Laos in 1893 was anything but peaceful and arguing Lao were not docile colonial subjects. The idea of 1893 as the partitioning of Laos into Thai and French states was even taught in Lao language secondary schools in 1973. Finally, there is an account of Lao soldiers who fought under the Thai to resist the French in the 1893 land war in southern Laos. While this does not fit into Lao nationalist reinterpretations it is included here to show the variety of Lao voices and experiences from the events of 1893 that defy easy categorization. More broadly, one can see the twin births of a modern Laos and an Isan region of Northeastern Thailand between the sixty years from the 1827-28 Thai destruction of Vientiane, the subsequent Thai depopulation campaigns of the 1830s-50s, which forcibly moved the peoples of Laos from the eastern to the western bank of the Mekong, and to the 1893 French seizure of only the eastern bank of the Mekong, which thereby permanently sealed this unnatural and imbalanced state of affairs while leaving a poor, perpetually low population territory to become modern Laos.

Keywords: Partition of Laos, Franco-Thai 1893 division of Laos, Lao transnationalism, historiography of Laos, Laos-centered history

The most commonly repeated epithet about Laos is that it was "invented" in 1893 by French colonialism.[1] Far from being the product of great advances in scholarship, or

[1] For one example used in undergraduate curricula see Norman G. Owen et al., *The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia: A New History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2005), 371 which refers to Laos as a "concoction." For very similar language see Steinberg et al., *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 1987), 192, which, for its slight treatment of Laos, is particularly disappointing as it is one of the few books of Western scholarship to be translated into Lao and available for sale in the country (ca. 2010). Grant Evans noted one of the paradoxes of Lao studies is the question of whether

even a postmodern predicament, this idea derives from the two truths of 20th century Lao history: a profound lack of Lao nationalist sentiment and overwhelming foreign influence. For historians who have dealt with it, the poor, little-known, "backwater" territory which constitutes the modern nation of Laos can only be a story of accident and happenstance. How else can one explain the ironies of the history of Laos, such as the fact that the largest Lao population lives outside the country, in neighboring Thailand? Or that its borders were drawn by European colonial powers capriciously, seemingly more a matter of negotiations and *realpolitik* in distant capitals than there being at stake a real nation of distinct people whose history was well-known?[2] Yet there is a real underlying and unaddressed problem concerning these issues which is that Lao history in 1893 is too often only viewed through two lenses: Thai or French. Thus, one can either see the people of Laos as คนกตัญญู "loyal subjects" of Siam or as "*Laotien*" of *Le Laos française*.[3] There were in fact more than just these two poles in the period concerned here. For these two dominating tropes of the history of Laos, both equally ignore the Lao and other local perspectives on historical events. This paper will examine a sample of such views as they have been articulated by modern Lao historians and as they appear in chronicles. With an analysis of their writings on the Franco-Thai 1893 division of Laos one can begin to appreciate what constitutes a Lao perspective on major events in the modern history of Laos, otherwise missing from well-known and widely-cited historical accounts of the country. This view contends that 1893 was a partitioning of Laos by foreign powers, French and Thai. However, the memory of Lao lands before the partitioning that were united and undivided survived and reemerged at particular times (such as 1945). This memory is recalled in such national symbols as the Lao Issara flag, which was adopted by the Lao People's Democratic Republic. In the flag, the blue strip between two red banks (the blood of the Lao people) represents the Mekong River, which is not portrayed as dividing Lao people, but uniting and connecting them.[4] This memory of partitioning in 1893 is essential to understand and account for the idea of a ລາວໃຫຍ່ "greater Laos" which images a pre-partition Lao state encompassing not just Isan, but also Tai areas of

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Laos exists as real nation, and cited scholars such as Bernard Fall stating Laos was "merely a political convenience" and Arthur Schlesinger who wrote Laos "was a state by diplomatic courtesy." Grant Evans, "Introduction: What is Lao Culture and Society?" in Grant Evans (ed.) *Laos: Culture and Society* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999), 1. See also Marc Askew, William S. Logan and Colin Long, *Vientiane: Transformations of a Lao landscape* (London: Routledge, 2007), 75. This notion was extended in a book-length treatment, Soren Ivarsson, *Creating Laos: The Making of a Lao Space between Indochina and Siam, 1860-1945* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008), but see especially page 8. More recently, see Geoffrey Gunn, "The Invention of French Laos," in Delsey Goldston (ed.), *Engaging Asia: Essays on Laos and Beyond in Honour of Martin Stuart-Fox* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2019).

[2] For an excellent account of the various border treaties for Laos in this period see Kennon Breazeal, "Laos Mapped by Treaty and Decree, 1895-1907" in Mayoury Ngaosrivathana and Kennon Breazeale (eds.), *Breaking New Ground in Lao History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002). See also Andrew Walker. 2008. "Borders in Motion on the Upper Mekong: Siam and France in the 1890s." Yves Goudineau and Michel Lorrillard, editors. *Recherches nouvelles sur le Laos*. Paris: école française d'Extrême-Orient. Walker examines interactions and practices along the new Mekong River border between French, Lao and Siamese officials.

[3] This is the Thai term used by Rama III with respect to the Lao ruler Chao Mangthaturat in the *Pavilion Chronicle*, which was a key expression of Lao-Thai relations from the 19th century. See further Collected Historical Papers, Vol. 5 พงษาวดารเมืองหลวงพระบางตามฉบับที่มีอยู่ในศาลาลูกขุน [Luang Prabang chronicle according to the Minister's Pavilion Edition] (Bangkok: Wachirayan Library, 1917), 262.

[4] Thanks to Phatang Sananikone for this point.

southern China, northwestern Vietnam, and parts of northern Cambodia. This idea became extremely important at certain moments, such as 1945, when Laos' territorial configuration was seen as profoundly malleable and Lao territories lost in 1893 could be recovered to form a greater Lao state. Christopher Goscha and Soren Ivarsson have notably analyzed the idea of a ລາວໃຫຍ່ "greater Laos" in their study of Prince Phetsarath.[5] However, and at the same time, there were those Lao in 1893 who were deeply invested in being part of a larger Siamese empire and preferred it to being ruled by France to the point that they fought to defend Thai power over Laos in 1893. One can also see this phenomenon in some respects in mid-19th century Luang Prabang, which became a major outpost of the Siamese empire while still maintaining its autonomy and even wielding real power.[6]

The emergence of modern Laos, both as a territory and concept, is usually thought to have been the outcome of a colonial conflict between France and Thailand for control of the area culminating in the "Pak Nam Incident" of July 1893 and subsequent Franco-Thai treaty of October 1893.[7] In its most nakedly chauvinist form, heroic French explorers discovered Laos, and woke the people from centuries of stagnation, while liberating them from Asian Despots (in this case, Thai).[8] In this act of liberation, the French claimed to give to Laos its territory, its history and identity while also pointing the way to modernity and civilization. [9] In fact, in the 1940s, some Lao intellectuals would lament French influence such as how the country was always referred to with a final S, as "Laos."[10] For the Thai, shrewd political maneuvering ensured the freedom of Lao living on the right bank of the Mekong (modern-day Isan), under the benign protection of Chakri monarchs. Thai expansion to Laos was internalized as natural, in terms of the derivative language and culture of the Lao (whose script was called ไทน้อย "little Thai"), to the point that in the face of French advances it was not seen as an expansion, but

