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“SIAMESE DOMINATION OF THE LAO-CAMBODIAN FRONTIER REGION”

(DRAFT)

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Abstract: This paper studies the Siamese expansion into and control of the Lao-Cambodian frontier area in the late 18th century. It examines the incorporation of the Lao and Khmer communities above and below the Dangrek Range, stretching as far eastwards as Veun Sai and Attapeu on the highlands of the Sāy Phū Luang. In particular, it seeks to demonstrate how the Siamese dismantled the local economy of the Champāsak kingdom which formed the traditional hub of the Lao-Cambodian frontier. The paper examines the Siamese role in controlling and later nurturing banditry and trade monopolies centred on Khōrāt in the face of French colonial expansion in the modern tri-border area (Champāsak, Ubon and Stueng Traeng, including Preāh Vihéar). By studying the composition and evolution of *srok* and *meuang* authorities, the paper will demonstrate the continued influence of Siamese-sponsored elites in the face of French attempts to counter Siamese political and economic patronage. In conclusion, the paper will show how the communities of the Lao-Cambodian frontier zone were prevented from capitalizing on the natural wealth and strategic potential of the Champāsak kingdom due first to Siamese intervention and then to Franco-Siamese rivalry.

Keywords: Laos, Cambodia, Ubon, Champāsak, Stueng Traeng, tributary relations, foreign occupation, Kūy, Mekong, Dangrek Range, Khōrāt, Īsān, Xē Kông, trade and resistance..

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By the mid 18th century the Lao kingdom of Champāsak had established itself right across the Lao-Cambodian frontier region (a territory which spans from Burīram in the west, Attapeu in the east, Pāk Mūn in the north and Siēm Bouk in the south) by incorporating the diverse *meuang* and *srok* of Attapeu, Sālavan, Không, Mūnlapamôk, Kâmpông Srâlau, Stueng Traeng, Tônlé Repou, Mlu Prey, Srīsakēt, Rôy-Et and the Rôtanak Kiri highlands. This had resulted in the exodus of some minority Austroasiatic-speaking peoples (eg. Kūy) and the integration of others into the Lao kingdom.

The Lao king of Champasak Chao Sôysīsamut (1713-1737) had cultivated

important relations with neighbouring powers during his reign. Through his marriage to a Cambodian princess he had secured his kingdom's southern frontier, not to mention expanding his territory.¹ Even so, the religious culture of Champāsak was drawn towards Cambodia through the exchange of monks and sacred texts, a legacy going back to Phra Khrū.² Relations with Viang Chan and Ayutthaya could be balanced against one another given the threat of invading Burmese armies.

The Champāsak kingdom's economy was focused on trade with Cambodia, or more correctly Phnom Pénh. The primary items of trade were slavery and gold, which was found in rich alluvial deposits in the Xē Kông-Xē Kamān river system. This trade mostly followed a north-south route via the Xē Kông River which flowed from Attapeu, past Siēm Pāng to Stueng Traeng where it joined the Mekong. Smaller movements of trade also directed goods north to Viang Chan and west to Ayutthaya.

Actual competition for the frontier zone's wealth and strategic location had begun in earnest in the late 16th century, when the Lān Xāng king Xētthāthirāt I clashed with the Khmer king Barom Reachea I.³ The Khmer were victorious over the Lao but both powers withdrew from the region as internal power struggles developed within the two *mandalas* and a more serious threat to their security emerged on their western frontiers in the form of a rejuvenated kingdom of Ayutthaya.

The Siamese made their presence felt in the Lao-Cambodian frontier region in 1770 when they established trading relations through the slave trading centre of Siēm Pāng. Trade relations were also stimulated by the exchange of livestock, most notably

¹ Chao Sanhprasith Na Champassak, *The Royal Family of Champāsak*, private manuscript, (Paris, 1995), 144 pages; Manich Jumsai, *History of Laos*, 2nd ed., (Bangkok, Chalermnit, 1971), p. 93.

² Phra Khrū is a popular historical figure linked to the establishment of the Southern Lao kingdom. Major works detailing his exploits have been written by Manich Jumsai, Charles Archaimbault, Pierre Lintingre and Martin Stuart-Fox. I have also utilized private sources stored by the Na Champassak family elders, who are currently exiled in France. The late Chao Sith was particularly generous in providing access to his private collection, now managed by his daughter-in-law.

³ Manich Jumsai, *History of Thailand and Cambodia*, Revised Edition, (Bangkok, Chalermnit, 1996), pp. 32-33.

elephants which were captured and trained by the Kūy who had established their own network through their westerly migrations along the Dangrek Range and Mūn River basin.

In the course of the next five years (1771-1775) Siamese forces commanded by the newly crowned Thai king Taksin expanded the Thonburī kingdom's influence onto the Khōrāt Plateau and across the Northern Cambodian Plain. In 1777 the Siamese armies were presented with an opportunity to extend their direct influence into the Lao-Cambodian frontier region through the Nāng Rōng uprising and the Lao attack upon the Siamese dependency of Dôn Mot Daeng.⁴ The Siamese king Taksin sent out two large armies led by Chao Phrayā Chakrī and his younger brother, Chao Phrayā Surasi, to secure the Lao-Cambodian frontier region. Chao Phrayā Chakrī led his army through the Mūn River basin while Chao Phrayā Surasi directed a separate expedition via Northern Cambodia. While passing through the *Huameuang Khamen Pā-dong* (Forest Khmer Principalities), Chao Phrayā Chakrī conscripted ethnic Khmer and Kūy who had been forced out by the migrating Lao to assist his Thai forces. Meanwhile Chao Phrayā Surasi rallied ethnic Khmer across Northern Cambodia who had earlier ceded from the Cambodian kingdom in protest to the court's closer affiliation with Vietnam.

The Siamese armies led a two pronged attack on the kingdom of Champāsak in 1778. Chao Phrayā Surasi's forces led a riverborne assault via Stueng Traeng and then Không, while Chao Phrayā Chakrī directed his army to the mouth of the Mūn River and downstream to the kingdom's capital. The victorious Thai forces sent the Champāsak king Xainyakumān to Thonburī where he acknowledged the suzerainty of the Siamese king and accepted that his kingdom would be tributary. The leaders of the ethnic Khmer and Kūy forces which had assisted the campaign were promoted, thus securing a line of control running from Khōrāt to the frontier region.

From 1781 Champāsak was a vassal state of Siam sending tribute from its various subsidiary *meuang* directly to Thonburī. Relations between Champāsak and

⁴ Martin Stuart-Fox, *The Lao Kingdom of Lān Xāng: Rise and Decline*, (Bangkok, White Lotus, 1998), pp. 111-113.

Viang Chan were estranged through the involvement of Champāsak forces in the Siamese attack on Viang Chan and subsequent Siamese domination of communication routes across the Khōrāt Plateau. Similarly relations between Champāsak and Cambodia were also weakened as internal power struggles in the Khmer court led to its submission to rival Thai and Vietnamese patrons.

With the founding of the Chakrī dynasty in 1782 Siamese forces began cementing their administrative control over the outer provinces of the Thai kingdom. Attapeu, Srīsakēt (1782) and Stueng Traeng (1784) which had been tributary to Champāsak were made directly answerable to Bangkok in their affairs.⁵ Meanwhile in Northern Cambodia Bântéay Méanchey and Siēm Réap were also drawn under the closer watch of Thai authorities through the promotion of Chao Phrayā Baen.

What was more important during this period was that the descendants of Phra Vôr who had rebelled against Viang Chan and Champāsak set up their own settlement in the vicinity of Ubon (1791) which became a loyal vassal of Bangkok. The renegade district of Nāng Rông was also pacified and attached to Burīram, thus ensuring a stable line of tributary *meuang* to the boundaries of the frontier region at its most crucial point, the Mekong River Valley.

The intrusion of the Siamese overlords into the Lao-Cambodian frontier region did not go without challenge. Yet the protests and uprisings of local leaders simply provided the opportunity for Siamese officials to place a local ally, Thao Fây Nā, a descendant of Phra Ta, on the Champāsak throne, thus further strengthening the strategic relationship between Ubon and Champāsak.

