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Source: *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Feb., 2007, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Feb., 2007), pp. 55-81

Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of Department of History, National University of Singapore

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/20071807

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Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 38 (1), pp 55–81 February 2007. Printed in the United Kingdom.
© 2007 The National University of Singapore doi:10.1017/S0022463406000932

Prince Phetsarath (1890–1959): Nationalism and Royalty in the Making of Modern Laos

Søren Ivarsson and Christopher E. Goscha

A biography of Prince Phetsarath highlights how a specific idea about Laos and its culture was formed under French colonial rule and nurtured under the Japanese occupation and its aftermath. During these periods, Phetsarath's understanding of Lao cultural nationalism was transformed into a political and anticolonial nationalism. While ultimately a study of failure, Phetsarath's activities show that anticolonial nationalism did not always have to be linked to Communist movements to be 'revolutionary', and suggests the importance of taking into account non-revolutionary and non-Communist actors – even members of royal blood – in order to better understand the complexity that went into the making of modern postcolonial states.

Few would contest the importance of Prince Phetsarath Ratanavongsa in the making of modern Laos. He is known as a colonial moderniser and anticolonial nationalist; several Western writers acknowledge him as the 'father of Lao nationalism' and as 'the seminal figure in the development of Lao nationalism'.[1] Yet it is surprising how little attention has actually been paid to understanding the man, his ideas and his contributions to the making of modern Laos. An unsigned, hagiographical account of the Prince was published in Thai in 1956. Entitled *Iron man of Laos*, its publication coincided with Phetsarath's return from exile in 1957. More recently, Lao authorities allowed the sale of a biography of Phetsarath, penned years ago by his long-time associate, Sila Viravong; it has subsequently been translated into Thai and German.[2] While the historical value of

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1 3349, *Iron man of Laos: Prince Phetsarath Ratanavongsa*, tr. John B. Murdoch (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Data Paper, 1978), p. xi; Martin Stuart-Fox, *Historical dictionary of Laos* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2001), p. 236.

2 3349, *Čhao Phetcharāt burut lek hœng rātchānāčhak Lāo* [Prince Phetsarath – iron man of Laos] (Bangkok: Ruam Mit Thai, 1956); Sila Viravong, *Chao Mahāupalāt Phetsalāt* [His Highness Viceroy Phetsarath] (Vientiane: Social Science Committee, 1996); Sila, *Čhao Phetcharāt burut lek hœng rātchānāčhak Lāo* [Prince Phetsarath – iron man of Laos], tr. Sommai Premchit (Bangkok: Matichon Press, 1999); and Sila, *Prinz Phetsarat: Ein Leben für Laos. 'Eine Biographie von Chao Maha Uparat Phetsarat' und 'Die Geschichte des 12. Oktober 1945'*, tr. and ed. Volker Grabowsky (Münster-Hamburg-London: Lit Verlag, 2003). (Note that although the 1999 Thai translation of Sila's biography has the same title as the 1956 book by '3349', they are not the same work.)

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these two biographies is undeniable, both accounts were written decades ago by actors close to the Prince and sympathetic to his ideas.

Why this lack of interest in the Prince if he is considered by specialists to have been the 'father' of Lao nationalism? Part of it is linked to the fact that the winners write 'the' history, 'their' history, while the losers are left to fade away. Phetsarath was certainly not on the winning side of twentieth-century Lao political history. Even in Western scholarship, the 1975 victories of 'revolutionary' movements in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam have led most historians to focus on the Communist victors to understand how they were able to come to power against all odds. The Communist Pathet Lao, like its Vietnamese and Cambodian counterparts, has understandably received greater attention in modern historical research than its opponents.

There are perhaps other reasons explaining Phetsarath's marginalisation, however. Paradoxically, the official historiography of socialist Laos and its earlier colonial counterpart have both had a hard time finding a place for him in their respective readings of the past. The problem is that this Lao prince was neither a 'faithful' colonial collaborator like King Sisavang Vong and his son nor a fellow traveller like the 'Red Prince', Souphanouvong. On the colonial side, Phetsarath got into trouble when he voiced a number of opinions designed to unify Laos in national ways and lent his support to Lao independence from French rule in 1945. His nationalist opposition to the return of French colonialism after World War II poses a problem for colonial-minded historiography, even though he was non-Communist and wary of the Vietnamese.[3] What counts most in the French colonial version of the past is Sisavang Vong's loyalty, symbolised by his refusal in 1945 to dissolve the protectorate and declare Laos' national independence. France would bestow independence when the time came; it was not to be taken from her. Forgetting Vichy's own collaboration, colonial administrators and commentators were quick to condemn Phetsarath for his 'collaboration' with the Japanese, writing him off as 'anti-French' and 'vainglorious'. Jean Rochet, the former head of Vichy's *Lao Nhay* patriotic youth movement during the war, saw in Phetsarath only treachery and betrayal of the French cause. Looking back, he wrote bitterly: 'And that fellow owes everything he is to France! He owes her everything! . . . What a disgrace! What a disgrace for the Lao country.'[4]

From the Communist point of view, Phetsarath made the 'wrong' choice when he rejected an invitation from Prince Souphanouvong and Ho Chi Minh to join the Indochinese Communist cause in 1950. In a 'revolutionary' historiography that defines a 'real' nationalist as a Communist, it is hard to find a place for this independent-minded prince. Such a historical narrative skips over his activities in the *Lao Issara* in Thailand in the late 1940s and says nothing of his refusal to collaborate with the Vietnamese in 1950. Another reason why the current regime in Laos has problems incorporating Phetsarath into its 'revolutionary' historiography might have something to do with his Thai connections. While living in Thailand he married a Thai widow – a relative of former Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh – and had close relations with members of the Thai elite. Such connections do not promote a sense of Lao nationalism that is linked to a

3 To our knowledge, there has been no serious study of Prince Phetsarath and his work in French.

4 Charles Rochet, *Pays Lao: Le Laos dans la tourmente, 1939–1945* (Paris: Jean Vigneau, 1946), pp. 205–6.

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'special' Lao–Vietnamese friendship, nor do they fit well with French, Vietnamese and Lao views of the past. (Phetsarath's choice of a Thai wife of course, provides an interesting contrast with the number of top Pathet Lao leaders – notably Souphanouvong, Kaysone Phomvihane and Nouhak Phoumsavan – who married Vietnamese women.) As a result, Phetsarath continues to roam the edges of official historiography in Laos and in Vietnam.[5]

In short, the Prince's anticolonial nationalism cost him a place in the colonial annals, whereas his non-Communist nationalism denies him full membership in the party's revolutionary pantheon of nationalist heroes. Interestingly, the only place where he has made several modest appearances is in the religious realm. Since the 1990s, Lao have discreetly placed photos of Phetsarath on small Buddhist altars in numerous shops and houses, not only in Luang Phrabang but in other parts of the country as well. Lately, the compound of his former palace in Luang Phrabang has been turned into a resort run by a Thai company. The palace itself has been renovated and transformed into a kind of museum, which also shows how his memory is being used in new ways and for new reasons.[6]

This study is a modest attempt to re-examine the life and work of this Lao prince in the making of modern Laos. Relying on a large body of French and several relevant sources in Thai and Lao, the first part of the article looks at Phetsarath's role as a colonial moderniser and nationalist under French rule. The second part focuses on his break with the French and their royal supporters as well as his failed attempt to create an independent Lao nation-state with himself at the helm. It is ultimately a story of failure, but one that deserves to be told. It also suggests the importance of taking into account non-revolutionary and non-Communist actors – even members of royal blood – in order to better understand the complexity that went into the making of modern postcolonial states.

Phetsarath and the making of colonial nationalism in Laos

The creation of modern Laos can be traced back to Siamese–French treaties at the turn of the twentieth century which established the territorial limits of both French colonial and Thai nationalist expansion in the Mekong region. When the ink had finally dried at the turn of the century, a French-ruled Laos emerged as a separate colonial space distinct from Siam. To the west of the Mekong, the Lao people living on the Khorat Plateau (known in Thai as *Isan* or the Northeast) were absorbed into a Thai nation-state – symbolised by the change in name from 'Siam' to 'Thailand' in 1939. 'French Laos' (*le Laos français*), as it was often called at the time, was incorporated into the French Indochinese Union, which had been created in 1887. (Besides Laos, French Indochina consisted of Cambodia, Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina.) However, prior to World

5 For more on this question, see Bruce Lockhart, 'Narrating 1945 in Lao historiography' and Christopher E. Goscha, 'Revolutionizing the Indochinese past: Communist Vietnam's "special" historiography on Laos', in *Contesting visions of the Lao past*, ed. Christopher E. Goscha and Søren Ivarsson (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2003), pp. 129–63 and 265–99 respectively. We would like to thank Volker Grabowsky for bringing the point about the Thai connections to our attention.

6 Our thanks to Volker Grabowsky for this information.

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War II, Laos remained an administrative and legal hodgepodge, as the French never established a unified indigenous political structure to administer the territory defined by the colonial borders of *le Laos français*. Of the royal families ruling over territories that the French had colonised – Luang Phrabang, Xiengkhuang and Champasak – only the first was recognised officially and given an administrative identity. While the Luang Phrabang Kingdom was administrated as a protectorate, the rest of Laos was ruled directly by the French either as a colony or as military territories.

From a Thai nationalist perspective, however, French Laos continued to be considered as a 'natural' and 'integral' part of the emerging Thai nation-state. It was repeatedly referred to as a 'lost territory', inhabited by the people of the same race and with the same culture and language as the Thai. The Lao living east of the Mekong were seen to be a natural part of modern Thailand in much the same ways that the Lao on the Khorat Plateau had – at least officially – become 'Thai'. Thai nationalists rejected the French colonial claim that Laos was a separate historical entity existing outside of its 'Thai' form. Laos was thus a contested space from the outset.[7] Faced with this inclusive Thai nationalist discourse, French colonial architects countered by trying to create a specific idea about Laos and its culture; this would also help consolidate and legitimate French rule.

