Princes without a Principality: Champassak Non-State Royals and the Politics of Performativity in France

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Abstract

Few people who have not visited Laos know where "Champassak" is located. Even fewer are aware of the Champassak Royal House. This is not surprising, as Champassak is not included as one of Southeast Asia's nation states, and thus is not prominently identified on any world maps. Nor is the Champassak Royal House legally recognized anywhere in the world. One could characterize Champassak as a loser of European colonial expansion in Southeast Asia, and the subsequent period when the region was divided into countries, as it was never elevated to modern statehood. Yet the Champassak Royal House persists amongst politically exiled members of the family who fled Laos when it was taken over by communists in 1975. Indeed, in 2013 family members celebrated the 300th year anniversary of the Champassak Royal House—not in Champassak itself, the space that originally constituted it—but in Paris, France, where much of the Na Champassak royal family now reside. Here we examine how Champassak royalty is positioned in France, both socially and spatially, as 'non-state royals'—royalty in foreign exile. That includes considering the politics of rank and recognition, and varying forms of performativity amongst Champassak royals of different generations and positionalities.

Keywords: Laos, Royalty, Exile, Sovereignty, Positionality, Performativity, Non-State

Introduction

On August 1, 2013, I arrived in the suburbs of Paris, after having flown from Bangkok. It was hot, and there was plenty of activity at the modest home of *Chao*[1] Keuakoun Na Champassak and his wife *Chao Nang* Patthouma Soratchaphak, as they were the main organizers of the event that I had timed my trip to attend: the 300th anniversary of the Champassak Royal House. Few who have not visited Laos know 'Champassak'. Even fewer are aware of the Champassak Royal House. This is not surprising, as Champassak is not one of Southeast Asia's nation states,[2] and thus is not prominently situated on any world maps, which privilege nation states. Nor is the Champassak Royal House legally recognized anywhere in the world. The Kingdom of Champassak could be considered as a loser to European colonial expansion in Southeast Asia and the subsequent carving up of the region into countries, as it could have been a

[1] *Chao* refers to male royals, and *Chao Nang* and *Chao Heuane* refer to female royals. Chao Heuane Nying refers to a daughter of the head of the Champassak Royal House.

[2] In this paper, I follow Robinson's (2013: 556) useful distinction between governments and states: "states are juridical entities of the international legal system; governments are the exclusive legally coercive organizations for making and enforcing certain group decisions."

candidate for statehood had the political circumstances been different (see Baird, 2009; 2010). Champassak is much like 'Indochina', as it is "endur[ing] today only in the realm of memory, or more often nostalgia" (Goscha, 2012: ix). Indeed, as a political entity, Champassak is only imagined, and is not enshrined with any state power. Thus, the Champassak royal family can be characterized as 'non-state royals', royals without political sovereignty and territory to constitute their royal status; indeed, they are princes and princesses without principalities. This being the case, the ability of royals-in-exile to perform royalty, in Judith Butler's (1993) embodied sense, has become particularly important for Champassak royals living in France. It is the only way for them to keep the Champassak Royal House alive. Even though all explicit forms of monarchy were disbanded in 1975 when the Lao People's Democratic Republic was formed, Patrice Ladwig (2015: 1877) has effectively argued that, the "modern Lao state socialism is still imbued (and increasingly so) with patterns of Buddhist statecraft."[3] In contrast, however, this paper is focused on the way Champassak royalty in exile has variously positioned itself socially and spatially, as 'non-state royals'. How is the Champassak royalty imagined and performed among members of the Champassak Royal House in France?

Champassak is located in present-day Champassak Province, southern Laos (Figure 1), and in 1713 Chao Soisysamouth became the first king of Champassak, at the bequest of an important Theravada Buddhist monk, Phra Khrou Phonsamek,[4] and a local female leader, Nang Phao. The 300th anniversary reunion event was scheduled in just three days, on August 4th. I was excited to be in Paris.

It has been a long time since Champassak was arguably a kingdom, depending on one's perspective. After its first 65 years of apparent independence, when they apparently did not pay tribute to other kingdoms, in 1778 the Siamese invaded Champassak and forcibly subsumed it. From that time the Champassak Royal House continued to follow the Mandala system (Tambiah 1984) and collect taxes from other surrounding principalities, some of which was sent as tribute to Siam. Then in 1893, European colonial expansion led to the establishment of French Laos, which further eroded Champassak's influence as all territories east of the Mekong River were taken by France, whereas Champassak remained under Siam's tutelage on the west side of the river (Baird, 2013; Evans, 2002; Breazeale, 2002; Simms and Simms, 1999; Archaimbault, 1961). In 1905, Champassak town itself, and a sizable piece of territory west of the Mekong, were incorporated into French Laos (Breazeale, 2002). Champassak, however, was not recognized as a kingdom by the French. While Luang Phrabang, in northern Laos, was made a royal protectorate—albeit under de facto control of the French—the head of Champassak was relegated to the position of 'governor'; but one without much power.

One could argue that Champassak ceased to be a kingdom in 1778. It could, however, also be argued that Champassak's rule ended in 1893, the year that the French incorporated the territory east of the Mekong as part of French Laos, or maybe even 1905, the year that Champassak town, which is on the west side of the Mekong River, was incorporated into French Laos (Breazeale, 2002). Yet Champassak remained influential with the people who inhabited the territory that was once governed by Champassak

[3] Buddhist statecraft refers to the intermingling of state governance with state legitimation that comes from Buddhist belief and practice.

[4] He is also known as '*Phra khou khi home*' (good smelling excrement monk). He was a very famous monk.

royals, and also in relation to the larger state of Laos, particularly from Khammouane Province south (Figure 1), up until the time of the communist take-over of Laos in 1975, at which time most of the family fled to Thailand and later to France, the United States and elsewhere. However one situates the Champassak Royal House in history and in relation to state sovereignty, the Na Champassak family can hardly be dismissed as insignificant. Even today, they remain well known, albeit mainly amongst the aging first generation of ethnic Lao immigrant community of France, and the United States.