The reign of Thao Fây Nā was significant in the development of the Lao-Cambodian frontier region as he shifted the centre of political power northwards up the Mekong towards the Mūn River junction (Bān Kao Kan Gerng) and away from the ancient crossroads situated in the vicinity of the Khôn Falls. The purpose of this northern relocation was to extend control over newly acquired tributary *meuang* such

⁵ The territory of Stueng Traeng extended as far as Siēm Bouk during this period.

as Meuang Saphat (near Khamthông Yai), Ubon and Nakhôn Phanom.⁶ Under Thao Fây Nā the consolidation of territories along the northern frontier of the Champāsak kingdom became a priority, whereas his predecessors had led territorial expansions in southerly and westerly directions. Meanwhile the Siamese authorities continued to acknowledge the strategic significance of *meuang* located near the Khôn Falls, or more precisely along the Xē Kông River valley, as they placed the settlement of Siêm Pāng under their suzerainty in 1798.

In the early 19th century the ruling families of Attapeu and Stueng Traeng became linked through the lineage of Chao Kham, thus demonstrating the strong significance of trade exchanges which continued between the two eastern Lao *meuang* via the Xē Kông River.

In 1813 Siamese authorities permitted the use of Tônlé Repou and Không districts as safe havens for Khmer rebelling against the rule of Ang Chan, who had developed a close relationship with the Vietnamese. By providing refuge to the Khmer rebels the Siamese were able to extend their territorial influence over the west bank districts of the Mekong bordered by the Stueng Chinit. At the same time Siamese authorities intervened in the internal politics of the Champāsak kingdom as they separated opposing claimants to the throne and supported the breakaway of Meuang Ubon (Thao Kham) and Meuang Yasothôn (Thao Meuang). Thus the territory under the direct control of Champāsak only extended as far as the Lam Dôm Yai-Xē Mūn junction in the west and the mouth of the Xē Bang Hiang to the north.⁷ These shifts in allegiance brought instability to the Champāsak kingdom and thus prevented the Lao from extending their influence over Cambodia. Only the Xē Kông River Valley continued to develop as a corridor of growth as its slave trade was stimulated by increased Siamese demand.

It is significant to note that at this juncture in time the Siamese authorities

⁶ Pierre Lintingre, *Les Rois de Champassak*, (Pakxe, 1972), p. 15

⁷ Charles Archaimbault, "L'Histoire de Campasak", *Journal Asiatique* 294 (1961), pp. 519-595.

were restraining the southerly movement of the Lao or ‘*Dern Tāng Tai Lao*’, and using the Khmer, who were seeking the asylum of the Thai kingdom, as buffers in the outer tributary territories of the frontier region. Khmer resistance to the settlement of Vietnamese in Eastern Cambodia had already resulted in bloody conflict, and the Siamese were cultivating key allies in the frontier region who would serve them well in the future.

In 1814 the Siamese appointed an ethnic Lao official, Upahāt Thao Un, as the *chao meuang* of Siēm Pāng and occupied the territory of Stueng Traeng. Thao Un replaced the former Khmer mandarin Ponhea Muk whose line of ancestors had ruled the *srok* since post-Angkorian times.⁸ During the same period the Northern districts of Cambodia were formally incorporated into the tax regime of the Thai kingdom as the region of Preāh Vihéar and Mlu Prey was named the province of Promthep. The territory of Promthep bordered the kingdom of Champāsak and the *meuang* of Stueng Traeng and Tônlé Repou. In this way Siamese forces gained control over the overland trade routes running from the Lao-Cambodian frontier region right across the Northern Cambodian Plain and the Mūn River basin to the central Thai provinces. From this point on there was fierce competition between Bangkok and Phnom Pénh for the control of trade from the frontier region. This stimulated uprisings from minority Austroasiatic-speaking peoples who found themselves more heavily targeted for taxation and slave raids. Yet rather than focusing their anger against representatives of the Siamese kingdom the minority peoples turned against the Lao kingdom of Champāsak. This resulted in the further weakening of the kingdom and the heightened intervention of Thai forces in the frontier region.

In 1819 Rama II appointed Chao Nyō, the son of Chao Ānu ruler of Viang Chan, as king of Champāsak after he had succeeded in suppressing the uprising of the *phū wiset* Āy Sa in the highlands of Attapeu.⁹ The promotion of Chao Nyō did not please the population of Champāsak since it placed an outsider as the ruler of their

⁸ Norodom Sihanouk, Editorial - “The Definition of Our Frontiers”, *Kambuja*, April 1969, pp. 24-25

⁹ Martin Stuart-Fox, *The Lao Kingdom of Lān Xāng*, p. 118.

kingdom. He also established new *meuang* such as Không Chīam and Samiah (near Sālavan). Being in the weakened state it was, the frontier region was unable to challenge the Siamese dominion. The failure of Chao Nyō to defend the territorial integrity of old Champāsak, with the breakaway of Det Udom in 1825, turned the frustration of the Champāsak elite against him rather than his Siamese superiors.

The Chao Ānu uprising of 1826 provided the Champāsak elite with an opportunity to restore their local identity by leading their peoples in opposition against Chao Nyō. In his eagerness to support his father Chao Nyō failed to capitalize on the chagrin of the *meuang* and peoples most affected by the Siamese annexation of the frontier region. Instead he led attacks against *meuang* closely aligned to the Siamese in the *Huameuang Khamen Pā-dong* and on the Khōrāt Plateau. Thus by serving the strategic interests of Viang Chan Chao Nyō sacrificed the opportunity to consolidate the territories of Champāsak. In the aftermath of the Chao Ānu uprising more *meuang* (Sālavan, Sīthandôn, Samiah, Không Chīam and Khamthông Yai) were stripped from the Champāsak kingdom and were directed to pay tribute directly to Bangkok.¹⁰

From the beginning of its control by the Siamese, the Lao-Cambodian frontier region maintained an antagonism towards the traditional Lao and Cambodian centres of Viang Chan and Phnom Pénh. The governors of the Lao-Cambodian frontier *meuang* tended to oppose Lao and Cambodian royal power. Bangkok acted consciously to attract trade away from the Champāsak-Stueng Traeng region towards Siam, and impede trade relations with Viang Chan and Phnom Pénh. This obstruction was never complete, but the political and economic life of the region no longer had a clear connection with Viang Chan and Phnom Pénh.

The divide and rule policy employed by the Siamese as they supported local nobles to establish new *meuang* effectively strengthened their political power and economic interests in Laos and Cambodia. On the other hand, it ensured that Laos and Cambodia could never become strong enough in their own right to resist Siamese

¹⁰ Pierre Lintingre, *Les Rois de Champassak*, (Pakxe, 1972), p. 15.

encroachment by strengthening the power of a certain faction, as the Siamese had mistakenly done in the case of Chao Nyō.

Early in the 19th century the Lao and Khmer territories had lost the wealthy frontier region of Champāsak-Stueng Traeng which potentially could have provided manpower, rice harvests and forest products for a lucrative regional market increasingly in contact with the international economy. Champāsak and Stueng Traeng were completely removed from the traditional Lao and Cambodian *mandalas* into Siamese control. Both Laos and Cambodia lost significant percentages of their populations to the Siamese depopulation campaigns which were associated with the fallout of the Chao Ānu uprising and hegemonic rivalry between Siam and Vietnam. The frontier region's local and overseas trade was disrupted indirectly for more than a decade as a result of interventions, war and massive evacuations. Trade in the Lao-Cambodian frontier region was diverted to the Siamese kingdom which was modernized and strengthened.

The presence of Siamese power in the frontier region prolonged factionalism in Lao and Cambodian politics. The loss of the frontier region destroyed the balance of political and economic power of both Lao and Cambodian rulers in Phnom Pénh/Ũdông and Viang Chan/Luang Phrabāng. By the mid 19th century the loss of control over the economic basis to Siam and the powerful frontier aristocracy weakened both Cambodia and Laos as political entities.