Phetsarath was also interested in creating a specific idea of Laos, though a nationalist rather than a colonial one. While French colonialism never penetrated as deeply into Lao society as it did in eastern Indochina, Phetsarath's career shows how it could open up new horizons and journeys for the Lao urban elite. He was born in 1890 into the royal family of Luang Phrabang, the son of the Viceroy Boun Khong. At a young age, he left the court to study in Cochinchina, France and even England for a short spell, attending classes at the Lycée Chasseloup-Laubat in Saigon before moving on to study at the *École Coloniale* in Paris. In many ways, he followed the standard trajectory of colonial elites – secondary education in elite schools in the colonies and then, for those who made the cut, higher studies in the *métropole*. If Siam had previously constituted the educational centre for members of the Luang Phrabang royal family, French colonialism gave rise to new educational pilgrimages. Phetsarath was not alone: the father of revolutionary Vietnam, Hồ Chí Minh, had applied to study at the *École Coloniale*. Though his application was rejected, his initial goal was to modernise Vietnam in collaboration with the French, and his time in France was crucial to his intellectual development.[8]

As one of the best educated of the tiny colonial Lao elite of his generation, Phetsarath returned home in 1912 keen on playing an important role in the administration and modernisation of his country. In 1914, he joined the colonial administration as editor *(rédacteur)* in the Office of Financial Management of the Kingdom of Luang Phrabang and then as a contractual editor (*rédacteur contractuel*) in the Office of the *Résidence Supérieure* of Laos. In 1919, he was named to the Cabinet of the *Résident Supérieur* and put in charge of the 'examination of questions related to indigenous administration'. In 1923, he was promoted to the post of Native Inspector for Political and Administrative

7 For a discussion of the making of this Thai nationalist perspective on Laos, see Søren Ivarsson, 'Making Laos "our" space: Thai discourses on history and race, 1900–1940' in Goscha and Ivarsson ed., *Contesting visions*, pp. 239–64.

8 Daniel Hémery, 'Jeunesse d'un colonisé, genèse d'un exil', *Approches-Asie*, 11 (1992): 83–93.

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Affairs of Laos, the highest post held by a Lao in the colonial administration at the time. Nor did his activities stop there; between 1919 and 1930, he was a member of the Government Council and served as a member of the Grand Council for the Economic and Financial Interests of Indochina in 1932 and 1933.

Phetsarath was clearly a man on the move; he most certainly did not remain cooped up in the royal palace in Luang Phrabang. As a result of his official positions and wide range of interests, he travelled throughout Laos on inspection tours; as an avid hunter, he ventured even further.[9] In 1929, for example, *L'Éveil Économique* published an article on the need to develop communication and river transports in Laos. The French author singled out Phetsarath for his use of motorised sampans and pirogues to navigate up the Mekong, going further and faster than ever before. During his travels, he also began mapping out the regions through which he passed.[10] It was a small but important shift. Laos was no longer a simple geographical abstraction; it assumed a real physical and human life of its own, it made sense. Moreover, because of his administrative roles, the Prince was now moving in a Lao entity extending well beyond the confines of the Kingdom of Luang Phrabang.

Benedict Anderson, in his highly influential book *Imagined communities*, discusses the importance of what he calls 'educational and administrative pilgrimages'. These journeys united people from all over the colonial state in educational centres and then circulated them throughout administrative posts across the colonial realm. In Anderson's view, these educational and administrative movements contributed greatly to concretising the colonial space in their minds and subtly facilitated the transformation of the colonial state into a nation-state. Had Phetsarath lived to read the book, he would have probably agreed with Anderson on this point when it came to imagining a *Lao* idea (but not an Indochinese one).[11] The Prince himself was involved in re-routing traditional 'administrative pilgrimages' of Lao civil servants in wider colonial and even national ways. At the turn of the twentieth century, local administrators in a district were still recruited from among people born and living in that same district. Thinking back on it in the 1950s, Prince Phetsarath argued that this system created a situation whereby 'the people of each district understood that their motherland had an area limited to their own district, and they believed that other districts were like other provinces.... Consequently, each district considered itself independent and alone'.[12]

In 1917, with the backing of the young Prince, this precolonial practice was altered so that local civil servants could now be rotated among different districts in the same province – a policy already being followed in the Luang Phrabang Kingdom. In 1920,

9 Descriptions of hunting/administrative trips can be found in Sila, *Chao Mahāupalāt*, pp. 27–48.

10 This point is made by Maha Sila Viravong, who notes that Phetsarath always had maps made of the localities visited based on information gathered during the visits (ibid., p. 37). The praise for his water travel is in Henri Cucherousset, 'Les pirogues et sampans à moteurs sur nos fleuves et rivières', *L'Éveil Économique*, 631 (1929): 10–11.

11 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso Press, 1991). On Phetsarath's views see Christopher E. Goscha, 'L'Indochine repensée par les "Indochinois": Pham Quynh et les deux débats de 1931 sur l'immigration, le féderalisme et la réalité de l'Indochine', *Revue Française d'Histoire d'Outre-Mer*, 82 (1995): 421–53.

12 3349, *Iron man of Laos*, p. 98.

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it finally became possible to circulate local civil servants among different provinces according to the needs of the wider Franco-Lao administration. The horizons of the administrators were thus widened and people began to meet and know civil servants coming from all over the country, not just from their 'home' district. In the words of Sila Viravong, a situation was created whereby 'Lao from all over the country felt that they were Lao and that they all lived in the same Lao country, and not in different countries as they previously had felt.'[13] In 1923, as noted, Phetsarath joined in creating the Indigenous Consultative Assembly for Laos. By its very nature, this institution brought elites together from all over French Laos and stimulated wider debates and reflections on Lao needs and goals. These colonial meeting points also gave rise to a wider consciousness of Laos in territorial and human terms.

For Phetsarath, it was the whole of Laos and its members that formed a Lao identity – even if it was packaged in a colonial form. He made this clear in an interview he granted to the paper *France-Indochine* in 1931. The primary theme of the interview was a wider debate on the question of Indochinese federalism and Vietnamese immigration to Laos. For French officials, the Indochinese Union constituted the overall colonial state, and hence it was only natural that Vietnamese civil servants be allowed to work and live in Cambodia and Laos in order to staff the lower levels of the bureaucracy. Phetsarath and others worried that continued immigration would unfavourably alter the demographic make-up of Laos. (The Vietnamese accounted for about 60 per cent of the total urban population in Laos in 1940.) What is noteworthy for our purposes here, though, is that Phetsarath was not necessarily opposed to Vietnamese immigration on racial grounds. Rather, he stressed that this immigration had to be controlled and that the Vietnamese had to become 'Lao' subjects, so that they did not end up forming a 'State within a State'. He thus understood the modern legal mechanics of turning all of those living within Lao borders into Lao 'nationals'.[14]

In the same breath, the Prince also explained his opposition to the internal colonial fragmentation of Laos into separate military, royal and ethnic spaces. For him it was increasingly important and possible to conceive of an administratively unified Laos, one which would supersede the royal configurations of the Kingdoms of Luang Phrabang or Champasak and the military territories. The article paraphrased his views as follows:

> Prince Phetsarath, who would like a great and prosperous Laos . . . feels that before encouraging Annamese immigration – and to do so in the normal conditions he explains – the protecting nation [France] should first strengthen the Lao administration, so as to make it clearer, more unified, and better accepted by other subject races. Laos, which is only comprised of one people, is bizarrely divided. One part of it is a hybrid State (and no one knows if it is a colony or a protectorate). In this part, the native administration does not even have the equivalent for the rank of *tong doc* [a provincial governor in the Vietnamese administration], something which is not refused to any Annamese province. This is a great cause of weakness, because the Lao is loyal to his aristocracy and entrusts himself to them.

13 Sila, *Chao Mahāupalāt*, p. 50.

14 'La question laotienne. Opinions du Prince Phetsarath', *France-Indochine*, 21 Mar. 1931, p. 1. For a discussion of this article and its context, see Goscha, 'L'Indochine repensée par les "Indochinois"'; the statistic on the Vietnamese community is from p. 429.

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> .... The prince feels that because one can see today that Laos exists, because populations less blessed by nature are moving into [Laos] out of need or greed, it is necessary to return to Laos the nominal unity she had in former times so that she can welcome [these immigrants] with the majesty and authority necessary for her rule to be respected [by them] (*afin de donner à son accueil la majesté et l'autorité, nécessaire à faire valoir son bon droit*). The King of Luang Phrabang would thus be the King of Laos. Alongside the existing French control and justice system, the Lao administration would do its job right and could solve questions of immigration in the interests of all.[15]

Phetsarath would not actively move on this idea until later, but already in 1931 we can see that the desire to create a wider, national Lao territorial entity and nationality, not an Indochinese one, was clearly on his mind.[16] While he was not the only one thinking about these matters, he was certainly the most important Lao nationalist to do so at the time.

The transition to a national idea of Laos also occurred on the cultural front. Phetsarath was notably involved in efforts to construct a cultural frontier between Laos and Siam by 'Laoifying' the Buddhist religion. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Vientiane had served as an important regional centre for religious studies, attracting monks from present-day Thailand and Cambodia and even beyond. This situation changed drastically, however, following the Siamese sacking and depopulation of the city in 1828. As the modernizing Thai kings turned to the *Sangha* (monkhood) to consolidate their state, Bangkok became the centre for Theravada studies in mainland Southeast Asia. Lao monks living on the Khorat Plateau – and many monks in northwestern Cambodia – travelled to Bangkok rather than Phnom Penh or Vientiane for religious instruction. The French correctly felt that Bangkok's religious pull had political implications and could pose a potential threat to their influence in and control of western Indochina. The influence of the royally backed Thai Buddhist *Thammayut* sect among Lao and Khmer monks was increasingly worrisome to the French by the 1920s.

The need to counter the potential Thai attraction over Khmer and Lao hearts and minds was at the centre of the French decision to create separate Buddhist Institutes in Vientiane and Phnom Penh during the interwar period. With the help of the École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), the French adopted a cultural policy designed to de-link Khmer and Lao Buddhisms from their Thai orbit. This meant carving out uniquely Lao and Khmer religious identities. In the 1920s, as Penny Edwards and Anne Hansen have shown, the French put the EFEO's Suzanne Karpelès in charge of running Cambodian religious institutes in order to oversee the translation and promotion of a more specifically Cambodian Buddhist canon and religious identity.[17] Following this

15 'La question laotienne', p. 1.

16 For more on this, see Christopher E. Goscha, 'Beyond the "colonizer" – "colonized": Three intra-Asian debates in French colonial Indochina', (unpublished manuscript).

17 Anne Hansen, 'Khmer identity and Theravāda Buddhism' and Penny Edwards, 'Making a religion of the nation and its language: The French protectorate (1863–1945) and the Dhammakāy', in *History, Buddhism, and new religious movements in Cambodia*, ed. John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), pp. 40–62 and 63–85 respectively.

