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The Changing Historiographies of Laos: A Focus on the Early Period

Vatthana Pholsena

The narrative of the origins of the Lao people in contemporary Lao-language history books and textbooks is divided among divergent interpretations. The most popular reading is the 'Ai-Lao' version, an implicit response to Thai nationalist historiography. Marxist-Leninist-orientated historiography, by contrast, resembles the Vietnamese Communist narrative. As far as likely future trends are concerned, a journey back to the 'roots' seems ultimately to reveal the biography of a pre-modern spatial identity.

In the decade following the Communist takeover of Laos in 1975, monarchy and Buddhism – the country's most potent national symbols under the former Royal Lao Government (RLG) – disappeared from the new regime's rhetoric. Almost 30 years after the Revolution, however, the 'infamous' past associated with these symbols seems to be as relevant as ever in Laos. The revival of Buddhism is evident at both the popular and state levels; the conflation of Buddhism and socialism is openly celebrated and benefits from extensive media coverage, such as the frequently cited example of senior Communist Party members publicly making merit during major festivals. Lao urban society and lowland rural areas alike are also experiencing a process of retraditionalisation based mainly upon ethnic Lao customs and codes of *savoir-vivre* after several years of cultural and social anomie. Meanwhile, the country's economic liberalisation since the late 1980s has given the Lao, especially the younger generation, access to other means of communication than the official channels, as well as more exposure to outside influences. By contrast, the blanket theme of the '30-year struggle for independence' that gives the standard propagandistic narration a thin thread of continuity and unity has steadily lost its appeal and credibility among the population in the post-Cold War era. At the same time, however, the formal Marxist-Leninist policy of equality towards the upland and highland minorities continues to be promoted by the Lao government in both discourse and practice, albeit with uneven results. It is within this transitional environment – where socialist modernity stalls while traditions of the 'old regime' (*labop kao*) are selectively revived – that contemporary Lao-language nationalist historiography will be analysed, especially its reconstruction of the early period.

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Postcolonial historiographers share an obsession with origins. As Paul Connerton points out, the politics of *tabula rasa* paradoxically engender even greater reference to the past.¹ Nations need a foundation, a mythical past so as to enforce a *longue durée* – an essential component for consolidating a collective memory and identity. Horizontal homogeneity must be accomplished along an uninterrupted span of time: ‘we are what you were, we will be what you are’, in Ernest Renan’s famous words.² Likewise, Patricia Pelley remarks with respect to post-1945 Vietnamese historiography that ‘[o]nly by determining when [Vietnam’s past] began, they [Vietnamese historiographers] reckoned, could they narrate it in a meaningful way. Only when they had a clear sense of origins could they clarify the trajectory of the past and divide it into meaningful segments’.³

History textbooks, as is well known, are the main vehicle for disseminating such a history, particularly in countries where dissonant voices are repressed and alternative perspectives discouraged. In that context, school textbooks merely tend to be ‘ideological, repetitive and mantra-like’.⁴ In modern Lao-language history books and textbooks, however, the narrative of the country’s origins does not depict a master version of a pacified history representing ‘idealized images of a harmonious, pre-colonial social order imbued of nostalgia’.⁵ Rather, it is divided among three interpretations of the origins of the Lao people, each of them situated in divergent geopolitical, political and ideological perspectives. The first and most popular reading is the ‘Ai-Lao’ version, which is dominated by the trope of migration and constitutes an implicit response to Thai nationalist historiography. The second historiography, by contrast, has a Marxist-Leninist orientation and resembles the Vietnamese Communist narrative. This article suggests that the (re)writing of the origins of the Lao nation epitomises the fragmentary state of Lao historiography, more precisely its struggle to deal with competing ideologies. More significantly, as is argued in the third and last section, the journey back to the ‘roots’ found in modern Lao-language history books constitutes a search for ‘a continuous Lao-centric history of Laos’, to paraphrase John Smail’s seminal words. This journey is more than the search for ‘a screen on which desires for unity and continuity . . . could be projected’; ultimately it seems to reveal a quest for an autonomous history which exposes the country’s ‘underlying social structure and culture’.⁶

1 Paul Connerton, *How societies remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 61.

2 Ernest Renan, *Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?* (Paris: Éditions Mille et Une Nuits, 1997 reprint), p. 32.

3 Patricia M. Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam. New histories of the national past* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 8.

4 Ahmad Abu Talib and Tan Liok Ee, ‘Introduction’, in *New terrains in Southeast Asian history*, ed. Ahmad Abu Talib and Tan Liok Ee (Athens, OH and Singapore: Ohio University Press and Singapore University Press, 2003), p. xiii, quoting Charnvit Kasetsiri, ‘History: “In and out” of textbooks in Thailand’, paper presented at the Conference on Southeast Asian Historiography since 1945, Penang, 1999.