In the wake of the Chao Ānu rebellion Lao nobles serving as clients of the Siamese kingdom found their status within the *Sakdinā* system had been diminished in contrast to their Cambodian neighbours.¹¹ This was acknowledgement of Cambodian assistance in repressing the rebel Lao. But it also reflected the need to secure loyalty from Khmer nobles for the successful implementation of Siam's strategic interests in Cambodia. In contrast Laos had already been stripped of its wealth, so there was little pressure to provide special dispensation to Lao nobles.

¹¹ Paitoon Mikusol, *Social and Cultural History of Northeastern Thailand from 1868-1910*, PhD, University of Washington, 1984, p. 86.

While Siam waged its wars against Vietnamese forces in Cambodia in the mid 19th century a huge amount of manpower and natural wealth was siphoned out of the Lao-Cambodian frontier region to support Thai armies and build the Thai kingdom.¹² Lao nobles from the frontier region submitted their allegiance to Siam since they feared a repeat of the Chao Ānu crackdown whereas Khmer nobles rallied to the Siamese as they grew tired of the instability brought about by the Siamese-Vietnamese power struggle.

After a period of time, relative peace returned to the Lao-Cambodian frontier region. Around 1845 the kingdom of Champāsak attempted to reassert its territorial integrity by incorporating the diverse *meuang/srok* located along the west bank of the Mekong, between the royal capital and the Thai occupied province of Promthep in Northern Cambodia. These settlements were located in poor country which was either marshy or barren, and thus had been bypassed when Siamese forces secured more strategic points located further eastwards in the Sāy Phū Luang hinterland. Nevertheless Champāsak was able to secure valuable territory when it incorporated the *meuang* of Phonthông and Buntharik located in the hinterland between Ubon and Champāsak.

In the mid 19th century large numbers of migrant Chinese began to enter the Lao-Cambodian frontier region serving as proxy trade and tax agents for the Siamese kingdom. The ethnic Chinese enjoyed privileges such as freedom of movement and were required to pay only a head tax. They thus stood outside of the Lao-Cambodian system of patronage corvée and had the advantage of being able to trade anywhere.¹³ In time, Chinese traders were joined by Shan, Burmese, Malay, Vietnamese and European merchants.

These traders brought manufactured goods into the frontier region where they

¹² Puangthong Rungswasdisab, *War and Trade: Siamese Interventions in Cambodia, 1767-1851*, PhD, University of Woollongong, 1995, pp. 130-155.

¹³ Paitoon Mikusol, pp. 100-103.

purchased livestock and agricultural produce in exchange. Their most important role in the development of the Lao-Cambodian frontier region was to accentuate the abundance of rare and valuable forest goods for the regional and international markets. Forest goods had always been in demand but their extensive exposure to trading syndicates by the Chinese merchants meant that there was a steep and steady increase of trading caravans in and out of the frontier region. Rama III's patronage of these Chinese merchants ensured the Siamese domination of this forest goods-based economy as most products were transited overland to Khōrāt and then on to the port of Bangkok. Smaller quantities were traded through the ports and markets of Phnom Pénh, Saigon and Chanthaburī.

The forest goods economy was significant because it drew upon the tributary relations established by the ethnic Lao with the Austroasiatic-speaking peoples of the Sāy Phū Luang hinterland. Since the 18th century migrating Lao had followed and explored the Tônlé San, Tônlé Srae Pôk and Xē Kông river systems building valuable contacts with various tribal groups. The Khmer had also built up important relations with the minority Austroasiatic-speaking peoples in the past, but for security reasons rather than economic gain.

Compared with the traditional gold and slave trading economies of the Lao-Cambodian frontier region, the forest goods economy was labour intensive and dependent upon good negotiating skills to maintain a stable supply. Through its reliance on a broad network of trading relations the forest goods economy was able to direct the attention of a large percentage of the local population towards Bangkok where previously many had remained in isolation living in the harmony of a subsistence culture. This was because business exchanges involving gold and slaves in the past had only concerned those belonging to the local elite. Slavery had alienated the tribal groups, who fled deeper into the mountains for safety. The growth of new settlements on the Khōrāt Plateau also stimulated new demands in the livestock trade of the Lao-Cambodian frontier region. The raising and sale of livestock from the frontier region rendered large numbers of people dependent on the Thai bureaucracy as well as the Bangkok-dominated economy.

The ascension of King Mongkut in 1851 was closely followed by a series of reforms in the Thai kingdom and changes to the Lao-Cambodian frontier region. His Thammayut-nikai Buddhist order established monasteries at Ubon and throughout the *Huameaung Khamen Pā-dong*. Within the core region of Champāsak-Stueng Traeng the Thammayut-nikai order received a mixed welcome. The Champāsak elite adopted the reformist order in order to seek the favour of the Thai king whereas the local population adhered to the traditional Mahā-nikai order, especially in Stueng Traeng where no temple for the reformists was built and local Lao remained firmly attached to the legacy of Phra Khrū.¹⁴ An important connection between the Thammayut-nikai temples and the economy of the frontier region was that many of the trading caravans guiding livestock and portering forest goods to the markets of Khōrāt and Bangkok were led by *āchār*. Thus while studying as monks many of these local merchants had been influenced by the political and social development of the Thai kingdom.

Prior to the establishment of a rail-link between Bangkok and Khōrāt in 1900, transportation and communication from Bangkok to the *meuang/srok* of the Lao-Cambodian frontier region was always difficult. Travelers were attacked by bandits, threatened by wild animals and exposed to fever and disease in the tropical forests and swamplands. There were two main routes from Bangkok to the frontier region: via Khōrāt, Burīram, Surin, Srīsakēt and Ubon; or via Prachīnburī, Sīsophôn, through the Chông Chom pass to Surin and on to Ubon. Roads were only built in the centres of settlements, while rough tracks linked the various communities of the Lao-Cambodian frontier. Between Ubon and Khōrāt an important river route operated along the Mūn River. River boats could make the journey between Ubon and Khōrāt in 15 to 30 days depending on whether they were travelling upstream or downstream.¹⁵

In 1859 Prince Norodom terminated the tributary relationship between the

¹⁴ Chao Sanhprasith Na Champassak, *The Royal Family of Champāsak*, private manuscript, (Paris, 1995), 144 pages.

¹⁵ Personal correspondence with Dr. Wutti Leenam, Rajabhat Institute lecturer and Phibun Mangsahan resident, July 1997; Paitoon Mikusol, p. 104

Khmer king and the Jarai kings of the eastern highlands. This was significant because it showed that after having lost control of the frontier region the Khmer kings recognized there was little advantage in maintaining a close relationship with the upland tribal peoples.

In 1860 the sudden death of the Khmer king Ang Duong triggered the collapse of the kingdom's political integrity, which impacted on the frontier region through the Si Votha revolt. As a direct consequence, the new Khmer king Norodom signed a treaty of protectorate with France in July 1863. This precipitated an anti-colonial revolt under the millenarian figure Pou Kombo.¹⁶ This uprising was centred in Eastern Cambodia but when colonial forces were sent to crush it, elements of the movement fled towards the sanctuary of the Lao frontier region.

In the mid 1860s the French authorities commissioned a Mekong survey expedition which passed through the frontier region. The expedition led by Captain Doudart de Lagrée and Lieutenant Francis Garnier sought to examine the viability of establishing a river trade route into China via the Mekong. It also aimed to legitimize the extension of French influence into the region as the Si Votha rebellion drew French intervention further up the Mekong basin.¹⁷ The members of the survey group carefully noted the presence and influence of Siamese commissioners posted at Stueng Traeng, Không, Bassac and Ubon. In Ubon important commercial links with Khōrāt and Viang Chan were identified as well as the presence of Shan traders.¹⁸ In addition the French noted that traders from Laos preferred to travel to Bangkok via Khōrāt rather than to Phnom Pénh because of a tax barrier on trade into Cambodia.

The Mekong expedition met with the king of Champāsak, Chao Khamsuk, at Bassac. The French sought to develop close relations with the Champāsak royal

¹⁶ John Tully, *Cambodia Under the Tricolour: King Sisowath and the 'Mission Civilisatrice' 1904-1927*, (Melbourne, Monash Asia Institute, 1996), p. 29.

