Journal of Southeast Asian Studies

http://journals.cambridge.org/SEA

Additional services for ***Journal of Southeast Asian Studies:***

Email alerts: Click here
Subscriptions: Click here
Commercial reprints: Click here
Terms of use : Click here



Sons of Khun Bulom: The discovery by modern Lao historians of the 'birth of the Lao race'

Ryan Wolfson-Ford

Journal of Southeast Asian Studies / Volume 47 / Issue 02 / June 2016, pp 168 - 188
DOI: 10.1017/S0022463416000035, Published online: 29 April 2016

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0022463416000035

How to cite this article:
Ryan Wolfson-Ford (2016). Sons of Khun Bulom: The discovery by modern Lao historians of the 'birth of the Lao race'. Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 47, pp 168-188 doi:10.1017/S0022463416000035

Request Permissions : Click here

CAMBRIDGE JOURNALS

Downloaded from http://journals.cambridge.org/SEA, IP address: 149.152.212.234 on 02 May 2016

Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 47(2), pp 168–188 June 2016.
© The National University of Singapore, 2016 doi:10.1017/S0022463416000035

Sons of Khun Bulom: The discovery by modern Lao historians of the 'birth of the Lao race'

Ryan Wolfson-Ford

The opening of the nithan khun bulom *genre of texts is usually regarded as a mythic account of Lao history. But the process by which Lao historians themselves began to perceive this was an important nationalist project of the elite during the Royal Lao Government (RLG) period. As early as the 1920s, Lao authors began rewriting the old folktales into a new, modern, scientific account of the past, the 'birth of the Lao race'. By studying elite writings in the RLG period I show that Lao nationalism was more modernist and autonomous than previously recognised.*

When the late Grant Evans discussed Lao origins when speaking on the dilemmas facing the field of Lao studies a few years ago, he cut right to the heart of this article when he argued that after fifty years, it was time to drop the Nanzhao thesis.[1] He was referring to the oft-repeated claim by Lao historians that the ancient kingdom of Nanzhao in modern-day Yunnan province was actually ruled by Lao and was the origin-point for their migration south.[2] But Evans knew well that decades ago scholars had shown that the kings of Nanzhao were Lolo people, not Lao.[3] This article examines the origins and significance of the Nanzhao thesis as Lao historians articulated it prior to 1975. However, one cannot simply analyse the Nanzhao thesis alone, but rather must consider an entire complex of interrelated and tightly-bound concepts that have been reformulated by Lao intellectuals over many years. My hypothesis is that Lao historians were not simply making claims to an ancient, little-known kingdom in southern China, but rather were engaging in complex cultural transitions by

Ryan Wolfson-Ford is Adjunct Professor at Western Connecticut State University. Correspondence in connection with this article should be addressed to: wolfsonfordr@wcsu.edu. I would like to thank Wynn Gadkar-Wilcox, Christopher Goscha, Kennon Breazeale, Thongchai Winichakul and the anonymous reviewers of *JSEAS* for offering thoughtful comment to help improve this article. I owe a profound debt of gratitude to Maha Khamphoui Sisavatdy for spending countless hours teaching me to read palm leaf manuscripts. Thanks also to Mr Thongsuey Outhompone at the National Library of Laos, Vientiane, for my first instruction in *tham* script. All translations in this article are mine.

1 Grant Evans, keynote speech given at the Center for Lao Studies banquet, Fourth International Conference on Lao Studies, Khon Kaen, 2010.

2 For a comprehensive account of the Nanzhao thesis see Grant Evans, 'The Ai-Lao and Nan Chao/Tali Kingdom: A re-orientation', *Journal of the Siam Society* 102 (2014): 221–56.

3 David Wyatt, *Thailand: A short history* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 12. See further B.J. Terwiel, *A history of modern Thailand, 1767–1942* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1984), p. 240.

CrossMark

rewriting the hugely important *nithan khun bulom* story of the nineteenth century into the 'birth of the Lao race' narrative for a modern twentieth-century audience in order to imagine the new national identity through history. The newly written version, as I will show, was now in the spirit of a modern, scientific and racialist account of the Lao people that aligned with the new ethos of the period, namely, popular sovereignty, nationalism and Social Darwinism.

The *nithan khun bulom* proved fertile ground for elite nationalists to stake their claims. In extant versions from the nineteenth century,[4] this story told of the divine lineage of Lao rulers descended from Khun Bulom, who came from heaven to rule at Na Noi Oui Nu (ນານ້ອຍອ້ອຍຫນູ) or Muang Thaeng, modern-day Dienbienphu.[5] This was followed by a narrow reciting of the kings of Lan Xang beginning with Khun Lo, the eldest son of Khun Bulom. Included with the *nithan khun bulom* was the famous gourd story, which told of the origins of the Lao people. In this story, the Lao and the Kha[6] were born from different holes of the gourd by which they came to have different physiognomies and customs, which explained ethnic diversity in Laos. Yet beginning in the 1920s, and especially during the independent Royal Lao Government (RLG) period (1953–75), Lao writers grew sceptical of this account and began to alter it.

To begin this profoundly modernist undertaking, first these writers had to remove the fantastic, unrealistic elements if they were to have a reliable, credible account of their history. This stage often included a review of existing literature and critique of textual sources with philological leanings to purge and purify the history of myths and legends.[7] Second, they replaced the fantastic with the historically verified: Heaven became China and Khun Bulom was remade as Pi-Lo-Ko, the eighth-century ruler of Nanzhao. Finally, often lacking the names of Lao persons to follow in the first historical epoch, they wrote instead of the birth of the anonymous, homogenous multitude they called the Lao *xaat* (ຊາດລາວ), which would be the collective protagonist for the period prior to Khun Bulom. The final product was a modern, scientific history of Lao racial origins reliant on the existing precolonial narrative of Khun Bulom's bloodline, which synecdochally mutated into the origin of all Lao people.[8]

Yet why did the Lao elite become fixated on the 'birth of the Lao race' to such a degree? To put it simply, they viewed history as the key to knowing one's own *xaat* — race, nation — and further that this was crucial for nationalism to develop in Laos. Maha Sila Viravong may have put it best when he wrote that the 'study of one's

4 Lao palm leaf manuscripts were not well preserved and those which have come down to us are the latest in a long cycle of recopying.

5 See Martin Stuart-Fox, *The Lao kingdom of Lan Xang: Rise and decline* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1998), p. xi, in which he bemoans the lack of sociological, economic, etc., detail in the chronicles (primarily the *nithan khun bulom*). But his expectation, shared by others, that the *Phongsavadan* would be an exact equivalence to a Western chronicle is ultimately flawed. *Phongsavadan* actually translates more accurately as 'royal genealogy' (it is a compound word from two Sanskrit words *vamsa* and *avatar*).

6 'Kha' is a pejorative term which meant 'subordinate', but somewhat ambiguously referred to non-Lao ethnic groups or a legal class ('slave') depending on context.

7 The most prominent example of this would be the preface to Sila's 1957 work. See Maha Sila Viravong, *Phongsavadan Lao* [Chronicle of the Lao] (Vientiane: Ministère de l'éducation nationale, 1957), pp. ๒–๓.

8 My use of the terms 'modern' and 'scientific' in regard to RLG writers is not an endorsement of their claims; it would be a mistake to ignore the links between them and earlier racialists.

own chronicles is truly necessary and extremely important because strong and true patriotism comes from the study of the history, or chronicles, of one's own *xaat*'.[9] Echoing this sentiment, the diplomat Khamchan Pradit wrote: 'I wish to give the youth a new model to know the greatness of the Lao *xaat* in Asia and [it] should continue to participate [in the same manner] in the future'.[10] Nationalism was the primary concern of the generation of writers to be examined. This account of the development of nationalism should be considered in contrast to those who have said that the country was simply 'invented' by the French in 1893 and that subsequent Lao nationalism amounted to nothing.[11] Observers such as MacAlister Brown and Joseph Zasloff perceived the country as little more than a collection of tribes, utterly devoid of nationalist sentiment.[12] This article will demonstrate that the Lao have long held strong nationalist views and that it is only due to historians' studied ignorance of these views that they have been lost.