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lead, the French then created a similar Buddhist Institute for Laos in Vientiane. It was opened with great pomp and ceremony in February 1931 under the supervision of Karpelès.[18]

Phetsarath attended the inauguration of the new Institute, which would serve as a centre for collecting and translating old Lao religious manuscripts, writing new texts and training a new generation of Lao monks. This cultural policy thus contributed to creating a 'Lao' Buddhist tradition as distinct from a wider, transnational Theravada network. The opening of the institute was hailed as the start of a 'new era in Lao intellectual development'.[19] The Lao chairman of the Buddhist Institute in Vientiane was none other than Phetsarath himself. His personal secretary was Sila Viravong, who would have an immense impact on Lao culture for almost the next six decades. As author to, or translator-*cum*-compiler of, many of the textbooks intended for religious studies in Laos, Sila was intimately linked with the endeavours to resurrect Buddhism in Lao ways, as the Buddhist Institute in Vientiane had first aimed to do.

Closely tied to this agenda was a parallel attempt to de-link Laos from Siam by standardising and maintaining a Lao writing system distinct from that of Siamese; again, Phetsarath was one of the strongest backers of the project. Since the early twentieth century the responsibility for unifying the written Lao script had been left to various committees appointed by the *Résident Supérieur*. None of these groups, however, had produced an official grammar and dictionary, essential to any standardisation process. In 1918, Phetsarath renewed calls for the codification of the Lao language. This time he was reacting to a radical linguistic reform proposed that same year by the French Commissioner in Luang Phrabang, who wanted the Lao to use Siamese letters to write their language. This, he argued, would facilitate the printing of books, particularly schoolbooks, for Lao children.

Such a suggestion may have made sense from a colonial point of view; from a Lao nationalist perspective, however, the idea of representing Laos *via* Siamese print-language was anathema. The Prince resisted such a plan since it would 'hasten the disappearance of the Lao writing system and thus undermine our Lao literature and our Lao language'.[20] If the Siamese alphabet were used, he argued, Siamese literature would pour into Laos with disastrous consequences: The 'spiritual influence of the Siamese would win over the Lao "spirit"'. What was at stake was the survival of two important cultural markers distinguishing the Lao from the Siamese – a separate (national) language and literature. Phetsarath countered by calling for the immediate standardisation and codification of the grammatical structures of the Lao language. In a significant convergence, the Buddhist Institute in Vientiane carried out what none of the above-mentioned colonial committees had been able to accomplish: in 1935 it published the first grammar of the Lao language. Phetsarath's right-hand man, Sila Viravong, was there again to compile

18 The speeches are printed in *Bulletin d'École Française d'Extrême-Orient*, 31 (1931): 334–42.

19 Speech by Susanne Karpelès, ibid., p. 338. The French also used the Institutes in Phnom Penh and Vientiane to resurrect and reinforce in modern ways ancient royal–religious connections between the two countries, at the expense of the Thai. Official voyages, scholarly exchanges and collaborative projects between the two Institutes were organised.

20 'Note sur la réforme de l'écriture laotienne par Phetsarath, Vientiane, 8.2.1918', Archives de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient, Paris, file d. F4, box c. 33.

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Laos' first modern grammar book.[21] All these undertakings show how the idea of Laos as a cultural concept and identity developed during the colonial period of the 1920s–1930s. While Phetsarath was not alone in the making of this Lao cultural identity, he played a leading role.

The Vichy regime would pick up on this during World War II. French colonial nationalists, many of whom had lived in Indochina for years and spoke the languages and respected the local cultures where they were stationed, enthusiastically supported patriotic identities once politics on high finally allowed them to do so. Charles Rochet, one of Laos' best cultural nationalists, is a case in point. He organised the Lao youth into sports groups and patriotic organisations in order to counter a pan-Thai and anti-French campaign emanating from Bangkok following the fall of France in 1940. The need to ally local patriotisms in Laos and Cambodia was all the greater when war broke out in 1941 between the Thai and the French over the control of western Indochina.[22] In mid-1941, under Japanese pressure, France was forced to cede territories on the west bank of the Mekong to the Thai, opposite Luang Phrabang and Pakse. In so doing, as Rochet himself conceded, the French lost face in the eyes of many Lao elites. Phetsarath, however, was not duped by Vichy's work in cultural nationalism; he and others had their own view of Laos' national future.

Prince Phetsarath and World War II: Beyond *Le Laos français*

Thai success in expanding their influence into French Laos in 1941 convinced Phetsarath that the future of Laos was not necessarily linked to France in some sort of a timeless special relationship ordained by 'History'. In 1940 he secretly informed Bangkok that he would welcome the 'return' of Laos to Thailand – on the condition, however, that the two kingdoms would co-exist in a Thai–Lao confederation and that Laos would not be integrated nationally as the ethnic Lao of Isan had been. French authorities were apparently aware of his secret overtures to the Thais and his visions of a greater Laos. Around 1941, the Governor General for Indochina under Vichy, Jean Decoux, warned his *Résident Supérieur* in Laos about the Prince's 'dubious character (*esprit douteux*)'.[23]

World War II created new opportunities for Phetsarath. For example, with the transfer of west-bank territories to the Thai, the French compensated Luang Phrabang for its loss of Xayabury province – renamed 'Lan Xang' by the Thai – by expanding its administrative control to include the provinces of Vientiane and Xiengkhuang, which had previously been under direct French rule. During this administrative reorganisation, the royal council was also abolished and replaced with a ministerial system. Phetsarath was appointed Prime Minister and was also elevated to the rank of Viceroy. Symbolically, this title was very important. In 1904, when King Kham Souk of Luang Phrabang died,

21 Sila Viravong, *Vainyākōn Lāo* [A Lao grammar] (Bangkok: Kramol Tiranasaw, 1957 reprint).

22 A discussion of this campaign is in Søren Ivarsson, 'Towards a new Laos: *Lao Nhay* and the campaign for a national "reawakening" in Laos, 1941–45', in *Laos: Culture and society*, ed. Grant Evans (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999), pp. 61–78. Rochet's own views are in his *Pays lao.*

23 Quoted in Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence [henceforth CAOM], Haut-Commissariat d'Indochine [henceforth HCI], file Laos, Phetsarath, box 163, BCR 1000, no. 2587/1000/B.3/0, 'Indochine: Activités laotiennes au sujet de Phetsarath', 15 July 1947. On Phetsarath's contacts with Bangkok see Sila, *Chao Mahāupalāt*, p. 59.

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Phetsarath's father Boun Khong held the same title, and according to royal custom, he should have been favourably positioned to take the throne. However, due to intervention by the colonial authorities, Boun Khong was passed over, and Sisavang Vong, the French-educated son of Kham Souk, succeeded his father as King. When Boun Khong died in 1920, the French abolished the position of Viceroy.

With the restoration of the Viceroy rank in 1941, Phetsarath thus obtained an important source of royal legitimacy, confirming his leading position in Lao politics and society. While it is true that the reorganisation of the Kingdom's administration also allowed Crown Prince Savang to serve as head of a new private advisory council to the King, it was Phetsarath who ran administrative matters as Prime Minister. It seems most likely, as Grant Evans has noted, that he understood the reorganisation to be something similar to the formation of a constitutional monarchy with him as head of the government. In private, he was reported to have declared that the 'the King reigns, but the one who runs the place is me' (*le roi règne, mais celui qui fait marcher la boîte, c'est moi*).[24]

If Phetsarath was truly determined to 'run the place', this was undoubtedly one important factor that brought him into conflict with the newly appointed French Commissioner in Luang Phrabang, Christian Bonamy. Phetsarath apparently felt that the young Commissioner was deliberately bypassing him on relevant administrative matters, was being condescending to him despite the difference in their ages or was keeping him out of the loop on the grounds that many issues were outside his authority. That a conflict was in the making was made clear when a remark proffered by Phetsarath infuriated Bonamy. As the latter put it to a superior, 'the Prime Minister [Phetsarath] explained to me one day that we should apply to Luang Phrabang the [British] system used for the Shan States, one in which the English resident limits himself to matters of checking on things and playing polo (*se borne à contrôler et à jouer au polo*)'.[25] Phetsarath's message could not have been clearer: Bonamy was trespassing on his turf. Nor was Bonamy's rigid view of his own power (as articulated in the following quotation) likely to impress this proud, Western-trained but ever status-conscious Viceroy:

> I administer the province with my personnel. I keep the Prince up-do-date on all matters extending beyond the provincial cadre and I solicit his view for those things which seem to me to be of interest to him. But I do not consider myself to be his underling, nor to have to inform him of the details of daily matters (*la vie courante*). I'm also not looking for a reason to stir up the Phetsarath bogeyman (*agiter l'épouvantail Phetsarath*).[26]

To make matters worse, Bonamy favoured his relations with the much more pliable King Sisavang Vong. Real or not, the mere perception of a colonial alliance with the King could not have been interpreted favourably by Phetsarath, who was beginning to understand that his administrative experience, prestige and nomination as Prime Minister and Viceroy could allow him to increase his power and influence in Luang Phrabang and, eventually, all of Laos.

24 Grant Evans, *A short history of Laos: The land in between* (Crow's Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2002), p. 77. Phetsarath's remark is quoted in 'Indochine: Activités laotiennes'.
25 'Bonamy à Monsieur le Directeur', 29 Jan. 1945, CAOM, HCI, file Laos, Phetsarath, box 163.
26 'Motifs supposés de la crise de janvier 1945 dans les rapports du Commissaire du Gouvernement et du Prince Phetsarath', 29 Jan. 1944 [*sic*, should be 1945], CAOM, HCI, file Laos, Phetsarath, box 163.

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That Phetsarath was determined to push the kingdom in the direction of a constitutional monarchy became clear after the Japanese overthrow of the French on 9 March 1945. This *coup de force* changed the political situation radically, as 40 years of colonial rule in Laos crumbled in a few days. If most French colonial bureaucrats and administrators lost their positions (and many were in fact subject to terrible Japanese exactions and executions), the 'indigenous' Lao segment of the administration remained in place, and a number of officials were promoted to take over from the French. Most of the Vietnamese community stayed on as well. As for the Japanese, they belatedly supported Indochinese independence. On 8 April, after Japanese troops had moved into Luang Phrabang, the King was forced to declare the independence of Laos. However, judging from the reports of the meetings between Phetsarath and Supreme Counsellor Ishibashi in early July, no real measures to formalise this independence were ever taken.[27] Most important was the need to get the Japanese to accept and approve the royal budget as it had been administered under the French, to solve problems related to the Vietnamese population and immigration, and to form and train a civic guard.