¹⁷ Louis de Carné, *Travels on the Mekong: Cambodia, Laos and Yunnan*, Transl. Walter E.J.Tips, (Bangkok, White Lotus, 1995), p. 14

¹⁸ Louis de Carné, pp. 93 and 95

family as they knew the kingdom had been weakened since the Chao Ānu uprising. Still it was noted that some Lao enjoyed good relations with the Siamese and served as administrators in the conquered territories.¹⁹ For example, the *chao meuang* of Không exerted his authority over Stueng Traeng on the behalf of the Siamese. Meanwhile the region of Attapeu had a legendary status amongst the Lao because of the Xē Kông River's slave and gold trading, only the turmoil of the Tay Son rebellion had helped secure Attapeu within the Siamese sphere of influence.²⁰

In July 1867 the kingdom of Siam relinquished some of its more centrally located Cambodian territories to the French.²¹ Nevertheless the Thai secured the line of districts across Northern Cambodia by making them dependencies of *meuang* located north of the Dangrek Range. Two years later the Siamese authorities ordered the mass conscription of *corvée* labourers from the Lao-Cambodian frontier region. These conscripts were sent to Eastern Siam where they constructed government offices for the purpose of accommodating and processing envoys from the Northern Cambodian dependencies of Sīsophôn, Siêm Réap, Mlu Prey and Stueng Traeng who were making the journey to Bangkok to present taxes, and receive royal appointments, as well as to expand trade.²²

In 1874 Rama V initiated his series of anti-slavery acts. In response the French abolished the practice of slavery in Cambodia in 1877. These decrees had a major impact on traditional Lao-Cambodian trade relations in the frontier region since the slave market in Phnom Pénh was closed off. In contrast the Thai slavery reforms were relatively moderate and introduced over time, so all sectors of the frontier region economy became oriented towards Bangkok. Members of the Cambodian elite who had profited from the slave trade responded by joining forces with Si Votha and led another uprising against the interference of French officials in the affairs and political

¹⁹ Louis de Carné, p. 12

²⁰ Louis de Carné, pp. 71, 83 and 85

²¹ Manich Jumsai, *History of Thailand and Cambodia*, Revised Edition, (Bangkok, Chalermnit, 1996), p. 176.

²² Paitoon Mikusol, p. 116

culture of the Khmer kingdom. Si Votha and his partisans based their resistance movement close to the Siamese-administered territories of the frontier region.

Meanwhile in Champāsak king Chao Khamsuk began to realize his opportunity to strengthen his kingdom as both the French and the Thai competed to secure their influence in the region. Chao Khamsuk was unable to expand his territory but he did cultivate stronger patron-client relations with local nobles as he raised the status of their *bān* (villages) to *meuang* (districts). The *chao meuang* of Mūnlapamôk sent a number of subjects under the leadership of Phra Vongsa Soradet to establish a settlement at Thā Kalān on the Tônlé San.²³ Nevertheless the Thai authorities were able to maintain a tight rein on these developments as new *chao meuang* were required to send a son or relative to serve as royal pages in Bangkok. Through their time at the royal court these subjects of the frontier region became quickly influenced by the protocols and politics of the Thai kingdom. They studied the Siamese administrative system and made valuable contacts with the Thai elite. When compared with the Lao and Cambodian political systems few of these junior officials would ever have been provided with the opportunity to mix with elite and educated circles of men and women, as well as foreign entrepreneurs and professionals.

In 1877 the French explorer Dr. Jules Harmand penetrated the Bôlavēns Plateau in the course of a survey expedition through Attapeu and Champasak. Harmand began his expedition with a detour as he avoided the Si Votha rebellion and arrived at Bassac. From Bassac he journeyed by elephant over the lowlands south of the Bôlavēns Plateau to Attapeu. From there he explored the Xē Kông and Xē Kamān river systems, and then made his way up onto the Bôlavēns Plateau via the Nam Nôy. On the tablelands Harmand studied the *Lao Thoeng* tribal groups and then traveled westwards to Bassac, from where he continued his survey north to Nâkhon Phanom.

Harmand noted that the Siamese extended their authority as far east as Attapeu, thereafter the territories fell to the control of the independent *Lao Thoeng*

²³ “Monographie de la Province de Stung-Treng”, *Bulletin de la Societe des Etudes Indochinoises de Saigon*, No. 64, 1st semestre (1913), 26 pages.

tribal groups. He praised the region's rich agricultural potential but also noted the many obstacles to overland and riverborne transport. Harmand noted the local slave trade which integrated Attapeu, Bassac and Stueng Traeng through the passage of convoys supervised by Malay, Chinese and local slave merchants to the markets of Khōrāt, Bangkok and Phnom Pénh.²⁴ While exploring the Xē Kamān River, Harmand learnt of the capture of Vietnamese from the frontier of Binh Dinh by *Lao Thoeng* raiding parties for sale to the ethnic Lao.²⁵ Harmand noted with interest how the Lao and the Chinese were afraid of the Attapeu region due to its history of rebellion and the large populations of *Lao Thoeng*. The tributary tribes of *Lao Thoeng* performed corvée and sent gold to Bangkok to honour their Siamese masters.²⁶ Harmand noted that the *Lao Thoeng* groups living on the Bôlavēns Plateau had adopted the culture and customs of the ethnic Lao.²⁷ Some tribal groups such as the Nyaheun were oppressed by the ethnic Lao who paid very little for the valuable cardamom and other forest goods collected by the *Lao Thoeng*.²⁸ Harmand noted the presence of foreign merchants, especially Shans, operating the trade between the Eastern highlands and Khōrāt. These traders were multi-lingual and sold large quantities of textiles to the Austroasiatic-speaking tribal groups.²⁹

In 1882 Rama V initiated major administrative reforms throughout the Thai kingdom. The major outcomes of these reforms were that centrally appointed officials were sent to administer the frontier territories and that Siamese titles replaced Lao and Khmer ones. Rama V appointed two senior officials to maintain a close eye on the developments in the Lao-Cambodian frontier region, his own younger brother Krom Luang Phichitprichakorn (Ubon) and Phrayā Mahā Ammataya-thibodi (Nakhôn

²⁴ F.J. Harmand, *Laos and the Hilltribes of Indochina*, Transl. Walter E.J. Tips, (Bangkok, White Lotus, 1997), p. 21

²⁵ F.J. Harmand, p. 51

²⁶ F.J. Harmand, pp. 43 and 45

²⁷ F.J. Harmand, p. 91

²⁸ F.J. Harmand, pp. 20-21

²⁹ F.J. Harmand, pp. 79 and 82

Champāsak).³⁰ The Siamese government also established military bases from which to monitor security in the frontier region. Close relations between the royal authorities and the Chinese traders operating in the Lao-Cambodian frontier region were also maintained.

In 1884 the Siamese authorities changed the name of the district of Meuang Selamphao to Thala Bârivăt.³¹ This was possibly to maintain Khmer support in their opposition to the French as King Norodom signed a full new agreement with France that transferred control of the provincial administration into the hands of French-appointed Résidents. The French administrators introduced a new system of taxes which affected the Cambodian people in a direct and immediate fashion which was deemed oppressive. Once more protests at the growing influence of the French in Cambodian affairs led to popular opposition. In 1885 Si Votha regathered his supporters in another revolt against French rule.³² As before Cambodian rebels utilized the sanctuary of the Lao-Cambodian frontier region as they concentrated their forces in the vicinity of Krâchéh and the wilderness of the Stueng Chinit.

In 1886 the Siamese authorities attached the kingdom of Champāsak to their administration in Ubon. At that time a new Commissioner, Phrayā Srīsinghathep, ordered the construction of two river steamers so as to secure commercial dominance over trade flowing from the frontier region. The new steamers were expected to halve the time needed to transport goods along the Mūn River, thus providing stiff competition for French merchants who were just beginning to push their sphere of operations into the frontier region.³³ Siamese commercial interests were also reinforced through the establishment of a trading post at Thā Kalān in 1887, located on the upper reaches of the Tônlé San. Thā Kalān was able to draw trade from ethnic Lao settlements such as Lumphăt, Bôkæo and Bôkham which had already blended successfully into the economy of the upland tribal groups. The Siamese thereby

³⁰ Paitoon Mikusol, p. 126.

