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Strangers in the hills: Social disruption and the origins of Lao nationalism (1873–1911)

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Abstract
Lao nationalism is usually thought to have emerged only at the end of the French colonial period during the Lao Renovation Movement (1941–1945), placing its origins much later than elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Yet when surveying Lao palm leaf manuscripts, it is evident that Lao scribes were writing in uniquely modern ways about themselves and others as early as 1890, three years prior to French colonization. They wrote in response to recent upheavals seen in the north amidst the Ho Wars (1869–1889) and the related migrations from south China during the mid- to late 19th century, and their accounts included highly-charged descriptions of newly arrived ethnic groups that subtly redefined what it meant to be Lao. These developments suggest an earlier origin to Lao ethnic nationalism at the turn of the century, which anticipated the later, more intense changes to appear in the French colonial era (1893–1945). Emphasis is placed on significant connections between the precolonial and colonial periods.

Keywords
Intellectual history, Laos, nationalisms, neologisms, palm-leaf manuscripts

The traditional authority of northern Laos was on the brink of collapse in the wake of the Ho Wars (c. 1869–1889), which witnessed unprecedented migrations from China and culminated with the destruction of Luang Prabang on June 10, 1887.[1] The threat of Ho and new, ungovernable ethnic

1. The definitive account of the Ho Wars has yet to be written as it pertains to Laos. Summaries of different stages of the conflict have appeared: see especially Andrew D. W. Forbes (1987), 'The struggle for hegemony in late 19th century Laos: The third Siamese military expedition to the North-East (1885–1887)', *Proceedings of the International Conference of Thai Studies*, The Australian National University, 3–6 July; and Andrew D. W. Forbes (1988), 'Red, black, yellow and striped banners: the Siamese

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groups within northern Lao territory forced some Lao to abandon traditional conceptions and search for new sources of authority.[2] It was at the moment when Lao were no longer unambiguously Lao (besieged by foreigners and confronted by their own impotence) that modern notions of identity emerged that relied on strict boundaries between foreigner and Lao. This was the root of modern Lao nationalism and it is no surprise then that only a few years later in 1890, the term *xeua-xaat* (ເຊື້ອຊາດ) seemed to have first appeared in its modern sense in a palm leaf manuscript.[3] Still several years prior to the French conquest of the country in 1893, the timing of these developments demands an explanation. For a country that had no recorded European visitors for over 200 years, and only a handful of travelers since the mid-century, how exactly did this notion arise? One must admit that Laos was not slumbering, waiting for France to awaken it to the modern world, but rather the late 19th century was a time of great social upheaval in the north of the country, which texts of the time referred to as *vunvai* (ວ่ຸນວາຍ), meaning confusion, chaos, and disturbance. With an examination of Lao palm leaf manuscripts from the period, I argue that a new discourse on Lao and other ethnic groups arose over the latter half of the 19th century, especially in the north of the country. Lacking a clear point of transmission from Europe at the earliest stages, I argue that the dissemination of such ideas followed Asian routes of exchange and was tempered by key events in the country.

Since the 1840s, and escalating during the Ho Wars, unprecedented migrations from southern China drove key historical processes engendering broad social and intellectual change. These migrants (Hmong-Mien and Tibeto-Burman speakers later dubbed *lao sung*) resisted state integration, disrupted existing ethnic relations, and challenged established power in northern Laos, all of which ushered in a new era. These events were the context for a series of texts that were

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military expedition to Laos and Sipsongchuthai of 1884–1885', *Journal of the Siam Society* Vol 76, pp. 134–144. See also Noel Battye (1974), 'The military government and society in Siam, 1868–1910: politics and military reform during the reign of King Chulalongkorn', PhD thesis, Cornell University, USA: chs. V–VI. A more serious archival study of the conflict is found in Nithi Eoseewong (1966), 'The suppression of the Haw uprisings and the loss of Thai territories in 1888', PhD thesis, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand.

2. Kennon Breazeale's work is the best account of the depopulation of Laos after the Chao Anou War; see Kennon Breazeale and Snit Smuckarn (1988), *A Culture in Search of Survival: The Phuan of Thailand and Laos*, Yale University, New Haven, CT. Vanina Boute has studied the migrations of the Phounoi in this period, who were originally brought to northern Laos as war-slaves from the Lue state of Sipsong Panna; see Vanina Boute (2007), 'Political hierarchical processes among some highlanders of Laos', in Francois Robinne, and Mandy Sadan, eds, *Social Dynamics in the Highlands of Southeast Asia*, Brill, Leiden, pp. 187–208. Mai Na Lee's work contains oral accounts of the mid- to late 19th-century Hmong migrations to Laos; see Mai Na Lee (2015), *Dreams of the Hmong Kingdom*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, WI. There are many other accounts, yet a comprehensive account of the social disruptions in northern Laos in the mid- to late 19th century remains to be written.
3. This is the earliest example of the term in its modern sense that I could find in a palm leaf manuscript that could be firmly associated with a date; however, additional research may provide earlier examples. 'Khong thao phanya thang cet khong thao phanya thang ha [The seven and five traditions of a king]' manuscript, from the Digital Library of Lao Manuscripts, website: http://laomanuscripts.net/en/texts/949#1 (accessed 1 January 2016), folio 17 line 3. This first instance appears in a passage of the law code regarding cases set before the king's ministers for decision in which they are implored to not "adjudicate with bias" (ຕັດບ່ງຖ). The Lao *xaat* is from the Pali-Sanskrit root *jati* meaning 'birth,' but paired with *xeua* gives the modern term 'race'.

composed by Lao scribes of the period who responded in searching writings. An anonymous scribe who purportedly wrote on the traditional subject of the 'ten laws of a just ruler' (*thotsa rasatham sip bakan*) wrote instead on the need to preserve Lao culture amidst the bewildering changes he observed in society.[4] It is remarkable that the scribe made no mention of the French but only differentiated between established families he saw as linked to Khun Bulom and more recent families with no such ties.[5] He and his generation were in fact engaged in a struggle for meaning, to come to terms with recent history and to find their place in a rapidly changing world.[6] At the same time, the Lao elite acted to incorporate the new migrants in the country by revising the law code, creating a new legal category at the lowest level: the *akhandok* (ອາຄັນດົກ), which meant stranger or newcomer.[7] The law code was patronized by the ruler of Muang Ngoi at the end of the Ho Wars, which had been at the center of the related *kha cheuang* revolts and was along the invasion route taken by Deo Van Tri when he sacked Luang Prabang in 1887.[8] The text was written not only to serve the immediate ends of restoring peace and order in the aftermath of war, but more broadly as an attempt by the Lao elite to compel the new migrants to acknowledge and respect Lao sovereignty. Both trends were important to a changing Lao society, yet this article will pay more attention to the textual world rather than practical on-the-ground realities.