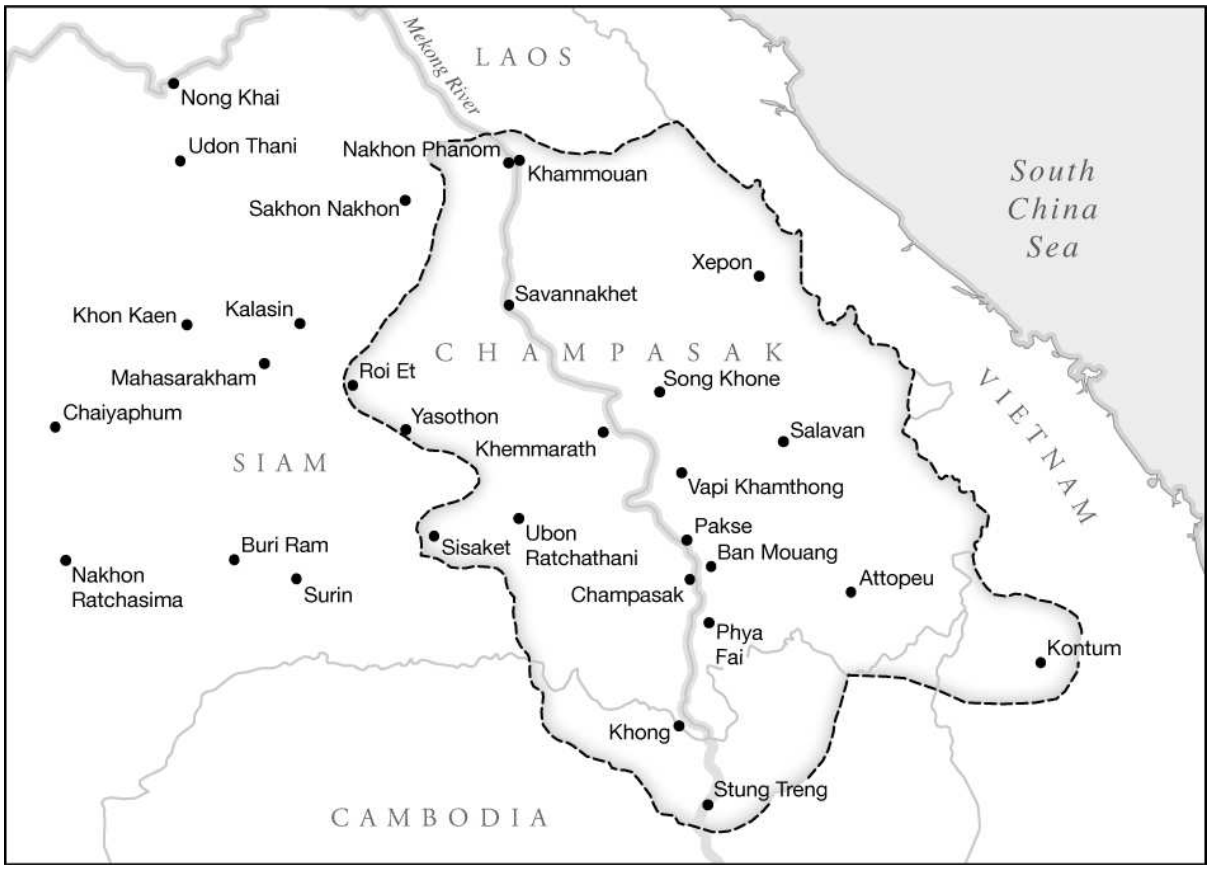

Figure 1: The approximate territory controlled by the Champassak Royal House in the late nineteenth century.

Many royals live in exile, and there are dozens of exiled royal families globally (Davis 2012; Mansel and Riotte 2011). In Washington DC, for example, one can find members of the former royal family of Ethiopia, an Ashanti King of Ghana, the former King of Rwanda, members of the Afghan royal family, and the Iranian Crown Prince (Wax, 2011), just to name a few. There are also many royals living in Europe (Mansel and Riotte 2011). Until just over a decade ago senior members of the Italian royal family were in exile in Portugal and later Switzerland (Willan, 2002), and the Greek king was in London, a popular abode for exiled royals, until 2013 when he returned home after being away for 46 years (Smith, 2013). The Prince of Libya also long resided in London, as did the

son of the last king of Yugoslavia, before both returned to their respective countries. The crown princes of Burma and Albania still live in London, as do other royals.[5]

The rise of Republicanism and Communism globally in the twentieth century forced many royals to flee their countries of origin. Although Grant Evans (2009) has contributed an important work on Lao royals, his focus on Luang Phrabang royals differentiates his project from mine, as the Luang Phrabang royals are the official Lao royal family in exile. I am, however, interested in the Na Champassak family, which Evans (2009) wrote much less about, and can be considered to be Laos' second royal family. I wish to examine the politics of positionality, that is the politics of positioning in relation to society—including the associated spatialities—of this non-state royal family in exile, something that has so far evaded the gaze of scholars. The particular type of royalty found in Southeast Asia, which frequently gains legitimacy through Buddhism (Tambiah 1984; Winachakul, 1994; Swearer 2003; Holt 2009; Baird 2017b), is fundamentally associated with state territorialization, and particularly with spaces that those in exile have been severed from. Indeed, the spatiality of royalty, or the relationship of royalty to space, at least in the modern era, is fundamentally different from the spatiality of common people, as royals are not just citizens of states, but their positions as royalty are unique and special, and they are legitimized as royals through their particular ancestral attachment to territory, and also Buddhism (Baird, 2017b). The identities of royals are not only associated with ethnicity and their ancestors, they are also closely linked to particular spaces that are crucial for legitimizing their royal status. So, how have the Champassak royals-in-exile in France positioned themselves, and been positioned by others? In addition, how can a spatial approach help us to understand the politics of royals-in-exile, and political refugee space-making processes more generally?

Next, I present a brief history of Champassak, in order to provide some necessary background. I then outline how most of those in the Na Champassak family were forced to flee Laos as political refugees. I then consider the spatiality associated with ideas about sovereign power and the bringing of Buddhist images together in space. I follow by providing some context about my investigations of the Na Champassak family, before presenting some of my ethnographic findings regarding the variety of ways in which members of the family are interpreting and positioning themselves in France with regard to their royal status. I am particularly interested in how they are making sense of their royal identities within spaces that have not been produced to constitute them, and how they are attempting to produce royal spaces in France, but with only limited scope and success. Finally, I provide some preliminary conclusions about the positionality, including spatiality, of these non-state royals.

A Brief History of Champassak

The Na Champassak Royal House is descended from Luang Phrabang and Vientiane royals. In 1694, the great Lao king Chao Soulignavongsa of Vientiane passed away. There was internal conflict over who would succeed him, and one potential successor, Chao Somphon, was murdered by another, Phaya Muang Chanh (Phaya Amat),

[5] Kings without a country, http://royalcello.websitetoolbox.com/post?id=5177070&goto=nextoldest, accessed February 2, 2014.

who took control of the throne. The new ruler wanted to make the wife of his former rival, Chao Nang Soumangkhala, his own wife, but she refused, so Phra Khrou Phonsamek, a senior monk for the royal family, known as *Chao Ratsakhou Louang* in Lao, fled with Chao Nang Soumangkhala, who was pregnant from her deceased husband, to the south along with a large entourage of followers. A boy, Nokasat, was subsequently born. Phra Khrou Phonsamek gradually moved south, and after many years, including some time in Phnom Penh and Stung Treng, in Cambodia, ended up in what is now Champassak, on the west side of the Mekong River in present-day southern Laos. In 1713 Chao Nokasat, by then a teenager, was given the royal title Chao Soisysamouth, and was elevated to be the first king of *Nakhonekalachambak Nakhabouri Sisattanakhanahout* (known in short as *Nakhone Champassak*) (Na Champassak, 1995a; Lintingre, 1972). Champassak apparently did not pay tribute to other kingdoms for all of Chao Soisysamouth's reign, which ended with his passing in 1737 (Na Champassak, 1995b). He was succeeded by his son, Chao Sayakoumane, whose reign was long, lasting until his death in 1791. In 1778, however, the Siamese sent an army and successfully took control of Champassak, taking an important Buddhist image back to Bangkok, and making Champassak its vassal (Archaimbault, 1961; Na Champassak, 1995a & b; Baird 2017b). This Buddhist image had been crucial for legitimating the Kingdom of Champassak, and constituting the sovereign territorial power of the Champassak Royal House (Baird, 2017b).