³¹ Manich Jumsai, *History of Laos*, 2nd ed., (Bangkok, Chalermnit, 1971), p.137.

³² John Tully, p. 24.

³³ Paitoon Mikusol, p. 104

captured the highland forest goods market, which had fallen from Khmer control during the turmoil of the Si Votha rebellion.

The French directly and indirectly attempted to gain economic influence in the frontier region by sending survey expeditions into the eastern highlands (crossing over from Annam) and permitting foreign traders to move into Siamese held territories. These strategies attracted both positive and negative results. Commercial agents posted at Stueng Traeng assessed the frontier region's natural economy and evaluated the marketing techniques of Chinese merchants and Siamese officials. They quickly realized that the major centres of commercial activity were Ubon, Bassac, Không and Stueng Traeng. Explorers such as Dr. Jules Harmand and Captains Cupet, De Malglaive and Rivière were able to identify local grievances attributed to the Siamese which were then able to be exploited in French attempts to gain local support. In contrast, foreign traders were targeted by local bandits, as in the case of a Malay merchant who was attacked while trading in Mlu Prey and Tônlé Repou. In the late 1880s French officials accused Siamese authorities in Ubon of association with rebel forces from Northern Cambodia, and threatened to take action if the Siamese continued.

The Siamese authorities were well aware that the French intended to expand their sphere of political influence, as well as economic activities, up into the Middle Mekong. Hence they took appropriate measures to better protect their interests in the Lao-Cambodian frontier region. First, they waived tax payments as the region suffered poor harvests during seasons of drought and flood. They also improved local infrastructure and opened up government schools and post offices in the key population and business centres between Champāsak and Khōrāt. More importantly, in 1890 a telegraph line was established which connected Siamese officials in Champāsak with their superiors in Bangkok. Thus efforts were made to change the image of an isolated outpost to one of a key spoke supporting the kingdom's integrity.

At the same time the drafting of local Lao and Khmer continued. They were first sent to Nakhôn Champāsak and Ubon for military training, then assigned to guard strategic points along the frontier. Efforts were also made to combine the Lao

dominated-territories of the frontier region with the *Huameuang Khamen Pā-dong* in a new administrative circle, *mônthon*, created under Phra Phitsanuthep.³⁴

In 1891 Rama V sent his brother, Krom Luang Phichitprichakorn, to the eastern edge of the kingdom to serve as High Commissioner for the *Huameuang Lao Kao* (Old Lao Principalities) in Nakhôn Champāsak.³⁵ The *Huameuang Lao Kao* was an important administrative region because it combined the Middle Mekong and Lower Īsān Lao *meuang* into a single unit. In the frontier region tensions rose between Thai and French officials, as the Commissioner of Stueng Traeng became embroiled in a boat detention affair with the Résident of Sâmbour. The Résident of Sâmbour was a key figure in plans to extend French authority into the Lao-Cambodian frontier region as a result of his commercial reports detailing trade movements along the Mekong between Cambodia and Laos. He also studied the difficulties and loop-holes associated with the collection of taxes along the frontier with Siam.

In late 1891 the Si Votha rebellion ground to a halt with the death of its leader in the remote jungles of Prey Krak in Siēm Bouk district on the frontier between Krâchéh and Stueng Traeng. Supporters of the renegade prince either submitted to the colonial authorities or temporarily faded from the political scene. Thus this opened the way for French authorities to begin seriously planning their push into the Lao-Cambodian frontier region. In 1892 the French established a Posts and Telegraphs office at Stueng Traeng under the direction of the commercial agent, M. de Coulgeans.³⁶

The Thai meanwhile attempted to strengthen their own control. After a brief period, the ethnic Khmer and Kūy dominated *meuang* of the *Huameuang Lao Kao* were detached from it and placed under their own Commissioner of the *Huameuang Khamen Pā-dong* who was based at Khu Khan. Thus the Thai authorities continued to

³⁴ Paitoon Mikusol, p. 127.

³⁵ Paitoon Mikusol, p. 128.

³⁶ “Monographie de la Province de Stung-Treng”, *Bulletin de la Societe des Etudes Indochinoises de Saigon*, No. 64, 1st semestre (1913), 26 pages.

prioritize the Forest Khmer over the Lao. Meanwhile within the frontier region itself tensions built between local and Thai appointed officials as the High Commissioner enforced strict Thai justice on complacent local nobles.

In March 1893 Auguste Pavie informed the Thai government that France intended to secure the east bank territories of the Mekong River Valley. The Siamese protested but the French continued with their plans. The French annexation of the Lao-Cambodian frontier region commenced in April 1893. Under the authorization of Chancellor Bastard, the French Résident Supérieur of Cambodia, a military column was sent to Stueng Traeng on the 1st April. The French force known as the 'Mission Bastard' was commanded by Captain Thoreux and included 180 mostly Vietnamese soldiers. After securing Stueng Traeng, Thoreux's troops proceeded north to Dôn Khôn on the 4th April.³⁷ Siêm Pāng was occupied by the French forces the following day.³⁸ Thus the French secured three of the most important trading points in the Lao-Cambodian frontier region in less than a week.

The Siamese government protested these actions, and Siamese military outposts defended their territory. On the 3rd May Thoreux was captured by Siamese forces on Dôn Khôn and sent to Bangkok. The situation quickly deteriorated leading to the Pāknam Incident. Thai authorities were forced to relinquish control over all Lao territories east of the Mekong through the signing of the Franco-Siamese Treaty of October 3rd, 1893.

With this agreement Siam lost direct control over Không, Attapeu, Bān Meuang, and the Sī Phan Dôn but was able to keep Bassac, Pāk Mūn, Mūnlapamôk and Tônlé Repou. The French occupation ruptured the dominion of Bassac over Stueng Traeng and Attapeu thus creating tension in the Lao kingdom's relationship with the Thai. In compensation the Thai tried to direct Lao influence towards the region of Mlu Prey while also lobbying local officials in opposition to the French.

The Franco-Siamese Treaty included several terms which led to the partial

³⁷ Manich Jumsai, *History of Laos*, 2nd ed., (Bangkok, Chalermit, 1971), pp. 188-190.

³⁸ RSC 389, 1905, CAOM

loss of Siamese control over the Lao-Cambodian frontier, but the most significant was a 25 kilometer demilitarized zone on the west bank of the Mekong. The treaty specified that local leaders would administer the zone using Lao customary law rather than Siamese government functionaries. The French installed colonial commercial and navigation agents at Champāsak, Pāk Mūn, Khemarāt, Stueng Traeng and other points along the Mekong, thereby increasing their economic presence in the frontier region. The problem was that the French authorities failed to comprehend the complex matrix of patron-client relations which under-pinned the local economy based on the trade of forest goods from gatherers in the highlands to the sales agents in the emporia of Bangkok. The Mekong boundary drawn between French and Siamese administered Lao territories failed to act as a barrier against Siamese influence, because the river was an artery for the westward flow of trade to Bangkok.

Another provision of the 1893 Franco-Siamese Treaty was for extraterritorial rights for French subjects living in Siam. This was a major problem for the Siamese administrators since French subjects (Lao, Khmer, Vietnamese, Chinese) were able to exploit special privileges so as to evade Siamese justice, taxation and national service. This created a situation where the rule of law was both challenged and ignored by French and Siamese authorities. Both thereby encouraged bandit groups operating in the frontier region who were able to exploit legal and more importantly economic loop-holes in one or the other administrations.