This study proposes to revise our understanding of Lao nationalism through the prism of race, instead of the more widely observed vector for nationalism: imagined communities, engendered by the dissemination of modern, nationally-oriented print media.[13] Few Lao publications appeared in the French colonial period, which has limited our understanding of Lao nationalism; however, we may perceive a longer, more significant progression if we instead consider the Lao elite's appropriation of race. As a result, Lao nationalist activity can be recognised before the Second World War — the *Lao Nyai* renovation movement — and significant connections can be made with pre-colonial history. The Lao did not suddenly become nationalists in the Vichy period, but slowly developed such notions in many stages, culminating with the RLG period. The literature on Lao nationalism has progressed from a preponderant concern with anticolonial struggle and the Japanese interregnum during the Second World War to recent investigations into pro-French imagined communities.[14] Simon Creak's study on Lao nationalism through notions of the body in sport sets a new standard in the field, not least because of its consummate skill with Lao sources.[15] To understand the rise of nationalism, the successful approach across the region has been to study the writings of the elite, along with newspapers and political parties, to reconstruct the intellectual and political history of the gestational stages of nationalism.

Until recently, little consideration has been given to the writings of elite intellectuals during the RLG period, who have largely been dismissed. Few scholars have as of

9 Sila, *Phongsavadan Lao* (1957), p. ת.

10 Khamchan Pradit, *Pavatsat kantut Lao* [History of Lao diplomacy] (Vientiane: PakPasak Press, 1971), p. 1.

11 For a recent example of the 'invention' thesis in many undergraduate curricula in the United States, see *The emergence of modern Southeast Asia: A new history*, ed. Norman G. Owen (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), p. 371, which refers to Laos as a 'concoction'.

12 MacAlister Brown and Joseph Zasloff, *Apprentice revolutionaries: The Communist movement in Laos, 1930–1985* (Stanford: Hoover Institute Press, 1986), pp. 3–5.

13 Benedict Anderson's famous thesis has been recently applied to Laos by Soren Ivarsson. See Soren Ivarsson, *Creating Laos: The making of a Lao space between Indochina and Siam, 1860–1945* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press, 2008); B.R. O'G. Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

14 See Ivarsson, *Creating Laos,* pp. 11–20.

15 Simon Creak, *Embodied nation: Sport, masculinity, and the making of modern Laos* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015).

yet made any study of the RLG elite's projects to instill patriotism in the people.[16] One such project was the production of new histories, seen as key to proper knowledge of one's own *xaat*. The rewriting of the *nithan khun bulom* then was critical to the formation of the new nationalism the elite wished to inculcate in the people at large. Earlier studies approached Lao history through an external lens, but recent studies on the elite during the colonial period reveal that there was in fact a Lao discourse on Lao.[17] The fact that this discourse did not develop in isolation from foreign influences does not mean it was inauthentic; rather it developed in a fashion similar to elsewhere in the region. I have attempted to trace how the discourse evolved in the independent period and shaped RLG culture and society in ways which were far more significant than has been fully acknowledged.

However, there is still a strong vein in the historiography of Lao nationalism which is problematic and must be addressed: this is the conceit that the country and ethnic identities were created by French colonisation.[18] Certainly it is important to recognise the major influence of the French, especially when dealing with a topic such as race, but to understand the development of Lao nationalism, more attention needs to be paid to the role of the elite. The French did not happen upon a *tabula rasa* in Laos. There were many pre-existing notions, including a conceit of ethnic identity, in addition to other more significant identifiers, which I argue became important precisely in the era of modernisation to follow, subtly guiding the transitions.[19] The French created a skeletal colonial machine in Laos, which in practice, left most people largely to themselves. Thus the Lao elite had a significant role to play as cultural brokers and translators. Lao understandings crucially determined the nuances of the modern term *xaat*.

The French were the first to write a Westernised version of Lao history, but this was not equivalent to the Lao elite's project to rewrite the *nithan khun bulom*. This began with Auguste Pavie's work to translate the text, bringing it to Western attention.[20] This was followed by many French histories of the new possession culminating in the work of Paul Le Boulanger.[21] The study of the *nithan khun bulom* has until now been treated separately from Lao nationalism, but this oversight is attributable to a false dichotomy between the 'premodern' and 'modern' periods. Michel Lorrillard and Souneth Phothisane have led scholarship on the text, but few others have taken an interest in it, and there has not yet been any study of the venerable text's

16 One exception is Creak, *Embodied nation*, pp. 118–39.

17 See, for example, the essays by Soren Ivarsson, Peter Koret and Nick Enfield in *Laos: Culture and society*, ed. Grant Evans (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 1999).

18 For the former, see Ivarsson, *Creating Laos*, and for the latter, Vatthana Pholsena, *Post-war Laos: The politics of culture, history and identity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), pp. 26–7.

19 See further Frank Proschan, 'Peoples of the gourd: Imagined ethnicities in highland Southeast Asia', *Journal of Asian Studies* 60, 4 (2001): 999–1032. Volker Grabowsky, 'Forced resettlement campaigns in Northern Thailand during the early Bangkok period', *Journal of the Siam Society* 87 (1999): 45–86, has noted the role of religious identification in the early nineteenth century, in his discussion of *nikai*.

20 Auguste Pavie, *Mission Pavie Indochine (1879–1895): Études diverse II: Recherches sur l'histoire du Cambodge, du Laos et du Siam* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1898).

21 Some of the major works of the colonial period include: François Tournier, *Notice sur le Laos français* (Hanoi: F.H. Schneider, 1900); Lucien de Reinach, *Le Laos* (Paris: E. Guilmoto, 1911); and Paul Le Boulanger, *Histoire du Laos français: Essai d'une etude chronologique des principautès laotiennes* (Paris: Plon, 1930).

role in the twentieth century.[22] For historians of Laos, the mythical chapters dealing with Khun Bulom and the gourd story are easily skipped over to get to the 'literal' history. By relegating this material to the dustbin of 'myth and legend' we have missed important writings, on the order of nationalist fantasies, by central Lao figures of the time when nationalism took hold in the country. The purpose of this article is to examine RLG elite writings in light of these considerations to advance our understanding of twentieth-century Lao nationalism.

The most relevant work to date on RLG histories has been Vatthana Pholsena's study of the historiography of early Lao history; however, she did not focus exclusively on the RLG period, but was more concerned with the directions of contemporary historiography in the country, rather than considering RLG works in their own right.[23] While the RLG history pamphlet Volker Grabowsky and Oliver Tappe studied did not consider the origins of the Lao, it did show how RLG leaders could manipulate history to promote patriotism.[24] Important connections to the colonial period were made by Ivarsson, who traced the elaboration of race in popular Lao histories as they appeared in *Lao Nyai*, which inform this study.[25] Ivarsson expanded his earlier analysis to a monograph, which led to new understandings of Lao–French collaborations, yet his treatment of Lao agency needs to be more balanced. On the other hand, Ivarsson and Christopher Goscha's pioneering study on Chao Phetsarath Ratanavongsa prefers to consider his 'Greater Laos' in spatial, not racial terms.[26] Most recently, Creak followed Francophile Lao who joined the French to revive the Lao race, a sentiment shared by both, but does not focus on Lao notions of race afterward.[27] The RLG's ethnocentrism has long been known, but its source has not been thoroughly examined; such a study could explain why RLG nationalism failed to attract enough support during the Vietnam War. Grant Evans had noted briefly the racial aspects of Sila's work, yet the present article shows that this trope was not limited to a single work or author, but was in fact widespread in the period, found across many writings.[28] Moreover, this article contributes to the foregoing discussions by arguing that the nationalism produced by RLG writers was more modernist and autonomous than previously recognised, but with curious links to the past.