By tracing the evolution of certain textual traditions, crucial shifts in Lao thought may be discerned that reveal the earliest emergence of *xaat* in its modern sense against the backdrop of war, migration, and upheaval. This is most evident in comparing different versions of the *nithan*

4. 'Thotsa lasatham sip pakan lae pen khong thammada [Ten laws and usual customs]', manuscript from the Digital Library of Lao Manuscripts, website: http://www.laomanuscripts.net/en/texts/5400#1 (accessed 1 January 2016). See for example folio 3, lines 4–5 and folio 4, line 1, in which the scribe implores the audience to learn the 'trait-name-lineage' (ລັກສະນະຊື່ຊາດສະກຸນ) of individuals or else suffer great misfortune, which is very inauspicious (a theme repeated in the text).While this text does not contain a date, I strongly suspect it dates to this period due to its content.
5. See *ibid*., folio 5, lines 1–2. In the 19th century, Khun Bulom was considered to be the ancient progenitor of the semi-divine Lao royal lineage. He is featured in the Lao origin myth of the gourd story.
6. Another important textual tradition for these scribes was the millenarian Buddhist tradition, which shared much in common with the texts I examine here, including the idea of the world turning over, the social order in flux, and the need to preserve Lao culture. Millenarian texts moreover frequently warn of the danger of intermingling with foreigners, which is highly suggestive for comparison purposes. Thanks to the anonymous reviewer for bringing this to my attention. I will address relevant prophecy texts in a separate study. See further, Peter Koret (2007), 'Past, present and future in Buddhist prophetic literature of the Lao', in Ian Harris, ed., *Buddhism, Power and Political Order*, Routledge, London, pp. 143–167.
7. 'Khong thao phanya', folio 22, line 2–3 refers to the 'poor people, strangers' (ຄົນທຸກໄຮຝ່ງໝ່ອາຄັນດົກ). This passage notes the punishment for the crime of rape against this class of people is only valued at 5 baht, whereas for the same crime others are punished from 150 for kha up to 1000 for the King. *Akhandok* is a variant of the pali term *akhandhuka* (ອາຄັນຕຸກະ).
8. For an excellent account of the kha cheaung revolt which occurred during the Ho Wars, see Frank Proschan (1998), 'Cheuang in Kmhmu folklore, history and memory', in Sumitr Pitiphat, ed., *Tamnan keokap thao hung thao chuang: miti thang prawattisat lae wattanatham* [Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Literary, Historical and Cultural Aspects of Thao Hung Thao Cheuang], Thammasat University, Bangkok, pp. 174–209. See also Kampol Champapan (2009), 'Kha cheuang: the holy man's rebellion in the royal territories of Siam, 1872–1893 BC', MA thesis, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand.

khun bulom genre of texts from the 1870s to the 1890s. However, during the period in question the most important term is not the familiar *xaat* but a related neologism of the time, *xeua-naeo* (ເຊື້ອແນວ). A unique combination of *xeua* ('lineage') and *naeo* ('seed kept for the next crop'), the neologism made use of an agricultural metaphor that was obviously appealing to scribes of the time. Previously the term *xeua-naeo* was thought to demonstrate a 'common Tai ethnicity' in existence since Ram Khamhaeng, yet in the texts of the early 1870s ethnicity remained a remarkably plastic notion. Only in the 1890s in the wake of the Ho Wars was this term used to express what must be the earliest example of Lao ethnic nationalism. Various unnamed minor scribes expressed ethnic chauvinism in derogatory remarks about minorities in a bid to renew Lao ethnic dominance after the Ho Wars. As in the colonial period, it was often the gourd story that Lao writers manipulated to achieve this affect.[9] Yet by the early 1900s, Lao terminology began to converge with that of the Thai (and French glosses) in the familiar *xaat*. The detour of Lao intellectual processes through the neologism *xeua naeo* provides the clearest textual evidence of a change in the underlying Lao mentalities which aids the understanding of the shifting meaning of the related *xaat*. The neologism is also significant because, unlike *xaat*, it is distinct from terms in circulation in neighboring Thailand (i.e. *chaat*), which suggests a measure of independence to the Lao processes.[10] While the Thai elite developed their modern notions of *chaat* in exchanges with the West, Laos offered quite a different example, as the new language arose in relations with other Asians, specifically various ethnic groups from southern China (Ho, Hmong, Iu-Mien etc.), and only later with the West.[11] While in the period under study here the terms did not yet bear the full sense of modern political notions, and may be used only in the vaguest sense of a 'nation (of people),' nevertheless, the central claim of this work is that the appearance of such new language marks the beginnings of recognizably modern ways of thinking among Lao intellectuals.

The study of the origins of Lao nationalism has been limited by the neglect of palm leaf manuscripts which were the only medium available to Lao until the late arrival of print.[12] Instead, scholars have been satisfied that Lao remained blithely unaware of nationalism until the Lao Renovation Movement (1941–1945).[13] This is very misleading in that the notion that the Lao Renovation Movement was the origin of Lao nationalism has actually been circulating for over half a century. In its earliest iteration it was linked with the idea of the colonial period as a 'peaceful' and 'harmonious' time.[14] Later, when the colonial period was shown to be anything but peaceful, the Lao Renovation Movement's significance as the origin of Lao nationalism remained

9. The gourd story told of the creation of both the Lao and the *kha*, who emerged into the world from a gourd.
10. The anonymous reviewer has pointed out that *naeo* is not unique to the Lao, but is a term used by other related peoples such as the Shan who use it to mean 'type/kind', especially to refer to one's nationality.
11. Eiji Murashima (1988), 'The origin of modern official state ideology in Thailand', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol 19, No 1, pp. 80–96 See also Thongchai Winichakul (1994), *Siam Mapped*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, HI, pp 134–135.
12. Peter Koret (1999), 'Books of search: the invention of traditional Lao literature as a subject of study', in Grant Evans, ed., *Laos: Culture and Society*, Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai pp. 226–257.
13. Most recently Soren Ivarsson (2008), *Creating Laos: The Making of a Lao Space Between Indochina and Siam, 1860–1945*, NIAS Press, Copenhagen.
14. See Hugh Toye (1968), *Laos: Buffer State or Battleground*, London: Oxford University Press. See also Sisouk Na Champasak (1961), *Storm over Laos*, Praeger, New York. Sisouk claims equal importance for the Lao Renovation Movement and the Japanese Invasion.

unchallenged,[15] and yet its endurance owed more to a lack of recognition of earlier developments than anything else. Most recently, scholars have split on the issue: Soren Ivarsson has placed renewed focus on the Lao Renovation Movement by applying Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined communities to the first Lao newspaper from the Movement, while Martin Stuart-Fox has identified earlier stages in the evolution of Lao nationalism in the 1930s.[16] The present study seeks to expand on Stuart-Fox's work by presenting evidence of the earliest stirrings of Lao ethnic nationalism during the years 1873–1911 from palm leaf manuscript sources. Several scholars point to an 'ethnic awakening' among various minorities in Laos at the turn of the century, including the Khmu and the Phounoi in the north and the so-called *kha* in the south, yet no similar changes have been observed among Lao. This article presents what may be the best available evidence of such an 'ethnic awakening' in the writings of Lao scribes.[17]

Lao writers of the time sought to address their changing society by composing new versions of ancient texts wherein they tried to incorporate new migrants into the existing web of ethnic relations. Conversely, they also took a reactionary pose and were led to write strong invectives against the migrants breaking with the conventions of the normally conservative, transcendental works. Not only were these writers guided by their personal passions, but also their works were inevitably a product of their social environment. Thus it is clear that these texts are not merely 'copies,' and regarding them as such would miss crucial transitions in Lao intellectual history. Rather, these writers knew how to manipulate their accumulated traditions to disseminate contemporary messages, albeit draped in the old, authoritative texts they putatively 'copied.' That the majority of Lao texts from this period included no author or date attests to the fact that these texts were considered to contain universal knowledge. These authors were presenting their work not as an individual act of creation by an author but simply as a 'copy' of much older knowledge from the past that provided a much larger window into the nature of the universe. Lao scribes made great efforts to efface themselves from the texts they composed, and some later scholars have at times not sufficiently investigated this aspect of the texts. There is a certain school of scholarship on Thai-Lao manuscripts which places great emphasis on reconstructing a 'complete' version of a text while neglecting 'corrupted' versions written by 'copyists.'[18] Such scholarship does ensure these texts become more widely known in translations, and yet trying to reconstruct a 'perfect' version