Champassak royals continued, however, to be influential, as following the Mandala system, they were allowed considerable autonomy provided that they pay tribute and remain loyal to the King of Siam. To demonstrate their loyalty, the King of Champassak periodically pledged allegiance, often with a water oath in Bangkok (*saban nam* in Lao) (Baird, 2013). This changed, however, after the French arrived in the second half of the nineteenth century. During this period, arguably the last king of Champassak, Chao Khamsouk or Chao Nyouthithamathone, the 11th king of Champassak, was the first Champassak sovereign to encounter French explorers (Garnier, 1996; Harmand, 1997). He was still king when the French took control of his territories east of the Mekong River to establish colonial Laos in 1893. He died, however, in 1899 (Na Champassak, 1995a; Baird, 2013), a few years before Champassak proper, on the west bank of the Mekong, was ceded to the French in 1905 (Breazeale, 2002; Baird, 2013). He was eventually succeeded by his son, Chao Nyouy or Chao Raxadanai. As mentioned earlier, however, the French did not recognize the status of Champassak like they did Luang Phrabang, and when Chao Raxadanai died in 1945, he was succeeded by his son Chao Boun Oum Na Champassak, who became a powerful right-wing politician—including Prime Minister for a short period—in Laos. Chao Sone Bouttarobol, another important member of the Champassak Royal House, also became a royal advisor to the Lao King in Luang Phrabang (Baird 2017a), indicating how the Champassak Royal House had become at least somewhat subservient to the Luang Phrabang Royal House. Finally, however, Chao Boun Oum and much of the Champassak Royal House were forced to flee to Thailand in 1975 and then to France in 1976. In 1981 Chao Boun Oum finally passed away in Paris (Na Champassak, 1995a & b).

Fleeing Laos

In May 1975, communist-incited student protests against right-wing Ministers aligned with the Royal Government of Laos created considerable political turmoil, providing an opportunity for the Pathet Lao communists to gradually take full control of the state (Evans, 2002). Thus, members of the Champassak royal family, who were mainly politically right-wing, and thus enemies of the communist Pathet Lao and their North Vietnamese backers, largely fled to Thailand. Chao Sisouk Na Champassak, the Minister of both Defense and Finance in Vientiane, was one of the first to leave on May 10, 1975, after he was sentenced to death by a Pathet Lao tribunal (Evans, 2002). Others, including the patriarch of the family, Chao Boun Oum, fled to Thailand soon after. Chao Boun Oum had a house in the city of Ubon Ratchathani, in northeastern Thailand, and stayed there for a short period before continuing onto Bangkok and then France as a high-profile political refugee. Some Na Champassak family members stayed along the border to fight against communist forces in Laos (Baird, 2012). A smaller number remained in Laos, albeit without any status as Champassak royals. Some were imprisoned in so-called 're-education' (*seminar* or *samana* in Lao) camps in remote parts of the country (Na Champassak, 2010; Thammakhanty, 2004); others avoided detention and took low profiles. Many with 'reactionary' last names such as 'Na Champassak' changed them.

In 1981 Chao Sanhprasith (Chao Sith) Na Champassak, a graduate of the prestigious military school in Paris, Saint Cyr (see Figure 2), and a former full colonel in the Royal Lao Army, was able to escape from Laos. He snuck across the Mekong River to Thailand and became leader of the Lao armed resistance to communism in southern Laos, based in Ubon Ratchathani Province. At the time, the Government of Thailand was supportive of right-wing and neutralist military resistance groups, which were opposed to the communist government in Laos (Baird, 2012). Later Chao Sith cooperated closely with the United Front for the Liberation of Laos (UFLL), popularly known as the *Neo Hom Pot Poi Xat*, or simply *Neo Hom*, a 1981-established resistance organization under the leadership the former Hmong General of the Royal Lao Army, Vang Pao, and Thonglith Chokbengboun, an ethnic Lao former general from Laos. Chao Sith continued in that position until the Thai government forced him to leave Thailand for France in 1989 as a result of Thailand's change in position regarding Laos, including the adoption of , Chatchai Choonhavan's (the Thai Prime Minister), "battlefields to marketplace" policy[6] (Baird, 2012). As resistance activities against communist Laos rapidly declined along with Thai government support, a few members of the Na Champassak family went underground in Thailand. At least one of those reportedly believed that his spirit was linked to Laos and Thailand and that he should therefore not flee to Europe. Most, however, ended up in France, where many continued to support efforts to overthrow the communist regime in Laos, including through using auspicious Buddha images to support such efforts (Baird, 2017b). Indeed, Buddhism has also long been linked to political power elsewhere in Southeast Asia (Tambiah 1984; Swearer 2004; Holt 2009).

[6] After August 1988, when Chatchai Choonhavan was elected as Prime Minister of Thailand, he adopted a policy of reconciliation with former communist foes in Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia.



Figure 2: Chao Sanhprasith Na Champassak as Saint Cyr cadet in Paris France, circa 1962. Photo Courtesy of Chao Heuane Nying Chitprasong Na Champassak.

Bringing the Buddhist Images Together

Buddhist belief and practice have been crucial for the Champassak Royal House since its inception, and this remains the case for many first generation exiled Champassak royals, including Chao Keuakoun, Chao Heuane Nying Chitprasong, Chao Singto and many others. It is thus not surprising that Buddhist images sometimes hold important places in ritual practices and associated imaginaries. Indeed, images often go beyond simply religion, and in particular, they represent potent material legitimating symbols of royal power, including magical power and territorial sovereignty (Baird, 2017b).

According to some, Chao Nyouthithamathone had either three or possibly seven small crystal Buddhist images in his house at the time he was King. However, upon his death these images were dispersed to various close relatives. Later, when Laos became communist, these Buddhist images were dispersed around the world. Legend has it, however, that if all these sacred Buddhist images could be brought together in a single space, the Champassak Royal House would regain its former power and glory in Champassak. The prophesy is not known by a large number of people, but many of those within the inner circle of the family are well aware of it. Nobody, however, has been able to unify the family enough to bring all the Buddhist images together. Nobody even knows where all these powerful Buddhist images are located (Baird, 2017b).