22 See Souneth Phothisane, 'The Nidan Khun Borom: Annotated translation and analysis' (Ph.D. diss., University of Queensland, 1996) and Michel Lorrillard, 'Les chroniques royales du Laos: Contribution à la connaissance historique des royaumes lao (1316–1887)' (Ph.D. diss., École Pratique des Hautes Études, 1995). Peter Koret has written in general about issues of palm leaf manuscripts in the twentieth century, see Koret, 'Lao perceptions of traditional literature: Both past and present', in *New Laos: New challenges*, ed. Jacqueline Butler-Diaz (Tempe: Arizona State University, 1998).

23 See Pholsena, *Post-war Laos*, pp. 77–118.

24 See Volker Grabowsky and Oliver Tappe, 'Important kings of Laos': Translation and analysis of a Lao cartoon pamphlet, *Journal of Lao Studies* 2, 1 (2011):1–44.

25 Soren Ivarsson, 'Toward a new Laos: *Lao Nhay* and the campaign for national "reawakening" in Laos, 1941–1945', in Evans, *Laos: Culture and society*, pp. 61–78.

26 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 (2007): 55–81.

27 Creak, *Embodied nation*, pp. 22–83.

28 Grant Evans, 'Introduction: What is Lao culture and society?', in *Laos: Culture and society*, p. 3.

Race in Laos

Laos was not isolated from world history in the course of these events. The transition to modernity at the opening of the twentieth century witnessed the rise of nationalism which ripped apart cosmopolitan empires in favour of states founded on distinct peoples. This was inextricably linked to popular sovereignty with a new racial science in the wings to produce requisite authoritative knowledge on the newly conceived 'people'. The latter was a global phenomenon embraced by the masses and their leaders, including everyone from Theodore Roosevelt to Adolf Hitler to Sun Yat-Sen and Yan Fu of China, albeit for different reasons.[29] Intellectuals in colonial Vietnam were 'enchanted by social Darwinist schemes' and thus boasted of a glorious imperial past.[30] In the West, race was used to unify the working classes with the bourgeois elite while in colonial Asia it was seized upon as a liberation ideology to unify and free each of the various countries from imperialism through regeneration and renewal of the race.[31] Direct experience of colonialism had left many intellectuals in Asia receptive to the Social Darwinist account of the 'survival of the fittest' which could explain recent history as well as chart a way forward, out from under the jackboot of Western imperialism.

In Laos, the term *xaat* in the nineteenth century had meant simply 'birth' and had religious connotations in the *samsara* cycle of death and rebirth; however, the related term *chaat* began to be used differently in the sense of national identity at the mid-century in Thailand — not to the exclusion of the earlier meaning.[32] *Xaat* in this sense first appeared in Lao palm leaf manuscripts as early as 1890, predating French colonisation by a few years.[33] The Lao may well have been influenced by the new usage of the term as it emerged in Thailand. However, there were key differences and unique circumstances surrounding the first Lao usage of the term.[34] By the 1950s the meaning of the Lao term had clearly become very similar to its Western counterpart. In a 1957 French–Lao dictionary written by one of the foremost of the Lao elite

29 Yan Fu translated Herbert Spencer's *The study of sociology*, among several other works. His efforts were widely influential. See further Ko-wu Huang, 'The reception of Yan Fu in twentieth century China', in *China reconstructs*, ed. Cindy Yik-yi Chu and Ricardo K.S. Mak (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003), p. 26.

30 Patricia Pelley, '"Barbarians" and "younger brothers": The remaking of race in postcolonial Vietnam', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 29, 2 (1998): 380.

31 For the case of China, see Frank Dikötter, *The discourse of race in modern China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1992).

32 Both the Lao and Thai terms are derived from the Sanskritic term *jāti*. In my research at the Thai National Library's manuscripts section, I found a very early instance (1856) of the new usage of *chaat*, regarding differences among Westerners. In this case, *chaat* appears to be used to distinguish among different Westerners, such as an American who was called a *farang-chaat-amerikan*. See document number 181 in the National Library microfilm collection on Rama IV. This should be added to the evidence collected in Eiji Murashima, 'The origin of modern official state ideology in Thailand', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 19, 1 (1988): 80–96. See also, David Streckfuss, 'The mixed colonial legacy in Siam: Origins of Thai racialist thought, 1890–1910', in *Autonomous histories, particular truths: Essays in honour of John R.W. Smail*, ed. Laurie J. Sears (Madison: University of Wisconsin-Madison and Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), pp. 123–53.

33 This evidence appears in a law text from the Luang Prabang area. I discovered this text during my research into palm leaf manuscripts in the Lao National Library in Vientiane, and further work with Maha Khamphoui Sisavatdy.

34 I will address this in another publication.

at the time, Somchin P. Nginn, *xaat* was unambiguously equated with the French *race*.[35] Another Francophile Lao of the time, who was also prime minister in the RLG, Katay D. Sasorith, had few misgivings about using the term in his discussion of Laos, employing it freely in his 1953 work.[36] This may be partly ascribed to the prolonged effects of a racial order instituted by French colonial rule, and as indirectly continued into the RLG period by American patrons. Yet the emergence of a racial ideology in Laos arose from complicated interactions involving many individuals, and a unique feature of the period was that foreign knowledge, ideologies and customs were appropriated, disassembled, recreated and domesticated by local geniuses.[37] Vital to this process was the ability of new racial ideas to be smoothly appropriated by overlaying on top of existing Lao beliefs. These processes are truly fascinating considering that the very boundary between *foreign* and *Lao* was constantly being redrawn and renegotiated. It is a mistake to consider this as simple Westernisation, which would miss crucial aspects such as the Lao elite's selective appropriation of race because it was useful to their ends. While the equivalent term had Western origins, its use and deployment, the context, the terms and conditions, and even the ultimate meaning and significance were all Lao.

The racial aspects of French colonial rule have been widely observed.[38] It is evident across a broad range of colonial life, from the laws and attitudes shielding the French population to the staffing of the administration and down to the tax regime and census. Pholsena's analysis of the census is illuminating.[39] The census can be read as a taxonomy of the essence of the Lao as well as other peoples of the country who were defined and racialised. Yet it is also important to observe that French racialist ideas had significant convergences with existing Lao notions. Prior to 1893, both Lao and French held similar basic notions regarding the stratification of humanity.[40] Neither were the French the only ones interested in physiognomy. The Lao had their

35 Somchin P. Nginn, *Vatchananukom Farangset-Lao doi Achan Somchin P Nginn* [A French–Lao dictionary by Professor Somchin P. Nginn], repr. (Bangkok: Rung Ruang Ratna Press, 1969), p. 570. He also includes the related term '*xeua-xaat*'.

36 Katay D. Sasorith, *Le Laos: Son évolution politique sa place dans l'Union française* (Paris: Editions Berger-Levrault, 1953).

37 This is my understanding of the process involved in the histories analysed below. See further the localisation process outlined in Oliver Wolters, *History, culture and region in Southeast Asian perspectives* (Ithaca: Cornell SEAP, 1999). An important extension of localisation is the co-figuration process of cultural equivalence described in Wynn Wilcox, 'Introduction: The co-figuration of Vietnam and the West', in *Vietnam and the West: New approaches,* ed. Wynn Wilcox (Ithaca: Cornell SEAP, 2010), pp. 1–16.

38 See Geoffrey C. Gunn, *Rebellion in Laos: Peasants and politics in a colonial backwater* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1990); Martin Stuart-Fox, 'The French in Laos, 1887–1945', *Modern Asian Studies* 29, 1 (1995): 111–39; Alfred W. McCoy, 'French colonialism in Laos, 1893–1945', in *Laos: War and revolution*, ed. Nina S. Adams and Alfred W. McCoy (New York: Harper Colophon, 1970), pp. 67–99; Pholsena, *Post-war Laos*, pp. 32–3; Marc Askew, Colin Long and William Logan, *Vientiane: Transformations of a Lao landscape* (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 85, 101; Grant Evans, *A short history of Laos: The land in-between* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2002), pp. 59–61, claims racism in the colony was 'tempered', but does offer additional examples, including Lao elite frustrations with the presumed superiority of poor Frenchmen: pp. 39, 44 and pp. 65–8.