15. Geoffrey Gunn (1990), *Rebellion in Laos: Peasant and Politics in a Colonial Backwater*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO.
16. Ivarsson, *supra* note 13. Martin Stuart-Fox (1997), *A History of Laos*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. Vatthana Pholsena follows Stuart-Fox in her monograph: Vatthana Pholsena (2006) *Post-War Laos: The Politics of Culture, History and Identity*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, p 88.
17. For the Khmu, who were impacted by the Ho wars and the Cheaung revolt to such an extent that they began referring to themselves as 'Cheuang people' (ᩁᩫᨦᨾᩮᩬ), see Frank Proschan (1996), 'Who are the Khaa?', in *Proceedings of the 6th Annual International Conference on Thai Studies*, Chiang Mai, Thailand, pp. 391–414. For texts on the Phouni, who were escaped slaves from Luang Prabang given territory, see Boute, *supra* note 2. For an interpretation of the anti-colonial revolts in southern Laos as an ethnic awakening, see Vatthana, *supra* note 16, at pp 19–45.
18. See, for one example, Souneth Phothisane (1996), 'The Nidan Khun Bulom: Annotated translation and analysis', PhD thesis, University of Queensland, Australia, which pieces together 39 versions of this text; yet the final product is a text which has no historical antecedent and exists in current scholarship alone. Souneth was likely inspired to take this approach following David Wyatt's example in his work on the Nan chronicle, yet Wyatt himself revised his method in his later work on the Chiang Mai chronicle, in which he translated a single text rather than stitching together many variants.

of the manuscript tradition often comes at the price of not appreciating each iteration as a unique product of the scribe, much less viewing the scribe's work as a window into their society and times. This study does not seek some ideal text, but merely the lens through which the particular scribe composed their work at a particular place and time.

In method, I follow Peter Koret (1994) who argued for the creative talents of scribes.[19] Koret, in his study of traditional Lao literature, argued that scribes were forced to take on the role of author because the texts they copied contained so many errors that they would become unintelligible unless changes were made to maintain the meaning of the text. It was conventional for Lao scribes to call on the reader to 'fix' the scribe's own text, such as appears in a 1911 version of the *nithan khun bulom* in which the scribe called on all educated persons to add to the text according to what one's "ears hear and eyes see."[20] The 'copy' which a scribe produced was in fact their own composition, which inevitably contained their particular understanding of the meaning of the text they 'copied.' These scribes did not hold to the notion of the inviolability of the text. Thus, it is precisely the corruptions which allow the treatment of each manuscript as a unique historical document in its own right. This approach is similar to Martin Stuart-Fox's reading of the chronicle accounts of Fa Ngum which he suggested reflected more on the 16th century when such accounts were first written down.[21] Likewise, Nidhi Eoseewong took a similar approach to Ayutthayan texts which he read to understand early Bangkok society.[22] I suggest these texts, especially the gourd story from the *nithan khun bulom*, may be read as a window into the mentalities of the late 19th century in the Luang Prabang kingdom where each scribe composed their particular version of the text.

Unearthing 19th-century mentalities

In establishing the political history of Laos prior to the 20th century, knowledge of the cultural and intellectual history has been left wanting and most of what is known is contained in stories like the *nithan khun bulom*, with little reference to other genres of texts. On the other hand, some scholars have been drawn to see Lao from an outsider's (especially Thai) perspective, but there has been little consideration for how Lao defined themselves prior to the 20th century.[23] Thus, there is a serious dilemma when trying to understand the origins of Lao nationalism, and in order to understand the changes wrought by nationalism a better understanding of the mentalities in the country prior to its introduction must first be established. I begin with an examination of several

19. Peter Koret (1994), 'Whispered so softly it resounds through the forest, spoken so loudly it can hardly be heard: the art of parallelism in traditional Lao literature', PhD thesis, University of London, UK, especially pp 66–70.
20. 'Nithan khun bulom [Legend of Khun Bulom],' manuscript from the Digital Library of Lao Manuscripts, website: http://www.laomanuscripts.net/en/texts/632#1 (accessed 1 January 2016), bundle 5, folio 36, lines 3–4. Hereafter referred to as the 1911 mss.
21. Martin Stuart-Fox (1998), *The Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang: Rise and Decline*, White Lotus Press, Bangkok, p 44.
22. Nidhi Eoseewong (2005), *Pen and Sail: Literature and History in Early Bangkok*, Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai.
23. Ivarsson, *supra* note 13, at p 24. Grant Evans (2005), 'What is Lao culture?', in Grant Evans, ed., *Laos: Culture and Society*, Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai, pp. 1–34; Justin McDaniel (2005), 'Notes on the Lao influence on Northern Thai Buddhist literature', in K. Nettavong, H. Hundius, D. Kanlaya, D. Wharton, and K. Yangnouvong, eds, *The Literary Heritage of Laos: Preservation, Dissemination and Research Perspectives*, National Library of Laos, Vientiane, pp. 373–396.

relevant but diverse texts, including official correspondence from 1840, a religious history from 1865, and a law text from 1877. I argue that while ethnic distinctions clearly existed in these works they remained vague and amorphous compared to later notions and were ultimately of less importance than other distinctions to the 19th-century mentality.

Letters from early in Chao Sukkasoem's reign (r. 1839–1850) reveal that Ho and Akha migration caused serious upheaval within the realm and challenged the sovereign authority of Luang Prabang. Reports detail how several cities in an important region of the kingdom were colluding with the migrants against the authority of the king, which posed a significant internal challenge. Perhaps the most serious problem was how to address the many Lue who migrated into Luang Prabang territory but continued to pay tax to Sipsong Panna. As a result, these new migrants refused to pay any tax to Lao authorities (a double jeopardy scenario for them), which undermined local government in the area. Luang Prabang pleaded with Sipsong Panna to come to a mutual understanding, between 'Tai' countries, on the issue of tax and migration: "… from now on, Ho and Akha in the frontier of any Tai country, let them enter the care of that country [and] be lost [to the other country]…"[24] A vague notion of a common 'Tai' ethnicity appears prominently in the writing, alongside other ethnonyms in what is otherwise a discussion of daily matters of government. While ethnic distinctions were known at the time, these did not match later 20th-century notions. Above all, allegiance to the king was paramount, and further, it seems religious identity also took some precedence. In the same collection of letters, Sukkasoem wrote of solidarity with Rama III, not as between Tai countries as might be expected, but on the basis of shared religion. Not yet fixed, the term *tai* had a range of meanings including legal, pronominal, and religious. Sukkasoem's cache of letters provides evidence, not only for distinguishing between shades of meaning in contemporary usage of the term, but also because it demonstrates that such matters were not divorced from the social and political context but rather were in many ways shaped by them.

A *pheun pabang* text dated to 1865 offers another example of the 19th-century mentalities of Lao, wherein the text tells broadly of the history of the Prabang image. This is a similar genre of text to that of the more well-known *nithan khun bulom* texts. After explaining the origins of the name of the Kingdom of Lan Xang, the scribe inserted an invented etymology for the term 'Lao':

> That which is called *muang lao* is all the people who came to be the masters of the country in the past that [came] out the inside of the gourd to be the kings and lords. That we call Master Khun Lo. [We] truly are called Lao because of that.[25]

The scribe continues his explanation, now given in Pali, in which he shows the Pali term for gourd (*lavu*) over time lost its final vowel to be simply *lao*.[26] While these two explanations do refer to a common origin, they are not entirely free of ambiguity as the gourd is the origin not only of Lao but also of *kha*. In this case, a further distinction is required in which Lao would be the 'high-born' people of the gourd who all held the honored positions in society as the ruling elite.

24. 'Untitled', manuscript from the DLLM, website: http://laomanuscripts.net/en/texts/7666#1 (accessed 1 January 2016), folio 10, lines 1–2.
25. 'Pheun Pabang [Story of the Pabang]', manuscript from the DLLM, website: http://laomanuscripts.net/en/texts/7967#1 (accessed January 1 2016), folio 4, line 4 and folio 5, line 1.
26. *Ibid*.: folio 5, lines 1–4.