Although the crystal Buddhist images in question are relatively small in size, they are considered priceless. I know where some are, but they are so valuable and important to those who control them that I cannot reveal who has them or where they are located. Those who possess them fear that if this information were to become widely known, they could become vulnerable to robbers. The images themselves are believed to be powerful, in a magical sort of a way. The possessors also believe that the Lao communist government is searching for them because they want to tap the power of these Buddhist images (Baird, 2017b). As one man put it, “The Lao government has been looking hard for them [the Buddhist image]. They really want to get them.”

The belief in the spatial convergence of these Buddhist images as a way of returning power to Champassak royals is both symbolically and materially important. On the one hand, if the conditions existed that could bring them materially together, that would indicate that members of the royal house have been able to cooperate sufficiently to do so, an important achievement indeed. Secondly, however, it is deemed important to have the Buddhist images physically together in order to magically restore spatial power to the Champassak Royal House (see Baird, 2017b). The politics and spatiality of exile politics and religion intersect, in ways that somewhat parallels what McConnell (2013) writes about in relation to the politics of reincarnation amongst exiled Tibetans in India. In particular, Buddhist temples in France and the United States have become key spaces for asserting particular political views, including those linked to royalty, and Buddhism has also played a crucial role in justifying and legitimating political and even military conflict with communists in Laos (Baird, 2012).

Investigating Champassak Royal Space Outside Laos

I—as a just 51-year old White male Canadian who lived in Laos and Thailand for more than 20 years, and speaks Lao and Thai fluently—have been investigating the historical and present-day circumstances of the Champassak Royal House since first visiting France in 2005 (See Baird, 2007; 2009; 2010; 2013; 2017a; 2017b), including conducting archival research, examining historical documentation, and pursuing ethnographic research, including participating in family activities, and conducting interviews with people in Laos, Thailand, the United States, Canada and France. I stayed a month with Chao Keuakoun and Chao Nang Patthouma in 2009,[7] so I already knew them well. I had planned to return for more interviews in May 2013, but when I phoned Chao Keuakoun a few months beforehand, he suggested that I instead visit in August for a month in order to attend the 300th anniversary celebration, and also to meet and conduct interviews with various family members in the Paris area.

There were initially two events planned. One was a Buddhist religious ceremony, and the other was a family reunion. However, upon my arrival in Paris, I learned that the religious ceremony had been postponed. However, the family reunion was still scheduled. Members of the family had decided that the family reunion should come first, and that the religious event could follow later. The circumstances, however, soon indicated that bringing the family together was no simple matter. Moreover, 300 custom-made Buddhist images were ordered from Thailand to sell at cost to family members so as to materially and spiritually represent the 300th anniversary. Thus, the religious event had been delayed until the end of the year, since it would take more time before the Buddhist images could be produced and delivered.

The Reunion

The reunion was held as planned on Sunday, August 4th, at the Missions Étrangères de Paris on Rue du Bac, in the heart of Paris. It might seem odd to organize such a gathering of devout Buddhists at one of the oldest Catholic foreign missions in Paris, which was established in 1659, and has sent 4,200 mission priests to Asia and North America over the last 350 years. But Patthouma—herself a Buddhist—has a senior management position at the Mission. Thus, she was able to gain use of the facilities for free. The gathering brought together over 100 family members, mainly from France but also a few from Belgium and Switzerland. Many relatives from the United States and Thailand sent their best wishes, but none attended.

Many of those who participated use the last name of Na Champassak, but other family names, such as Phothisan, Phothirath, Phouangphet, Sinhbandith, Vongsavath, Ngonphetsy, Vouti, Bouttarobol, and Singratchaphak were also represented. The idea was to bring the family together, regardless of surname, so as to reconnect the older generation, and help the newer generation know who their relatives are. It was hoped

[7] Chao Keuakoun is one of the sons of Chao Silome Na Champassak, a child of the head of the Champassak Royal House, Chao Nyouthithamathone; and Chao Nang Patthouma was the daughter of Lt. Gen. Phasouk Soratchaphak, whose father was Anya Louang Sing and another daughter of Chao Nyouthithamathone, and Chao Heuane Nying Bounlonh, one of the daughters of Chao Raxadanai, the head of the Na Champassak Royal House until 1946, and the oldest son of Chao Nyouthithamathone.

that the event would strengthen existing family relations, so that the Na Champassak family—broadly defined—would continue to be relevant. The fact that "regardless of last name" was mentioned by Chao Keuakoun became significant for me when he explained the circumstances. Indeed, there has been some sensitivity regarding the place of relatives who do not hold the last name 'Na Champassak', the most prestigious sir name in the family. As Chao Keuakoun put it, in Lao, "We need to determine who should be using the term "*chao*" (royal), as some do, and who should not. There should be a committee of members of different lines of the family to verify and decide what titles they should use." Indeed, over the years I have heard of a number of cases where ethnic Lao people living in France and the United States have fraudulently used the 'Na Champassak' name.

Chao Keuakoun opened the workshop on the morning of August 4th, after some debate a few days earlier regarding how he should position himself and his accomplishments during the reunion. He eventually took the advice of his wife and children and played down his role. He represented the event as a chance for representatives of different family lines to make short presentations about their connections, and for members of the younger generation to consider what it meant to them, as primarily French speakers, to be members of the Champassak royal family in France. He also explained that he hoped that family members would connect with their relatives, not so much in Laos, but particularly in Europe and the United States. That is, the space that he was trying to constitute largely excludes Laos, his land of birth and ancestry. He stated, however, that, "We are doing this event in France. It is not our land, but we are doing it to remember our ancestors." Yet the center of Champassak royalty has indeed shifted to France.

I was there because of my long-term interest in southern Laos and the Na Champassak family. Apart from wanting to make connections with family members in order to conduct interviews, and hoping to expand my knowledge of history and family connections, I was specifically interested in learning more about the dynamics of a royal family without any standing in its country of origin, Laos. I was interested in how they would come together to celebrate their 300th anniversary in a place such as Paris, somewhere that many would consider 'out of place' for Champassak Royal House members. I wanted to investigate more about what it was like to be royals without land or territory, or non-state royals.

James Scott's scholarship regarding 'non-state spaces' (Scott, 2009; 1998) is worth briefly discussing here even if it relates to fundamentally different circumstances than those that I address here. Scott (2009) was interested in upland peoples in Southeast Asia who were fundamentally hostile to lowland states and tried to variously evade them, thus being defined as "non-state" peoples. Firstly, I reject the binary of absolute state and non-state implicit in this terminology, and like other scholars (Jonsson, 2010; 2012; Baird, 2013; Lee, 2015), I recognize that upland peoples in Southeast Asia, while certainly sometimes having tried to evade states, also have a long history of frequently attempting to gain legitimacy and power via creating connections with lowland states, something that Scott does not sufficiently acknowledge. Crucially, when I write of non-state royals, I am not implying that these royals are non-state due to their attempts to evade states. Indeed, their positions as royals were initially constituted through their relationships with states. However, they are non-state in a different way,

as they are royals who have been politically and physically severed from the states that originally constituted their royal positions, particularly in their case, Laos. Therefore, I am interested in cases where royals do not have official status, and I am interested in how the Champassak Royal House, a non-state royal family in exile, conceptualizes and produces space. How do they attempt to produce and reproduce it? And what challenges do they face?