39 Pholsena, *Post-war Laos*, offers an analysis of the census, pp. 151–4.

40 For instance, the Lao views regarding upland peoples, which were widely shared with other Tai peoples. See Richard David, *Muang metaphysics: A study of Northern Thai myth and ritual* (Bangkok: Pandora, 1984), pp. 81–3.

own beliefs about skin colour, as can be seen from the gourd story. When considering how the French went about identifying all the various groups in Laos we may note that while they had their own notions, they also used local informants, primarily Lao. Thus we see the French employ Lao terms for minority groups — *meo*/ແມ້ວ, *kha*/ຂ້າ, *yao*/ຍ້າວ, even when such terms were seen as highly offensive to the people in question.[41] Underlying the French borrowing, the Lao and French saw these 'primitive' groups in remarkably similar ways.[42] More than has been previously recognised, the Lao wrote their own notions into the French census tables.[43] As for the motivation of the Lao, there is another aspect to the census, recognised by Pholsena, which is that races are listed in order of their perceived superiority, with the Lao placed at the top.[44] Race, like other notions of cultural superiority, established the natural order: French rule over the colony, and Lao elite rule of the *muang* and *tassaeng* with renewed authority over minorities in the country.[45] While the Lao were left subordinate to the white European races in this new order, as we will see below they would not quietly submit to this positioning in their writings.

A precursor in colonial Laos

The earliest example of the rewriting of the *nithan khun bulom* was the 1927 publication of a collection of Lao chronicles, written in King Sisavang Vong's (r. 1904–59) hand. It was published under French auspices in Hanoi by the Imprimerie d'Extrême-Orient.[46] While the text amounts to little more than a collection of various copies of chronicles, the title *Phongsavadan xaat lao* already indicates a new moment in the discourse on Lao identity. This document is an early precursor of the modern histories to come for more reasons than simply employing the term *xaat* in its distinctly new sense of national identity. It is the first Lao-authored text to include all the chronicles from the heretofore separate kingdoms of Laos — Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Champasak, Xieng Khuang — as a single national history. Furthermore, this is the first text to remove or suppress mythical aspects of the chronicles it treats to present a more scientific, modern and literal account. Finally, it was the first of the modern accounts to sanitise earlier accounts of the gourd story from the 1890s to the 1910s which included racist attacks on ethnic minorities in Laos (*kha, yao*). Ultimately, however, the later modernist historians would further alter the *nithan khun bulom* beyond recognition compared to any version from the nineteenth century. The 1927 text, therefore, marks a truly transitionary moment in the development of these processes.

41 The Lao term *meo* appears in palm leaf manuscripts as early as 1877. This is a borrowing of the Chinese term *miao*, and it is likely the Lao understood the discriminatory meaning of that term, 'barbarian'.

42 My emphasis on the similarities between Lao and French thought does not mean there were no serious differences. A biological notion of racial difference was notably absent in earlier Lao notions, while a greater emphasis was placed on religious identity and a multiethnic kingdom.

43 For instance, French views of the Ho were also very likely shaped by Lao perceptions of them, see Tournier, *Notice sur le Laos français*, p. 115.

44 Pholsena, *Post-war Laos*, p. 153.

45 Not all such administrative posts were held by Lao, as some were held by minorities.

46 *Annales du Laos, Luang-Prabang, Vientiane, Tranninh et Bassac* (Hanoi: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1927). The text is written in *lao buhan* script.

Much of the alterations can be seen already in the new layout and reorganisation of the chronicle. There has clearly been an effort to rationalise the content and organise it logically, including the addition of chapters and section headings that one would never see in a palm leaf manuscript.[47] Moreover, the divisions introduced into the earliest portions of the text are illuminating. The first part titled *Phongsavadan pathet lao* is the familiar story of how the area for Luang Prabang was selected for the founding of the city, due to its auspicious and sacred qualities, and the subsequent boundaries set by the ancient wise men (*chao ratsi*). It also includes tales of the Nantha dynasty and Chantaphanit, the latter having discovered the gold and silver trees in the city, representing the prosperity of the area. The second part is titled *Phongsavadan xaat lao*, which consists of the remainder of the chronicle, but especially the story of Khun Bulom and the gourd story, which is indicated by the following transition inserted by the author of the 1927 version:

> The original royal lineage of the city expired when lord Chanthaphanit entered heaven. [From then on] it is we the people of the *Lao xaat* who rule the country in succession until the present day.[48]

It is significant that the first section is perceived not to include any ethnic Lao persons and so the chronicle is only called the *Phongsavadan pathet lao* (Chronicle of the Lao country), but the opening of the Khun Bulom story is apprehended to tell the origin of the Lao so that the chronicle then is properly titled the *Phongsavadan xaat lao* (Chronicle of the Lao race). This is a first inchoate move toward the discovery by modern Lao historians of the 'birth of the Lao race'. In dividing the sections this way one notes there is an abiding concern that the people in the first section are not Lao.[49] The modern period is marked by many similar instances in which the chronicle distinguishes between those who are Lao and those who are not, although now marking this boundary by insertion of the phrase '*xaat* Lao'.

As for what has been removed from the nineteenth-century accounts in this version, the bulk of the mythic content that is missing is from the opening of the text. One significant change is that there is no description of the creation of the world — the *Maha Kap* story — as in many other older versions of the *nithan khun bulom*. This version merely concerns itself with Luang Prabang's founding. It is restricted to that one particular corner of the world, rather than taking its subject as the world. Overall the section is more truncated than nineteenth-century versions. It makes up a much smaller proportion of the text, which is now dominated by the 'literal', 'historical' reign of Lao kings from Fa Ngum onward. These changes appear in the version written in the hand of Sisavang Vong, who otherwise made himself appear to be quite modern. One cannot forget the accounts of this king in his European suit, smoking a cigarette, driving his Ford automobile around Luang

47 Whereas the main organising concept of palm leaf manuscripts seems to have been a concern with space constraints — a natural concern given that the material was handmade — rather than each item's relation to the others.

48 *Annales*, p. 4.

49 Souneth, 'The nidan khun bulom', has noted that the Nanda dynasty rulers were represented as non-Lao, which provides another example of pre-existing notions of ethnicity from the nineteenth century.

Prabang.[50] He was the first king to be educated in the French system, going abroad to France from a young age, and the first of the Francophile generation whose upbringing would have impressed in him an awareness of the Western sciences, and shown him presentations of French history denuded of its legends, to an extent, replaced with the fervent nationalism of the age.

Finally we will consider the gourd story in which the racist abuse from an earlier period is sanitised. The difference here is that unlike in earlier versions from the 1890s to 1910s there is no mention of either the Lao or the Kha, but only a generic referent 'people' (ຄົນ). As a result, in the 1927 version little emphasis is placed on the differences between the two groups who emerge from the gourd; instead this account treats both equally. But as much as this new version elides the differences, it still is unable to totally erase the innate qualities of the story; thus this sanitised version still makes references to the skin colour of the first group. The essential meaning of the gourd story is the simple truth that groups of people are not the same, yet in the 1890s it was rewritten to emphasise the natural superiority of one group versus another. The alterations which Sisavang Vong introduced, however, laid emphasis on shared qualities and what was held in common among the different peoples. The following is the sanitised account in the 1927 text:

> Grandpa really took out a red iron tool and bored a hole with it. All the people spilled out. Khun Khan saw that, then he really took a large chisel and went to chisel out one side of the gourd. People spilled out for three days and three nights, then really [it was] finished. Those who came out the bore hole were two groups: one was called *tai lom*, one was called *tai lue*. Those who came out of the chisel hole were three groups: one was *tai lo*, one was *tai lung,* one was *tai kwang*. The people who came out of the gourd did not know their origin, their own upbringing and they did not know respect. Grandpa *rang seung* really taught them the knowledge to subsist and told them to pair up and become husband and wife and to make houses and to give respect to their parents or anyone who was older than them *and told them to make a funeral for those who died: the group who came out of the chiselled hole should be cremated and the group that came out of the bore should be buried.* [51]

Only the italicised portion preserves the pattern from the late nineteenth-century versions. It is the only part that indicates how the two groups, the Lao and the Kha, were different to the core of their natures. In this version, however, the term people (ຄົນ) replaces the terms *lao* (ລາວ) and *kha* (ຂ້າ) such that it serves to sanitise this version. One can only speculate on the motivations behind this act (which was itself convenient myth-making). Perhaps to counter earlier versions, Sisavang Vong appears to have made an effort to moderate popular sentiments. But, we really know very little about the context in which this text was produced. Yet, in broad terms, we see many of the basic themes which make up the 1950s texts are already present in this 1927 text, albeit in a transitional form.