Significantly however, Phetsarath was keen on getting the Japanese Supreme Counsellor to settle a growing dispute between the royal house and the government over who actually had the right to run the country. The problem, from his point-of-view, was that Crown Prince Savang wanted to interfere in the administration of the kingdom, which according to Phetsarath was his own concern and not Savang's. When the news of the Japanese coup in Vientiane reached Luang Phrabang, the Crown Prince instigated what Geoffrey Gunn has called a 'palace revolution': he assumed power in his father's name and effectively relegated the Prime Minister (Phetsarath) to a secondary role.[28] Unfortunately, the documents available do not inform us of Ishibashi's views on this matter; in any case, the post-March 1945 interlude did not leave much time to resolve this royal dispute, as Japanese troops surrendered on 15 August. Nevertheless, it is clear that the relations between Phetsarath and both the French and the Luang Phrabang royal family had deteriorated even before the end of the Pacific War.

The Japanese defeat provided Phetsarath with the 'favourable moment' for declaring Laos' independence without the King's consent. In a proclamation to French prisoners in Laos about to be released from Japanese incarceration, he explained that although peace had been re-established in the Pacific, the Allied victory in no way negated the kingdom's national independence and corresponding international status. Given France's failure to protect Lao territorial integrity in 1941 and its defeat at the hands of the Japanese in March 1945, he considered all treaties established between the two countries to be null and void. When, upon release from prison, former *Résident Supérieur* Louis Brasey called upon Phetsarath to inform him that he would resume the colonial leadership of Laos from 1 September, the Prince sent him packing.[29]

27 'Relation sommaire pour mémoire, des principales questions examinées par S.E. le Colonel Ishibashi Conseiller Suprême auprès du Gouvernement Royal de Luang Phrabang et S.A. le Tiao Maha Oupahat Phetsarath, Premier Ministre du royaume, entrevu du 6.7.1945', in CAOM, HCI, box 163.

28 Geoffrey Gunn, *Political struggles in Laos (1930–1954)* (Bangkok: Éditions Duang Kamol, 1988), p. 112.

29 3349, *Iron man of Laos*, p. 26. For Phetsarath's declaration see 'Proclamation de S.A. le Premier Ministre du Gouvernement Royal de Luang Phrabang à la population française, 1.9.1945', in Jean Deuve, *Le Laos 1945–1949: Contribution à l'histoire du mouvement Lao Issala* (Montpellier: Université Paul Valery, n.d.), pp. 292–3.

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The Prince went further in September by declaring Laos not only independent, but territorially unified. Already in early 1945, he had sent a telegram to the King asking for authorisation to sign a proclamation attaching the southern provinces to Luang Phrabang in a bid to create a sole and unified Lao nation instead of the colonial *mélange* described above. The King refused to respond to his request, and the Crown Prince explained shortly thereafter to the French Mission holed up in the palace that the Court had decided not to announce any territorial changes without French approval. The King would, however, ask the French at an appropriate time to unify the country administratively; for, Savang insisted, if his father did not follow Phetsarath's lead, then the latter would 'acquire a great deal of popularity from it'.[30] On 15 September, without the King's permission, Phetsarath formally proclaimed the attachment of the four southern provinces to Luang Phrabang, thereby unifying the French-derived Lao state for the first time.

Significantly, the Prince had even grander visions for Laos. As elsewhere in the region, the national forms that emerged out of the colonial experience were varied and sometimes surprising. Indeed, it would be a mistake to assume that the 'French Laos' Phetsarath declared independent and unified in mid-1945 was the only option available to nationalists at this historic conjuncture. As we have seen, he had already evoked the possibility of some sort of a union with Thailand; he simultaneously dreamed of creating a 'Greater' Lao nation running across the Mekong and outside of Thai national control. In an internal report penned in early September 1945 and sent to a British mission operating along the Mekong, Phetsarath envisioned a post-war Laos that would encompass

> besides the territories on the left-bank of the Mekong until the Annamese Cordillera to the East, the territories on the right bank of the river limited roughly by: in the North, Burma; in the West, Chiang Mai Province and the dividing line between the waters of the Mekong and the Menam [Chao Phraya]; in the South, by the Dangrek Mountains and the Khone Falls.[31]

Phetsarath was effectively calling for a wider national territory based on the existence of ethnic Lao populations scattered across the Mekong into the Khorat Plateau, and parts of Northern Thailand (Nan and Chiang Rai). He used powerful nationalist rhetoric to defend the historical legitimacy of a new greater Laos situated in the heart of mainland Southeast Asia. He rejected the idea that the Mekong constituted a 'natural' boundary dividing *le Laos français* from the ethnic Lao living in *Thai Isan*, arguing that the river 'has never been a barrier but rather a bridge'. Phetsarath insisted in this manifesto that the Lao people were united by 'common origins; they speak the same language; and they have shared the same historical experience for more than six centuries, having shared the same joys and having been subjected to the same national sufferings'. Although the ethnic Lao on the Khorat Plateau had been subjected to half a century of 'Thaification', they still

30 'Indochine: Activités laotiennes'.

31 Phetsarath, 'Pour la constitution d'un État Lao' attached to a letter from Phetsarath to Prince Kindavong, 6 Sept. 1945, in Archives of the Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Paris (henceforth AMAE), États Associés, file 157.

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belonged to this larger Lao-space, as they had not 'lost the memory of their origins and their national sentiment'. 'The so-called Thai of Ubon and Khorat', he insisted, 'still continue to use the Lao language and sing Lao poems, following on all occasions the mores and customs of Laos.'[32] As the Prince summed up his justification for a greater Lao nation:

> Laos as it exists with the Mekong as [the western] boundary and its million inhabitants is a mistake with regard to both geography and politics. This country which has been amputated of two-thirds of its territory – the richest and most populous – is not viable and cannot exist as a state. It has only been able to survive due to the support received from the other countries in the Indochinese Federation more favoured than it. But its progress has been slow due to limited human resources. It is with a view to reconstituting a geographical and ethnic reality in conformity with its history and forming a state that is viable from a political and economic point of view to appear on the map of the world that this report has been written. It expresses the profound and intimate sentiment of all Lao – those on both the right bank and the left bank.[33]

Prince Phetsarath hoped that this could at the very least take form within the confines of a confederation with either Thailand or Cambodia – 'the only two countries in Indochina whose traditions are close to those of Laos'.[34] Few, if any, Lao (or Cambodian) nationalists favoured the French idea of joining the Indochinese Federation with a united Vietnam.

While the exact origins of this Greater Lao idea are hard to pin down, this remarkable document on the 'formation of a Lao state' makes it clear that Phetsarath believed a favourable situation existed at the end of the war for creating a trans-Mekong Lao nation. The close ties between Isan nationalists in Thailand and their counterparts on the eastern side of the Mekong must have also influenced him in his vision of a larger Lao space. *Thao* Oun Sananikone, a former partisan of the *Lao Pen Lao*, member of the *Lao Issara* (see below for these movements) and close collaborator of Isan separatists, explained in secret meetings with the French in 1949 that ethnic Lao in Thailand – such as Thongin Phuriphat, Tieng Serikhan, etc. – aimed to create a 'Greater Lao' state by legal means. The idea was that these 'Lao Thais' from the northeast would soon obtain high-ranking posts within the Bangkok government. Their increased political power would subsequently allow them to push the government to create a 'Thai Federation' by majority vote in the Parliament. According to this plan, *le Laos français* would naturally be attached to this larger federation based out of Bangkok, but would be guaranteed its autonomy within the proposed federal structure.[35]

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 'Revendication de S.A. le Prince Phetsarath Premier Ministre de la Cour de Luang Phrabang remise à la mission britannique de Lakhon, Siam le 10 septembre 1945', Annexe VI in 'Indochine: Activités laotiennes'. The French frequently included Siam/Thailand within the scope of 'Indochine' in a geographical sense.

35 HCFIC, SDECE, no. 1908/RD, 'Retour et contact d'un chef Lao Issara: Thao Oun', 2 Apr. 1949, in CAOM, Conseiller Politique, file 119.

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Such a vision was of course politically naïve and never took shape, but the fact that it was even considered by leading Lao nationalists such as Phetsarath reminds us that 'French Laos' was but one form among others. In the end, however, he and other Lao nationalists understood that their best bet was to 'nationalise' *le Laos français* before the French returned. The Allied decision at Potsdam to allow the Chinese to receive the Japanese capitulation in northern Indochina played into Phetsarath's hands. After declaring the unification of Laos on 15 September, he informed the French representative in Luang Phrabang that his own men – not the King and not the French – would receive the Chinese. On 23 September, Phetsarath personally welcomed the Chinese troops to Vientiane as the national head of Laos. In so doing, he was now on an open collision course with both the Court and the French. On the advice of the French representative, Court counsellors and the Crown Prince, the King cabled Phetsarath the following, fateful telegram on 10 October 1945:

> During the period following the end of hostilities, you did not observe your role of Prime Minister. You overstepped the power which [was] entrusted to you. Without prior approval, you adopted political and governmental measures in opposition to our will and the interests of the Lao people. We withdraw our confidence in you and we ask you to resign from your functions as Prime Minister as of this 10th day of October 1945. An order as of this day sanctions this resignation. You cannot, for this reason, maintain the rank of *Tiao Maha Oupahat* [Viceroy]. We order your demotion.[36]

According to the French, upon learning of the news, the now-dissident Prince recognised the King's authority. Though he protested the decision in a reply that same day, he allegedly demonstrated 'submissiveness' to the Court's will. Nonetheless, his breach with the reigning House of Luang Phrabang was now in the open. Phetsarath deeply resented the loss of his title, property and premiership. As one French observer rightly noted in 1947, 'this unexpected subservience led to great joy at the court, but it also marked the complete break between Phetsarath and the royal family. It was also the beginning of the actions Phetsarath would undertake against French authority.'[37] The two developments went together.

In August and September 1945 – crucial months throughout Indochina – Prince Phetsarath was in many ways a one-man show. Unlike Hồ Chí Minh, he did not understand the political importance of using the organised youth groups formed by Vichy for his own ends. Moreover, he had scarcely any concrete plans as to which direction to take once independence had been proclaimed. When he was relieved of his functions on 10 October, it was the *Lao Issara* – not the Prince – that prepared a new national government.