Taking history seriously, and positioning myself to be able to conduct ethnographic research with the Na Champassak family, I was grateful for the opportunity to stay with Keuakoun, Patthouma, and members of their family, as their modest suburban house can be regarded as the center of Na Champassak organizing efforts in France. Although my French is quite limited, this did not impede me much, as Keuakoun and Patthouma prefer to speak Lao. In fact, over the course of my month in France, I did not speak more than a few words of French or English. I became immersed in the social world of the Champassak Royal House, spending hours each day talking with Chao Keuakoun in his back yard and traveling around greater Paris to meet various family members and associates.

Although I had little sense of the particular politics associated with the 300th anniversary upon my arrival in Paris, I already had some understanding of the family, although family politics were more contentious than I realized. There are questions about who has the right to represent the Na Champassak Royal House, rank and recognition, and about how Champassak royals should 'perform royalty' or otherwise represent themselves in particular spaces, especially public ones in France. Indeed, it became clear that their performances shift depending on audience, with members of the Champassak Royal House, commoners in the Lao diaspora, and regular French society requiring different types of performances. I learned much more about controversies within the family regarding positionality and associated spatiality, some of which are discussed here.

During the morning session of the reunion workshop, elderly members of different branches of the family stood up in front of the group one after another and gave five-minute presentations about how their particular family lines were connected. There was an emphasis on genealogy. Virtually all these short presentations were made in Lao, the language of choice for the older generation. Notably, however, when we reconvened after a buffet Lao lunch in the courtyard of the mission, the participants were divided into two groups. One, consisting of mainly older people, continued discussing family connections and history in Lao. The other, however, was convened in French. All of those in the second group were young people who had spent most or all of their lives in France. The organizers hoped that a discussion geared toward them, and conducted in a language that they could easily express themselves in, would reinforce the royal identities of the younger generation. In other words, it was hoped that this work could help strengthen Champassak royal identities in France.

I stayed with the older people, but in the late afternoon both groups were brought together so that each could provide a summary (in both Lao and French) of the main points discussed in their respective groups. The older generation emphasized the need to strengthen family ties, but interestingly, one member of the family with another last name apart from Na Champassak suggested that the name of the "Champassak Association" in France be changed to the "Chao Soisysamouth Association", so as to name

the association after the first king of Champassak. The idea was to be more inclusive of those family members who do not have the Na Champassak family name. However, others in the family, especially those with Na Champassak as their last name, rejected the idea. This is despite the fact that the name Na Champassak was only given as a title by the King of Siam, Rama VI, at the request of Chao Sakpraseuth, in 1907, when he was living and working as a government official in Siam. Na Champassak was only transformed into a last name in Laos in 1943, when everyone in Laos had to adopt surnames.[8]

There was also discussion about deepening the family's understanding of history, including learning from past mistakes, and one elderly woman suggested that more effort should be made to relearn the royal language (*raxasap* in Lao), which was once used in Champassak by commoners when speaking with Champassak royals. The organizers also asked whether there should be regular family meetings like this one in the future. There seemed to be consensus amongst the older generation that there should be.

The summary presented by a member of the younger generation group who could speak both French and Lao well indicated, however, that younger members have much more ambiguous feelings about what being a member of the Champassak royal family means. Although the most ambivalent of the younger generation did not attend the event, some younger people who did participate expressed skepticism about the relevance of



Figure 3: 300th year anniversary of Champassak Royal House, Missions Étrangères de Paris on Rue du Bac, Paris, France, August 4, 2013. Photo by Ian G. Baird.

[8] Grant Evans, *pers. comm.,* Vientiane, May 12, 2014.

identifying as members of a royal family when their everyday lives were no longer connected to Laos. Some stated that they only attended the event due to pressure from their parents. However, the younger generation did agree to establish a 'comité de liaison' to investigate ways to strengthen family ties. Indeed, the summaries of the two groups clearly indicated the generation gap that has fast developed, and its significance in relation to the future prospects for the Champassak Royal House in France. While some members of the younger generation, especially those who still speak some Lao, such as Chao Champanakhone, a successful dentist in Lyon, expressed interest in strengthening family connections, it was clear from their summaries that many felt somewhat confused regarding the significance of their royal ancestry.

At the very end of the event, just before a photo was taken of all the participants in the courtyard (See Figure 3), older members of the family stood in front of the group and sang a Lao nationalist song that was apparently a favorite of Chao Boun Oum, titled *Teuan chai Lao* (Lao, be Prepared!). The intention was to instill a sense of family solidarity, and Lao nationalism, but it was unclear to me to what extent this strategy was successful, at least with the younger generation. Or was it simply symbolic of the generation gap? Still, overall, the older generation seemed to generally feel that the event had gone well.

August 4th, 2013 was a productive day for me, but it was just the beginning of my month in France.

Positioning Royalty

Positioning oneself in relation to rank, recognition and ritual is important for members of the Na Champassak family, as it is for most royals. Chao Boun Oum was the last leader of the Champassak Royal House in Laos. A Frenchman, Commissaire Parisot, convinced him (Chao Boun Oum later claimed that he was coerced to sign[9]), on the verge of undergoing a serious appendicitis operation in Laos, to sign away the rights of the Royal House of Champassak on August 27, 1946 so that Luang Phrabang could be recognized as the only true royal house in Laos. The French, in turn, agreed that Chao Boun Oum would become Inspector-General of the Kingdom (Evans, 2002; Archaimbault, 1961). It was also agreed that his child would succeed him as the head of the Champassak Royal House. This informal agreement, known as a *modus vivendi*, left Chao Boun Oum's wife and nine children (three girls, six boys)[10] with the understandable claim that they are the only legitimate representatives of the Champassak Royal House. These were also in line with succession rules adopted in Luang Phrabang and Bangkok. Such a principle is, however, much more in line with the way European royals operate than how royals in Southeast Asia did, but considering that Chao Boun Oum's children all grew up outside of Laos, where they were sent to study as young children, this gravitation to European norms should come as little surprise.