The imposition and collection of customs and taxes were major aims of the French administrators in the frontier region, along with the establishment of monopolies over alcohol, opium and salt. The trade in livestock continued to be a key aspect of the frontier region's economy. The French sought to limit and redirect the sale and traffic of elephants and buffalo by controlling the various routes of commerce which the Siamese had historically dominated.³⁹

RSC 259, Correspondence with French Consul in Ubon, 1894, CAOM

In late 1893 Rama V appointed his half-brother, Krom Luang Sanphasitthiprasong, to replace Krom Luang Phichitprichakorn as High Commissioner of *Huameuang Lao Kao*.⁴⁰ What is most significant during this period is that the High Commissioner's office was moved from Nakhôn Champāsak to Ubon and that the region was renamed *Mônthon Lao Kao*. Thus the previously close relationship between the Champāsak elite and the court of Bangkok was slightly altered. Between 1893 and 1896 the Siamese Commissioner Krom Luang Sanphasitthiprasong was actively engaged in suppressing banditry in *Mônthon Lao Kao* so as to deny the French the opportunity of intervening further in regional affairs.¹

Although France had gained control of all the Lao territories on the left bank, and all islands in the Mekong River, it was still interested in the Khōrāt Plateau. France established Consul Generals in Ubon and Khōrāt (M. de Coulgeans) in an effort to expand its political influence amongst the Lao and Khmer populations of the Īsān region. From 1893-1894 the French constructed a telegraph line linking Stueng Traeng with Meuang Không and Bassac. They also established a postal service. From 1894 to 1918 the Résidents in the frontier region were in regular contact with the French consulate in Ubon. Correspondence between the Consul and the Résidents covered political affairs, immigration, the delimitation of frontiers, surveillance of foreigners, piracy, among other matters.

The inhabitants of the Lao-Cambodian frontier region were not quickly attracted to the sale of French goods at the trading posts established along the Mekong. They preferred the European goods which were sold at lower cost by Chinese merchants who were connected to the Siamese economy. These European goods which were usually of German and British origin were also of a higher quality compared to goods which came via Phnom Pénh.

In 1895 the east bank Lao territories were divided into Upper and Lower Laos by the French colonial administration. The Viang Chan code of justice was applied in

⁴⁰ Paitoon Mikusol, pp. 130-131.

the Lao *meuang* by the *āyasid* and local officials. M. Tournier, the Commandant Supérieur of Lower Laos, had the task of organizing Không, Stueng Traeng, Bān Meuang and Attapeu. During this period Southern Laos developed close ties with the kingdom of Cambodia since the French colonial administration was already well established in the central Cambodian provinces.

On the 20th June, 1895 Stueng Traeng was formally placed under French administration.⁴¹ A map showing the administrative organization of Stueng Traeng included the districts of Ânlǒng Vêng, Chǒâm Khsant, Mlu Prey, Kâmpông Srâlau, Spǒng, Thala Bârivăt, Stueng Traeng, Siêm Pāng, Veun Sai and Lumphăt. European administrators were posted at Chǒâm Khsant, Thala Bârivăt, Stueng Traeng, Siêm Pāng and Veun Sai while local officials were in charge elsewhere. As several passes ran through the Dangrek Range linking the frontier region with Siam, the French were quickly forced to increase their non-native personnel.²

In 1895 the French Commissioners made an expedition to the *Lao Thoeng* (upland tribal groups) districts in the vicinity of Bān Meuang. The Lao were recognized to have special relations with particular *Lao Thoeng* communities as the tribal peoples collected forest goods and captured Vietnamese as slaves, in an active trade which operated along the Xēdōn valley and on the Bôlavēns Plateau.⁴² Historically the *Lao Thoeng* seized Vietnamese from Binh Dinh and Thanh Hoa, to trade them with the Lao for buffalo and common forms of merchandise. In Meuang Attapeu the population had 500 Vietnamese slaves, 300 *Lao Thoeng* slaves and 200 Lao slaves, whom the French freed. Although the French established a small presence in Attapeu local officials continued to collect taxes from the *Lao Thoeng* for Bangkok. The Lao generally managed taxation on an individual basis while the *Lao Thoeng* sent communal tribute.⁴³

HCC //33, Frontiers with Siam, 25/7/1904, CAOM

RSL D//1, 1895, Bassac Monograph, CAOM

RSL D//1, 1895, Attapeu Report, CAOM

It was noted that the route from Attapeu to Stueng Traeng could take from 10-20 days, depending on seasonal conditions and whether travelers were going with or against the current. River transport and communications between Attapeu, Siêm Păng and Stueng Traeng were hindered by the Kaeng Dôn Tai rapids. The French sought to attract Europeans to exploit the mineral wealth and agricultural potential of the Bôlavēns Plateau. There was also an urgent need for labour since local sources of manpower were inadequate for intensive farming. In contrast the Thai still controlled the more densely populated districts of Phonhông and Champāsak. French officials sought to create a new settlement of freed Vietnamese slaves between Meuang Kao and Meuang Mai which would provide them with a loyal population.⁴⁴

A freight shipping service was established in 1896 between Stueng Traeng and Southern Laos. Timber from the frontier region was shipped downstream to Sâmbour, Krâchéh and Saigon. Coolie workers were brought upstream to provide the necessary labour. French officials discussed the matter of delineating the Lao-Cambodian frontier. Khôn was identified as a good natural boundary but the population of Stueng Traeng was heavily dependent on the supply of rice from Meuang Không so the boundary was maintained between Stueng Traeng and Krâchéh.⁴⁵

In 1897 the French Résident in Stueng Treng received reports from his counterpart in Attapeu as this was the most efficient way to correspond with the Commandant Supérieur in Không. A report from Attapeu reviewed the colonial policy regarding the *Lao Thoeng*. This was because ‘free’ *Lao Thoeng* groups had been raiding Lao and tributary *Lao Thoeng* villages, and the French wanted to stabilize the situation in the face of Siamese-instigated opposition to their rule. An expedition was sent into the eastern territories to assess the problem. The French decided that it was necessary to establish direct contacts with the *Lao Thoeng* since Lao officials were unable to extend their authority effectively into these isolated districts.⁴⁶

RSL D//1, 30/6/1895-1896, Attapeu, CAOM

RSC File 25652, NAC

RSL D//1, 17/2/1897, Attapeu, CAOM

In March the French Commission under M. Reinach at Bān Meuang issued a report detailing the economy, politics and culture of the local region. On the plains of the Mekong River Valley the husbandry of livestock dominated the local economy. There was an annual sale of cattle and buffalo to regional markets. Bān Saphai, located adjacent to Mūnlapamôk, was actively engaged in this trade with Ubon. The Bôlavēn, Brao, Souk, Ālak, and Nyāheun *Lao Thoeng* groups sent tribute in the form of forest products to Bassac. The *Lao Thoeng* and Kūy harvested Chinese nettle, allspice and a wild variety of cardamom. Chinese merchants sought to capture the cardamom market associated with these tribal groups for themselves, in competition with the French who encouraged the development of cardamom gardens. The Chinese had a strong demand for cardamom, as it was used in their traditional medicines. The *Lao Thoeng* and Kūy exchanged valuable cardamom for salt, cloth, metal pots and bottles. The French calculated the costs and profits for the purchase, freight and trade of cardamom from Bassac to Phnom Pénh. Their analysis showed it was necessary to charge a five percent service fee. This drew entrepreneurs but not large scale investors to the frontier region since superior distribution infrastructure already existed in Siam.⁴⁷

River patrols operated between Meuang Không and Pāk Mūn. Roads were constructed over and to the Bôlavēns Plateau. There was a need to monitor the trade and portage of cardamom by oxen and elephants as important revenue was collected in its taxation.³ Goods were brought from the Xēdōn valley to Bassac then on to Phnom Pénh, or alternatively to Pāk Mūn then on to Ubon. Rice was traded with Phnom Pénh, and its cultivation was strongly encouraged by the French. The Lao cultivated cotton and indigo, and had developed an active textile industry which attracted traders from Ubon, Khōrāt and Bangkok. A large number of cattle and buffalo were being transited to Ubon and Cambodia via Khôn. In one year (1896-1897) 1224 cattle, 350 buffalo and 12 horses were traded. In general, quantities of traded goods were hard to calculate except for cardamom due to the porous nature of the Mekong frontier. Studies were made of monetary exchanges with Siam. These showed the local peoples preferred the use of Siamese coins over French notes.

RSL D//1, 1897 Notice Ban Muang Commission, CAOM

The French sought to create a monopoly over trade with the *Lao Thoeng* and Kūy by meeting their interests and needs, but to do this the French had to compete with the Lao and Chinese to gain control of the domestic economy. Conflicting with this was the increased competition of the Siamese Chinese for the control of the regional economy.