Prince Phetsarath and the *Lao Issara*

Also known as the 'Promoters' (*Khana Kokan*), the *Lao Issara* leadership consisted of patriotic civil servants who had worked in the French colonial administration and a

36 'Indochine: Activités laotiennes'.

37 Ibid.; see also Présidence du Gouvernement Provisoire de la République Française, État-Major de la Défense Nationale, 'Historique de la libération de l'Indochine, deuxième fascicule, l'Indochine Française après la capitulation japonaise, 15 août – 15 octobre 1945', 18 July 1946, in AMAE, Indochine, Asie Océanie, vol. 401.

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group of Lao like Oun who had been in Thailand during World War II as exiles or in the service of the Bangkok government. A number of them had worked directly with the *Seri Thai* or Free Thai movement run by Pridi Phanomyong and dominated by ethnic Lao from Isan such as Tieng and Thongin. Others came from the Lao offshoot known as the *Lao Pen Lao* (Laos for the Lao).[38]

All alone, Phetsarath was immediately drawn to the *Lao Issara* as his Japanese backers disappeared and his problems with the French and the Luang Phrabang court exploded. He shared the *Issara*'s desire to establish an independent, unified and non-Communist Laos. He agreed with them that a constitutional monarchy should replace the king's absolute power, though he undoubtedly hoped to put himself in a position of importance. That the *Lao Issara* was also at odds with Sisavang Vong over the future of Laos could only reassure him. The Lao ruler had decided to gamble Laos' political future on the return of the French; on 30 August, he declared the French protectorate to be still valid. Unlike his Vietnamese counterpart Bảo Đại, he refused to recognise his country's national independence without a French green light.

Whatever its weaknesses, the *Lao Issara* government did take steps to create a postcolonial nation-state. On 8 October, its spokesman informed the King that its leaders intended to establish a constitutional monarchy with himself at the head of a unified, independent Laos; unsurprisingly, he refused. Phetsarath, now in direct conflict with Sisavang Vong, lent his royal support to the *Issara* government. On 12 October, the *Issara* held a ceremony in Vientiane to proclaim the independence and unity of Laos under its national authority. The new government promulgated the nation's first constitution and on 15 October presented its programme to the provisional National Assembly. Prime Minister Khammao Vilai's speech on this occasion did not dwell much on proposed policies, explaining instead why it had been necessary to form the national government in the first place. He criticised the royal government for its ill-conceived actions and lack of achievements. Despite the old regime's longevity, he believed that it had done very little of value for the country. He condemned it for having acted irresponsibly during the war and especially for its decision to support the return of the colonial order. How could the *Lao Issara* People's Committee (*Khana Latsadon*) continue to trust the old government, he asked rhetorically? Moreover, the old government was a monarchical political system (*lasathipatai*) which, he insisted, no longer had a place in a modern world where democracy (*pasathipatai*) had become the norm.[39] On 19 November, the *Lao Issara* deposed the king.

Was Khammao also thinking of Prince Phetsarath in his critique of the 'old' government, the monarchy? Probably not, as the two men knew and respected each others' nationalist credentials. In his speech, Khammao never pronounced the Prince's name; instead, he spoke of the Viceroy 'whom we [the new government] respect and who has

38 An overview of events in Laos in 1945 can be found in Sila Viravong, *Pavatsāt van thī 12 Tulā 1945* [History of 12 October 1945] (Vientiane: Pakpasak Kanphim, 1975). See also Gunn, *Political struggles*, pp. 127–62; Jean Deuve, *Guérilla au Laos* (Paris: Éditions l'Harmattan, 1997 reprint); and Deuve, *Laos 1945–1949*.

39 '*Nayōbāi khōng Ratthabān thalaeng to Saphā Phūthaen Rātsadōn, 20.10.1945* [The policy of the Government announced to the House of Representatives, 20.10.1945], Thai National Archives (3) SR.0201.9/4.

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always offered to help us'. While the sources currently available do not reveal the Prince's response, it would seem that he did not interpret this as a personal attack on him and that he maintained close links to the new government as an advisor.[40]

Prince Phetsarath and the *Lao Issara* in exile (1946–49)

As was the case in Vietnam, the presence of Chinese troops in Laos did not last for long. In February 1946, the geopolitical situation changed significantly when French and Chinese authorities signed a convention allowing French troops to replace their counterparts in northern Indochina above the sixteenth parallel. If the continued presence of the Chinese in Vietnam prevented an immediate French attack on the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), the opposite was the case in Laos. On 21 March, the French re-occupied Thakhek in a bloody attack and moved northwards to retake all of Laos by May. They restored Sisavang Vong to his pre-March 1945 posts, grateful for his loyal support of the French protectorate over Laos – something which the colonial canon would enshrine. In the spring of 1946, Phetsarath and the *Lao Issara* government crossed the Mekong to take up exile in Thailand. Faced with the return of the French and at odds with the King, the Prince threw in his lot with the *Lao Issara* and turned to the Thai for support. Whatever his earlier reservations, on 1 December he agreed to serve as Supreme Chief of the *Lao Issara* provisional government. It is clear that Phetsarath did not want this to be simply an honorific position; when accepting the post, he made it clear to Khammao that he wanted to be acting chief of the movement with 'full power to decide various matters and to grant my approval to all inter-ministerial conferences'. According to a French source, he also wanted the ministers individually to take an oath of allegiance to him.[41] Under the continued premiership of Khammao, the *Lao Issara* now operated out of Bangkok, where it was based, and Northeastern Thailand, where its soldiers and guerrillas were stationed. French intelligence reported 75 *Lao Issara* working in the capital, 500 reservists in Ubon and four groups of guerrillas totalling around 300 men located on the Khorat Plateau.[42] While militarily the *Issara* never posed a threat on the other side of the Mekong, the presence of many of the best and brightest of the French-trained elite in exile undermined French attempts to legitimate their post-war colonial project in Laos. Nor did France's tight relationship with and support of Sisavang Vong help these efforts.

Throughout the late 1940s, *Lao Issara* representatives did their best to use Thailand to build regional and international contacts and recognition. *Issara* delegates met with Thai, American, Vietnamese and British officials to discuss the course of events in Indochina – the nature of the Franco-Vietnamese war along with French policy in Indochina in general and Laos in particular. Phetsarath was also involved with other *Issara* leaders in training troops, procuring money and diffusing pro-*Issara* publications and propaganda. He played on precolonial Thai–Lao royal connections to finance

40 On connections between the *Issara* government and Phetsarath after his dismissal, see Deuve, *Laos 1945–1949*, pp. 169, 188, 194; according to Deuve, Phetsarath functioned 'in the shadows [as] the discreet advisor to the government' (p. 99).
41 Ibid., pp. 224, 333–5 (Phetsarath's letter to Khammao).
42 'M. Jean Daridan Chargé d'Affaires de France au Siam à SE M. MAE', no. 237/AS, 18 June 1947, CAOM, Conseiller Diplomatique [henceforth CD], file 109.

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himself and the national government in exile. Already when travelling from Luang Phrabang to Bangkok to take up his residence-in-exile, he approached and was approached by Thai government officials – including the Minister of Interior – and relied on economic support from them.[43] Later, according to information obtained from a Thai official, Phetsarath received a single grant of 50,000 *baht* from the Pridi government when he took refuge in Thailand in 1946, but he rejected Bangkok's offer of a monthly pension. Thanks to financial support from Princess Pradithanari, a widow of King Chulalongkorn and a large property-holder in the capital, Phetsarath was able to live in dignity. Police General Phao Sriyanonda later contributed to funding his stay in Thailand as well.[44]

The Thai government, still smarting from the return of 'lost territories' to France in late 1946 and with a continued interest in deconstructing western French Indochina, allowed the *Issara* to operate from its territory despite French protests. At the outset, the *Issara* hoped that *Seri Thai* leaders now in power would continue to support their cause. Phetsarath and *Issara* leaders aimed to use their political exile as a bargaining chip to force the French to accept the reality of an independent Laos. The Prince met periodically with members of the French Embassy in Bangkok and twice with the Ambassador in the summer of 1947. Long before Sihanouk tried it in Cambodia, Phetsarath pressed the French to accord real independence to the Lao in exchange for his return and that of the *Lao Issara*. He also asked *Lao Issara* partisans to remain firm and patient, as to return now would undermine the movement's political leverage over the French.[45]

While the *Lao Issara* met with Isan politicians to discuss their country's future, the leadership balked at showing too much support for these secession-minded politicians, given the importance of maintaining Bangkok's backing. One example will suffice. In 1947, Phetsarath took umbrage when Thai Admiral Thamrong Daoruang asserted publicly that Laos was historically an integral part of Thailand. He protested to the Thai government that Laos was and had always been a distinctly constituted national identity, undoubtedly thinking of a Greater Lao Nation reaching back to Lan Xang. Thamrong is said to have replied 'that there had never been Lao but only Thai on the Left Bank [of the Mekong, i.e. in present-day Laos]'.[46] Phetsarath's protest attracted the attention of Isan parliamentary representatives, who tried to renew contacts with him. However, when Phibun Songkram returned to power in early 1948 following the overthrow of Pridi, the *Lao Issara*'s longtime ally, Thai security forces cracked down violently on the northeastern politicians. Phetsarath came to heel immediately, knowing full well that it

43 Sila, *Chao Mahāupalāt*, pp 78–84.

44 Phao's support is mentioned in Daniel A. Fineman, *A special relationship: The United States and military government in Thailand, 1947–1958* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), pp. 186–9. Other information on Phetsarath's finances is from 'HCFIC, DSS, no. 5469/C/SG 1, Saigon, le 4 septembre 1951, note pour le Haut Commissariat, au sujet du prince Phetsarath' and 'BCR 1000, no. 2587/1000/b.3/0, 15 juillet 1947, Renseignement: objet: Indochine: activités laotiennes au sujet de Phetsarath par Barada', CAOM, HCI, file 163.

45 'S.A. Tiao Phetsarath, chef des Lao Issara aux représentants du gouvernement des Lao réfugiés . . . a/s des négociations entre mes délégués et ceux du gouvernement français', 5 Aug. 1947, CAOM, CD, file 109.

46 Cited in 'M Léon Marchal Ambassadeur de France en Thaïlande au Haut Commissariat de France en Indochine, Conseiller Diplomatique', Saigon, 22 Sept. 1949, no. 262, in AMAE, États Associés, Indochine, box 239.