Yet, as the scribe wrote of it, 'Lao' people were not just the people of the lowlands, but the 'kings and lords,' such that even many people of the lowlands would not be considered to be fully 'Lao.' Thus to the 19th-century mentality being Lao would constitute membership among the semi-divine ruling class who traced their origins back to the original intermarriage of the favored people from the gourd with the sons of Khun Bulom.

Prevailing 19th-century notions of non-Lao peoples, such as that of the so-called *kha* (ຂ້າ), were also important to the broader 19th-century mentalities. It should be noted that *kha* does not refer to any single group of people recognized today and is viewed as a strongly pejorative term in Laos when used in that sense.[27] At the time it was a blanket term which reduced many groups known to the Lao such as the *kha khmu*, *kha phounoi*, and *kha ko* (Akha) under a single term. However, it was not simply a term referring to non-Lao ethnic groups. Similar to '*tai*', it was a term with several meanings depending on the context. In its most general sense it meant 'subordinate,' and Lao might use it in pronominal expressions ('we,' 'I') in certain social settings.[28] The fact that one could become *kha* simply by owing a debt was attested to as late as 1877 in a law code which included harsh statutes stipulating the return of runaway *kha* and forbidding a *kha* from becoming indebted to others without his or her owner's consent.[29] Once again, ethnicity is entwined with its political, legal, economic, and cultural contexts. In broad terms, to the 19th-century mentality the various non-Lao peoples were all subsumed under the label *kha*, but these earlier notions would harden later in the century.

As discussed in the next section, the evidence available suggests this shift in view was linked specifically to the arrival of new migrants from southern China who did not fit the *kha* mold, signaling an end to the earlier more vague and amorphous notions of the 19th-century mentality. The very same law code of 1877 includes perhaps the earliest appearance of the term *meo* (ແມ້ວ) in any Lao text. This term was used to refer to the Hmong and was certainly borrowed from the Chinese term *miao*, which literally meant 'barbarian.' Yet why did the Lao not simply consider the Hmong as just another non-Lao *kha*? This usage of the Chinese term may be based on a perception that Hmong remained too far beyond the purview of the Lao cultural horizon, being too strange or too Chinese. While the French traveler Paul Neis described early Lao-Hmong interactions as "peaceful," he also noted a quixotic story suggesting an atmosphere of suspicion, mutual distrust, and fear.[30] At some point, the Hmong reportedly became involved in the Ho Wars, perhaps on both sides of the conflict. There are further accounts of Hmong and Lao cultural misunderstandings in the early days of French rule.[31] Given these difficulties, the Lao borrowing, including the pejorative meaning, may have been intentional as a way to subordinate Hmong to Lao authority and maintain the status quo in northern Laos.

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27. Proschan, *supra* note 17, at pp 391–414. Proschan further refutes the notion that the Khmu ethnonym represents a shortening from earlier names like 'kha-mu'.
28. In addition to modern pronouns such as khanoi or the literary phukha, 19th-century texts would often simply use kha, meaning 'we' or 'your servant'.
29. 'Din hai na thao phanya [Wet and dry rice fields of the lords]', manuscript from the DLLM, website: http://laomanuscripts.net/en/texts/4056#1 (accessed January 1 2016).
30. Paul Neis (1997), *Travels in Upper Laos and Siam*, trans. Walter E. J. Tips, White Lotus, Bangkok, p 110. He recounts a story he heard from Lao to explain why the Hmong were uncomfortable to be in the lowlands for any amount of time, which in itself shows mutual misunderstandings. Mai Na Lee reports similar unease among Hmong in her study, *supra* note 2, at pp 79, 90.
31. See further Lee, *supra* note 2.

Textual transitions in the *nithan khun bulom*

In this section I will compare several different versions of the *nithan khun bulom*, paying close attention to the language of each in order to trace shifts in the meaning of key terms. It will be suggested that where there are changes in the wording of certain passages there are also corresponding changes in the broader mentalities of Lao scribes who authored the texts for their patrons and audience. In particular, a transition in the term *xeua-naeo* will be shown: in the texts of the early 1870s it reads as 'lineage,' yet by the early 1890s it had shifted to carry a more modern sentiment, placing greater emphasis on ethnic identity. From texts of the 1890s I will consider the emergence of certain neologisms, some of which are unique to Laos, as opposed to other related terms then in circulation in neighboring Thailand. This will be further investigated in the earliest French-Lao dictionaries. Finally, by 1911 there is evidence of a coalescing of notions to a certain point not yet an equivalence between Lao and French notions.

1873 text fragment

There is a surviving fragment of the *nithan khun bulom* which is dated to the first year of the reign of Chao Ounkham (r. 1873–1887)[32] and was likely prepared to commemorate his coronation. One finds in it unique expressions of the heritage of Lao and non-Lao peoples that provide a brief glimpse into the mentalities which must have been common for much of the 19th century. Even so, this analysis calls into question a so-called notion of 'common Tai ethnicity' identified by some scholars. This language appears in a fragment dealing with the great Fa Ngum's campaigns against his neighbors in his fabled conquest of the country.[33] A recurring feature of this story is a scene in which the vanquished kings each sued for peace with Fa Ngum by claiming to be of the same lineage as him, having a shared descent from the mythic Khun Bulom. In some versions of the myth, Khun Bulom counseled his seven sons to live in peace and harmony, which is referenced in this text fragment in which Fa Ngum is shown to abide Khun Bulom's teaching. While the scene is faithfully reproduced in several versions, the particular language used in this version reveals older meanings for the term *xeua naeo* based on distinct underlying concepts.

Amidst the formulaic military encounters retelling Fa Ngum's march to conquer the whole of Lan Xang, there is unique language in his encounters with certain neighbors. For example, Fa Ngum's exchange with the ruler of Xieng Khuang, Phanya Chet Cheaung, is typical and reinforces a notion of common ethnicity among Tai peoples:

> Not long after, when [Fa Ngum] reached Phanya Chet Cheaung, who was master of Muang Phuan Xieng Khuang, [Phanya Chet Cheaung] arranged Meun Luang Phuan with Muen Kham Mak to go pay homage to Fa Ngum at Pa Nam Hung, over there. [He] spoke thusly: "I certainly am a grandson, great-grandson of the lineage (*xeua-naeo*) of Khun Bulom, King of Kings and Khun Lo since ancient times truly! Phanya Fa Chao may conquer the countryside anywhere as may be, I will prepare

32. 'Nithan Khun Bulom [Legend of khun bulom]', manuscript from the DLLM, website: http://laomanuscripts.net/en/texts/640#1 (accessed 1 January 2016). Hereafter referred to as the 1873 mss.
33. Michel Lorrillard (2006), 'Insights on the diffusion of Lao Buddhism', in F. Lagirarde, and P. C. Koanathakool, eds, *Buddhist Legacies in Mainland Southeast Asia*, Ecole Francaise D'Extreme-Orient, Paris, has called into question the veracity of chronicle accounts of Fa Ngum, pp. 139–148.

> soldiers to go assist and advise [his army] anywhere at any time." Phanya Fa really then spoke thusly: "[That] our brethren still yet thinks of us like that is fortunate"…[34]

The neologism *xeua-naeo* is rendered here as 'lineage' since the two lords are speaking of family ties. That Phanya Chet Chuang refers to himself and his descendants as ultimately tied to the *xeua-naeo* of Khun Bulom makes this usage clear. Further in the text, Fa Ngum has a similar exchange with the Lue ruler of Sipsong Panna in his capital of Xieng Hung:

> Phanya Xieng Rung spoke thusly: "We certainly are of one and the same lineage (*xeua-naeo*). We will not skirmish with or battle Phanya Chao [Fa Ngum] and may his lordship take the frontier cities and villages, from the village of Bong Luang Khuang until Bun Tai Bun Neua, which is the boundary of Lan Xang country, if you please"…[35]

No less an authority than George Cœdès suggested that such passages are an early example of a feeling of "common ethnic origin" among Tai people dating back to Ram Khamhaeng.[36] Martin Stuart-Fox echoes this assessment, saying it was used to indicate a common Tai identity among neighboring kingdoms.[37] Even the context then prevailing in Chao Ounkham's court at Luang Prabang is suggestive, as it was an important vassal of the greater Siamese empire in which many Tai states were then joined.