50 Harry A. Franck, *East of Siam: Ramblings in the five divisions of French Indo-china* (New York: Century, 1926), p. 306.
51 *Annales*, p. 5.

Before considering the RLG period, we should appreciate the long delay in the advent of Lao language printing during the French colonial period.[52] As a young man, Sisavang Vong saw a printing press at a colonial exhibit in Hanoi and his father Sakkalin (r.1895–1904) expressed interest in acquiring one for Luang Prabang, but this never materialised. Mayoury and Pheuiphan Ngaosrivathana further note that it was Sisavang Vong who created the first punches for the national printing office only decades later in 1931 for the colonial exhibition in Paris.[53] Still, this was hardly a turning point as few publications appeared afterward in Laos. There were so few print media in the 1930s that Lao would transcribe Thai printed books onto palm leaf manuscripts.[54] The only major effort involving print was the *Lao Nyai* newspaper, but this was tightly controlled by the French, spreading their 'colonial legitimizing discourse' in the local language.[55] In Vietnam the French successfully replaced the Nôm script with the Roman script, but similar efforts in Cambodia and Laos only began later and were ultimately abandoned. One French official in 1918 suggested using the Thai script rather than trying to develop a Lao script.[56] The Lao themselves also played a role in the delay as there was a long-simmering dispute as to what the modern Lao script should be.[57] At any rate in late colonial Laos, some among the Lao elite preferred using French anyway.[58] The foregoing perhaps explains why it was only in the RLG period that Social Darwinist accounts appeared, when they were already being rejected elsewhere in the wake of the horrors witnessed worldwide during the Second World War.

Rewriting the *nithan khun bulom* in France

One of the first publications of the new generation of modern Lao historians was written by Katay Don Sasorith, who rewrote the *nithan khun bulom* for a French audience in 1953. However, his approach was quite different from his peers writing within the country. Rather than participate in the discovery of the 'birth of the Lao race' by writing a hagiographic account of the great achievements of the Lao race since ancient times, Katay wrote as a critic. He looked back on his culture as an unsentimental, at times ruthless modernist. He could hardly mention the story of Khun Bulom without at the same time labelling it a 'legend' or 'tradition'. In rewriting the traditional aspects of this story, he said he was 'stripping … all of which can fit into a novel, poetry or simple literature'.[59] Yet from his unique perspective, he

52 I do not address French missionary printing, which began producing Lao language texts in the country in 1907; rather my interest is when the Lao began to harness the printing press to produce their own works.

53 Mayoury Ngaosyvathn and Pheuiphanh Ngaosyvathn, *Paths to conflagration: Fifty years of diplomacy and warfare in Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, 1778–1828* (Ithaca: Cornell SEAP, 1998), p. 82, n.100.

54 Peter Koret, 'Books of search: The invention of traditional Lao literature as a subject of study', in *Laos: Culture and society*, p. 232.

55 Ivarsson, *Creating Laos*, p. 112. He made this comment in reference to other publications, but it seems apt here.

56 Ivarsson, 'Towards a new Laos', p. 71.

57 Ibid., p. 73.

58 The *Lao Nyai* paper was first introduced as a bilingual edition in French and Lao, but was split in 1943 according to Ivarsson, 'Toward a new Laos', p. 65. The new French language paper was intended for elite consumption.

59 Katay, *Le Laos*, p. 10.

went further than his peers by questioning some core beliefs which they dared not displace in their own endeavours. In certain places, Katay even challenged the Lao elite's cherished racial project. No such prominent voices would appear in the country until after the fall of the RLG in 1975.

Katay did share with other Lao writers a similar view on race in broad terms. For instance, he opened his book describing a greater Lao race scattered across northeast Thailand, Cambodia and northwestern Vietnam, whom he said still spoke, and called themselves, Lao.[60] This opening is similar to that of the author of *Chao Phetsarat, Ironman of Laos*, which reveals the significance writers of the time placed on the notion of a 'greater race'.[61] In other places Katay elaborates on the history of the race by referring to Chinese records showing it to be over 4,000 years old.[62] He further plots the tragic history of the 'greater race', which engaged in fratricidal infighting only to be dominated by outsiders.[63] In doing so, he praises the example of the United States, whose people have diverse origins, but 'all have or quickly acquire the American nationality'.[64] On the other hand, he questions the racial makeup of the Thai state by suggesting that a majority of the population are Lao.[65] Taken together, his views appear to be a mix of French racial critiques of Siam and Thai racial theories. But he was not blindly optimistic regarding race either. He alluded to the 'racial particularism' displayed in his country's name by praising the former 'neutral term', 'Lan Xang Kingdom', and further described at length the destructive impacts that the racist renaming of the state had in Thailand for the Lao minority there.[66]

When it came to his own rewriting of the *nithan khun bulom*, Katay made similar moves by turning to histories of southern China for a suitable substitute. Thus he wrote that Khun Bulom was 'none other than a descendant of the Tai kings who reigned formerly in China'.[67] Once Lao writers like him had discarded their legends, they began to raise interesting questions about their people's origins. Katay, like Sila and others of his generation, presented Chinese history as the key to unlocking the lost history of the Lao, where they had migrated from, and so on. In places he makes efforts to reconcile what is known from Western and Chinese histories with what appears in Lao chronicles.[68] Nonetheless he feels compelled to include a brief account of Khun Bulom, now rewritten in ironic fashion, in his otherwise contemporary account of Lao politics. As much as he radically critiqued it, he was unable to

60 Ibid., p. 9.
61 '3349', *Iron man of Laos: Prince Phetsarath Ratanavongsa*, trans. John B. Murdoch, ed. David Wyatt (Ithaca: Cornell SEAP, 1978), pp. 1–2. This book includes a number of interesting racialist views, including a tirade against Deo Van Tri.
62 Katay, *Le Laos*, p. 14.
63 Ibid., pp. 16–17. Katay claims that the Thai and the Lao had the same origin, and very few differences.
64 Ibid., p. 16.
65 Ibid. This sentiment echoes French views analysed by Streckfuss, 'The mixed colonial legacy in Siam'.
66 Katay, *Le Laos*, p. 14. He discussed this at length more so in the case of Siam, whose renaming he said 'created fear of … political domination by one ethnic group over others'.
67 Ibid., p. 10. Katay used Lao and Tai somewhat interchangeably when discussing ancient history.
68 Ibid., p. 11.

escape his generation's fascination with Khun Bulom, and thus he rewrote it for a modern, albeit foreign and largely disinterested, audience.