5 A. M. Alonso, ‘The politics of space, time and substance: State formation, nationalism, and ethnicity’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 23 (1994): 388.

6 John R. W. Smail, ‘On the possibility of an autonomous history of modern Southeast Asia’, reprinted in *Autonomous histories, particular truths. Essays in honor of John R. W. Smail*, ed. Laurie J. Sears (Madison: University of Wisconsin Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), p. 53. The ‘screen’ quotation is from John R. Gillis, *Commemorations: The politics of national identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 9.

The trope of migration: origins of the people

The theme of migration is predominant in Lao school textbooks. First-year secondary school students learn in their social science manuals (which include courses on history, geography and demography) the following version of the origins of the inhabitants of Laos:

The group within the Thai-Lao family, whose name was Ai-Lao, originally lived on a territory, on the upper area of the Mekong River in the valley in the south of the Yangzi River in China. They once constituted a developed and wealthy kingdom and were the masters of a country within the territory of China 3000–4000 years ago

Not long after or before the Christian era, the Thai-Lao family groups progressively went southward along the Mekong, Irrawaddy, Chao Phraya and Black Rivers, and mixed with other ethnic groups, who had been living for a long time in the Suvannaphum [Suvarnabhumi] peninsula. Then, around the mid-thirteenth century, the Mongols expanded their domination to the south over various kingdoms in the south of China, which forced the group of the Thai-Lao family to emigrate further south⁷

A historical discourse based on the tropes of migration and racial continuity which conflates legend and history is also utilised in Thailand. Like the lowland Lao-based narration, the Thai racial historiography upholds the story of the emergence and development of a Thai race during a huge migration process from the kingdom of Nanchao or Nanzhao in southern China during the pre-Sukhotai era (i.e., before the thirteenth century) to the territory of present-day Thailand. (Nanchao existed as a political entity in present-day Yunnan from the first half of the eighth century CE until its invasion and occupation by the Mongol armies of Kublai Khan in 1253. The founders of the kingdom of Nanchao, most scholars now believe, were not Tai at all but Lolo, a Tibeto-Burman speaking people.) As Thongchai Winichakul comments, ‘together, the Thai past was a linear movement of a great race from the time and place of Others to the time and place of self-realization as a sovereign race’. Despite denials from historians both outside and inside the country, the myth of a Thai identity for Nanchao was disseminated by government publications up until the 1980s and still prevails in school textbooks.⁸

Thongchai has shown in his excellent overview of the new interpretations of the past in Thailand how a long tradition of contesting historical studies has developed over the last 30 years in Thai academia, thereby challenging the conventional historiography. Yet, as Patrick Jory seems to suggest in a recent contribution, this challenge is made in vain given the Thai people’s present lack of interest in professional history:

What is today consumed as history by the Thai public consists of two forms: the royalist-nationalist history taught in the schools and popularized through bureaucratic channels; and products of the commercial media in the form of movies, TV dramas, and even advertisements, which are gradually becoming the dominant mode of reproduction of historical knowledge.

7 Institute of Research in Educational Sciences, *Vitthanyāsāt sangkhom* [Social sciences] (Vientiane: Ministry of Education, 1996), p. 13.

8 Thongchai Winichakul, ‘The changing landscape of the past: New histories in Thailand since 1973’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* [henceforth *JSEAS*], 26, 1 (1995): 108. On Nanchao in textbooks, see Barend J. Terwiel, ‘Civilising the past: Nation and knowledge in Thai historiography’, in *Time matters. Global and local time in Asian societies*, ed. Willem van Schendel and Henk Schulte-Nordholt (Amsterdam: VU Press, 2001), p. 100.

Consequently, the ‘dominance of the [Prince] Damrong [Rachanubhab] school of history (or Thongchai’s royalist-nationalist historiography)’, Jory goes on to suggest, may face its biggest challenge not from the new academic thinking, but from ‘new forms of dissemination and consumption of movies, TV dramas, and internet debate by new mass markets’.⁹ It is too soon to tell which form of historical knowledge will prevail in Thailand; for the time being, the royalist-nationalist historiography remains unrevised in the textbooks.