With this reading of the text established, it is puzzling then to consider Fa Ngum's exchange with the Vietnamese. It is only when noting that Fa Ngum conversed with his Vietnamese contemporary in the same manner as he did with the Tai Phuan or Tai Lue that it is apparent that the scribe writing this account in 1873 did not in fact exhibit notions of a 'common Tai ethnicity,' much less modern notions of ethnicity in general. In Fa Ngum's first encounter with the Vietnamese ruler (referred to as the 'Great Lotus King,' ᦅᦳᧉᦷᦀᦲᦎᦳ), he relates his family lineage:

> The Great Lotus King then made inquiries of the lineage (*xeua-naeo*) of the Phanya [Fa Ngum]. Phanya [Fa Ngum] replied: "[I] am the grandson, the great-grandson of Khun Bulom, King of Kings [whose lineage] continued many generations, many flowerings really then down to myself." The Great Lotus King truly said: "If you truly are of the lineage of Master Khun Lo then"…[38]

However, it is only later when the two rulers bid farewell that the purported blood ties between Lao and Vietnamese are made explicit: "The Great Lotus King replied: 'Let my elder brother return to Xieng Dong Xieng Tong there, if you please.'"[39] The Vietnamese King's reference to Fa Ngum as 'elder brother' recalls the greatest boasts of the myth of Khun Bulom in which it was said that his seven sons spread out across peninsular South East Asia to become rulers of great kingdoms and that the Lao kingdom stood above its neighbors as the eldest. Yet if the scribe used the

34. 1873 mss.: folio 4, lines 2–4.
35. 1873 mss.: folio 8, lines 2–3.
36. George Cœdès (1968), *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, HI, p 225.
37. Stuart-Fox, *supra* note 21, at p 41.
38. 1873 text, folio 5, lines 3–4. The 'Great Lotus King' could be identified as Tran Minh Tong (r. 1314–1357), who recorded fighting on the border of the province of Nghe An and Xieng Khouang in the year 1335.
39. 1873 text, folio 8, line 1. Xieng Dong Xieng Tong was the name of Luang Prabang until the 16th century.

term *xeua-naeo* in developing a sense of a common Tai ethnicity then why would he possibly use such a term with the Vietnamese? Even with such compelling examples for the Tai Phuan or Tai Lue, the fact that the scribe included Vietnam in this grouping seemingly without contradiction defies expectations, showing a different way of thinking. Rather than a common Tai ethnicity, the above examples may be more akin to interrelated lineages of monarchs, which would match the evidence better. This points to practices of intermarriage among the ruling elites of various polities in the region, who had a history of exchanging wives between each other.[40] It was part of the diplomacy and politics of the time but also partly an acknowledgement that the ruling elite of mainland South East Asia were of a similar kind of people and should marry among each other before marrying a commoner, even of their own people. The lineage of Khun Bulom in this example then would hardly serve as the basis for a Lao ethnicity.

Cœdès passed over the incoherence of this phrase which was used as much with the Lue and Phuan as it was with Vietnam and China. Thongchai Winichakul notes a similar account of a common ethnicity between the Tai of Muang Thaeng and the Vietnamese which he attributed to close political ties.[41] Rewriting histories and lineages to serve political ends is another possibility, except that in 1873 Chao Ounkham did not enjoy warm relations with Nguyen Vietnam, his father casting off suzerainty to the Vietnamese over 40 years earlier.[42] There were expressions of a common Tai ethnicity which, albeit vague, did seem to make sense, but scholars should not easily dismiss the case here as simply a scribe's 'copying error' when it was also used to refer to Vietnam. The scribe who wrote the 1873 text was speaking in an earlier discourse before ethnic identity solidified later in the century. The 1873 text remains a product of the 19th-century mentality.

New trends in the 1890s

The first manuscript to break with the earlier mentalities dates from 1890.[43] This text is rare in that it identifies both the date of composition and the name of the scribe, giving his name as Hua Kham (ຫົວຄຳ). While Hua Kham's writing style suggests that he was from the North East region of Thailand, perhaps in the area of modern Loei province, his text bears unmistakable signs that he was touched by recent events in northern Laos.[44] Given that the text is now housed in the National Library in Vientiane, it is likely it was produced in Loei and only found its way to Vientiane later.[45] Unlike his peers, Hua Kham took ownership of the text, breaking the protocol of

40. Keith Taylor (1999), 'The early kingdoms,' in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia: Volume One, Part One: From Early Times to c. 1500*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 137–182.
41. Thongchai, *supra* note 11, at p 99. Muang Thaeng is the Thai name of what is now known as Dien-bien-phu in northwest Vietnam.
42. Anonymous (1917), *Collected Historical Papers, Volume 5*, (Luang Prabang chronicle according to the Minister's Pavilion Edition), (พงษาวดารเมืองหลวงพระบางตามฉบับทีมีอยู่ในศาลาลูกขุน), Wachirayan Library, Bangkok, p 264.
43. 'Khun bulom', manuscript from the DLLM, website: http://laomanuscripts.net/en/texts/11958#1 (accessed January 1 2016). Hereafter referred to as the Hua Kham mss.
44. Thanks to my teacher Mr Thongsuey Outhompone at the National Library of Laos for pointing out the aspects of the text which indicate that the scribe was likely from northeast Thailand.
45. Akiko Iijima discusses the movement of manuscripts, which adds another layer of difficulty to contextualizing the texts. See Akiko Iijima (2005), 'A historical approach to the palm-leaf manuscripts preserved in Wat Mahathat, Yasothon (Thailand)', in K. Nettavong, H. Hundius, D. Kanlaya,

anonymity to sign his name. While the gourd story is widely regarded as a precolonial statement of Lao dominance over non-Lao, in Hua Kham's text it may be seen as the first emergence of a new sense of ethnic nationalism absent in earlier versions.

In Hua Kham's day the term *xeua-naeo* no longer simply meant 'lineage' but began to have a broader meaning of 'a people.' This is evident in a speech inserted by Hua Kham in which Khun Bulom educates those who had just emerged from the gourd:

> Then Khun Bulom really struck the gong, calling the servants [saying] to all the people to "take a husband, take a wife, every one! Be [as] a pair of tongs together. Younger brother *kha*, take *kha* that come out from the drilled hole. Every person of the *tai naeo*, younger brother Lao that come out through the chiseled hole, take to each other. Every person of the *kha naeo* is reserved to the *kha*, the Tai-Lao *naeo* kept for Lao – it's permanent!"[46]

The text in this passage appears to be remarkably modern. To express himself, Hua Kham uses the term *naeo*, yet reading it as a familial 'lineage' fails to make sense of the passage; rather, to understand Hua Kham's meaning it must be seen in the new, broader sense with which he uses it which might be glossed as a 'people,' a 'nation,' or a 'race.'[47] Previously, chronicles, like genealogies, had followed the heritage of important personages like the royal family but to do so for a distinct group of people was a new idea for the time in Laos. The Thai elite had become interested in English notions of race by the 1880s and there had been a few Europeans in Luang Prabang in the late 1880s, but Hua Kham is mainly concerned about the relationship among Lao and other ethnic minorities within the country, making no mention of Thai, French, or British.[48] Without any overt reference to European biology, Hua Kham promotes his views by relying on the divine imprimatur of Khun Bulom.