It seems certain that most or all family members would be happy to abide by this principle, but in reality Chao Boun Oum's children have largely chosen to not take on the

[9] Chao Heuane Nying Ninhdasak Na Champassak, *pers. comm.,* May 25, 2014.
[10] The children are Champhonesak, Saysanasak, Halusak, Simoungkhounsak, Vannahsak, Vongdasak, Ninhdasak, Keosondarasak and Keomanisak.

type of leadership roles that others in the family who want to keep the Champassak Royal House active and vibrant within the Lao diaspora community in France desire. It is not that Chao Boun Oum's children never attend community, family or religious gatherings, but they tend to stay outside of the center of community events. This may be because the children all went to school overseas, mainly in France, where they became accustomed to foreign languages and ways. They only visited Laos during school holidays. Thus, most have become quite Westernized and are less comfortable in Lao social situations compared to others who grew up in Laos. For example, when I spent time with Chao Halusak, one of Chao Boun Oum's sons, in Paris in 2009, he preferred to speak English with me, even though I am quite fluent in Lao. He can speak Lao, but not as well as he speaks either English or French. These circumstances have resulted in some tensions. One woman from a different line of the Champassak Royal House expressed deep frustration with Chao Boun Oum's children at a meeting a few days following the reunion event. As she emotionally put it, "The children of Chao Boun Oum have not done nearly as much for the community as Chao Heuane Nying Chitprasong!"[11]

In addition, the Champassak Royal House, as with other royals from Southeast Asia, has never been simply linear in terms of succession. Instead, historically succession shifted between different branches of the family (Na Champassak 1995a & b). Thus, after Chao Boun Oum died, and Chao Sith escaped from Laos, Chao Sith, as a half-brother of Chao Boun Oum, and a son of Chao Raxadanai, Chao Boun Oum's father, became the de facto head of the family in France until his death from cancer in 1999. Later, his wife, Chao Heuane Nying Chitprasong, the half-sister of her husband,[12] was elected at a family meeting in Paris to publicly represent the family. Fifty-five of the 58 people present voted for her, with three abstaining, apparently because they thought that Chao Champhonesak, Chao Boun Oum's eldest son, who lives in Switzerland, should take the position. Although the children of Chao Boun Oum were invited to the meeting, they chose not to or were unable to attend, thus leaving the rest of the family little option but to elect someone else.

Chao Heuane Nying Chitprasong continues to represent the family, with Chao Keuakoun serving as her de facto secretary, and while living in Lyon, she spends considerable amounts of time in Paris. When there, she stays with Keuakoun and Patthouma. Chao Keuakoun has also taken a leading role (he is presently the treasurer) in managing a Theravada Buddhist temple in Paris, Vat Phouttaphilom. This temple is well known for its close ties to the Champassak Royal House (Baird, 2012), and has also been important for increasing his position within the Lao Buddhist community in Paris, and for producing Champassak Lao royal space, albeit in limited ways. But it is certainly the most explicit public Na Champassak space in France, and Buddhist rituals conducted there are often led by Chao Keuakoun (See Figure 4). Moreover, many of the everyday duties of the Champassak Royal House, such as attending funerals, weddings, and religious ceremonies are done by Chao Heuane Nying Chitprasong and Chao Keuakoun, thus putting them at the center of the Champassak Royal House, in terms of publicly performing Champassak royalty. Indeed, these performances involve a wide array of practices, from controlling the temple, to leading Buddhist chants and rituals, to

[11] Chao Heuane Nying Chitprasong is one of the daughters of Chao Raxadanai and one of his many wives.
[12] It is common for Lao royals to marry close relatives within their own royal families (Evans, 2010).

organizing elite high-class events, to preparing invitations and letters of condolence using specially designed letterhead. In addition, at funerals and weddings, they are always seated at special tables in the front of the event, and at religious ceremonies the top members of the Royal House are situated at the front. Champassak royals, especially the women, also frequently wear traditional Champassak clothes when attending public events. All of these practices are important for performing Champassak royalty as non-state royals without sovereign territory.



Figure 4: Khou Ba Ea Sinbandith, performing a Theravada Buddhist ritual at Vat Phouttaphilom (Champassak Royal House temple) in Paris, France. Photo taken by Ian G. Baird, August 2013.

There is also contestation surrounding who has the right to perform different aspects of Champassak royalty. For example, some members of the family believe that only Chao Boun Oum's children should represent the Champassak Royal House. Indeed, upon my arrival in Paris I soon found myself sending e-mails to and talking on the phone with one of those skeptical of the motivations behind organizing the 300th year anniversary reunion. He was not particularly direct in criticizing the event, but it soon became evident that he was concerned that the reunion was being organized to increase the legitimacy of Chao Keuakoun and his close relatives. In the end, however, this person did attend. There is little evidence, however, that Chao Keuakoun was trying to increase his own stature, and those of his close relatives.

In any case, I learned that protocol was still a touchy topic. In particular, Chao Boun Oum's oldest son, Chao Champhonesak (referred to by family as Chao Noi), was sent an invitation letter by Chao Keuakoun for the event, just like other family members. He was not, however, happy when he received the invitation, as he apparently expected a special personalized invitation, as some consider him to be 15th in the Champassak royal line,[13] and he was insulted when he only received a standard invitation like everyone else.[14] Chao Keuakoun felt that all the people were family so that it should not have been problematic for everyone to receive the same type of invitation. Later Chao Champhonesak complained that he needed more lead-up notice because he is a medical doctor in Switzerland and cannot take time off without three to six-months advance notice. However, most family members believe that this was just an excuse not to attend, since Chao Champhonesak was informed well in advance. In the end, he did not show up to the reunion, and he even urged his siblings to not attend.

Another contentious point that apparently put Chao Keuakoun in the bad books of Chao Champhonesak and his siblings related to Chao Boun Oum's wife, Bouaphanh, who was a commoner from Kengkoke District, Savannakhet Province. According to standard Champassak royal protocol, she should be known as *Sonh*, the title for a commoner woman who is the first wife of the head of the Champassak royal family (Na Champassak 1995b). However, when Chao Keuakoun wrote *Mome*, the title for a commoner woman who marries a Champassak royal, on invitations that he helped prepare for her funeral earlier in 2013, her children objected, stating that the invitations should refer to her as *Chao Nying* (something like princess), the highest royal title possible for a woman in the Champassak Royal House, even though doing so is technically incorrect following Champassak royal protocol. In the end, the invitations that Chao Keuakoun prepared were discarded and new ones were prepared by Bouaphanh's children, with the corrections included that they desired.