The Commission at Meuang Không also produced a report of the territory's culture and economy. The Siamese had appointed the Lao as the local elite, and these were retained. River patrols were conducted between Khemarāt and Dôn Khôn. Patrol boats were manned by Vietnamese teams but piloted by Lao captains. The local police force radiated between Bān Meuang, Attapeu, Sālavan and Stueng Traeng when conducting patrols. Most recruits to the colonial security forces were Vietnamese from Tonkin, but efforts had been made to form volunteer brigades of Lao.

The main produce of Meuang Không was glutinous rice. The French wanted to encourage the cultivation of non-glutinous rice for the consumption of the Khmer, Vietnamese and European markets. Rice was exported to Cambodia to produce “*sra sa*” (white alcohol). Resin and gumlac were collected in large amounts and traded with the Chinese. Chinese traders were the most active of the local merchants, reaching north to Sālavan and east towards Attapeu with their trading operations. Along with forest goods the Chinese purchased rice and salted meats, usually in exchange for textiles. Dôn Sang Phai and Bassac were the two main trading points.⁴⁸ There was an annual hunt for elephants and rhinoceros at the beginning of winter (November). Captured elephants were taken to the Kūy village of Bān Pha Phô for training. Once trained the elephants were sold not just at Khôn, but as far afield as Viang Chan, Luang Phrabāng and Burma.⁴

In April 1897 Siēm Pāng was attached to the administration of Meuang Không. The *chao meuang* of Siēm Pāng was a Laotian while the *upahāt* was Khmer, the *rāxavong* Laotian and the *rāxabut* Lao-Khmer. In the local administration of six

officials, three were Khmer, two Lao and one Lao-Khmer. French officials wished to return Khmer titles to local officials and change Lao for Khmer names in the territory. The French official Pierre Guesde viewed the influence of Meuang Không and Bassac in the province as a malign force, and he believed that Siêm Păng rightly belonged to Cambodia as a part of Stueng Traeng.⁴⁹

The Siamese government meanwhile maintained control of the Khōrāt Plateau through the reformation of its administration into the *Thesaphiban* system of 1897 which established a national hierarchy down to the village level and placed local nobles on fixed salaries. In 1898 in the newly named *Mônthon Īsān* roughly 80% of taxes collected were sent to Bangkok, whereas in the Khmer dominated *Mônthon Būraphā* which included Bătdâmbâng and Siêm Réap, only 66% of taxes were taken by the central government.⁵⁰ Thus the local Khmer nobles received more wealth than the Lao under the Siamese administration to encourage resistance to the French. The payment of *ngun suai*, ‘levy money’, was banned and Lao and Khmer subjects were required to pay a head tax and perform *corvée*. This generated local opposition and increased official corruption but similar conditions existed in French-controlled parts of the frontier region. The Siamese reforms subverted the traditional hierarchies and politico-economic relationships between Bangkok and the local nobility of the frontier region, but they strengthened the integrity of the kingdom. As of 1899 peoples of different ethnicities, including Lao, Khmer and Kūy, became nationals of Siam.

In 1898 another Lao official by the name of Pha-Phak-Di created a new settlement upstream from Thā Kalān which he named Bān Veun Sai. He was supported in this endeavor by Chao Tham, a relative of Chao Khamsuk. Chao Tham and Pha-Phak-Di were able to gain influence over the tribal groups located to the north and east of Veun Sai. Veun Sai grew rapidly spreading as far as Thā Kalān in just a few years. Veun Sai was also referred to as Mūnlapamôk in recognition of the early Lao settlers who entered the highlands. Later Pha-Phak-Di was appointed *balat* of Mūnlapamôk by the King of Cambodia. He was given special responsibility for

HCC //33, April 1897, CAOM

⁵⁰ Paitoon Mikusol, p. 133.

managing tribal relations.⁵¹

Around 1899 the first *phū mī bun* activists began to organize resistance against the domineering reformist Siamese and French administrations. The purpose of the *phū mī bun* movements was to establish independent principalities beyond French and Siamese control. The leaders of the *phū mī bun* revolt in the Lao and Khmer dominated lowlands of the Lao-Cambodian frontier were mostly *āchār*. They were supported in their public protests by *mô lām* dance troupes and various ascetics who had enjoyed the isolation and independence of the old system of tributary relations.

In the western section of the Lao-Cambodian frontier region the *phū mī bun* movement was led by Thao Bunchan and Ong Prasatthong (Ong Man). Thao Bunchan, a relative of the *chao meuang* of Khu Khan, had become a *phū mī bun* after he was overlooked for promoted under the *Thesaphiban* system. He retreated to the Dangrek Mountains where he organized a following of several thousand people. Ong Prasatthong was originally from Laos but he had crossed the Mekong and established a following near Khemarāt.

In 1899 King Khamsuk ended his reign. Thereafter the heirs to the line of Champāsak were titled as princes. Chao Khamsuk had seven wives and thus left the Na Champāsak clan with broad influence through the region with its numerous family connections.⁵² Laos was united as a single administrative unit directed by Résident Supérieur Tournier, who was based in Viang Chan. Even so, Governor General of Indochina, Paul Doumer, reported that the native inhabitants of the Xē Kông and Xēdōn River valleys remained unsettled under the new colonial administration of Laos.

By 1900 the French Résident in Stung Traeng was linked by overland routes

⁵¹ “Monographie de la Province de Stung-Treng”, *Bulletin de la Societe des Etudes Indochinoises de Saigon*, No. 64, 1st semestre (1913), 26 pages.

⁵² Chao Sanhprasith Na Champassak, *The Royal Family of Champāsak*, private manuscript, (Paris, 1995), 144 pages.

to the Commissioners in Pākxē and Savannakhēt as well as officials in Darlac. More French colonists began settling in Stueng Traeng, bringing coolies with them. The French began registering forestry concessions in Stueng Traeng. They also began appointing non-local officials as administrators in the Cambodian frontier districts. The ethnic Khmer, Mey, who originated from Kâmpông Siey was appointed the *balat* of Stueng Traeng.⁵³ A Cambodian official from Krâchéh, Ua, was appointed governor of Veun Sai.

In April 1901 an anti-colonial revolt erupted in the Bôlavēns Plateau region of Southern Laos. This was led by Bac My (an Ālak chieftain from Sālavan province) and Kommadam (a Nyāheun chief from Nông Met). Bac My claimed to be a *phū mī bun* and gave himself the honorific title, Ong Kaeo, “Lord Gem”.⁵⁴ He regularly organized religious festivals or *bun* at which he gave sermons encouraging the local population, mostly Bôlavēn, Nyāheun, Ālak, Kūy and Taōy, to revolt against the French. Lowland Lao partly supported the Bôlavēns revolt as they resented the suppression of their profitable slave trade.

In the Īsān region of Siam a similar uprising against administrative interference developed in 1902. In March Siamese government forces attacked and defeated the *phū mī bun* movement of Thao Bunchan even as Ong Man and Ong Lek led a revolt against Thai authorities based at Ubon. The Siamese commissioners reacted quickly by sending forces from Khōrāt to attack the *phū mī bun* base at Trakānphutphon. Following clean-up operations were conducted throughout *Mônthon Īsān* so as to bring the *phū mī bun* movement to a complete halt. The crackdown was particularly harsh along the Dangrek Range frontier, so as to deny French security forces the excuse to enter Lower Īsān. Between 1902 and 1905 French *Garde Indigène* forces had the task of pacifying the Bôlavēns, yet this operation only covered the western edge of the plateau, and once it was completed anti-colonial resistance activities revived. To increase the French presence, the Résident of Stueng Traeng provided additional timber and forestry concessions to *colons* while also urging the settlement

⁵³ RSC File 12717, NAC.

⁵⁴ Martin Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, (Melbourne, Cambridge, 1997), pp. 34-35.

of Vietnamese labourers in the highlands of Veun Sai.