Hua Kham's text is not significant merely for its neologisms, but shows more broadly that his concerns had shifted from those of earlier writers. He writes at length on Lao and *kha*, in more detail than others previously had, and in doing so he draws both into sharper focus, viewing each more clearly in terms broadly similar to modern notions. Hua Kham's description of the Lao illustrates this point: "All the people who came out of the chiseled hole were the lords, the rulers, the courtesans, good persons, beautiful ones, artisans…and all who came from that way were good, beautiful in all things."[49]

Hua Kham's praise may be seen as more than simply idle talk, recognizing that the natural gifts he assigns to the Lao sit comfortably next to titles of political power and authority. Yet the Lao are no longer just the old semi-divine ruling class but are now described by physical and mental traits such as beauty, intelligence (as artisans), and moral superiority; in some respects a commoner could now be Lao. Conversely, Hua Kham describes the *kha* using highly disparaging language. After coming out of the burnt hole they are described as follows: "All the people who come through the brunt hole are savage, cruel people [who] seek knowledge and wisdom, [but] are

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D. Wharton, and K. Yangnouvong, eds, *The Literary Heritage of Laos: Preservation, Dissemination and Research Perspectives*, National Library of Laos, Vientiane, pp. 341–357.

46. Hua Kham mss., second bundle, folio 7, lines 2–3.
47. See Allen Kerr (1972), *Lao-English Dictionary*, Catholic Press of America, Washington, DC, Vol 2, p 711.
48. See Eiji, *supra* note 22.
49. Hua Kham mss., second bundle, folio 5, line 4 to folio 6, line 1.

unable [to attain it]."[50] The powerful description of these people as 'savage' is repeated in other places in the text. *Hai* (ຮ້າຍ) has many associated meanings, including physical and character traits such as ugliness or ferocity. An earlier text from the 1870s had described the *kha* as being of 'dark complexion' (ຄົ້ນດ່ຳ), but even that account did not contain such charged language or make inferences about their behavior or moral qualities.[51] Not only are they *hai* but, in contrast to the Lao, the *kha* are denied any intellectual gifts; being *kha* here makes no mention of indebtedness.

It is difficult to account for Hua Kham's writing on the *kha*, especially the disparaging language, without considering the context. Ultimately the old gourd story in which the *kha* are subordinated to the Lao seems to have lost its power and no longer satisfied Hua Kham or his audience. In the wake of the destruction of Luang Prabang, Hua Kham revised the old gourd story to reflect relatively modern distinctions in order to renew Lao dominance, now stated explicitly in ethnic terms. As opposed to the earlier 19th-century mentality outlined above, which gave primacy to monarchy and left ethnicity comparably vague, in Hua Kham's writing it is evident he placed much greater emphasis on ethnicity. It is a significant enough issue for him that he is clearly overtaken by passion to break his anonymous pose. His writing stands as a vociferous statement of Lao ethnic supremacy and is possibly the first sign of ethnic nationalism in a Lao text.

Nothing in the foregoing discussion gives any impression of what motivated Hua Kham to write in a new way. What indicates that it was the Ho Wars in particular that influenced his thinking? Hua Kham makes no mention of new migrants in his version of the gourd story, but in earlier tales appearing before the story of Khun Bulom he mentions the Hmong. In an old and well-established story on the Nantha dynasty, who were believed to have preceded the first Lao rulers of the country, he recounts the Buddha's role in civilizing the *naga* lords to prepare the way for the Lao. Hua Kham created one *naga* lord in particular who resided in what he called the *meo* cave and was among those who came to worship the Buddha.[52] Afterwards, this lord was 'soothed.' While the Hmong do not warrant mention in the gourd story, Hua Kham does textually subordinate them by the power of the Buddha, paving the way for just and righteous Lao rule.

Hua Kham's writings would appear to be an isolated case were there not another text which is broadly similar from Luang Prabang.[53] Unfortunately, the author did not record his name or the date of composition. The scribe wrote in old Lao script but made use of certain letters which appear in a very modern style. The date of composition is uncertain but Souneth Photisane dated the work to c. 1900.[54] It was written at least after 1893, as the document concludes with a rare criticism of the French.[55] It was later published by the National Library of Laos, but it must still be

50. Hua Kham mss., second bundle, folio 6, lines 3–4.
51. Savaeng Phinith (1987), *Contribution a l'histoire du royaume de luang Prabang*, Ecole Francaise D'Extreme-Orient, Paris, p 372.
52. Hua Kham mss., first bundle, folio 6, line 3.
53. 'Phongsavadan mueang [Chronicle of the country],' manuscript from the DLLM, website: http://lao manuscripts.net/en/texts/7400#1 (accessed January 1 2016). Hereafter referred to as the 1900 mss.
54. Souneth Photisane (2002), 'Evolution of the Chronicle of Luang Prabang: a comparison of sixteen versions', in Kennon Breazeale, and Mayoury Ngaosrivathana, eds, *Breaking New Ground in Lao History*, Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai, pp. 73–93.
55. One wonders if the scribe's references to 'both sides of the Mekong' throughout the text were at all political. See 1900 mss., folio 1, line 4 for an example from the Chao Ratsi story, and folio 6, line 4 in the Chanthaphanit story.

recognized as a unique creation of its scribe.[56] There are numerous alterations and manipulations to be found in the text, including lengthy insertions. For example, the scribe casts traditional Tai stories in an identifiably Buddhist light, which reflects a certain late 19th-century Buddhist sensibility observed by David Wyatt in neighboring Nan.[57] Curiously, however, the opening passage of the text, which was customarily reserved for praise of the Buddha, instead opens differently:

> Defeat danger in the Lao country! Ancient grandfathers and teachers held a saying in high regard: "Let the Lao country go to the wise ones." Remember and obey it, for it is a kingly custom, [do] not [be] lacking! Keep [it] for the educated people, those with purpose.[58]

The scribe dispenses with grand cosmologies or reverence for the Buddha, replacing it with concern for his people, the Lao—reflecting not the new Buddhist orthodoxy, but rather what appears to be the new ethno-nationalism on the rise in northern Laos. The quality of wisdom he promotes is distinct from that which most texts said was central to kingship, such as an observance of the Buddhist precepts, merit, or universal justice. Moreover, the scribe's concern for 'wisdom' suggests connections to Hua Kham: while the latter said the *kha* were lacking in wisdom, the scribe here tells the audience it was uniquely held by the Lao.

In the Canthaphanit story the scribe employed a neologism not seen in other texts, *naeo neua* (ᨣᨶᩮᩣᨣᨾᩮᩣᩃᩥᩣ), which might roughly translate as 'seed of [our] flesh.'[59] This neologism appears at the end of the Chanthaphanit story at the moment Chanthaphanit is crowned and goes on to rule the country. For the first time, *naeo* is used with the term *xaat*, the latter of which would become the preferred term in a few years. This evolution of the language occurs when the scribe introduces Khun Bulom:

> Here will be told the tale of the sovereign, the monarch, the dynasty of he who is his majesty the king in Xieng Dong Xieng Tong forthwith. The ancient *xaat* of kings [from] lord *Thaen*, possessors of vast stores of merit and goodness – certainly the sprouts of the Lao kings of the White Parasol are of that *naeo*.[60]

The anonymous scribe, animated by the same impulse as Hua Kham, was moved to use the term *naeo* and call on the agricultural metaphor to envision the first Lao kings as 'sprouts,' but he went further by comingling this with *xaat*. The ancient *xaat* of kings is made interchangeable with the Lao *naeo*, highlighting important exchanges between the two.