[5] Soren Ivarsson and Christopher Goscha, "Prince Phetsarath (1890-1959): Nationalism and Royalty in the Making of Modern Laos," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 38(1): 55-81.
[6] Ryan Wolfson-Ford, "Luang Prabang and Bangkok: a 19th century friendship," in Withaya Sucharithanarugse (ed.), *Interpretative Studies on Southeast Asian Culture* (Bangkok: Institute of Thai Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 2015): 193-225.
[7] Ivarsson's *Creating Laos* has most thoroughly explored this thesis.
[8] See for example Milton Osborne's *River Road to China: The Mekong River Expedition, 1866-1873* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1975).
[9] The "liberation" narrative is most succinctly presented in Auguste Pavie's myth of the "conquest of hearts." See Auguste Pavie, *A la conquête des cœurs: le pays des millions d'éléphants et du parasol blanc* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1947). Lao historians later challenged this notion, beginning with the Issara in 1945.
[10] Ryan Wolfson-Ford, "Xāt Lao: Imagining the Lao nation through race, history, and language," Zhouxiang Lu (ed.) *The Routledge Handbook of Nationalism in East and Southeast Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2023).

defense of a preexisting right.[11] For the Thai, French-Laos was their "lost territory."[12] With too little in the way of serious scholarship focusing on Lao or other peoples in the country during this period in Western or Thai literature, there remains even today a lack of alternative viewpoints separate from the above. While there is a wealth of scholarly literature available on the Pak Nam Incident, it is mainly studied for its significance to France or Thailand.[13] Little attention is given to the peoples of Laos in their own right; they are secondary characters in this drama.

The "invention" thesis was not formulated by the gradual accretion of incrementally greater levels of sober and mature scholarly insight, but rather was formed out of necessity given the great dearth of scholarship available on the history of Laos, and especially the peoples of Laos as historical agents in their own right. For anyone interested in reading historical works on Laos the available choices are far outpaced by what is available for Thailand, Vietnam or Indonesia. Moreover, what is written in such works does not have the benefit of resting on the shoulders of great works by so many other scholars, and so is more often tentative and imprecise or otherwise under-investigated. Another related problem is that some scholarship has been written almost entirely working from Thai or French sources.[14] These historians, working under very difficult circumstances in a low-priority area, and unable to fully resolve the inherent biases in their sources ended up perpetuating key myths in the history of Laos. Some

[11] Thai histories written contemporaneously and afterward frequently referred to different parts of Laos as so many "provinces." The derivative nature of the Lao people from the Thai was developed most effectively by Luang Wichit Wathakan during the 1920s-1940s. His claim that the Thai and the Lao were the same race was repeated by many, including prominent members of the Lao Issara including Chao Phetsarath and Katay Don Sasorith, who was Prime Minister of Laos in the 1950s. For an analysis see Scot Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the Creation of a Thai Identity* (Singapore: National University of Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993). Western scholars often accepted such views at face value, such as a French scholar who wrote an early Lao-French dictionary and noted the Lao language derived from Thai. More recently, see Tarling, Nicholas (ed.) *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia: Volume One* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 455 which suggests to readers interested in Lao history to read David Wyatt's *A Short History of Thailand*. Even today, at some US academic institutions, the idea that students should learn Thai language first and can simply "pick up" Lao language in the field has inhibited establishing Lao language programs in US academia for decades. This has hugely negative consequences for the development of Lao studies. Some US Thai studies scholars do not always appreciate the history of Thai expansionism toward Laos, nor necessarily see it as problematic.

[12] See Shane Strate, *The Lost Territories: Thailand's History of National Humiliation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015). Thai irredentist claims to Lao territory dating from 1893 were the *causi-belli* of the 1940-1941 Thai-French war in which Thailand was able to "regain" parts of Xainyaburi and Champassak provinces, with Japanese backing, while seeking to "liberate" and incorporate all of French Laos. See further Eiji Murashima, "Opposing French colonialism: Thailand and the independence movements in Indo-China in the early 1940s," *South East Asia Research*, vol. 13, no. 3 (November 2005) and Eiji Murashima, "Thailand and Indochina 1945-1951," Masaya Shiraishi, Nguyen Van Khanh and Bruce Lockhart, *Vietnam-Indochina-Japan Relations during the Second World War: Documents and Interpretations* (Waseda University Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, 2017).

[13] For example, Patrick Tuck, *The French Wolf and the Siamese Lamb: The French threat to Siamese Independence, 1858-1907* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1995).

[14] For example, Geoffrey C. Gunn, *Rebellion in Laos: Peasant and Politics in a Colonial Backwater* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990) is a valuable work from a Marxist perspective on Lao colonial history using French archival sources exclusively. Both Martin Stuart-Fox and Milton Osborne's works were similarly reliant on French sources. For Thai scholars, see the relevant discussion in Mayoury and Pheuiphanh Ngaosrivathana, *Paths to Conflagration*, 34.

myths were crafted by the French to justify and defend their colonial rule of Laos: that the people of Laos were not nationalist; that they were peaceful, docile, all loving French rule; and not interested, capable, or even aware of politics. Jean Deuve mentions in passing Lao nationalist stirrings, such as calling for increased participation in the colonial government, greater powers within the colonial administration, or requesting to lessen French demands on Laotian colonial subjects, but still maintains (however improbably) no anti-French feeling existed before 1940.[15] And Geoffrey Gunn similarly wrote of the "non-rebellion" of the Lao under French colonialism.[16] The French laid the idea that Lao were not political so deeply that even Lao intellectuals like "Pierre" Somchine Nginn repeated it in their writings.[17] While Gunn exploded the myth of a peaceful colonial period, his pioneering monograph on Lao nationalism did not find it before the French sponsored *Lao Nhay* (Lao renovation) movement of 1941-1945, casting Lao in a decidedly subordinate role.[18] Thus he claimed Lao nationalism was "French stimulated, French directed and French orchestrated."[19] Further, Gunn claimed the people of Laos were loyalists or Issara who opposed French rule in 1945 not because of politics, but for "personal vendettas, nepotism and patronage networks," or "motivated by family and clan loyalties."[20] Certainly at times and under various circumstances people used larger events for their own purposes, but not in every case. While some pursued their own interests there were others who did hold higher aims and were covertly or overtly political. It is a serious distortion to claim it was impossible for the people of Laos to be political, especially when it served to further French or Thai imperialism, whether in 1828, 1893 or 1945, as French fought to create or hold on to their Laotian protectorate and colony while Thai strove to conquer and absorb their Thai-Lao territories.