Katay broke from others of his time and challenged the RLG elite's new myth-making in certain passages of the work. Perhaps his most radical departure is discarding the claim which other Lao modernists clung to fiercely: that Khun Bulom was the original ancestor of the Lao race. The other Lao modernists had performed a number of operations, removing the legendary aspects, just as Katay had, but they did not wish to destroy Khun Bulom's role as the father of the Lao. Rather they sought exclusively to modernise it by tailoring it to fit the contemporary scientific disciplines of race and history. They altered the story of Khun Bulom in order to save it, preserving it by recreating it in an acceptable form for the next generation. Katay, however, quickly shattered this nascent movement at the end of his own version by noting that Khun Bulom was not the father of the Lao race, but strictly speaking could only be considered the progenitor of the ruling line:

> Anyway, Khun Bulom is not strictly speaking the common ancestor of all the populations of the Lao race or the original Lao who inhabited the Indochina peninsula, as is quite commonly believed, but of all the original Lao or Tai rulers *who governed the populations*. It is the extension of the word 'father' (the king, the prince is considered, here as elsewhere, as being the father of his subjects, the father of the people) which gave rise to this ambiguity in the mind of the masses.[69]

Katay's conception of Khun Bulom is actually much closer to the nineteenth-century understanding, in which the *nithan khun bulom* is a recitation of the genealogy of kings. In dealing with the story, he does not fall into the trap of nationalist history rewriting like his peers. He is thus able to maintain the earlier meaning of the story; he does not alter it for the sake of nationalism. Yet the most significant point of his comment is that he analyses what his fellow nationalists are doing to distort the meaning of the story, which he identifies as the false claim that Khun Bulom was the common ancestor. His critique of their misuse and unwarranted extension of the word 'father' implies that his fellow nationalists are taking the word at face value, rather than seeing it in its correct metaphorical sense. In this way he unmasks his fellow nationalists as not being truthful to history, but in fact making a new myth of Khun Bulom for the twentieth century, as the racial father of the Lao.[70]

The 'birth of the Lao race' in the RLG

The discovery by modern Lao historians of the 'birth of the Lao race' was arguably the most significant and lasting creative act in RLG culture and society. For all its shortcomings, the Lao elite who fashioned this new ideology were attempting to revive the greatness of their people and to reassert themselves on the global stage at a crucial moment in history. The RLG elite were competing with the Pathet Lao for the loyalty of the nation. The racial-nationalist ideology they fashioned not only challenged the Western imperialist order that subjugated them as inferiors to be 'civilised', but also

69 Ibid.; emphasis added.

70 Here, Khun Bulom serves a very similar role as the famous Yellow King in Chinese mythology, which had also been similarly rewritten a few decades before in China.

strove to defeat the Marxist ideology of the Pathet Lao by appealing to nationalist sentiment: to the greatness of the Lao race, to its age and civilisation, and to all the beautiful things that one could celebrate about Lao culture — art, music, poetry, literature, etc., that the Soviets would condemn as degenerate, and about Lao identity, as opposed to internationalism.[71] One may appreciate these works as an expression and articulation of nationalism as envisioned by the elite and produced for mass consumption in the RLG period. One may further consider them as a clue to the failure of the RLG. Pholsena has observed of the gourd story that it told of the natural right of the Lao to rule the non-Lao.[72] While the modernists discarded the gourd story as 'legend', they replaced it in their rewriting with the science of races, applying it to each race and grading the different civilisation levels. In the new 'birth of the Lao race' narrative, the Lao self-justification to rule over the minorities was renewed, but now rather than it being their divine right, instead scientists discovered in history the innate superiority of the Lao as evinced in its culture, its writing, art, cities, and observance of a major world religion, all of which placed the Lao above the 'primitives' living in remote forests and mountains who, lacking any such refinements, were deemed inferior. For all its noble intent to celebrate the country the new ideology of the RLG was exclusionary and not accepting of diversity, which aided the RLG's enemies.

The themes considered in each writer's work include the following points. Each historian focuses on the creation of the *xaat*, which appears most strongly in the early period of history. There was a scientific veneer to this narrative. The *xaat* was always noted for its great antiquity and its high development, since 'birth'. Yet the *xaat* was threatened by enemies — often Chinese or, at times, nomadic barbarians. Ultimately the early history was emplotted in the 'survival of the fittest' narrative, in which the strongest race prevailed and subsequently secured the resources necessary to its progress. The story is told as a comedy, in which the Lao race is placed in constant danger, threatened by destruction, but always manages to survive.[73] However, it is also a warning for the future, imploring the next generation to continue advancing or face oblivion.

The focus on Lao writers here should not give the impression that they worked in isolation. Many Western and Thai scholars joined the Lao in rewriting the *nithan khun bulom*.[74] Unfortunately, many Lao writers of the time did not always clarify who they were engaging with in their academic discussions. Khamchan, for instance, gave no indication of whom he read. On the other hand both Sila and Chao Khamman Vongkotrattana included bibliographies to their later works which provide crucial insights into their thinking. Thai writers were one source of inspiration: Sila consulted several works by Luang Wichit Watakan, the *Phrachum phongsawadan* series and two other histories of the Thai *xaat*. He also cited approvingly William Clifton Dodd's 1923 *The Thai race: Elder brother of the Chinese*, accepting Dodd's etymology

71 I do not claim to make a fair representation of the Pathet Lao and their ideology here, but only to present RLG perceptions of it.

72 Pholsena, *Post-war Laos*, pp. 24–5.

73 On the emplotment of history, see Hayden White, *Metahistory: The historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

74 For a survey of Western, Thai and Lao writers see Evans, 'The Ai-Lao and Nan Chao/Tali Kingdom'.

of the word 'Lao' as meaning originally 'great'. Sila further expanded on Dodd by noting this meant 'the Lao *xaat* is a great *xaat* (ຊາດໃຫຍ່) having many people and development, or a *xaat* with a high level of civilisation since ancient times'.[75] Unlike Sila, Khamman placed an emphasis on Lao sources, although he still relied on Thai works. Furthermore, Khamman cited French works such as the *Mission Pavie*. When it came to French authors, Sila made no explicit reference to any of their works, yet the impact of their scholarship in his writing is plainly evident. Khamchan made clear his indebtedness to French writers, such as referring to ancient China as the 'Empire Celeste'.[76] In a profound way, all were in fact responding to earlier French presentations of the Lao race. As they engaged with Thai and Western writings they also popularised such notions in the country for those who would not otherwise have access to them.

Rewriting the nithan khun bulom

To modernise the story of Khun Bulom, Khamchan, like others, reimagines the king as the ruler of the historical Nanzhao kingdom.[77] Furthermore, he specifically identifies Khun Bulom as Lao. He continues by noting that Khun Bulom's eldest son was Khun Lo and from his 'great royal lineage the Lao are descended from down to today'.[78] By this crucial literary stroke, Khamchan synecdochally transforms Khun Bulom into the father of the Lao *xaat*. In the modern era of popular sovereignty and democracy, elite intellectuals in the racial-nationalist movement refigured Khun Bulom to match their conceptions, thus he was presented as the father of the *xaat*. As for the gourd story, Khamchan notes the existence of a 'legend' (ນິທານ) in which the Lao were said to be born from a gourd in Muang Thaen.[79] However, he dismisses this by saying that the 'truth' is that the Muang Thaen of the gourd story is really only a metaphor for China.

In his rewriting, Sila makes frequent reference to Chinese chronicles and the *Phongsawadan xaat thai*, showing his indebtedness to these sources. Yet his account was actually quite independent from either of them. Sila makes only one brief mention of the gourd story and does not explicitly label it a legend, only denying it implicitly.[80] He likewise makes no mention of the mythic nineteenth-century treatments of Khun Bulom. Yet Sila did fundamentally remake Khun Bulom by turning the heavenly *primus inter pares* into a mere mortal human, but a hero nonetheless. This new conception would have been incomprehensible in the previous century. In place of the godly being, Sila recreates Khun Bulom as an ideal warrior-king. Khun Bulom is now but one king in the line-of-succession of the 'Lao country' of Nanzhao, fighting to secure independence for his people from the Chinese:

75 Sila gives the full citation to Dodd's work in his 1973 work; see Maha Sila Viravong, *Phongsavadan Lao* [Chronicle of the Lao] (Vientiane: Education Ministry, 1973), p. 180. For the discussion quoted above, see the original 1957 edition of *Phongsavadan Lao*, p. 13.
76 Khamchan, *Pavatsat kantut Lao*, p. 6.
77 Ibid., p. 5.
78 Ibid., p. 6.
79 Ibid.
80 Sila, *Phongsavadan Lao* (1957), p. 9. He refers to it in reference to his discussion of the etymology of the word 'Lao'.