The gourd story includes disparaging remarks about non-Lao, which underlines a growing sense of ethnic nationalism circulating among writers of the time. The Lao, true descendants of Khun Bulom, are presented in contrast to the *kha*:

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56. Anonymous (1969), *Chronicle of Luang Prabang* (ພົງສາວະດານເມືອງຫລວງພຣະບາງ), National Library Series, Vientiane.
57. Such as the scribe's claim that the Nanda dynasty were originally *naga* who came from Sri Lanka. See 1900 mss., folio 3, line 4. See, further, David Wyatt (1994), 'Five voices from Southeast Asia's past', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol 53, No 4, pp. 1076–1091.
58. 1900 mss., folio 1, lines 1–3.
59. Thanks to Kennon Breazeale for offering his translation of the term. The Chantaphanit story is a folk tale concerning the founding of Luang Prabang as a Lao city.
60. 1900 mss., folio 8, lines 1–3.

> Then all the people, the group in the gourd – the philosophers, sages, wise men came to be the children of the lords, the servants of Khun Bulom. The people were dumb and mute in the forest, the commoners making dry-rice fields, sowing the fields, eating.[61]

It is notable that this version does not explicitly make use of the ethnonyms '*lao*' and '*kha*,' preferring instead the generic 'person' (ꪎ). But is it possible that this scribe is able to write of the Lao in ethnic terms without using the word '*lao*'? The two terms had remained stable even in earlier texts written in the 19th-century mentality when ethnicity was itself more ambiguous. The one factor this scribe uses to distinguish among the people of the gourd is to discern between those who were linked to the lineage of Khun Bulom and those who were not, who were simply 'commoners.' Yet this is sufficient to distinguish between the two as Lao and *kha*. The variation still inevitably leads to the same result, elevating and defining Lao by excluding and rebuking non-Lao.

Evidence that the scribe was no mere copyist may be seen in his comments on the new migrants from southern China. In writing of the non-Lao peoples who came from the burnt hole of the gourd, the scribe wrote that they, "were the *kha* and the *yao*, [who] became slaves of the three lords."[62] Similar to *meo*, *yao* (ꪭꪱꪣ) was a Chinese term which the Lao had borrowed to label recent migrants (Iu-mien, Akha) from southern China. The scribe's account thus affirms the role of the Lao as rulers and defines on the other hand the other ethnic groups as the slave class, the common people. *Yao* are at the same time a new entity in the Lao world, foreign and distant strangers yet made to stand next to the *kha* in the text ready to serve the Lao. By forcing the new *yao* migrants to appear in the text alongside the *kha*, the scribe wishes to force them into the existing social relations of Laos, thereby obviating the danger of an unknown force. The scribe may foresee a point in time in the future when the *yao* are just another type of *kha* among the multitude under the benevolent protection of the White Parasol of Luang Prabang.

Early French-Lao exchanges

A brief consideration of relevant French texts of the period may shed light on the neologism *naeo* seen in palm leaf manuscripts from the 1870s to the 1890s. For while the transitions in Lao texts began some years prior to the French conquest, it was not long after that the first French-Lao dictionaries were published. These are valuable documents to aid in tracing the shifts in language. Victor-Alphonse Massie, who spent time at Luang Prabang, completed his *Dictionnaire Laotien*, which was published in 1894 as part of the *Pavie Mission Papers*.[63] Massie collaborated with an unnamed Lao scholar at Luang Prabang in order to complete the work during the years 1889–1890. For this collaboration, Massie presented word lists to the Luang Prabang monk and asked for an equivalent term in Lao. Massie offers a brief description of his method as follows:

> In effect, the words were first transcribed in Lao by an excellent scholar of Luang Prabang, after I was assured of their exact match to the meaning of the French word, and then taken one by one, after again

61. 1900 mss., folio 15, lines 2–3.
62. 1900 mss., folio 13, line 4.
63. Victor-Alphonse Massie (1894), *Mission Pavie: Indochine 1879–1895, Memoires et Documents, Vol. 2, Pt. 2: Dictionnaire Laotien*, Ernest Leroux, Paris.

> ascertaining the concordance and myself rehearsing several times the words, having pronounced them myself, then definitively transcribed them when I was certain of the exact reproduction.[64]

Critics may dismiss such evidence from French-Lao dictionaries as deriving from a purely French document which doesn't properly elucidate Lao thinking, but it must be admitted that during the compilation of such works certain Lao were confronted, perhaps for the first time, by a Westerner asking for a corresponding word in Lao for the Western notion of race. In Massie's work, under the heading '*race*' the Lao term is given as '*hede neo*' which, leaving aside the verb (ᦉᦱᧅ), is surely *naeo*. The unidentified Lao scholar's choice of this term matches its prevalence in manuscripts of the time. Clearly the agricultural metaphor of *naeo* that carried with it the transference from one generation to the next of the genetic code of the lineage was seen at the time as particularly elucidating, not only in Lao writings on new migrants but also when finding an equivalence for the Western notion of race. Yet from 1904 to 1912, this neologism was replaced in subsequent French-Lao dictionaries; the equivalent term given for the French 'race' was then fixed as '*xaat*.'[65] In Cuaz's 1904 work, Lao language was considered as merely a dialect of Thai.

A transitional 1911 text

The last text I will address is indicative of the course of historical developments I have considered between 1873 and 1911. It is a long manuscript from Luang Prabang, consisting of five bundles (ᨾᩮᩢᨴ) composed at two separate dates, 1909 and 1911.[66] The author does not give his name, but the patron for the text is identified as the *satou* of Pak Khan temple. The scribe who wrote the text only says his handwriting is not elegant because he was not able to ordain as a minor.[67] What sets his account apart is that throughout the text the author shows concern for the heritage of various figures in Lao history, which is not comparable in other texts. Related to this, the text refers to the pre-Lao Nantha dynasty with descriptions Souneth Photisane has called ethnographic.[68] Like others of his generation, the scribe is strongly influenced by Buddhism to such a degree that he reveals to the audience that Khun Bulom is actually Lord Indra.[69] The scribe draws attention to his own perceived distance from his forbears when he writes of Khun Bulom "truly the old Lao, they say *thaen fa khun*."[70]

The scribe makes a unique statement in his impassioned and extensive account of the Vietnamese invasion of the old kingdom of Lan Xang in 1479, and retells the war in gruesome detail, portraying bloody battles with mighty elephants. By the end of the war the scribe includes an imaginary sequence in which the defeated Vietnamese who returned were punished by their king to remind them never to go back to Laos again:

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64. Massie, *supra* note 62, at p 1.
65. Marie-Joseph Cuaz (1904), *Lexique Francis-Laotien*, Imprimerie de la Societe des Missions etrangeres, Hong Kong; Theodore Guignard (1912), *Dictionnaire Laotien-Francais*, Imprimerie de Nazareth, Hong Kong. See further Ivarsson, *supra* note 13, at pp 174–176, for a brief discussion of *xaat*.
66. For dates, see 1911 mss., bundle 3, folio 43 line 4 and bundle 5, folio 37, lines 3–4.
67. 1911 mss., cover folio to bundle 1.
68. His thesis, p 109.
69. 1911 mss., bundle 1, folio 3, line 2.
70. 1911 mss., bundle 1, folio 18, line 4.

> The Great Lotus King was indeed angry and then issued a decree: "From now on, anyone who persuades us to return to Lan Xang country, I beg of you, that country, certainly our brethren country, since the age of Grandfather Khun Bulom, King of Kings if they do cause us to govern [or] intervene [there] really [it] is [our] ruin for that reason. Truly the servants in the country will make a tattoo of a Lao footprint on the crown of the head of every person [who violates this decree]. Younger brothers of the country tattoo the face with a footprint over there. Don't let anyone persuade us to return to Lan Xang country at all. Anyone who comes to persuade [us] let [them] look at the forehead there please!"[71]

The scribe's anti-Vietnamese sentiment is similar to diatribes from the 1890s examined above. The text portrays Vietnam as cowering in fear of the Lao after the war at a time of violence unparalleled in Lao-Vietnamese history. However, by 1911 the subject of Lao writers' ire had noticeably shifted from south China migrants to the immigrant Vietnamese circulating within French Indochina. In this context, the audience is able to see the 15th-century invasion as a metaphor for the present 'invasion' of immigrants. Thus the scribe is able to rail against the French policy to facilitate Vietnamese immigration to, and privileges within, the country.