On the contrary, I argue Lao nationalism's development traces back to the 1930s, at least, among elite nationalists who wrote the blueprint of Lao nationalism later distilled to the masses in the 1940s through popular movements like the Issara and Lao Nhay.[21] While this nationalism centered on ethnic Lao, it did find ethnically diverse supporters, like Katay Don Sasorith and Pierre Somchine Nginn.[22] This led to the first Lao independence movement, the Issara, who emerged as a student protest in July 1940 against French rule at the Collège Pavie in Vientiane, several months before the French created the Lao Nhay movement, which was reacting against the Issara as much as it was against Thai anti-French forces.[23] It is important to note that many important Lao

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[15] For denial of politics and claims of no anti-French sentiment before 1940 see Jean Deuve, *Le Laos 1945-1949: Contribution à l'histoire du mouvement Lao Issala* (Montpellier: Université Paul Valery, 1995), 6, 12, 18, 22.

[16] Geoffrey Gunn, *Rebellion in Laos*, 59.

[17] "Pierre" Somchine Nginn, "La Constitution Lao," *Kinnari*, November 1947, no. 6, 11.

[18] Geoffrey Gunn, *Political Struggles in Laos, 1930-1954: Vietnamese Communist Power and the Lao Struggle for National Independence* (Bangkok: Editions Duang Kamol, 1988).

[19] Ibid, 101.

[20] Ibid, 122, 125.

[21] Wolfson-Ford, "Xāt Lao."

[22] Ibid. More broadly, I have further argued Lao ethnic nationalism can be traced back even further, to at least the 1890s. See Ryan Wolfson-Ford, "Strangers in the hills: Social disruption and the origins of Lao nationalism (1873-1911)," *South East Asia Research*, 2017 vol. 25(4): 412-430.

[23] Sila Viravong. 1975. ປວັດສາດອັນທີ 12 ຕຸລາ 1945 [History of October 12, 1945]. Vientiane: Pakpasak press.

nationalists were across the Mekong in Isan. Not just Sila Viravong, who was from Roi-Et, but Fong Sitthitham, who established an organization calling for Lao autonomy in 1935, and Tiang Serikhan, the latter of whom was a major Seri Thai leader and was assassinated by Thai police (on Phao Siyanon's order) in 1947 as a dangerous separatist. In 1935, a monk in Ubon, Chao Khun Oubali "erected two Buddha statues that sit back-to-back one looking towards Thailand and the other towards Laos" to demarcate a point on the western boundary of the former Lan Xang kingdom.[24] These trans-Mekong connections led the Issara to find protection in exile in Thailand for five years until they were able to return to Laos in August 1945 and eventually declare Lao independence on October 12, 1945. Yet even as Issara received vital support from the Thai state they feared Thai domination and absorption of the last remaining Lao territories into a Thai confederation.

The position which the history of Laos finds itself in is not unprecedented. In fact, it bears similarities to the state of Chinese historiography decades ago. It was Paul Cohen who then wrote of what he termed a "China-centered approach" which entailed eschewing Western historical sources in favor of Chinese sources, to investigate and ultimately improve the understanding of local historical processes, instead of continuing to produce more histories overwhelmed by external forces.[25] Prior to this John Fairbank propagated a unique vision of China that was unchanging and traditional, isolated in its own self-aggrandizing, arrogant world-view (placing itself at the cosmological center) and compounding this with its physical isolation as if it were hermetically sealed. Fairbank's notions were only challenged, revised and replaced with more nuanced and accurate understandings of Chinese history when works of the "China-centered approach" began to appear. It is worthwhile to consider whether a "Laos-centered approach"[26] would succeed in addressing some of the long-standing problems in the history of Laos discussed here. While Cohen's approach has been criticized by later scholars for too strongly ignoring external factors, the state of the history of Laos is such that few outside the country, including well-established scholars, know much about the internal history that such an approach is perhaps called for as one criteria of a larger, more balanced and careful approach. By suggesting this approach, I do not mean to suggest that critical scholarly research of the French or Thai role in Laos is not needed – far from it. What I mean is to suggest additional, complimentary avenues for research; and to open up rather than close down any approach.

It is worth noting that Thai and French actors were more complicated and nuanced than portrayals by Lao historians admit. Not every Thai or French was an imperialist. Some were sympathetic to the plight of Laos, especially during the Lao Nyai/renovation movement.[27] Likewise there were Lao who advocated for continuing

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[24] Pheuiphanh and Mayoury Nagosrivathana. 2017. "The Half Millennium Quandary: Establishing the Ayutthaya-Lan Xang Fronter 1357-1827." Delsey Golden, editor. *Engaging Asia: Essasy on Laos and Beyond in Honour of Martin Stuart-Fox*. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press, 50-51.

[25] See further Paul Cohen. 1984. *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past*. New York: Columbia University.

[26] Not ethnic Lao but centered on the people of Laos and including transnational connections.

[27] See Ivarsson, *Creating Laos*. See also Simon Creak. 2015. *Embodied Nation: Sport, Masculinity, and the Making of Modern Laos*. Honolulu: University of Hawa'i Press.

French rule of Laos, like Pierre Somchine Nginn, especially after 1945.[28] Thai and French also had changing views of Laos, too.[29] French views on Laos ranged from a land of "decrepit races" to be replaced by Vietnamese migration, as voiced by François-Jules Harmand in 1880, to expansionary views similar to Lao elites, centering on expanding across the Mekong (mostly before World War I) to incorporate ethnic Lao areas of Northeast Thailand, albeit under French rule.[30] Thus Marie Auguste Armand Tournier lamented in 1900 about how French Laos was only 1/3 of the actual Lao territory, echoing Sila's own writings later in the century.[31] This provided the basis for some level of mutual cooperation among certain French and Lao (especially at Luang Prabang). As will be described below, Auguste Pavie also agreed to work with Chao Bounkhong to expand the borders across the Mekong in 1894. Further, Alfred Raquez published a travel book in 1902 that included a letter from Luang Prabang ruler Sakkalin appending excerpts of Lao chronicles containing a ກົງດິນ Wheel of Territory text denoting the territorial boundaries of Luang Prabang kingdom, including areas across the Mekong and now within Siam.[32] As David Streckfuss noted, after 1893 France offered protégé status to those living within Siam who had been displaced and wished to return to Laos thereby challenging Thai authority over their Lao subjects.[33] Where Lao elite and French views diverged concerned whether French rule of Laos should continue, especially during World War II and afterwards. Thai expansionary views of Laos as a "lost territory" have been thoroughly explored by Shane Strate.[34] In the 1920s-40s Thai authorities saw Laos as being the same race as Thai were advocated by Luang Wichitwatakan.[35] In the 1940s, the Lao Issara considered forming a confederation with the Thai, however, they remained cautious of falling under Thai power. But there was a Franco-Thai imperialist violence at work on Laos in 1893 (where Laos was conquered and absorbed by Thai and French powers) that Lao historians perceived, and began to historicize and that this paper seeks to recover in light of its absence in Western historiography on Laos.