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was the price to pay for remaining in Thailand. The creation of a greater Lao state was a pipedream from this point onward, and supporting the separation of Isan from Thailand was downright dangerous with Phibun in power. Phetsarath kept quiet.

As for the French, their main concern was to dissolve the *Lao Issara* as quickly as possible, bring its members back to Laos, and thereby legitimate their own political project. However, their efforts to build an Indochinese Federation ran into stiff opposition from Lao and Cambodian nationalists, who refused to join a neo-colonial Indochinese state in which, they feared, the Vietnamese would dominate. They demanded the creation of unitary states of a uniquely Lao and Cambodian form, not an Indochinese one.[47] Unable to recreate colonial Indochina in a federal form, the French turned to local monarchs – Sisavang Vong, Bảo Đại and Sihanouk – to build Associated States along national lines but within the French Union.

The coming of the Cold War, marked by Chinese Communist victories and increasing American pressure on the French to decolonise, modified the thrust of this policy. The changing international context effectively pushed the French to sign conventions with each monarchy in 1949, recognising their national independence within the confines of the French Union. Political strategists led by High Commissioner Léon Pignon used the creation of these Associated States to remove the *raison d'être* of the *Lao Issara* (and *Khmer Issarak*) and thereby bring its leaders back to Laos. Not only would they help legitimate French counter-revolutionary, state-building efforts at the Indochinese and international levels, but they would also prevent the DRV from turning these nationalists against the French desire to keep Indochina in the French orbit. The Franco-Lao convention was signed in Paris on 19 July 1949, following the one signed with Bảo Đại and preceding another one penned by Sihanouk. No sooner had the ink dried on the convention than the French turned to dissolving the *Lao Issara* (and its Khmer counterparts) 'as early as possible'.[48]

In a remarkable operation, Pignon, André Torel (his legal counsellor), Léon Marchal (French Ambassador in Bangkok) and Charles Bonfils (head of the Indochinese Security Services) opened secret meetings with *Issara* members which successfully neutralised the movement in Thailand and brought most of its leaders back to Laos. This operation was facilitated by the fact that the Franco-Lao convention creating the Associated State of Laos satisfied the desires of most of the *Issara* nationalists who had been in Thailand since 1946.[49] When the French authorities in Indochina allowed the return of members of the *Issara* government, Phetsarath was urged to join them. When he refused, the *Issara* government relieved him of his position as supreme leader and criticised him for inefficient leadership – which 'always put his personal views and policies above those, of the members of the ruling government, even when unanimous'. Later, on 24 October 1949,

47 Goscha, 'Beyond the "colonizer-colonized"'.

48 'Premier Ministre, no. 64, Royaume du Laos, Gouvernement Provisoire du Laos Libre et Indépendant, Bangkok', 9 Oct. 1949, CAOM, HCI, file Laos, Phetsarath, box 163. For a general discussion of French attempts to build up non-Communist nationalisms using local monarchies in Indochina after World War II, see Bruce M. Lockhart, 'Monarchy and decolonization in Indochina', in *The transformation of Southeast Asia: International perspectives on decolonization*, ed. Marc Frey, Ronald W. Pruessen and Tai Yong Tan (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2003), pp. 52–71.

49 For the myriad of details, see the documents in CAOM, CD, file 109.

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three weeks after the Chinese Communist victory, the Prime Minister of the Provisional Government of Laos, Khammao, proclaimed the official dissolution of the *Lao Issara* government and movement.[50] Guaranteed amnesty and often posts in the Associated State of Laos, almost all of the major leaders of the movement and government returned to Laos in late 1949 and 1950.

The two revealing exceptions were Phetsarath and his half-brother Prince Souphanouvong. The latter had served under Phetsarath and Khammao in the *Issara* government as Minister of Foreign Affairs and then simultaneously as Minister of Defence. However, as the French moved towards creating a Lao state, Souphanouvong began to distance himself from the *Issara* and seek out new sources of support. It was at this conjuncture that he stepped up his contacts and collaboration with the Vietnamese working in Thailand, meeting regularly with the head of the DRV's delegation in Bangkok. Like Phetsarath, Souphanouvong knew perfectly well that *Issara* leaders were secretly meeting with French envoys concerning their return to Laos. He also knew that a Communist victory in China was imminent and that it would radically change the context of the Franco-Vietnamese war and, perhaps, provide him with new political opportunities.

It was only a matter of time before Souphanouvong clashed with the *Lao Issara* leadership. The break occurred in mid-1949, when he made unauthorised decisions during a trip to the north to contact and recruit renegade Chinese Nationalist forces to attack northern Laos, to place a controversial Lao (Vixienne) in charge of *Issara* military affairs, and to forbid his own subordinates from following *Issara* orders. When he was asked to explain his insubordination, he refused and resigned instead; on 19 May, the *Issara* convened a special meeting and threw him out of the government.[51] In private, *Issara* members, including Prince Phetsarath, were suspicious of Souphanouvong's contacts with the Vietnamese and his leftward track. In a stormy meeting on 16 May, Souphanouvong smugly reprimanded his detractors for daring to question him on the secret funds he was receiving from the Vietnamese, saying that it was none of their business and explaining curtly that 'I do not have confidence in you.' From this point, he had clearly decided to go down another road. As he put it arrogantly in this same meeting, 'I will lead the struggle alone. I know my way and it will lead to victory *(je mènerai tout seul la lutte, je sais [sic] mon chemin et ce chemin mènera à la victoire)*.' Phetsarath also refused to go over to the French, but he never forgot Souphanouvong's fateful decision to ally himself with the Vietnamese Communists at this crucial juncture.[52]

50 Cabinet du Premier Ministre, Gouvernement Provisoire du Laos Libre et Indépendant, 'Communiqué: dissolution du Gouvernement Provisoire du Laos Libre et Indépendant', 24 Oct. 1949, Archives of the Mémorial de Caën, grouping Jean Deuve, box G14–3; see also the documents on the Lao–French convention in the same box. The criticism of Phetsarath is from Cabinet du Premier Ministre, Royaume du Laos, Gouvernement Provisoire du Lao Libre et Indépendant, 'Communiqué', 19 Oct. 1949, in CAOM, CP, file 119, sub-file Lao Issara.

51 Royaume du Laos, no. 2553, 'S.A. Tiao Phetsarath Chef d'État du Gouvernement Provisoire du Laos Libre et Indépendant aux représentants des comités intéressés', 16 May 1949, CAOM, CD, file 109.

52 Souphanouvong's comments, reported by an agent to the French who was present at the meeting, are found in HCFIC, SDECE, no. 21.194/PM/GF, 'Renseignement', 16 May 1949, in CAOM, CP, file 119, sub-file Lao Issara.For details on DRV and ICP policy towards Laos, see Christopher E. Goscha, 'Le contexte asiatique de la guerre franco-vietnamienne: réseaux, relations et économie' (Ph.D. diss., École Pratique des Hautes Études/La Sorbonne, 2000), Laos and Cambodia sections.

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Phetsarath and the Vietnamese

That Souphanouvong broke with the *Lao Issara* and moved closer to the Vietnamese was no accident. As the French moved to create the Associated States of Indochina, Vietnamese Communists countered by preparing to form their own associated 'resistance' governments in Laos and Cambodia. Not only could the French-backed Associated States isolate the DRV on the Indochinese playing field, but with the Chinese Communists on the march southwards, the Vietnamese had to renew their internationalist mission to bring the revolution to all of former French Indochina.[53] What is less widely known is that while the DRV was interested in Souphanouvong, it sought to win over Phetsarath to its anticolonialist cause as well. In April 1949, the DRV directed its Lao affairs section to begin work on creating a new 'resistance' government. While the Vietnamese had already put their secret Communist organisation in place under the loyal control of Nouhak Phoumsavan and Kaysone Phomvihane, the idea was to first establish a 'progressive' constitutional monarchy to win over mass support more effectively to the revolutionary cause. The Vietnamese understood very well that they could not eliminate the monarchy for fear of undermining their own state-building plans in Laos and Cambodia, and propaganda attacks on the rulers were forbidden in those countries. As the April 1949 instructions explained it nicely, 'this is necessary since the Lao population is little developed (*peu évolué*) and remains attached to the royalty'.[54]

Winning over a leading Lao (or Cambodian) royal leader was also an important strategy for the Vietnamese. As the *Lao Issara* crumbled in 1949, the DRV ordered its delegation in Bangkok to invite Souphanouvong and Phetsarath back to Indochina to continue the anticolonialist struggle as part of a new Lao resistance movement and government. On 20 October 1949, Võ Nguyên Giáp cabled Souphanouvong asking him to come to Vietnam as quickly as possible. Two days later, Hồ Chí Minh invited Phetsarath to Indochina to run a new *Lao Issara*; the Prince politely declined his invitation.[55] The Vietnamese persisted, however. Phạm Ngọc Thạch, the DRV's diplomat-at-large and Hồ's most trusted and suave French-trained advisor, personally conveyed his best new year's wishes to Phetsarath on 24 December, explaining that 'as always our government will give all possible aid to the Lao movement'. He added that Phetsarath 'remained the uncontested champion of independent Laos'.[56] Like the French colonialists, the Vietnamese internationalists needed the royal stamp of approval which only Phetsarath could provide in order to legitimate their own revolutionary 'associated state' of Laos.

Phetsarath kept his options open. In mid-1950, as the Vietnamese moved to create a new Lao resistance government, he instructed his partisans in Laos to follow its development closely. He had not ruled out the possibility of lending his support to such an

53 Ibid.

54 Decrypted document HCFIC, SDECE, no. 13407/H/4, 'Directives du gouvernment viet minh a/s des affaires laotiennes et de l'organisation du Nord Laos', 5 Apr. 1949, CAOM, CP, file 119, sub-file Emprise Viet Minh.

55 Decrypted telegram HCFIC, SDECE, no. 10.929/4.MF, 'Réponse de Phetsarath au message du président Ho Chi Minh', 29 Oct. 1949, CAOM, CP, file 119, sub-file Emprise Viet Minh. For Giáp's cable see intercepted telegram HCFIC, SDECE, no. 21.921 PM/YG, 'Renseignement', 29 Oct. 1949, CAOM, CP, box 74, file Gouvernement Lao Libre, août 1950.