Another issue that emerged during the month I was in France related to how members of the family should position themselves in French society. On the one hand, Vongsavann Sinbandhit, the son of Chao Heuane Nying Boun Em, the first but an illegitimate child of Chao Boun Oum,[15] has tried to recreate certain aspects of

[13] See, for example, http://members.iinet.net.au/~royalty/states/asia/champassak.html, accessed March 7, 2014.
[14] I too unintentionally insulted Chao Champhonesak a few years earlier when I e-mailed him and referred to him as 'Chao Noi'.
[15] According to some, Chao Boun Oum's wife, Bouaphanh, did not fully accept Chao Heuane Nying Boun Em as her husband's child, even though Chao Boun Oum apparently did. Thus, she was not included in the funeral

Champassak royal practice in public situations in France, at least partially in order to play up his royal Champassak heritage in France, since he has right-wing political aspirations there. In 2005 when his daughter married a Frenchman, the bride and groom rode special horses (Figures 5 and 6), ones designed to replace the elephants that were used in Laos for important royal weddings in the past, such as the wedding of Chao Sith and Chao Heuane Nying Chitprasong in 1960 (Na Champassak 1995a; Evans 2009) (See Figures 7 and 8). The bride—who was referred to as a 'princess' in French, even though some contest that title—also wore a small specially produced crown (See Figure 6), and other ceremonial aspects of royal Champassak marriages were performed, thus publicly producing royal Champassak space. Some members of the family were unhappy with what they saw as an excessive attempt to perform Champassak royalty in public. The parents of the bride, however, felt that they had a legitimate right to follow these royal customs, since they were in the direct line of Chao Boun Oum. They wanted to produce royal spaces. Others felt that since Vongsavann is relatively wealthy, it was not inappropriate for him to spend his money on such a wedding ceremony for his daughter. To them, wealth and the appropriateness to perform royalty in public are strongly linked. Still, part of the tension relates to the fact that Chao Heuane Nying Boun Em has only been partially accepted by Chao Boun Oum's children from his wife, Bouaphanh, since Chao Heuane Nying Boun Em was born out of wedlock. There were a lot of bad feelings, which led Vongsavann to give up the position he held for many years as a sort of secretary for the Champassak Royal House. In 2013, Vongsavann still felt insulted by the criticisms, and was bitter about the refusal of Chao Boun Oum's other children to attend his daughter's wedding at the time.





Figures 5 and 6: Blaise Berdah (left), in marriage ceremony of Mariny (right), daughter of Vongsavann Sinhbandhit, Paris, France, July 17, 2005. Photo courtesy of Vongsavann Sinhbandhit.

book prepared for Chao Boun Oum's funeral. However, when Bouaphanh died in 2013, her children allowed Chao Heuane Nying Boun Em to sit with them at the funeral.



Figure 7: Elephants taking Chao Sanhprasith Na Champassak and Chao Heuane Nying Chitprasong Na Champasaak for wedding in Champassak, 1960. Photo courtesy of Chao Heuane Nying Chitprasong Na Champassak.



Figure 8: Chao Sanhprasith Na Champassak and Chao Heuane Nying Chitprasong, Champassak, Laos, 1960. Chao Boun Oum Na Champassak is on far right. Photo courtesy of Chao Heuane Nying Chitprasong Na Champassak.

Some have also complained that Vongsavann has referred to himself as '*Chao* Vongsavann'. Some believe that because his father was a commoner and his mother was a royal, he should only be known as *Anya*, a lesser royal title. Others argue that it is appropriate for him to refer himself as Chao, since his mother is Chao Heuane Nying. I did not observe him referring to himself as *Chao*, but others claimed he did so in the past. The politics surrounding the use of titles to constitute rank is one point of frequent contestation. But I also heard many people in the family lament the fact that there is no way to legally prevent people from using whatever titles they want, since doing so is not against the law in France, since the Champassak Royal House is not officially recognized in France. Indeed, there is no sovereign power, at least in relation to this family, to prevent people from using the titles they prefer.

The Champassak Royal House has negotiated its positionality in relation to the Luang Phrabang Royal House, which is also centered in Paris, and thus shares many of the same spaces, although the two royal houses have separate Buddhist temples, which emphasizes the importance of Buddhism in legitimating royalty from Laos. Still, at events where both royal houses are present, those from Champassak always agree to play a secondary role to Luang Phrabang royals. Indicative of this positionality, in Laos both considered their families to have been part of *Ratsavong Hom Khao* (Royal House of the White Parasol), but today in France only the Luang Phrabang royals use that term. The Na Champassaks just use *Ratsavong*, a somewhat lesser but still prestigious title. While some competition between the two royal houses remains, each also needs the other to gain legitimacy within the Lao diaspora, and they tend to do that by nostalgically referring to the past, as well as appealing to those who desire to maintain their high class status from Laos, and also to commoners through links to Lao cultural and Lao national identity.

Still, one source of disagreement within the Na Champassak family relates to the use of the term *Ratsavong*. Some in Champassak's first family feel that only Chao Boun Oum's children should use the title, but others have as well, such as Chao Ophat Na Champassak, a prominent member of the family who lived in Virginia, in the United States. He used *Ratsavong Champassak* to refer to himself until he passed away a few years ago. As Chao Keuakoun put it, "Now that we are in foreign countries, we cannot stop people from using different royal titles." Chao Keuakoun also feels that if the term *Ratsavong* stops being used, "the family will die out". For him, it is important to continue using it.

One noteworthy example of how the question of rank within the family has been dealt with relates to Phonxay Sinhbandith, who came some years ago to ask Chao Keuakoun for official recognition that he is part of *Ratsavong Champassak*, but Chao Keuakoun said he could not oblige, since he does not have an official stamp for creating formal documents.[16] In other words, in his view, he cannot fully perform royalty. He also explained that an official committee within the Champassak Royal House has not been established to determine who should be allowed to represent the family. These circumstances suggest that the Champassak Royal House, or at least elements within it, are somewhat uncertain about their own legitimacy and authority, as one would expect

[16] It is rumored that another member of the Champassak royal family in Paris has it.

that they would have made the stamp and created the appropriate committee had they felt confident in their own positionality.

During my time in France another member of the family told me that despite being very proud of his Champassak heritage, he felt that family members should not flaunt their royal status. For example, even though he is a *Chao*, or designate royal,[17] he chooses not to refer to himself using that title. According to him, "It depends on other people if they want to recognize my royal status or not." He feels that because the Champassak royals have no official positions or guaranteed sources of wealth, as they would if they controlled sovereign power, they have ended up having to work in all kinds of occupations, including ones that he feels are not sufficiently prestigious, such as working as waiters. Therefore, he thinks that it would demean the Na Champassak name if people in such positions were to advertise their royal heritage. As he put it, "What will people think if commoners make snide comments when speaking to a royal who is a waiter? What if someone says, prince, please bring me another glass of water?" Here we see how class relations in France, and social status and prestige in general, are causing some to feel like 'performing Champassak royalty' in public spaces should only be done when the appropriate prerequisites are in place. Some are concerned about being shamed by not having the social status or wealth deemed appropriate for representing the family in French society, where, for example, expensive clothing is deemed necessary for those with high status.

The Influence of Host Governments

Eva Ostergaard-Nielsen (2003) has usefully argued that transnational politics, in which I include the politics of exiled royalty, is highly dependent on the political institutions in both the sending and recipient countries of political refugees, and that global norms as well as the institutions and networks involved. Indeed, the performance of Champassak royalty are important legitimating exercises linked to transnational politics. In a related way, Fiona McConnell (2011; 2012) has examined the three-way intersection between the Tibetan government-in-exile in India, the government of India, and the population of Tibetan 'citizens' living in India. Indeed, legitimating ideas about Tibetan Buddhism and governance create important links between righteous sovereignty and the legitimacy of homeland territorial claims (McConnell, 2009a; 2009b). I also wish to make a similar point, but in a quite different context, since my goal is to consider the links of royals-in-exile rather than governments-in-exile. While royals are always linked to particular spaces, at least in memory, they are not linked as explicitly to governance as governments-in-exile typically are. These issues are arguably related but actually represent quite different types of sovereign power over and in relation to states. What I have noticed in relation to Champassak royals is that people see the transferability of Champassak royalty across space and borders differently, something that parallels how governments-in-exile are often variously viewed and understood.