That being said, Lao were not always the victim, and were dominating other ethnolinguistic groups within the country; symbolized by the very naming of the country

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[28] Ryan Wolfson-Ford, "Loyalism and anti-communism in the making of the modern monarchy in post-colonial Laos," in Robert Aldrich and Cindy McCreery (eds.) Monarchies and Decolonisation in Asia (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020): 175-191.

[29] Thanks to the anonymous reviewer for this point.

[30] François-Jules Harmand. 1880. *Laos and the Hilltribes of Indochina*. Walter E.J Tipps, trans. Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 143. On French expansionary views on the Mekong border after 1893 see Walker, "Borders in Motion on the Upper Mekong," 191.

[31] Marie Auguste Armand Tournier, *Notice sur le Laos français publiée par ordre de M Paul Doumer, gouverneur général de l'Indo-Chine, par le personnel administratif du Laos, sous la direction de M le lieutenant-colonel Tournier, Résident supérieur* (Hanoi: F. H. Schneider, 1900), 1.

[32] Thanks to the anonymous reviewer for this point and source. Alfred Raquez. 2019 [1900]. *Laotian Pages: A Classic Account of Travel in Upper, Middle and Lower Laos.* William L. Gibson and Paul Bruthiaux, editors and translators. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 5-7.

[33] Streckfuss. "The mixed colonial legacy in Siam." See also Alfred Raquez's 1903 article appearing in *Bulletin du Comité de L'Asie Française* detailing Lao people living in Thailand. Thanks to the anonymous reviewer for this point. The Thai National Archive has many documents around this time period of 1893 referring to cases of people either return to Laos or alternatively crossing the Mekong to settle in Thailand and so rejecting the new French regime.

[34] Strate, *The Lost Territories*.

[35] See further Barmé, *Luang Wichit Watakan and the Creation of a Thai Identity*.

after the ethnic Lao. Mai Na Lee's research into the idea of a Hmong kingdom among Hmong communities of Laos or James Scott's conception of Zomia for upland peoples are important counterpoints to lowland perspectives.[36] There are multiple levels of violence and oppression at work. Not every history of Laos needs to follow the Laos-centered approach. Rather, what I propose here as a Laos-centered approach is one possible analytic tool among many that historians may use to broaden the historical perspective on the country. There is a need for multiple perspectives on the histories of Laos. Multi-vocal histories are needed to recover and include the full range of diverse voices, actors, and perspectives across time and space. There is a need for historians to utilize diverse sources (oral and textual) as well to utilize multiple archives and publications to bring forth a broader view. In this paper, the sources I rely on are all texts authored by Lao elite men which as sources are themselves limited in nature by gender, class, and ethnicity, among other limitations. However, considering the absence of local voices on the events of 1893, I argue these views of the time still contribute to our knowledge and understanding of the history of Laos, despite their limitations. Ultimately, having more histories of Laos written from different approaches and fields will lead to a richer, larger, more complicated perspective.

Lost Voices: Lao historians' views on the partitioning of Laos in 1893

To Lao historians writing after the event, 1893 was, similar to the Thai, a crisis, but not in the same manner as the Thai "loss of territory"; rather it was the division of the people or Laos who lived on both sides of the Mekong. These Lao scholars knew well the historic connections between modern day Laos and the Northeastern "Isan" region of Thailand, which had been a Lao settlement going back centuries.[37] Mayoury and Pheuiphanh Ngaosrivathana stress the Mekong River as a connector between the people of Laos on both sides of it, rather than as a "natural border" as the French initially saw it in 1893.[38] One might recall here as an example the actions of the last king of Vientiane, Chao Anou (1803-1828) who among other projects renovated the *That Phanom* in Nakhon Phanom province and even built the first bridge across the Mekong.[39] An earlier example from the 16th century is the 'stupa of double affection' in Loei province, which dates to the end of a Lao-Siamese war in which the Thai attempted to challenge Lao rule of the Khorat plateau unsuccessfully. The Khorat plateau would remain under Lao rule for the next roughly 300 years. It was only during the Chao Anou War (1827-1828) that Siam finally was able to extend control beyond Nakhon Rachassima to the entire Khorat

[36] Mai Na Lee. 2015. *Dreams of the Hmong Kingdom: The Quest for Legitimacy in French Indochina, 1850-1960*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press. James Scott. 2009. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press.

[37] See Chapter Two of Askew, et al., *Vientiane: Transformations of a Lao landscape*, which demonstrates the historic connections of Vientiane to the Isan regions, most notably by a system of religious and urban complexes that were satellites of the Kingdom of Vientiane (e.g. Figure 2.1 on page 21). Similarly, one may consider the areas on the right bank that remain a part of Champassak and Xainyaburi provinces respectively today.

[38] Mayoury and Pheuiphanh Ngaosrivathana, *Paths to Conflagration*, 13, 17, 22, 58, 113, 140 and 237.

[39] Ibid, 58, 74-75. There was a tradition of Vientiane kings patronizing temples, including That Phanom, in Isan going back centuries (at least the 16th century).

plateau.[40] Thereafter Siam forcibly removed much of the peoples of Laos living on the east bank of the Mekong effectively creating the modern Isan region and, by depopulating it, creating modern Laos as we know it today.[41] Yet even then for most of the 19th century the area would remain within Siam known as the "Lao provinces."[42] The Ngaosrivathanas' claim that 1893 divided the people of Laos on "both sides" of the Mekong was not unique. Many Lao writers have repeated this observation in regard to 1893 including Maha Sila Viravong, Chao Khamman Vongkotrattana and Khamchan Pradit among others of their time. This is then one missing Lao perspective on the events of 1893: it was a division of the peoples of Laos between two separate states; a predicament that persists until today.

Yet before considering what Lao historians have written after the fact, it may be useful to first consider contemporary Lao writing from the period. There exists a rare criticism of the French in a palm leaf manuscript written by an anonymous Lao scribe which has been approximately dated to circa 1900. The same text appeared in print in 1969 in a publication by the Royal Lao Government-era (RLG) National Library of Laos, but the original manuscript, written in *Lao buhan* script, still exists.[43] Reflecting on the events of 1893, the scribe wrote the following entry:

> From then on Chao Khamsuk [Chao Sakkalin], the elder brother reigned, replacing his father [Chao Oun Kham], for three years when in 1893 in the tenth month, on the fifteenth day of the waning moon, the troubles arose between the King of Siam and the French and thusly [the Siamese King] abandoned the territory of Lan Xang and transferred it to depend on the French in that year, over there. The [Lao] lands, from then on, the French transformed by new customs (ທຳນຽມໃຫມ່). The lords are not permitted to have servants or slaves and neither may they have any *lam* interpreters. In the lord's house, [such persons] are released to be free (ᨴᩫᨶ᩠ᨶᩉ᩵). [The French] also collect a head tax from each person – each is two *mann* – and also request the labor of the people to work away from their land for twenty days – [or] again [the French] take two more *mann*. The religious temples, in some places, the French destroy to make separate French

[40] Mayoury and Pheuiphanh Ngaosrivathana convincingly show that the region was for many years prior to 1827 being encroached upon by Siam which was able to expand its power by forcibly tattooing Lao to enroll them in the Siamese state tax system which included corvee labor. The great canals built during the 19th century which allowed Siam to become an agricultural exporter in the region (especially supplying rice to Indonesia and the Philippines) were constructed in part through abuse of Lao labor from Isan.