> The line of Lao kings did rule the country in Nakhon Nongsae continuing from King Lo Saeng down three more kings, then really came Khunbulom Rasathirat, who in the Chinese chronicles was called Pi Lo Ko. Khun Bulom Rasathirat or Phrachao Pi Lo Ko was the Lao king who was brave, a skilled expert in war and who did expand the realm of the Lao of Nongsae to be vast and wide to its utmost.[81]

Sila lauds Khun Bulom's bravery and martial abilities which propelled his conquest of a sizeable earthly domain. Khun Bulom's coming to Muang Thaen is that of a great conqueror from China coming to found a new city; Thaen is seen as a haven from Chinese attacks.[82] Finally, in this version, Khun Bulom ages and dies; however great he is, he is mortal.[83] Yet his humanness makes him identifiable to his readers, not as a god to invoke, but as a historical personage to emulate. The greatness and spirit of the mortal Khun Bulom only lives on in the Lao *xaat*, the patrimony of all Lao. Sila creates a person who is very much a founder on par with Ramkhamhaeng, but appearing several centuries earlier. For Sila, Khun Bulom is the crucial link between written Lao history, the forgotten history of the Lao of Nanzhao and the birth of the Lao *xaat*.

Birth of the Lao race

While many wrote of it, Sila was the only one to actually include this exact phrase in his work. The influence of his 1957 history should not be underestimated. It was written to commemorate the 2500th year of the Buddhist era, and enjoyed huge influence in Laos, but it was also one of the few works to gain an international audience, being translated into English and Thai. History at its most basic level is a search for origins, and Sila's 'birth of the Lao race' was his attempt to answer that question for the Lao. No longer explained with recourse to myth, Sila's approach to Lao origins called on his understanding of the social sciences, especially anthropology. In fact he opens with a 'scientific' discourse on the origin of humans. From there he moves to describe the branches of humanity in Asia:

> Of humans that were born from the centre of *sumphutip* there were many groups, but the biggest groups that established themselves, living in settlements in Asia, were four groups:
>
> 1. The Chinese, subsisting by animal husbandry along the banks of the Caspian Sea in the southeast.
> 2. The Tartar who depend on the wilderness subsisting by pillaging, using horses.
> 3. The *Sanongnyu* who reside in the land of Korea up to Mongolia, subsisting by pillaging the same.
> 4. The Ai Lao, establishing foundations in the land between Hwangho River and Yangzi which is now the kingdom of the Chinese. The Ai Lao live by agriculture.[84]

81 Ibid., p. 22.
82 Ibid., pp. 22–4.
83 Ibid., p. 26.
84 Ibid., p. 8.

His approach is that of an 'anthropologist', distinguishing between diverse peoples. His inventory of Asian peoples shows two basic types of early man: first, the developed agriculturalist who is established and by implication 'civilised'; and second, the other, more 'primitive' man who is nomadic, lives in the wilderness, and pillages to satisfy his needs. By carefully framing the discussion, Sila sets up a dichotomy of 'civilised' and 'primitive' races. Following certain criteria, it is shown that the Lao number among the 'civilised' races, along with the Chinese. Further, the 'civilised' races are described in relatively peaceful terms, whereas the 'primitives' are portrayed as violent brigands. The origins of the Lao, which Sila has discovered, are that of an already-advanced people, but also one of the oldest races in the world:

> Anyhow, the people of the Lao race were born already in the world together with the Chinese race, counting as one of the oldest races in the world, who had vast refinements, not lower than any other race in the same period.[85]

Sila's claim to the extreme age of the Lao was echoed by others including Khamman, Khamchan and Katay. The significance of this is only clarified by the last phrase of the above passage. From Sila's investigations into the literal history of the Lao, he has gained new awareness of the antiquity and high civilisational attainments of the Lao, who deserve special recognition. Like most cases, it is important to understand who Sila was comparing the Lao to here. While in other passages he makes comparisons with minorities, here it is the world at large that is his concern. By claiming such, Sila, and others, were presenting evidence of their superior status, especially in regards to their former colonial masters in the West. Indeed, it was only when the Lao modernists took up the sciences of race and history that they were able to discover that they were not really inferior to anyone else in the world. In this way, the Lao modernists rejected the racial superiority of the white European races by arguing that the Lao had greater claims to civilisational attainments at a much earlier date.

Chao Khamman Vongkotrattana's history of the Lao *xaat* appeared in 1961. He was a family member of the Front Palace in Luang Prabang, but he was also an extraordinarily learned scholar, being perhaps the most prolific and knowledgeable Lao historian of his time. He shared with others a fascination for the origins of the Lao, the location of which he admitted was not known for certain. In his version, the Lao enter history migrating from the Altai mountains roughly 5,000 years ago. They were already skilled farmers, which led them to evaluate the Yangzi River basin, determining it as 'appropriate for planting'.[86] This early success led them to actively expand from there. Striking a similar note to Sila, he notes superior Lao achievements.

> When the *xonxaat* Tai came down to establish settlements in the geography already mentioned above, the settlements of the Tai were 'healthy and wealthy' and progressed more than the branch of the Mongolian *xaat*. This was because the Tai had systematic

85 Ibid., p. 14; see also p. 8.

86 Khamman Vongkotrattana, *Phongsavadan xaat Lao: Khwambinma khong xaat dhae deukdamban* [Chronicle of the Lao race: Origins of the race from ancient times], repr. (Vientiane: National Library of Laos, 1973), p. 6.

> administration for 4,000 years already while in that age the people of Europe were still sitting covered in animal skins (ຊາວເອີໂຣບຍັງນຸ່ງຫົ່ມໜັງສັດ).[87]

The Lao were already a mighty civilisation before the Europeans had even ceased roaming as nomads and learned to sow the fields, much less hold a stylus.

Khamman was preoccupied with portraying the Lao as a special race born already aged and wise. To support this, Khamman theorised that a system of government originated from agriculture and surmised that anything less resulted in anarchy. This is most evident from his study of the Lao and Chinese. The Chinese appeared as nomads migrating south who encountered an already advanced Lao civilisation. Khamman boasted 'the Tai were there before the Chinese for 1,000 years'.[88] Even when the Chinese took land by force they remained in a state of anarchy as 'they had no administration'.[89] When the Chinese finally did learn how to farm rice, they 'took the Tai example'.[90] The majority of Khamman's chapter is in fact devoted to the growth of the Chinese state. He was unable to tell in great detail a similar story of the Lao, due to a lack of sources. This puts his narration under strain, but he makes it fit by casting the Chinese as the enemy of the Lao. He even claims certain Chinese cultural achievements as Lao, such as the building of the Great Wall.[91] Yet the struggle between Lao and Chinese was a slow decline of the greater Tai race at the hands of the Chinese. Century after century, the Lao fought the Chinese in a desperate struggle to maintain their freedom against greater numbers. They never submitted to the Chinese, preferring to sacrifice land instead. The ancient Lao had an 'enduring love of freedom', which meant in the text that they wanted a ruler of their own race and a racially homogenous state. Without this love of freedom, the early Lao would have acquiesced to being absorbed by the burgeoning Chinese state, their racial identity annihilated.[92] Yet the Lao refused to submit and each time they lost a war, more fled south. Only in the reign of the 'heroic' Khun Bulom did the Lao reconstitute the greater race in a kingdom called 'Muang Tai' stretching from Tonkin to Tibet, further extended to the south by his seven sons.[93]

Survival of the fittest

Sila's study of the Golden Peninsula reveals to him a history of various peoples struggling to survive, in which the stronger races overpowered and absorbed the weaker ones. His views are well illustrated by passages on the Khom and Lwa, but perhaps most clearly for the Lwa. Falling before stronger neighbours, the Lwa's defeat by the Khom's superior ability to 'develop' led to the worst fate. Their racial identity was eradicated, their culture and heritage were lost, and any survivor was enslaved to be a low-caste servant of the victors. Sila's claim that the Khom were an old Lao group made the comparison for the Lao plain. It was a compelling historical lesson for