On the 7th October 1902 a convention was signed between the French and the Siamese, which returned Champāsak and Mlu Prey to France in exchange for Chanthaburī. The 25 kilometer demilitarized zone was abolished, but foreign nationals were not permitted to command Siamese troops in this zone. The French banned the Siamese construction of river ports, irrigation and transport canals, railways and other infrastructure in the Mekong river basin without their consent. This meant the traditional trading economies of the Mekong basin did not benefit from by Siamese infrastructure investment. Instead the centres of economic activity in Siam shifted westwards to places like Ubon and the Lao-Cambodian frontier fell victim to the stagnation of the French monopolies. The Siamese gained an advantage in this exchange of territories as they secured the prosperous and strategically located coastal region of Chanthaburī while the French acquired the backward and politically insecure territories of Champāsak and Mlu Prey.⁵ There the local elite was divided. Chao Nyuy (Rāxadanai) was appointed the twelfth heir to the throne of Champāsak in 1903, but the regent, Chao Sīsurat Phanh (1878-1903), refused to live under French rule and fled to Ubon.⁵⁵

The French attempted to establish new trade routes in the frontier region. Two officials, M. Fontano and M. Baudeine, studied the route between Stueng Traeng and Attapeu, hoping to promote it as a trade corridor into Cambodia and on to Saigon.⁵⁶ In August 1903 the French in Bassac reported that the pacification of the Bôlavēns was progressing smoothly now that tax abuses by the Lao had been identified. With better security established in the highlands the French quickly anticipated the development of the Mekong hinterland.⁵⁷

In January 1904 the French ethnographer Claudius Madrolle conducted an ethnographic survey of Stueng Traeng province.⁶ He also studied the various tribal

⁵⁵ Chao Sanhprasith Na Champassak, *The Royal Family of Champāsak*, private manuscript, (Paris, 1995), 144 pages.

RSL F//1, July-August 1903, Attapeu, CAOM

RSL F//1, August 1903, Bassac, CAOM

groups of Southern Laos. Madrolle noted that the people of Mlu Prey mostly had Kūy names while those people living in Southern Bassac had Lao as well as Kūy names. Madrolle extended his studies to the minority cultures of Northern and Northeastern Siam, seeking to assist French claims over the region with the collection of ethnographic data tracing the historical extent of Lao culture. In the Northeast and Eastern regions of Siam, Madrolle noted the rich mixture of peoples and cultures through his study of family names.

On the 13th February, 1904, Siam ceded the west bank territory of Champāsak to France and the Cambodian provinces of Mlu Prey (including Tônlé Repou) and Stueng Traeng. Thereafter the Thai were forced to develop underground contacts for their intelligence of economic and political developments within the frontier region. Siêm Pāng was absorbed into the administration of Stueng Traeng and additional government posts were established at Siêm Pāng, Mūnlapamôk (Veun Sai), Kâmpông Srâlau and Tônlé Repou (Thala Bârivăt). All reported to the Résident in Stueng Traeng.⁵⁸

King Sisowath was named as the new king of Cambodia by a council presided over by the Résident Supérieur of Cambodia. In June the Résident Supérieur of Cambodia contacted his counterpart in Laos regarding the demarcation of a new frontier between their territories. The French broke Darlac off from Laos so as to meet their strategic interests in Vietnam. By isolating Darlac from its traditional tributary/trade links with Champāsak and Siam the French sought to deny the minority peoples any geographic and political cohesion that might encourage rebellion. They also wanted Vietnamese to move into and develop the agricultural potential of the highlands. Greater diplomacy was applied to the separation of Stueng Traeng from Laos as tributary links were well established between Bassac and Tônlé Repou. Both Résidents discussed at length the boundary between Tônlé Repou and Mūnlapamôk and the confused status of Siêm Pāng. The mixture of Lao, Khmer, Kūy and Austroasiatic-speaking tribal groups across and along river systems raised questions with respect to the drawing of boundaries. Communities of Kūy, Brao and Kravet were nevertheless

RSL E//6, 1911, Bassac, CAOM

divided when the boundary between Laos and Cambodia was settled. It appeared French officials were making efforts to appease King Sisowath.⁵⁹

In July 1904 the Conceil Supérieur de l'Indochine issued a special report regarding the readjustment of its territories. The joining of Stueng Traeng to Cambodia was regarded as restoring the historical integrity of the kingdom.⁶⁰ It was noted in the district of Kâmpông Kasseng that the inhabitants of the interior areas were Kūy, who interacted with the Lao of Bassac more than other Kūy groups located further south near Mlu Prey. Thus the district was classified as Lao rather than Khmer by the French.⁶¹ A note was also made regarding the circle of relations running from Siêm Pāng. A critical study referred to the Lao as parasites feeding on the ignorance of the Austroasiatic-speaking peoples and the peaceful natural harmony of the Khmer. Local history recorded how the Siamese replaced Khmer officials with Lao, mostly from Meuang Không and Bassac.⁶² In 1901 there was a move to use the Xē Kông River as a provincial boundary, but this was challenged because two Austroasiatic-speaking tribal groups occupied both sides of the river's course. The French officials decided not to anger the tribal peoples by placing a boundary between them.⁶³ In August 1904 the Governor General of Indochina contacted the Résident Supérieur of Cambodia, H. de Lamothe, to confirm the formal inclusion of Stueng Traeng, Mlu Prey and Tônlé Repou in Cambodia.⁶⁴ This communication secured the external boundary between French Indochinese and Siamese territories in the Lao-Cambodian frontier region.

For over a century the Siamese authorities had exerted their rule over the Lao-

HCC //33, 20/6/1904, CAOM

HCC //33, 25/7/1904, "Mutations Territoriales", CAOM

HCC //33, 25/7/1904, CAOM

HCC //33, 25/7/1904, CAOM

RSC File 25652, NAC

HCC //33, 9/8/1904, CAOM

Cambodian frontier region, both directly and indirectly. The overland routes taken by the armies of Chao Phrayā Chakrī and Chao Phrayā Surasi evolved to become paths for trade, exploitation and development, as they carried the natural wealth of the frontier region west to the Siamese capital. In late 1904 the French had fully secured the Lao-Cambodian frontier but the orientation of the local economy and political elite remained firmly angled towards Bangkok. The trading routes established above and below the Dangrek Range continued to operate on the basis of patron-client networks that oversaw the exchange of goods from and to the frontier region. In the following two decades of colonial rule, the French experienced the highest levels of banditry and contraband activity as these old trading networks were converted into new smuggling rings and anti-colonial resistance movements. In response the French attempted to build up loyal settlements in the Lao and Cambodian interiors to counter the Siamese legacy in the frontier region. But their manipulation of minority relations was to prove less than successful as the Siamese continued to cultivate key allies in the region. It took time for the competition for influence in the frontier region to shift in favour of the French, by which time the rugged tri-border area had become the new arena for the struggle of allegiance.

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submission in December, 2000. This paper will be submitted for journal publication, so your feedback would be much appreciated.

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1. The name of *Mônthon Lao Kao* was changed to *Mônthon tawan-ok chiang nua*.
 2. Running eastwards from *Ânlông Vêng* the main passes were *Chông Tchiou*, *Chông Kabat Faso*, *Chông Keбал Krabe*, *Chông Pra Palai*, *Chông Donau*, *Chông Prea Chrey*, *Chông Dontone*, *Chông Dam Phka*, *Chông Kabal Au*, *Chông Dam Ta Poui*, *Chông Ausi* and *Chông Prea Chom Bok*.
 3. The French noted the cultivation of rice, cardamom, cotton, Chinese nettle, tobacco, allspice, corn, sugar cane, indigo and mulberry trees.
 4. Northern Thai, Shan and Burmese traders came to buy elephants to sell to the European timber companies for work in the teak forests of Burma and Northern Siam. The hunting of rhinoceros saw the animals being killed to be used in medicines produced by the Lao, Vietnamese and Chinese.
 5. The French later seized *Trât* and *Dăn Sây* (Loei province) so as to restore pressure for the return of *Bătdâmbâng* and *Siêm Réap*.
 6. Madrolle was appointed an *attache* to the Governor General's cabinet from 1902 to 1907. He had served in various capacities throughout the French colonial empire, having been held posts in Africa, Asia and the Pacific. Madrolle specialized in producing guide books which were used by administrators, colonists and tourists. Madrolle virtually mapped all of Laos during his time in Indochina and studied its ethnography. He was a skilled linguist and cartographer.