[41] On the Thai creation of the Isan region see Kennon Breazeale, "The Integration of the Lao States into the Thai Kingdom," (PhD Thesis, Oxford University, 1975). On the Thai depopulation of Laos in the 1830s-50s see Snit Smuckarn and Kennon Breazeale, *A Culture in Search of Survival: The Phuan of Thailand and Laos* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies Program, 1988).

[42] The renaming of the region as the Isan (northeast) region coincided with an official program to end the usage of the term "Lao" in all official settings, led by Prince Damrong Rajanuphap after 1893. Instead, all persons in Isan were thereafter to be called "Thai." See further, David Streckfuss, "The mixed colonial legacy in Siam: Origins of Thai racialist thought, 1890-1910," in Laurie J. Sears (ed.), *Autonomous histories, particular truths: Essays in honour of John R. W. Smail* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993).

[43] Anonymous, ພົງສາວະດານເມືອງຫລວງພຣະບາງ [Chronicle of Luang Prabang] (Vientiane: National Library of Laos, 1969 [1900]).

> settlements (ອັດຊາສາສນາລາງແຫ່ງຝຣັ່ງກໍ່ມ້າງເອົາເຮັດບ້ານເຮັດເມືອງຝຣັ່ງ ຕ່າງຫາກ).[44]

The chronicle after this last entry is incoherent, appearing to discuss some other unrelated period, but with dates that are erroneous. In general, direct criticisms of one's own times were normally out of the question for most scribes of Laos who wrote such texts, which they regarded as sacred and beyond any one time much less the creation of a single individual.[45] One may speculate that the nonsense at the end of this manuscript may have been included to hide the above criticism of French colonialism from others' prying eyes. At any rate, the scribe who wrote this entry is most impressed by the social changes which were ushered in by the French to the point that he is unable to remain silent about his own times.[46] The French outlawed slavery in Luang Prabang in 1895, which was several years before the Thai (who very gradually over decades undertook such change within Siam) yet few scholars have considered how Lao society adjusted to the new order. Not only did the French change laws and the tax system, but they violated Lao cultural spaces such as the temples and created separate spaces along racial lines. The scribe here does not suggest any rationale to explain such actions. His feeling about the new order is plain. In another manuscript from 1911, a Lao scribe composes the content to express discontent about uncontrolled Vietnamese immigration to Laos under French colonial rule.[47]

In his magisterial 1959 history, Chao Khamman Vongkotrattana presents some further contemporary evidence from 1893 as excerpts in his work. He was a prolific writer and truly accomplished historian specializing on the Luang Prabang region. This is understandable given that he was a family member of the Front Palace of Luang Prabang. In addition to writing perhaps the best account of Luang Prabang during the 19th century, he also wrote on Phongsaly, Xieng Khouang, the temples of Luang Prabang and a history of his own politically significant family.[48] Khamman seems to have had unparalleled access to archival documents from Luang Prabang that may no longer exist or be difficult to access. In one such excerpt he provides a unique first-hand account of the immediate aftermath of 1893 in Luang Prabang:

> In the year 1893, the lesser era year 1255, His Excellency Chulalongkorn wrote a tributary letter to the ruler of Luang Prabang [Chao Sakkalin]. The ruler of Luang Prabang then ordered Chao Krom Khun…and Chao Krom Siphai… to command a boat…floating down [the river] to receive and invite the letter at the port of North Chan village up to [Luang Prabang]. On Saturday, in the seventh month, the thirteenth day of waning moon, close to noontime, King Sakkalin blessedly invited the lords,

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[44] Ibid, 41. All translations are mine.

[45] See further Peter Koret, "Whispered so softly it resounds through the forest, spoken so loudly it can hardly be heard: the art of parallelism in traditional Lao literature," PhD thesis, University of London School of Africa and Oriental Studies, 1994.

[46] For comparison, see further David Wyatt, "Five Voices from Southeast Asia's Past" *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (Nov. 1994), especially 1085-1086. Wyatt's study of the Nan Chronicle did not reveal any overt comment like here.

[47] Ryan Wolfson-Ford, "Strangers in the hills: Social disruption and the origins of Lao nationalism (1873-1911)," *South East Asia Research* 25(4): 412-430.

[48] He was related to Phetsarath, Souphanouvong, Souvanna Phouma and Boun Khong.

> ministers and advisors to gather at the royal palace…then blessedly told Lord Samat to read out the letter and inform the King in the midst of [those gathered], which read as follows:
>
> "the Siamese Government did give Luang Prabang to the French out of necessity. To the King of Luang Prabang and all the lords, children and grandchildren, the high officials and advisors and all the people, do not at all be saddened. Please experience together [with the French] progress and happiness, please!" When Phraya Samat was finished reading, everyone became completely silent and all the people throughout the city were perfectly quiet.
>
> On the tenth month, the tenth day of the waning moon, Chao Sakkalin blessedly commanded to be built a ceremonial hall, decorated with flowers and garlands of extraordinary beauty, in front of the Royal Palace. [The King] invited the lords, ministers and advisors all arranged with their respective rank, insignia and servants. [The King further] ordered the people to gather in the royal palace in order to await and receive [the French]. The honorable Supreme Delegate Pavie, Mr. Lukang and Mr. Vace came from the consul station to have an audience with Chao Sakkalin. Then [the French] read the announcement of the French government, having Mr. Lamache translate, offering to the King the following message: "The country of France requests to care for and protect the country of Lan Xang in perfect happiness." Then [the French] raised the tri-colored flag (the national flag of France) up in the front of the ceremonial hall, blowing a golden trumpet in respect. The French then offered an increased rank to *Phrachao* Sakkalin, who became *Somdet Phrachao* Sakkalin.[49]