To some extent, the politics of historiography in contemporary Laos may also be analysed from the perspective of the modern relationship between Thailand and Laos. Houmphanh Rattanavong, the former Director of the Institute of Cultural Research in Vientiane, for instance, asserts that the term ‘Tai’ or ‘Thai’ did not yet exist in reference to either the ethno-linguistic and cultural category or the ethnic group before the sixth century; he claims that ‘the so-called “Tai” populations did not yet exist in North Vietnam nor in Laos. They were all called Lao.’¹⁰ In other words, only the name ‘Lao’ is original and authentic, thus implying the seniority of the ‘Lao’ over the ‘Thai’ (although there is no evidence that ‘Lao’ then actually referred to the present-day ethnic Lao in Laos). Accordingly, the postcolonial Lao obsession with origins may also be read, at least in part, as a response to the local perception of an overwhelming Thai sense of superiority over Thailand’s neighbours. As Barend Terwiel points out, though, research on the origins of the Tai stretching back to prehistoric times faces a major obstacle, namely that the Tai-speaking peoples are not mentioned by that name in any text.¹¹ Consequently, it would appear to be highly speculative to attempt to identify a discrete and homogenous people as being ‘Lao’ when in fact different names were being used to refer to the populations living in what is now the Tai-speaking area.

Consequently, perhaps because of the shared roots and structural similarities with Thai nationalist historiography (i.e., ‘migration/racial continuity/racial domination’), Lao history textbooks have also been trying to distinguish ‘their’ version of the past – especially the origins of the ‘Lao’ people – by popularising a ‘genealogy’ different from the ‘Nanchao’ version, specifically that of the ‘Ai-Lao’ people. (Interestingly, the Lao school texts, despite some strong hints, never mention the kingdom of Nanchao.) Maha Sila Viravong, arguably the most renowned historian in Laos, was the leading figure of this lowland Lao-based historiography. His *Phongsāvadān Lao* (History of Laos), published in 1957, has been for nearly half a century the master reference work for secondary school history textbooks, in both the ‘old’ and ‘new’ regimes. Its impact extended well beyond Laos thanks to an English translation that was available as early as 1958. Maha Sila Viravong’s writings on the history of Laos have shaped a perennialist vision of the Lao nation by strongly relating Lao national identity to a myth of ethnic descent. He dated the origins of the ‘Lao race’ to some 2,500 years ago in a region ‘along the Hwang

9 Patrick Jory, ‘Problems in contemporary Thai nationalist historiography’, *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, 3 (2003) <http://kyotoreview.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/issue/issue2/index.html>. Jory argues that although the commercial media (movies, TV dramas, and advertisements) often follow the official interpretation of the past articulated by history textbooks, traditional Thai stories are also sometimes portrayed in a more Westernised and modern format by the media to respond to the tastes of its audience.

10 Houmphanh Rattanavong, ‘Regarding what one calls the “Thai”’, *Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Thai Studies* (Kunming, 1990), p. 165.

11 Barend J. Terwiel, ‘The origin of the T’ai peoples reconsidered’, *Oriens Extremus*, 25 (1978): 240.

Ho river valley', claiming that their ancestors were an ancient people called the 'Ai-Lao' who dwelt in the valleys between the Yellow and Yangzi Rivers.¹²

The myth of a kingdom and civilisation several thousand years old linked to the 'Ai-Lao ancestors' is still widely disseminated through both school textbooks and the mass-circulation publications sold at a fairly reasonable price in markets and bookshops in Vientiane and major provincial towns.¹³ For example, in a Lao history booklet entitled *Anajak Khun Jeuang* (Kingdom of Khun Jeuang), reprinted three times since 1996, Douangsay Louangpasi – a prolific Lao writer and keen amateur historian – explains the origins of the Lao people as follows, stressing the origins and outstanding traits of the Ai-Lao people:

According to what is said in history, the word 'Lao' means *dāo* [star], that is the people whose race has come down from above, originating for instance in a region in the North, in high altitudes or heaven, skies . . . The Ai-Lao, viewed as belonging to the *Dāo* lineage, later adopted this word as their name. Then, the Chinese, who were going back and forth on the Yellow River came to encounter the *Dāo* or 'Dāo race', a civilized people who possessed solid means of subsistence, a high culture and a benevolent and generous heart. They were willing to help the Chinese, some of whom were in transit and others of whom immigrated from elsewhere. Through their virtues, the *Dāo* or 'Dāo race' earned respect from the Chinese. In their pronunciation of 'Ai Dao', the 'D' was imperfectly pronounced by the Chinese and became 'L', hence the name 'Ai-Lao' since then.¹⁴

Douangsay is not the only author to disseminate these views, whose scientific value is highly questionable given that the author never quotes his sources or mentions any references. They are also reproduced in school textbooks, so schoolchildren in Laos are taught and made to believe that they are the descendants of a very ancient people, the 'Ai-Lao', who once ruled a prosperous kingdom within China thousands of years ago. The latter then migrated southwards, settled in the present-day territory of Laos, and subsequently founded the kingdom of Lan Xang. On the other hand, the students learn little, if anything, about the origins of the rest of the population.¹⁵ In other words, this historiography that promotes a monolithic yet doubtful ethnic Lao past neglects all other inhabitants of Laos.