56 Intercepted telegram in Forces du Laos, EM/2ème Bureau, no. 1129/2, 27 Dec. 1949, CAOM, CP, box 74, file Phetsarath.

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anticolonialist government, despite his distrust of the Vietnamese Communists; like Souphanouvong, he understood that the Cold War had radically changed the geopolitical context. Phetsarath instructed his subordinates to continue to collaborate militarily with the Viet Minh and authorised his men to discuss financial matters with them: 'As far as politics is concerned, collaborate closely with the Viet Minh; after the war, there will be a treaty of friendship between our two countries'. The Prince even congratulated Nouhak when the latter assumed command of Lao troops for eastern Laos.[57]

Again, the Vietnamese understood that Phetsarath was the real source of legitimation for a 'new' *Lao Issara* and that his royal stature would win over the people much more effectively than promises of Communist salvation.[58] According to Phetsarath's representatives at the August 1950 congress that created the Pathet Lao resistance government, Souphanouvong was named Prime Minister, but Phetsarath was made *Chef d'État in absentia.* Phetsarath seems to have accepted the formation of this new resistance government, though he deplored the fact that the congress had been held on Vietnamese territory.[59] On 15 August, the architects of the Pathet Lao government sent him a telegram expressing their 'sincere regrets not to be able to have you among our national assembly'. They explained the government's main projects and policies, expressing the hope that the Prince would lend his support and return to Indochina as early as possible. In the meantime, Souphanouvong would fill in for him: 'Awaiting your return to the resisting people, the National Assembly voted a resolution designating Prince Souphanouvong to stand in for you on an interim basis.'[60]

Clearly the Vietnamese did not consider Souphanouvong's collaboration to be sufficient for building a new *Lao Issara* under their supervision. Indeed, Souphanouvong, who had disagreed heatedly with Phetsarath in 1949 over the Vietnamese question, had to swallow his pride (undoubtedly under Vietnamese pressure), bow his head and ask Phetsarath to return to Laos and support the new resistance government. On 4 November 1950, in an extraordinary concession, Souphanouvong sent the following message to his half-brother:

> In execution of the historic resolutions voted by the National Assembly of the Lao resistance which was held last August and in line with confidential telegram no. 1/ARL of 15 August 1950 . . . it is my honour to invite you, in the name of the resistance government and on behalf of all the resisting people of the Lao Nation (*Pathet Lao*) to come and publicly

57 Forces du Laos, EM/2ème Bureau, no. 294/FL/2, 'BR no. 2, mois de février 1950', Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre (henceforth SHAT), box 10H4303, file Laos, 1950. Phetsarath's instructions are in intercepted document 'Lettre adressée par Tiao Phetsarath à Thao Khamtai', no. 127, 17 Mar. 1950, in HCFIC, DSFS, no. 3010/C/SG-1, 'Note pour le HC et le CP', 22 Apr. 1950, CAOM, HCI, box 163, file Phetsarath.

58 Decrypted telegram HCFIC, SDECE, no. 12380/H.9/RG/DB, 28 Dec. 1949, 'Instructions du Comité Central Viet Minh au sujet du Laos et du Cambodge', CAOM, CP, box 74, file Gouvernement Lao Libre, août 1950.

59 'BR', 14 Dec. 1950, in DSS, 'Annexe à la note [no. ?] décembre 1950', CAOM, CD, file 109, sub-file Prince Souphanouvong. See also HCFIC, DSS, 'BR: au sujet [du] gouvernement de résistance du peuple lao', 14 Dec. 1950, CAOM, CP, box 74, file Gouvernement Lao Libre, août 1950; and Deuve, *Royaume du Laos 1949–1965*, p. 32.

60 'Télégramme confidentiel, no. 1/ARL, daté du 15 août 1950, Assemblée Nationale Résistance Lao à Altesse Phetsarath, par les soins du représentant de la RDVN à Bangkok [Nguyễn Đức Quy]', SHAT, box 10H550, file 69.

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> and effectively assume your supreme functions and live among us with our respectful affection in our liberated territory. . . . In the hope of seeing you soon among us, I wish you, Your Highness, good health and assure you of our devotion.[61]

The importance of this letter is obvious. Not only had Souphanouvong acknowledged Phetsarath as his superior using the words 'Your Highness', he implicitly conceded that his own royal name was insufficient to legitimate the government and rally the populations to the nationalist cause. As late as early 1951, Hồ Chí Minh personally invited Phetsarath to leave Thailand and come to the liberated zones in Laos and Vietnam.[62]

In the end, however, Phetsarath refused to budge, and he stayed in Thailand. By mid-1951, when the DRV's office in Bangkok officially closed, the Vietnamese had already moved on and placed all their chips on Souphanouvong. As one alert French intelligence officer had noted the previous year, 'fearful of being led on by Phetsarath, whose good faith is uncertain, the Viet Minh are increasingly tempted to listen to no one else but Souphanouvong'.[63] In the end, Phetsarath's failure to choose one side or the other at the conjuncture of 1949–50 effectively marginalised him from Lao politics, and his refusal to march in step with the Vietnamese allowed Souphanouvong to assume the leading royal role in the Pathet Lao.

Homecoming

That said, the combination of Phetsarath's non-Communist nationalist appeal and his continued presence in Thailand was a thorn in the side of French efforts to legitimate their Lao political projects. While they could not abduct him and ship him off to Algeria as they might have done during the colonial period, their aim was still to get him out of Thailand. In 1947, High Commissioner for Indochina Émile Bollaert had already instructed diplomatic representatives in Bangkok to offer the Prince permanent residence in Dalat, Saigon or France 'in material conditions in line with his rank'.[64] Bringing him back to Laos was out of the question for fear of insulting the royal family. Not only did the French feel obligated to respect the latter's wishes, they were also constrained by a secret promise made to Sisavang Vong in 1945 not to accept his cousin's return to Laos. The mere rumour that the French were talking to Phetsarath in Bangkok at this time had caused great consternation in Court circles.[65] The mission to contact Phetsarath was cancelled.

The pressure grew, however, in 1949–50 when the *Lao Issara* was dissolved officially and the Vietnamese began making overtures to Phetsarath. It was in this context that the

61 'Le Premier Ministre, Président du Conseil [Souphanouvong] à Son Altesse le Prince Phetsarath, Chef de l'État du Pathet Lao', 4 Nov. 1950, SHAT, box 10H550, file 69.

62 DSS, no. 2247/C/SG-1, 'Note pour le HC', 5 Apr. 1951, CAOM, HCI, box 163, file Phetsarath.

63 FL, EM/2B, no. 171/FL/2, 'BR no. 1, janvier 1950', 8 Feb. 1950, SHAT, box 10H4303, file Laos, 1950. See also DSS, 'BR: Relations entre Tiao Phetsarath et M. Nguyen Duc Quy', source: SR Bangkok, 16 Nov. 1950, CAOM, HCI, box 163, file Phetsarath.

64 'Bollaert, Instructions pour Monsieur Michaudel, très secret, Hanoi, 12.8.1947', CAOM, HCI, box 163, file Laos, Phetsarath.

65 Pierre Gentil, *Remous du Mékong* (Paris: Charles-Lavauzelle et Co, 1950), p. 152. The promise to the King is in 'Indochine: activités laotiennes', p. 10.

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French re-opened discussions with the Prince. Keen on neutralising him politically, the High Commissioner (now Léon Pignon) approached the King to see if he would be prepared to allow his cousin to return to Laos. Aware of the changed international situation and of growing French needs, the King conceded, on the condition that Phetsarath performed an act of submission; only then would he consider restoring the Prince's royal titles. '[He] would not act under pressure from a rebel', Sisavang Vong explained. Phetsarath would not do this and he also refused the French offer of asylum.[66]

More Franco-Lao efforts to win over Phetsarath occurred in early 1952 under the direction of Prince Khampane, one of Sisavang Vong's sons now working as the *Chargé d'Affaires* of the Associated State of Laos in Bangkok.[67] With the Vietnamese on the military offensive in all of Indochina and now supporting Souphanouvong at the head of the Pathet Lao, the royal family agreed in principle to allow Phetsarath to return to Vientiane without requiring a formal submission. The issue of restoring his lost titles remained an open question, however, for he insisted that his return was contingent on the restitution of both his titles and his properties, to be officially affirmed in a royal decree with parliamentary approval.[68]

After the dissolution of the *Lao Issara* in 1949 and his subsequent refusal to head a Lao resistance movement allied with the Viet Minh, Phetsarath became less concerned with political activities. It has been claimed that he was linked to a plot to provoke a military coup in Laos and the killing of the Defence Minister Kou Voravong, both of which took place in 1954.[69] It is very unclear, however, to what extent this was the case. What is certain is that he increasingly dedicated his time to writing books – one on the history of guns and one on astrology – and was particularly fond of going on hunting excursions with important Thai dignitaries.[70] In short, he began to fade away from the political scene.

It was only in March 1957, as the political situation took a turn for the worse in Laos and following a myriad of exchanges, that Phetsarath was allowed to return home. Following the Geneva Accords of 1954, Souphanouvong and the Vietnamese-backed Pathet Lao (now operating as the *Neo Lao Hak Xat* or Lao Patriotic Front) had become a part of the political process, while the Americans had begun supporting anti-Communist factions. It was hoped that Phetsarath could serve as a stabilizing force. In Vientiane, he was received with quasi-regal ceremony. After setting foot on Lao soil at the ferry landing

66 DSS, HCFIC, BR, 'Activités du Prince Phetsarath', 10 Jan. 1951, CAOM, HCI, box 161, file Laos, Phetsarath. For Pignon's initiative see Gentil, *Remous du Mékong*, p. 152.

67 HCFIC, DSS, no. 2341/C/SG/1, Saigon, 'Note pour M. le Haut Commissaire', 22 Apr. 1952, CAOM, HCI, box 163.

68 This issue is documented in 'Note pour MM Commissaire: activités en Thaïlande de SAR Phetarath', 11 Feb. 1954 and DSS HCFIC, BR, 'Activité du Prince Phetsarath', 7 Feb. 1952, both in CAOM, HCI, box 163, file Laos, Phetsarath; Commissariat Général de France en Indochine, Direction du Service de Protection de la Représentation Civile Française et du Corps Expéditionnaire, 'Note pour M. le Commissaire Général de France en Indochine', 8 Oct. 1954, CAOM, HCI, box 163.