Unfortunately, Chao Khamman does not cite his sources in this passage, but it is reasonable to suppose given his status that he had access to the original palm leaf manuscripts stored in the Royal Palace archive at Luang Prabang. There is the added complication that while some of the excerpts appear to be direct quotations, without properly marking these in the text it is not always clear what is from an original source and what is from Khamman himself. Aside from that caution, Khamman affords a detailed account of how the conclusion of the 1893 conflict was experienced in Luang Prabang by the Lao people there. He includes the court protocols related to the exchange of letters between Luang Prabang and Siam, but this is the last such suzerain ceremony to be held between the two, such protocol now eclipsed by the course of events. Khamman portrays the great disquiet of the people, confronted with new and unknown circumstances. There are no celebrations for the commencement of French rule in Luang Prabang in 1893. Finally, he describes the reception of the French as the new colonial "protectors" of the Luang Prabang court. The act of draping the tricolor over the front of the hall (and the palace) is clearly a highly symbolic and laden act, displaying the new dominating position

[49] Khamman Vongkotrattana, ພົງສາວະດານຊາຕິລາວຄວາມເປັນມາຂອງຊາຕິແຕ່ດຶກດຳບັນ [History of the Lao Nation: the Origins of the Race-Nation since Antiquity] (Vientiane: National Library of Laos, 1973 [1959]), 128.

of the French. Yet Khamman follows up this potent scene of the subduing of the Lao of Luang Prabang with a very nimble maneuver by the Lao elite:

> The Viceroy [Chao Bounkhong] thought that Luang Prabang would fall to be a marginal, frontier state, and was afraid that there would be wicked thieves and bandits who would ruin, plunder and rob the people, troubling them. The Viceroy then really had a report on Wednesday the 12 of November 1894 [as follows]: "Dear Supreme Delegate Pavie, Muang Paklay, Muang Xainyaburi and Muang Hongsa in the area on the right bank, were within the 'limits of the realm' of Luang Prabang since ancient times, from the insect hills to the rock cliffs, all was the terrain [of Luang Prabang] until the French and the Thai did agree that it was a Thai possession. I, your loyal servant, do not submit to this." Pavie then really came to consult [Bounkhong] saying "I, servant of his highness, do not submit and I implore you to go to expel the Thai." I [Bounkhong] was very happy.[50]

The areas in question contained valuable royal teak forests as well as royal funeral spaces belonging to Luang Prabang before 1893. One may briefly note the fact that certain parts of this account were written using the first-person pronoun "I, your humble servant/ຂ້າພະເຈົ້າ", suggests it was actually an excerpt from an original document, that Khamman inserted into his work. Chao Bounkhong, the viceroy or *oupharat* of Luang Prabang was able to quickly size up his new suzerains and able to very shrewdly and adroitly manipulate them into a joint endeavor that was at his initiation and for his purposes: to expand and recover Luang Prabang's lost territories. This was the beginning of a long sympathetic relationship between the early French colonial officers in Laos who worked hand in glove with Chao Bounkhong to expand the power and authority of the new French Laos throughout the upper Mekong (not unlike similar efforts by Luang Prabang to work with the Thai after 1828). The Lao elite at Luang Prabang were able to form such an amiable relationship with the French by finding points of agreement, such as their mutual dissatisfaction with the Mekong as a border (could anyone ever image the Chao Phraya as such for the Thai?). There are a number of documents in the Thai National Archives which further illustrate this relationship. Ultimately, the French favor shown to Luang Prabang after 1893 elevated the kingdom to new heights, including in 1947 when the kingdom was given control of the whole of modern Laos, a power it had not ever had previously (in geographic terms).[51] This can be constructively compared with the rulers of southern Laos at Champassak, who were not recognized by the French, but simply made "governors."[52] Indeed, Champassak and Phouan rulers secretly fomented other ethnic groups against the French, such was their hostility in 1893 and after.[53]

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[50] Ibid, 128-129.

[51] Ryan Wolfson-Ford, "Loyalism and anti-communism in the making of the modern monarchy in post-colonial Laos."

[52] See further, Ian Baird. 2010. "Different views of history: shades of irredentism along the Laos-Cambodia border." Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, Vol 41, No. 2.

[53] Ian Baird, "Millenarian Movements in Southern Laos and Northeastern Siam (Thailand) at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: Reconsidering the Involvement of the Champassak Royal House," *South East Asia Research*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (June 2013): 257-279.

Chao Bounkhong's alliance with the French was not a given. When the French first took power over Luang Prabang he refused to accept their rule. Instead, he conscripted soldiers and prepared to mount a defense of Luang Prabang against the French.[54] When the French consul learned of this, he threatened to throw Bounkhong in jail and warned that his family line would cease in infamy. The consul sent an agent to ask Bounkhong if he wished to fight the French, to which Bounkhong replied: "If the Thai order your humble servant to fight, [then] your humble servant will fight. If your humble servant is under the command of the French already, [and] the French order your humble servant to fight the Thai, your humble servant will fight."[55] This is another aspect that Khamman was able to record and historicize of the often muted or hidden violence of the French occupation of Laos. Not everyone in Laos accepted the new French rule, including Chao Bounkhong at Luang Prabang. Yet he did set this initial conflict aside to cooperate.

To further flesh out the above one may consider the writings of Khamchan Pradit, who was an RLG diplomat, having studied in France and who also lived for a time in the United States. Writing in 1971, he was very critical of the French. To begin with, he makes a bold accusation that the French were in fact behind the horrific destruction of Luang Prabang in 1887, which sent the old King Oun Kham into the waiting arms of the French, for protection:

> In the year 1885 when Tonkin and Annam were dependents of the French already, the French were interested with the Lao country. Therefore Mr. Auguste Pavie then came to be the deputy consul at Luang Prabang. In the year 1887 to serve the desire to make Muang Lai (Laichau), Muang Thaeng (Dienbienphu), Muang Sawn (Sonla)… to be possessions of Tonkin, the French then incited Chieftain Deo Van Tri, the leader of the Tai Lai together with six hundred thieves to come attack Luang Prabang because the land of the Sip Song Chuthai was dependent on Luang Prabang.[56]

In Pavie's own account of events in April-June 1887 he makes no mention of any such provocative action on his part.[57] Rather he presents himself as merely reacting when the army of Muang Lai occupied Luang Prabang. When fighting broke out, it was Pavie who had the amazing presence of mind to send his porter to the Royal Palace and indeed save the elderly Lao ruler Chao Oun Kham. Together with Pavie, Oun Kham was able to escape down the river, while the viceroy, Souvanna Phomma, was killed fighting in the palace and the rest of the city was burnt to the ground. It was at this point that Pavie claims the Luang Prabang monarch requested protection from the French, the so-called "conquest of hearts." But what Pavie does not mention is that Chao Oun Kham subsequently went to Bangkok and for all intents and purposes appeared to continue to act as a faithful vassal of Siam for the next several years following practices of multiple, overlapping

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[54] Khamman Vongkotrattana, ພຣະຣາຊປະວັຕິ ວົງຄ໌ວັງຫນ້າ ຣາຊຕະກູລ ເຈົ້າອຸປຣາຊອຸນເກ້ວ [History of the viceroy line of Prince Viceroy Oun Kaeo] (Vientiane: National Library of Laos, 1971), 32-33.