Lao animosity toward the Vietnamese in the colonial era is well known, and its importance to the development of Lao nationalism is beginning to be appreciated. From Prince Phetsarath's warning of a Vietnamese 'state within a state' in 1931 to a 1936 Lao-Vietnamese soccer brawl, to dire predictions of a 'Vietnamese flood' in the pages of Lao Nyai in 1941, it was a serious and enduring concern for early Lao nationalists who sought to defend their country.[72] What is most significant, however, are the connections between anti-Vietnamese sentiment in the colony and anti-immigrant sentiment in the wake of the Ho. In both cases, Lao disparaged minorities who as a group had recently migrated to the country and fallen into conflict with Lao. In a general sense, the same historical process is at work in 1890 as it is in 1911, or the 1930s: what it means to be Lao is being redefined, first in the 1890s in starkly new ethnic terms, and later in service of nationalist leaders and movements in the colonial era.

Finally, when describing the retreat of the Vietnamese army and the accompanying tally of the war-dead, the scribe has a unique way of describing the relationship between the Vietnamese King and his improbably numerous soldiers:

> When they returned to the country they took a stone and went to place it over [the graves of] one billion five million people … All the great [multitude] are the children, grandchildren, the *xeua-naeo* of the Great Lotus King, every person over there.[73]

I have left the term *xeua naeo* untranslated in the above to call into question its meaning. It is the familiar neologism I have glossed above as 'lineage' in a text which appeared in Laos nearly four decades earlier but this instance could not possibly carry that meaning. It is nonsense to read it

71. 1911 mss., bundle 4, folio 9, lines 1–4.
72. For the reference to Phetsarath's interview, see Christopher Goscha (1995), 'L'Indochine repensée par les "Indochinois": Pham Quynh et les deux débats de 1931 sur l'immigration, le fédéralisme et la réalité de l'Indochine', *Revue francaise d'histoire d'outre-mer*, Vol 82, No 309, pp. For the soccer brawl, see Simon Creak (2015), *Embodied Nation: Sport, Masculinity and the Making of Modern Laos*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, HI, pp 1–3. For the reference to the Lao Nyai paper, see Ivarsson, *supra* note 13, at p 179.
73. 1911 mss., bundle 4, folio 8, lines 2–4 and folio 9, line 1.

as 'lineage' in this passage, which would mean the king had fathered all of the soldiers of the Vietnamese army or had some kind of real familial tie to each one of them. Rather, in this passage the way in which the scribe is using *xeua-naeo* has changed to such a degree that it is now much closer in meaning to modern notions of race and nation. The scribe used it in a new way, specifically regarding the connection among all the Vietnamese soldiers and their King, to say they all shared a common identity.

Conclusion: Towards modern Laos

Lao ethnic supremacy was so obvious to the 19th-century mentality that it hardly needed to be said —that is until the Ho Wars of the late 19th century in Luang Prabang. As the monarchy faltered, Lao came to redefine their identity no longer in terms of fealty to the king but more broadly in terms of Lao-ness. This trend was further intensified by the establishment of a French colony in Lao areas which came amidst upheaval in the country. Yet this study's conclusions at this stage must remain preliminary. Due to the limited number of texts examined, several points remain uncertain, not least of which is how widely prevalent the views I have examined above were within the country at this early date. As a result, my conclusions cannot be definitive but only suggestive, yet I have striven to form a hypothesis for which there exists some evidence, to conclude that a new discourse existed earlier than previously thought in sources which have long been neglected for the study of modern Lao history. While it is too early and these questions need more study, I hope to show the historicity of palm leaf manuscripts. I would be entirely satisfied if this study was outdated soon by more research on the topic but it is difficult to find palm leaf manuscripts that have a date and can be associated to a particular place, so the texts I use are valuable in this regard.

An additional limitation has been the exclusive focus on the unique circumstances prevailing in northern Laos, centred at the ancient capital of the Lao, Luang Prabang. It would be erroneous to generalize this for all of Laos when other regions clearly had their own historical processes. Luang Prabang stands as an outlier in the 19th century in as much as Siamese control was felt later and lighter there than in Champassak and it withstood the upheavals of the Ho Wars better than Xieng Khouang. In the 20th century, intellectuals from Luang Prabang played a major role in early nationalist movements, populist and elitist alike. Luang Prabang's outsized influence is partly a result of the collaborations formed there with the French as opposed to elsewhere in the country where the Lao elite were disenfranchised or covertly supporting revolts against the French. In several respects, these findings remain partial but I hope they can open new avenues of research.

With that proviso in mind, the basic outlines are clear. The nature of the Lao 'ethnic awakening' in northern Laos was shaped by the pivotal events of the destruction of Luang Prabang, the Ho Wars, and the migration of new settlers from southern China. Under threat, the community had to be reformed and redefined along strict lines; attacks on non-Lao, who often recently immigrated from southern China or from Indochina, were a common manifestation of this process in the texts. The various textual references seem almost incidental in isolation, but when taken together, the *akhandok* of the Muang Ngoi law text, Hua Kham's 'soothed' *meo*, the anonymous scribe's arrangement of the *yao* alongside the *kha*, and the metaphorical invasion of the Vietnamese immigrants suggest it may be an important theme of turn-of-the-century Laos. This fixation with minorities led, consciously or not, to the recasting of Lao identity in ethnic terms. Older notions of the Lao as the semi-divine ruling elite faded away. Khun Bulom was a locus to be manipulated by these processes; from a god-king he morphed into the father of the Lao race, in parallel with broader shifts in the mentality about what it meant to be Lao.

What have scholars missed from neglecting palm leaf manuscripts as historical sources for this important period? The Ho Wars have largely been seen as a footnote to the Franco-Siamese contest over Laos, despite the conflict initiating decades earlier after originally spilling over from China. Most works do not consider the impact on Laos beyond treaties and territory.[74] In contrast, I have attempted to show how this event influenced the earliest reorientation of the country towards a new modern era. It is perhaps ironic that later Lao scholars themselves have not always understood this aspect of the Ho Wars. Looking back, later nationalist thinkers held the Ho in contempt, perceiving them as nothing more than despoilers of the nation, potently symbolized by the Ho's destruction of the That Luang stupa in 1875. Thus they wrote of a conflict between civilized Lao and uncivilized bandit Ho.[75]

One novel finding has been the story of *naeo* and the underlying change of the Lao mentality to which it points. This story cautions us to hesitate when evaluating Thai or French influence on Lao at this earliest stage without direct evidence. Based solely on what they wrote, Lao were more concerned with new migrants from southern China and Vietnam. Before 1893, French influence appears inconclusive and deserves more attention. For the Thai it is more complicated in that their influence grew over the years 1884–1893 in Luang Prabang as a result of the establishment of a garrison during the Ho Wars. Even so, Lao scribes did not use the equivalent term found in Thai (*xaat*), but instead preferred their own term (*naeo*). The fact that Lao did eventually use *xaat* may be a sign of belated Thai influence, but in the earliest years Lao thinking appears to be somewhat more independent of either the Thai or the French.

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74. The major exception to this trend is Proschan, *supra* note 8.
75. 3349, David Wyatt, ed. (1978), *Iron Man of Laos*, trans. John Murdoch, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, p 109. Similarly, Sisouk, *supra* note 14, p 5.