69 Jean Deuve, *Un épisode oublié de l'histoire du Laos: Le complot de Chinaimo (1954–55)* (Paris: Centre d'Histoire et Civilisations de la Péninsule Indochine, 1986).

70 Descriptions of some of these hunting trips can be found in the books by Chali Iamkrasin. For the book on weapons, see Chali Iamkrasin, *Trawēn phrai lae prawat āwut puen čhāk banthuek khōng Chao Phetcharāt* [Roaming the jungle and 'A history of firearms' by Prince Phetsarath] (Bangkok: Phrae Phittaya, 1960).

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of Tha Deua outside Vientiane, he was met by a delegation encompassing members of the government, the National Assembly, the King's Council, provincial governors, civil servants, the army and the *Neo Lao Hak Xat*. He was offered flowers and Buddhist prayers, and victory arches lined the villages he passed through on his way into the city.[71]

In April, at a ceremony at the royal palace in Luang Phrabang, the wayward Prince re-gained his title of Viceroy. According to the French Ambassador, Phetsarath was from this point onward regarded as the second highest dignitary in Laos – second only to the King.[72] He openly supported the policy of neutrality pursued by the Souvanna Phouma government. During the governmental crisis in June–July 1957, when the attempt to form a government led by Bong Souvannavong failed, the Ambassador noted that the possibility of calling in Phetsarath was being considered behind closed doors.[73]

It would have indeed been a glorious return if the Viceroy could have chaired negotiations to obtain the unity of Laos, something which he had first proclaimed in 1945. When Souvanna Phouma negotiated with the Communists in September 1956, he proposed that Phetsarath preside over a government of *Union nationale* once the *Neo Lao Hak Xat* had signed a declaration of loyalty and dissolution.[74] For Phetsarath himself there seemed to be no doubt that he was the obvious candidate to chair the ongoing negotiations. This never happened, however, and Phetsarath did not take part in the opening ceremony of the National Assembly in May 1957.[75] Instead, he started touring Laos on the same kind of fact-finding missions he had made during in the colonial period. He travelled in the provinces in northern Laos controlled by the Royal Lao government on an official tour. He visited *Neo Lao Hak Xat* areas in Xamneua, and later in May and June he toured Saravane and Attopeu in the south. While he dreamt of a unified, independent and national Laos, in the end the country remained divided due to internal and external factors which far surpassed his impressive efforts to create a postcolonial and neutral nation-state. In 1959 Phetsarath passed away in Luang Phrabang, as the war for Vietnam began to suck Laos into its vortex.

Conclusion

It is well known that discourses about the past shape the understanding of the present, and ruling groups have always used perceptions of the past as an ideological tool to legitimate and thereby reinforce existing power relations. That is certainly the case in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Since the Lao People's Revolutionary Party

71 'M. Olivier Gassouin, Ambassadeur de France au Laos, à Son Excellence M. Christian Pineau, Ministre des Affaires Étrangères', Vientiane, 5 Apr. 1957, no 106/AP, AMAE, Asie-Oceanie 1944–1955, file 13.

72 'Télégramme no 390/392, M. Olivier Gassouin, Ambassadeur de France au Laos, à Son Excellence M Christian Pineau, Ministre des Affaires Étrangères', Vientiane, 18 Apr. 1957, AMAE, Asie-Oceanie 1944–1955, file 13.

73 'Télégramme no 727, M. Olivier Gassouin, Ambassadeur de France au Laos, à Son Excellence M. Christian Pineau, Ministre des Affaires Étrangères', Vientiane, 6 July 1957, AMAE, Asie-Oceanie 1944–1955, file 14.

74 'Note, 25 septembre 1957 (no other information)', AMAE, Asie-Oceanie 1944–1955, file 14.

75 'Télégramme no 468/469, M Olivier Gassouin, Ambassadeur de France au Laos, à Son Excellence M Christian Pineau, Ministre des Affaires Étrangères', Vientiane, 13 May 1957, AMAE, Asie-Oceanie 1944–55, file 13.

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(LPRP) took power throughout the country in 1975, Lao history has been framed to show how the revolutionary movement has deep historical roots in the past, with the Party leading the fight against foreign aggressors to final victory. In recent years, however, Communism has begun to lose its attraction and leaders have begun searching for new nationalist roots for legitimating their continued claim to rule. It is no accident that they have turned to the power of royalty. The recent, state-sponsored erection of a statue of the legendary King Fa Ngum in Vientiane attests to the way in which Lao kings of a distant past are being praised as national heroes today, part of the regime's new reading of the past and search for new sources of legitimacy.[76]

That works fine for distant kings; however, the current 'revolutionary' regime still has to deal with the fate of the Lao royalty in the recent past. In 1975, when the LPRP came to power, King Savang Vatthana was forced to abdicate; he and some leading members of the royal family later died in prison camps in Laos. In general royal figures of the colonial and postcolonial periods are not mentioned in public. A notable exception to this rule is, of course, Souphanouvong, who fits the revolutionary reading of the past because he heeded the 'Indochinese call' of the DRV in 1950 and joined the resistance government they formed. Even so, as in 1950, it would seem that the regime recognises that Souphanouvong is still not a sufficiently powerful source of royal legitimation, in part due precisely to his close alliance with the Vietnamese. Whether the Vietnamese and Lao architects of a timeless Lao–Vietnamese 'special relationship' like it or not, the strong revolutionary link to Vietnam could still be construed by a new generation of nationalists as 'un-national' and 'foreign'.

This potential crisis in self-legitimation allows for ambiguous cases like Phetsarath to resurface. In the former royal palace in Luang Phrabang – today a museum in which a segment of the country's royal past is on display – visitors can, for example, buy photos of Phetsarath and amulets stamped with his image. His picture can also be found on small Buddhist altars in shops and houses throughout Laos, as noted at the beginning of this article. This is a new development. As suggested by Grant Evans, Phetsarath's popularity among the Lao population at large derives from his being associated with the religious sphere – as it is a widespread belief that he possessed magical powers – and not the political sphere.[77] For the LPRP it is the political sphere that counts. As the Party considers the *Lao Issara* anticolonial movement to be its ancestor, it is Phetsarath's association with this movement that makes him an acceptable royal personality for the regime. In fact, in the officially sanctioned accounts of Laos' past published since 1975, the regime has claimed Party leadership of the *Issara* anticolonial movement and of events in Laos in 1945–46 in general. In this manner, ideological differences between the anticolonial movement of the 1940s and the later revolutionary movement are erased, and Phetsarath is implicitly made part of the revolutionary struggle.

This linkage between Phetsarath and the revolutionary struggle is, for example, clearly expressed in a massive history of Laos published in 2000 by the Ministry of

76 For a discussion of legitimacy issues see Martin Stuart-Fox, 'The challenge for Lao historiography', and Vatthana Pholsena, 'The early years of the Lao Revolution (1945–1949): Between history, myth and experience', *South East Asia Research*, 14, 3 (2006): 339–59 and 403–30 respectively.

77 Grant Evans, *The politics of ritual and remembrance: Laos since 1975* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1998), pp. 102–3.

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Information and Culture. According to Vatthana Pholsena, this text is becoming 'a master reference within official circles [in Laos], including university teachers'. In this detailed account Phetsarath figures prominently in the section dealing with events in Laos in the period leading up to the declaration of independence and the promulgation of the nation's first constitution in October 1945. At the same time, this crucial turning point in Laos' history is firmly linked with the revolutionary struggle conducted under the guidance of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP). Thus, when the text summarises the reasons for the victorious – although short-lived – outcome of the Lao people's struggle against the French in 1945, it is explicitly stated that it took place under ICP leadership.[78]

What about Phetsarath's anticommunism and his refusal to ally Laos' future with the Vietnamese in 1950? This is and will continue to be taboo if he is to remain a part of the new official Lao version of the past. The publication of Sila Viravong's officially sanctioned and recently published biography does not signal a deviation from the regime's monopoly on the interpretation of the past. The text is more or less silent about Phetsarath as a political figure and about his political visions and does not reflect a new commitment to open up for a more nuanced dealing with the past; instead, it helps to hold up a specific narrative of this past.

In many ways, Phetsarath's story is one of failure. Of course, he contributed significantly to bringing Laos into being – he worked within the French colonial system as a prominent moderniser and cultural nationalist, and in 1945 he defended Lao independence and played an important role in the *Issara* movement. However, during his years of exile in Thailand and even after his return to Laos, he was marginalised, and he ultimately played no role in post-1950 developments. Unlike Sihanouk in Cambodia, Phetsarath did not grasp or did not have the energy to exploit the new political conditions created by the arrival of the Cold War. Rather than launching a crusade against the French with the knowledge that the Americans would probably support him on Cold War grounds, Phetsarath preferred to fade away on hunting trips or argue about getting his titles back. His decision not to play the conjuncture of 1950 his way ultimately sidelined him politically – as did his stubbornness.

Still, this story of a failed nationalist in the postcolonial period is worth telling. It is a story that proposes a genealogy of Lao nationalism different from the one propagated in the historical narrative sanctioned by the Party in Laos and Vietnam today or in certain French colonial circles. It is a biography which highlights how a specific idea about Laos and its culture was formed during the first 40 years of French colonial rule and nurtured the emergence of a Lao cultural nationalism. Such a genealogy also underscores how this cultural nationalism was transformed into a political and anticolonial nationalism under the Japanese occupation at the end of World War II. Finally, Phetsarath's activities show

78 Souneth Photisane *et al.*, *Pavatsāt Lāo (dư̄kdamban-pachuban)* [History of Laos (ancient times to the present)] (Vientiane: Ministry of Information and Culture, 2000), p. 711. Vatthana's comment is in Vatthana Pholsena, 'The changing historiographies of Laos: A focus on the early period', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 35, 2 (2004): 252. (This important text is also discussed in Bruce M. Lockhart, '*Pavatsat Lao*: constructing a national history', *South East Asia Research*, 14, 3 (2006): 361–86.) For a discussion of other Lao versions of the events in 1945, see Lockhart, 'Narrating 1945 in Lao historiography', in Goscha and Iversson ed., *Contesting visions*, pp. 129–63.

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that anticolonial nationalism did not always have to be linked to Communist movements to be 'revolutionary' – and that is perhaps why, in official Lao historiography today, to 'remember' him means having to forget quite a bit at the same time. Therein lies one of the most important paradoxes of Prince Phetsarath and his making of modern Laos, and the reason why he will continue to pose a real problem for official Party historians in Laos (and Vietnam).

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