[55] Ibid, 36.

[56] Khamchan Pradit, ປະວັດສາດການທູດລາວ [Diplomatic History of Laos] (Vientiane: Pakpassak, 1971), 19. The ellipses are in Khamchan's original text.

[57] Auguste Pavie, *Mission Pavie Indo-Chine, 1879-1895: Geographié et Voyages. VI. Passages du Mé-Khong au Tonkin (1887 et 1888)* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1911).

sovereignties in the area.[58] Khamchan however claims that Pavie did not simply wait for such an opportunity, but rather he was devious enough to manufacture a crisis for which he could then appear falsely to be the hero.[59] Khamchan was not the only one of the Lao elite at the time to make such an accusation; it was in fact a popular notion of the period.[60] Indeed, the Issara wrote about it in 1948 and even went so far as to destroy the statues commemorating Auguste Pavie in Vientiane and Luang Prabang in 1945 during their rule of Laos. [61] Underlying this conceit is the feeling that the French colonization of Laos was illegitimate and the supposed "conquest of hearts" and "peaceful" colonization of Laos was a myth that Lao sought to dispel.

Khamchan continues to demystify the events of 1893 by presenting the French as the aggressors. In fact, in Khamchan's account the French are the ones who march their armies first into Laos, to which the Thai and Lao can only then react by self-defense.[62] In the ensuing fighting, the French Inspector Grossin is killed, which "pains" the French who then "take revenge."[63] This came in the form of the famous gunboat diplomacy of 1893 – the Pak Nam Incident, when three French warships fought their way up the Chao Phraya River and, in Khamchan's words, "threatened" to "blast Bangkok to bits" unless French demands were met.[64] Khamchan refers to the French victory as "the seizure of the Lao country on the left bank [of the Mekong]."[65] In Khamchan's account the French invade Laos by force and when they encounter resistance or setbacks respond with increasing violence. This is why Khamchan refers to 1893 as the "seizure" of Laos.

In most Western and Thai accounts of the Paknam Incident, peoples from Laos have little role to play, but Khamchan's account is deliberately different. For instance, when he discusses the various border treaties involving Laos, including cases where Lao territory was lost, he makes the point, repeatedly and in blunt terms, that "the Lao had no right to participate."[66] Further, when the French dissolve the Luang Prabang treasury, tightening their grip on the kingdom in 1917, Khamchan notes again "the Lao objected."[67] Khamchan's account raises questions for some scholars, such as Gunn, who claimed that because the Lao never rose in mass revolt against the French that they had in fact acquiesced to French rule. Khamchan supplies numerous examples throughout the French period to contradict the idea that Lao were docile colonial subjects while only other ethnolinguistic groups resisted French rule. One Lao historical personage already mentioned, Chao Bounkhong, the then viceroy of Luang Prabang and father to Phetsarath,

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[58] On overlapping sovereignties see Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994), chapter 4.

[59] For a relevant analysis of Pavie with respect to 1893 from his post in Bangkok, see Noel Battye, "The Military, Government and Society in Siam 1868-1910: Politics and Military Reform during the Reign of King Chulalongkorn" (PhD Thesis, Cornell University, 1974), Chapter VII.

[60] Phoui Sananikone, who was the speaker of the RLG National Assembly for many years, wrote of this in his autobiography. Katay Don Sasorith wrote a detailed pamphlet on it while in exile in Thailand in the late 1940s. On the latter, see further, Wolfson-Ford, Xāt Lao.

[61] Wolfson-Ford, Xāt Lao.

[62] This paragraph references Khamchan, ປະວັດສາດການທູດລາວ, 21.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid, p. 24.

[67] Ibid, p. 26.

Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong, is portrayed as resisting French administration until they finally eliminated his office:

> In 1913 Mr. Chaffray oppressed the Lao people throughout the country. Therefore, Chao Oupharat Bounkhong then recommended to the French government [Chaffray] be removed from Laos immediately. Mr Chaffray then was removed to stay at Hanoi according to this request.[68]

Here Chao Bounkhong, who previously worked with Pavie to expand French Lao power across the Mekong, is instead working to curb the worst excesses of French rule in Laos. It is amazing, given the low estimation the French held of the Lao, whom they saw as an inferior race, "lazy" and "indolent," that Bounkhong had any success at all. While Bounkhong was deeply involved in the rebuilding of Luang Prabang after the destruction of the Haw wars (1869-1889), including the reconstruction of the Royal Palace, Khamchan also notes that he "drew up a program to build a road from Luang Prabang to Xieng Khuang."[69] The French were not alone when they pursued road building projects that were instrumental in connecting the country, which were also important to the broader development of nationalism. Chao Bounkhong, who seems especially active when Sisavangvong was still young, is the first Luang Prabang viceroy to have much power in many decades. It is entirely possible that the ultimate reason the French removed the position of viceroy was not because of their preference for a succession of the monarchy based on primogeniture as in the West, but rather simply because Bounkhong challenged the French and they wanted to remove him, he having refused to acquiesce to French whims.

Next, one may consider the "father of Lao history" Maha Sila Viravong who wrote about the division of the peoples of Laos in 1893 in a 1973 history used as part of the Fa Ngum secondary school curriculum by the RLG. These were the first secondary schools to teach entirely in Lao language. Sila's text contrasts with his earlier historical work from the 1950s, which was silent on the French period. Writing on the events of 1893 he has this to say:

> In truth, the Lao territory or the 'limits of the Lao realm' from antiquity covered both banks of the Mekong, having there the widest plains, but the French snatched from the Thai only one third of all the land and the part the French got was only mountains and sparsely populated as well. As for that which fell to be a possession of Siam there was three times as much land which was only flat plains and densely populated, which now is called especially the northeast [Isan] region having fifteen million people. Really then we must question for what reason did the French not capture or demand all the land that was the 'limits of the Lao realm' since ancient times? Why really [were the French] happy to take only specifically the left bank? …The fact that the French did this really is a lost benefit to the Lao because the people of both banks of the Mekong are of the same race and

[68] Ibid, p. 25.
[69] Ibid, p. 25.

> nation but today they must be divided so that one side is Lao and the other side is Thai.[70]

Here one sees more language regarding the Lao on "both sides of the Mekong" now being taught in the Lao school system as part of the curriculum. In addition, Sila ascribes the poverty and tiny population which constitutes the modern country to the failure of the French to have completed the seizure of all Lao territory, effectively breaking up the country. His description of the areas of Lao settlement under French control versus those remaining in Siam is very similar to a description by the Resident Superior of Laos, Lieutenant Colonel Marie Auguste Armand Tournier written in 1900. [71] Yet Sila's repetition here is made in service of a strong rebuke to French intervention, which destroyed the ancient boundaries of the Lao country, leaving only a rump state. To Sila, the Franco-Thai Treaty of 1893 flew in the face of the essential fact that the people on both sides of the river were one and the same. In as much as the French sought to be the "protector" of Laos and in as much as they vilified the Thai for their oppression of Laos, well represented by the Thai destruction of Vientiane in 1828, the French had after all this quite ironically overseen the final division of the Lao by the Franco-Thai Treaty of 1893.