The positionality of refugees is greatly affected by the politics of the actual sovereign powers of the spaces where they reside. Thus, it is crucial to consider the

[17] Royal Lao houses are supposed to have royal rules (*kot monthian ban* in Lao), but the Champassak royals do not, although Chao Keuakoun would like to develop a set of rules.

positionality of the government of France. For one, France is a Republic, without a King, and many French are deeply proud of their historic achievement of getting rid of the monarchy during the French revolution at the end of the eighteenth century. This certainly contributes to some members of the Champassak Royal House feeling trepidation about identifying themselves with royalty, even if they are not French royalty. This is especially true for younger family members, and I heard that even Chao Keuakoun's children have admonished French friends for referring to them using royal titles. Within French society, many feel that there is little to be gained from identifying with a marginal royal family from Laos. However, it is also true that some elite groups in France have shown respect to the Lao Royal Houses.

Certainly the situation would be different if the Champassak royals lived in Great Britain, where royalty generally receives more respect.[18] Furthermore, different governments variously approve of, condone and support governments-in-exile. In France, for example, Lao refugees who arrived after 1975 soon learned that certain forms of political activism were unacceptable to the French government. For example, in 1976 a former right-wing Prime Minister of Laos, Phouy Sananikone, attempted to establish a government-in-exile. However, the French national government, socialists at the time, told him that this was not acceptable in France, and that those who persisted with promoting such politics would find their processes for gaining French citizenship halted or greatly delayed. They were told that it was appropriate in France to instead establish 'associations'. Thus, the government-in-exile was disbanded, and associations were created, including some that were quite political. The Champassak Association was one of those, and it raised funds in the 1980s and 1990s to send to resistance groups fighting against the communist government in Laos. In contrast, the United States government has not attempted to shut down the various Lao governments-in-exile that have been established there since 1975. Thus, they have remained an important staging ground for transnational political activism directed against the communist Lao People's Democratic Republic. More recently, however, it has been notable that some Champassak royals have discouraged family members from joining the various governments-in-exile in the United States. For example, there was criticism when Chao Sisanga Na Champassak, the younger brother of the late Chao Sisouk Na Champassak, became deputy Prime Minister in the Royal Lao Government in Exile (RLGE) in the mid-2000s. Chao Keuakoun confirmed to me that many feel that family members should instead position themselves "above everyday politics". Still, many family members have been variously involved in transnational homeland politics, which represent particular space-making projects on their own right, and also sometimes serve to increase the legitimacy of Lao royals. For example, for many years Chao Keuakoun was deputy head of the European branch of the UFLL. The objective of the UFLL was to overthrow the communist government in Laos and return the country to its circumstances prior to 1975, when the country was a democratic constitutional monarchy. Thus, its goal was to return the monarchy to Laos; thus political activities related to governments-in-exile sometimes allow for opportunities to perform royalty. However, at least more recently, there seems to be a general understanding that keeping low profiles is important because of royal status and the political context associated with being in France. Thus, particular types of

[18] There are apparently no Champassak royals living on British soil.

political/royal space are being created while others are not. There is also an attempt to follow the trend of other constitutional monarchies that are not allowed to directly participate in politics. They consider themselves to be "above politics", and so keeping out of politics can also be considered to be a way of indirectly performing royalty. This resembles the type of mimicking that McConnell, Moreau and Dittmer (2012) write about in relation to the politics of diaspora attempts to gain political legitimacy.

Conclusions

The ways in which different members of the Champassak Royal House are negotiating their 'non-state royalness', including rank and recognition, both in private and public in France, differ markedly, and standards for what is considered appropriate in particular spaces and contexts vary between individuals, factions and generations within the family. But there are presently not any official royal rules (*bot monthien ban* in Lao) for governing such practices in France, making it difficult to resolve these differences. The royals of Champassak previously had—to varying degrees during different periods of time—the power to determine the 'state of exception', which is the sovereign's ability to transcend the rule of law in the name of the public good, following Agamben (2008). Now that they are outside of the territories that constituted them with this privilege, however, they are unable to make much use of their heritage apart from in relation to social hierarchy within the Lao diaspora. Therefore, they can only perform Champassak royalty to a limited extent, depending on both the norms and rules of France, but also in relation to Lao diaspora understandings of Lao royalty and how it should be positioned. Therefore, Champassak royals have had to perform without actually having the power of the sovereign. This should come as little surprise considering the status of so many royals-in-exile, and that the Champassak Royal House is not even the main exiled Lao royal house. Moreover, the royals from Luang Phrabang also face similar challenges. Still, some in the first generation members of the Champassak royal family in France clearly wish that they could again control the territory that would allow them to assert sovereign power as Champassak royals. Moreover, many Champassak royals in France are certainly frustrated with their inability to produce the type of Champassak royal space in France, outside of through a limited number of practices, especially as compared to what was once possible for them in Laos.

In this article I have tried to outline some of the main challenges presently facing members of the Na Champassak Royal House in France, including the micro-politics related to recognition and rank, protocol and positionality within the new spaces that Champassak royals find themselves at present. I see the positionality of Champassak royals in France as a performative struggle that few care about outside the Champassak Royal House and Lao diaspora. In fact, even amongst the Lao diaspora the importance of Champassak royalty is clearly fading, including amongst younger members of the family themselves, who now speak mainly or only French and feel few connections with their royal heritage. While some older members of the Champassak Royal House continue to dream that they will be able to remain significant for hundreds of more years into the future, it would appear that the biggest challenge is to remain relevant out of sovereign space. Although it is noteworthy that the royal family continues to occupy the royal palace (*hong* in Lao) in Champassak Town in Laos, and that the Lao People's Democratic

Republic government has allowed the family to return the ashes of many important deceased members so that they can be interned in stupas (*that* in Lao) near the old royal temple, Vat Thong, in Champassak, many in France continue to refuse to return to Laos even to visit, and instead pursue the Cold War dream that the Champassak Royal House will one day be able to politically return to the partially-sovereign space (not an independent country, but a place where the Champassak Royal House had partially state-like power) it came from, and constituted by, Champassak. However, political barriers are unlikely to allow any politically meaningful return to Champassak in the foreseeable future. This being the case, the family will undoubtedly continue to negotiate these issues into the future, sometimes in public spaces, but mainly in relatively narrow private Lao spaces in France, such as people's houses and at the Buddhist temple in France that is considered to be especially linked to Champassak royalty.

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