87 Ibid. Similar to Katay, Khamman uses Tai and Lao (or Ai-Lao) interchangeably when discussing the early period.
88 Ibid.
89 Ibid., p. 7.
90 Ibid.
91 Ibid., p. 11.
92 See, for example, the assassination of an ethnic Chinese ruler; ibid., p. 19.
93 Ibid., pp. 19–21.

the Lao, facing their neighbours, unveiling the brutal nature of the world, otherwise normally hidden by a veneer of civility:

> The Lwa are a *xaat* which did not develop equally with the Khom. Therefore when the Khom expanded their power into the north, the Khom really seized the land of the Lwa, all of it gone. The Lwa really disappeared — ພວກລ້ວະຈົ່ງເສື່ອມສຸນລ້ງ —. [They] became citizens of the Khom like the original Khom — the Kha — became the citizens of the Lao in the present day[94]

In order to survive the *xaat* had to keep progressing and not fall behind, or it would be overwhelmed. The ultimate punishment was to suffer the destruction of one's *xaat*, and hence lose one's identity. Such an idea was not totally unprecedented in earlier Lao intellectual discourse. In many nineteenth century Lao palm leaf manuscripts 'to disappear/ເສົ້າສຸນເສັຍ' was a curse that was frequently invoked as a terrible fate for those who failed to heed the warnings.[95] In accordance with his modernist project, Sila adjusted the earlier Lao notion to fit modern scientific discourse, which he used in his historical interpretations. By the same token, the Lao elite's appropriation of this trope of racism was easier, more palatable and more compelling in as much as there was an existing analog in the learned discourse of the Lao.

Khamchan's account of the early period bears striking similarities to Sila's work. While the Lao *xaat* reprises its role as the protagonist, Khamchan presents it in unique terms. For not long after the migration of the Lao *xaat* into the Yellow River basin, they are 'invaded' by the Chinese. In the final confrontation, we can see Khamchan returning to Social Darwinism in his interpretation of this struggle:

> After the diplomatic visit was over, the Chinese had the success to spread their political influence out frequently until they did seize the Lao lands bit by bit; the beautiful country was filled with Chinese. The Lao retreated into the forest, the mountains and the outer marginal regions like the present day.[96]

The weaker race was forced to leave the rich Yangzi basin and subsist on poorer 'marginal' land; its subsequent development would be impaired by a lack of resources.[97] However, instead of Social Darwinism merely serving as a warning by allusion, Khamchan identifies it as a direct process in the history of the Lao themselves. Were it not for the warlike advances the Chinese made on Lao land, or the tragic defeat which forced the Lao to seek refuge in the south, one can only imagine the new heights Lao civilisation might have reached. Khamchan writes of the continual hardships facing Lao history using repetitive language: 'release the [Chinese/Thai]

94 Sila, *Phongsavadan Lao* (1957), p. 7.

95 See, for example, the many nineteenth-century versions of the *Vatthu Haw* (Chinese object) text from northern Laos. The phrase not only appears in many astrological or prophetic texts, but is also found in versions of the *nithan khun bulom*. Another related term is ຈິບຫາຍ meaning loss, ruin or destruction.

96 Khamchan, *Pavatsat kantut Lao*, p. 2.

97 Katay, *Le Laos*, p. 10, also refers to the racial extinction of those who remained in China: 'The child of this Tai king, write the historians, became completely Chinese and no longer respected the Tai customs and traditions.'

yoke from the Lao neck'.[98] To Khamchan, Lao history has been shaped by its struggles with others, the Lao people bearing all the resulting scars. Unlike Sila, who presented the Lao as the end-point of the Lwa and the Khom who were surpassed, Khamchan instead presents the Lao on the losing side of history, which may very well represent the contrasting vigour of the early years of the RLG period as opposed to the twilight of its latter days in the midst of the Vietnam War.

Conclusion

On a Monday afternoon, 27 September 1971, many Lao intellectuals who were gathered for a history seminar in Vientiane returned from the last coffee break for the next presenter. They were in the audience for a speech on the 'birth of the Lao race' made by Sila.[99] Sila's address was composed very much like a postscript. Much of what he had to say was gleaned from his 1957 work with only minor adjustments. His peers were already familiar with his major points, which was suggested by the meandering approach he took as much as by the influence he had on their works. By this point, the 'birth of the Lao race' thesis was widely accepted, and its repetition in the history seminar could be said to be the culminating moment in its achievement of hegemony within the RLG. Sila merely added now that the gourd story was legend, and the mythic treatments of Khun Bulom from the nineteenth century really referred to Nanzhao in China.[100] Only two years later, Sila's latest work would be included in the national curriculum for secondary schools. The 'birth of the Lao race' had become dogma in RLG schools.[101]

Yet the work of the modernist Lao historians in the RLG period was only part of a broader transformation in the country, which can be traced as far back as the 1890s. The conclusion of the Ho wars (1869–89) and the unprecedented migration of new ethnic minorities to the country from China had major impacts on Lao society which few have recognised, overshadowed by French conquest a few years later. The issues we have considered in the RLG period were therefore only the latter stages in the broader sequence of events. In the RLG period, Laos became a nation, a state founded on the basis of popular sovereignty and a constitutional monarch, in line with the rest of the world. Yet the colonial period for various reasons left that transition tinged with racialist thought, plainly evident in RLG works.

To conclude, we return to our opening question: Lao historians' inability to reject the Nanzhao thesis, which Grant Evans sought to finally dispel. A stubborn hold-out

98 Khamchan, *Pavatsat kantut Lao*, employs this phrase using 'Chinese' (p. 3) and 'Thai' (p. 16) alternately.

99 Sadly, both Katay and Khamman had already passed away. Khamchan was present at the seminar and made his own presentation on the Vietnamese–Lao war of 1479.

100 Maha Sila Viravong, '*Kamneut xaat lao*' [The birth of the Lao race], in *Sammana pavatsat Lao: Viengchan, 25 kannya–2 dhula, 1971* [Seminar on Lao history: Vientiane, 25 Sept.–2 Oct. 1971] (Vientiane: Ministry of Education, 1971), pp. 23–4. In his treatment of the four oldest races of Asia — which he continues to insist was the birthplace of humanity — he removes the language concerning civilisational qualities of each group, except the Lao, as discussed above. This represents a difference of degree, not of kind.

101 Sila, *Phongsavadan Lao* (1973). It is perhaps not inconsequential that Sila himself wrote years later in his autobiography that he became a Lao nationalist only after first experiencing racism in Bangkok as a young man.

from the RLG era, the idea's continued currency may be due to enduring concerns among Lao intellectuals to assert a Lao place in the world and promote the value of Lao civilisation in the human past. Whether current Lao intellectuals address notions of Lao superiority tied to the Nanzhao thesis is beyond the scope of this article. This article has offered an analysis of RLG writing to show the ways in which the rewriting of the *nithan khun bulom* shaped twentieth-century Lao culture, which produced a modernist and autonomous Lao nationalism during the RLG period. Yet this intellectual endeavour faced a serious dilemma it never resolved: the project to create a celebratory nationalist history never escaped ethnocentrism. Nevertheless, the historical works of the RLG elite provide unique insight into Lao nationalist sentiment. Theirs was a form of elite-nationalism that envisioned the *xaat* through recourse to history. This study has demonstrated the process by which the modernist Lao elite rewrote the *nithan khun bulom*, while preserving the text's worldview of the Lao as civilised and the minorities as primitive, by recourse to racial science. As part of this process, the Lao elite clashed with the Pathet Lao and the West in their writings. Yet the rewriting of the *nithan khun bulom* was imprinted with the Social Darwinist 'survival of the fittest' narrative, which created an exclusionary nationalism that ultimately weakened the RLG in its ideological struggles. The rewriting of the *nithan khun bulom* was one facet of a wider effort by the Lao elite to appropriate race, which they enlisted in service to their claim to civility in new and distinctly modern ways. Yet the most significant aspect of the RLG elite's work may well be its links to the past, found in otherwise deliberately modern writings.