Finally, one may consider another type of unheard voices in the events of 1893, which are of a more complicated, cross-border, transnational nature. As much as 1893 served as a rallying cry for both Lao and Thai nationalists for their respective purposes, at the time loyalties in the region were not so neatly distinguished. There was at least one case where Lao military units actually fought loyally alongside their Thai masters to preserve and defend Thai rule against the French invasion. This example comes from the 1893 land-war, which first took shape around the old southern Lao kingdom of Champassak. Noel Battye, who wrote on the reform of the Siamese military, provides an excellent account of the battle in question. This began on April 4, 1893 when the Thai Commissioner of area, Phra Prachakhadikhit, reacted to the French capture of Stung Treng by planning a counterattack. By May 3 a Thai-Lao force set out to present the French with an ultimatum: disarm and retreat or be expelled by force, as Battye describes:

> [The Siamese officer] Nai Sut Chinda …was awarded the mission and embarked in pirogues with about 800 poorly armed Lao for the islands of Sakhon and Khone. He ringed the French positions with stockades, one at least in classical garuda form. According to Siamese on-the-spot account, the French opened fire before the ultimatum was delivered. Then, when it had been delivered and rejected, the Siamese opened fire in earnest by command of Phra Pracha, apparently acting on his own initiative. The two sides exchanged ineffective fire. The Siamese—or, rather the Lao irregulars—scored the major success, the capture of a live French officer. The Ratchawong of Saphang Phupha and his followers, patrolling the river

[70] Sila Viravong, ພົງສາວະດານລາວ [Chronicle of the Lao] (Vientiane: Department of Secondary Education, Ministry of Education, 1973), 176. Sila offers three excellent reasons for why the French did not make further territorial gains.

[71] See Marie Auguste Armand Tournier, *Notice sur le Laos français publiée par ordre de M Paul Doumer, gouverneur général de l'Indo-Chine, par le personnel administratif du Laos, sous la direction de M le lieutenant-colonel Tournier, Résident supérieur* (Hanoi: F. H. Schneider, 1900), 1.

> to cut the French supply line, surrounded and captured a party of coolies peddling supplies under the command of Captain Thoreux. The captain was taken to Champasak and thence to Ubon as a prisoner of war.[72]

Battye concludes on this battle, only a minor event in the whole war, that "nonetheless, the resistance of the Lao men of the country, a handful of Siamese troops, a couple of junior military officers and a few provincial officers was enough to make [the French commander] de Lanessan move the troop reserve from Phnom Penh to the front and, throughout May, to raise Cambodian militia."[73] Minor event though it was, the battle is significant for this study. While one must be cautious, it is very likely that the Lao who risked their lives to repel the French here, some of whom did indeed give their lives for Siam, were genuinely motivated by a sense of loyalty to defend Thai rule. Given that the bulk of the Thai army was made up of Lao from the Isan provinces or from elsewhere suggests this was not an isolated case. Ironically, it is in the nationalist accounts written by the Lao elite that these voices go unheard, but while not all Lao voices fit the preconceived meta-narratives of either side, they are worth recovering from the dustbin of history. An anti-French Thai-Lao alliance of sorts would re-emerge again during the 1940-1941 Franco-Thai war, led by Oun Sananikone, Sila Viravong and others closely associated with the Issara movement which itself received vital support from the Thai – that is until this ruptured in 1947 over concerns over Lao separatism in Isan.

Lao voices went unheard on the one hand by the great colonial powers of Britain and France which mercilessly carved up the peninsula, and on the other, by the Thai cry of "lost territories" inflicted on it in 1893 at the hands of the French. This would become a key mythos of modern Thailand, to proudly proclaim it as the only country in the region to escape colonization, thanks to its wise rulers. Yet few outside the country have observed the loss Lao suffered at the same moment or what significance this had for the genesis of Laos as a modern nation. Instead, it is endlessly repeated by both popular writers and scholars alike that Laos was "invented," without much serious investigation into what this comment actually meant, beyond the established French or Thai views. This study presents a sample of Lao views on this key moment in history. To these Lao historians, 1893 was many things, but foremost it was the division of the Lao people on both banks of the Mekong as articulated by the Ngaosrivathanas, Khamchan and Sila. It was a mystification of the French conquest of Laos which Khamchan wrote against. It is also an opportunity to challenge Gunn's thesis that the Lao had acquiesced to French rule and remained "docile" throughout the colonial period. For Khamman it was the pall of silence that reigned in Luang Prabang when news of the treaty of 1893 was made known. To these views one may add a small addendum not found in any nationalist history, of the Lao who were loyal to Siam and fought and died to protect Siamese rule against French forces.

This paper has sought to recover lost voices from 1893 that are neither Thai nor French, the two dominating imperialist powers whose views and sources have dominated the historical narrative. There are more Lao views than the ones just presented here, not to mention those views remaining to be recovered of persons of different classes, genders and ethnolinguistic groups. But it is important to recover voices

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[72] Battye, "The Military, Government and Society in Siam 1868-1910," 344-345.
[73] Ibid, 346.

from those living within the country to counter a historical narrative dominated by French and Thai competition over Lao territories. There was more happening in 1893 than just Thai-French rivalry. Thai and French actors are more complicated and nuanced than appear in Lao historians writing on 1893, but their writings are nonetheless important despite their flaws because they have been neglected. To consider Lao views on this pivotal moment in history contributes to our knowledge and understanding of the history of Laos. To the Lao elites, whose writings I present, 1893 was a partition of the country by Thai and French powers. The country up to this point had always been along both banks of the Mekong River. Now a new modern, international boundary separated them. As Andrew Walker has shown, contact and communication across the borders continued.[74] There were opportunities for French-Lao cooperation, as seen at Luang Prabang, which later became the sole monarchy of Laos in 1947 due to its history of collaboration with French. There were those who fought alongside Thai to resist French rule. However, we must not forget the violence of the division and partition itself. The Lao living within Siam were subject to intense assimilation efforts by Thai authorities – somewhat driven by and reacting against French pressure. The Lao living under the new French rule were part of what became French Indochina, along with Vietnam and Cambodia. In addition to heavy French taxes and racial segregation, the French treated Lao as inferiors to Vietnamese within the colony and in a few years, Lao would begin complaining about uncontrolled Vietnamese migration, a policy created by France. In 1945 Issara would condemn the twin masters of Laos, French and Vietnamese. Indeed, in the post-colonial era, Lao historians writing in the late 1940s-early 1970s wrote to remember, study and historize this colonial Franco-Thai violence, complicating our views of 1893 in modern Lao history. They ask us to recall the twin births of modern Laos and Isan regions in 1893.

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