In fact, members of the Austroasiatic ethno-linguistic family – who comprise 23 per cent of the population according to the 1995 census, and are split between Mon-Khmer (22.7 per cent) and Viet-Muong (0.3 per cent) speakers – are found throughout the country in both upland and lowland environments and are generally acknowledged to be the original inhabitants of the country. However, the only non-ethnic Lao peoples that receive even scant attention in these texts are those who used

12 Maha Sila Viravong, *History of Laos* (New York: Paragon Book Reprint, 1964), pp. 6–8. The Lao version of the text has recently been reprinted: Maha Sila Viravong, *Phongsāvadān Lāo tae bouhān thoeng 1946* [Lao history from ancient times until 1946] (Vientiane: National Library, 2001).

13 Secondary school manuals (whose latest edition dates from 1996) are on sale at 8000 kip each (less than a dollar), while students in high school must copy their lessons from the teacher's dictation. The university students are given a brochure which is a condensed version of the lessons prepared by their lecturers. The mass-market publications are priced between 15,000–20,000 kip.

14 Douangsay Louangphasi, *Anajak Khun Jeuang* [Khun Jeuang kingdom] (Vientiane: Sūnkāng Naeo Lāo Sāngsāt, 2001), pp. 10–11.

15 See, for example, Ministry of Education, Centre for Teachers' Training, *Pavatsāt Lāo samay bouhān lae samay kāng* [History of Laos in the ancient and middle ages] (Vientiane: Ministry of Education, 1998), p. 8.

to rule over a significant portion of the former kingdom of Lan Xang but who either no longer exist or happen to live outside Laos and have been turned into ‘minorities’ since the creation of national boundaries. The latter include the Khom, Mon and Lawa. The history handbook for secondary school teachers, for instance, notes that ‘the Lao racial community, presently called the Lao, is not the Lao from the Lawa or Lua lineage, because those Lawa, primitive inhabitants, no longer exist. What little remains of the Lawa is the Khmu community, which dwells nowadays in the forests and mountains in northern Laos and Thailand.’¹⁶ The linear logic of migration and racial continuity is therefore entirely focused on the ethnic Lao, as if the previous ‘multi-ethnic population’ had been somehow wiped out by the huge migration wave.

As far as the origins of the Tai-speaking peoples are concerned, it is most unlikely that they were ever within a thousand miles of the Altai Mountains. Recent studies in linguistics, history and comparative anthropology suggest that the original Tai homeland occupied an area extending from western Guangxi and south-eastern Yunnan into northern Vietnam and north-eastern Laos.¹⁷ Likewise, a direct kinship relationship between the ‘Ai-Lao’ of Chinese texts and the present-day ethnic Lao population in Laos is hard to find. As Terwiel notes, ‘there is one early account regarding the Ai-Lao who are mentioned for the first time in Han times in the *Hou-han-shu* . . . They were reported then to have lived in the Kwangsi-Yunnan area, the region of China bordering on Tongkin. At this stage we cannot be certain that these actually were T’ais’.¹⁸ The assumption that the ‘Ai-Lao’ were the direct ancestors of the ethnic Lao has been rejected. Martin Stuart-Fox concludes that it is ‘unlikely . . . that whoever the Chinese referred to as the Ai-Lao were directly ancestral to the Tai-Lao who founded the Kingdom of Lan Xang well over a millennium later’.¹⁹

This trope of migration, underlining a logic of racial continuity and homogeneity and associated with mythical origins, epitomises the perennialist historiography whereby ‘the nation is a recurrent form of social organization and nationalism a perennial mode of cultural belonging’.²⁰ It is the myth of an ancient, self-conscious people that has marched through the ages from time immemorial until the present. In this sense, as Anthony D. Smith argues, the works of the nationalist historians are comparable to those of archaeologists:

16 Institute of Research in Educational Sciences, *Vitthanyāsāt sangkhom*, p. 17. The origins of the term ‘Khom’ are not clear, but it seems to have been an old word used by the Tai peoples in ancient times – perhaps before the foundation of the Lan Xang kingdom – to designate the Mon-Khmer-speaking population. Later, ethnic Lao texts such as the *Nithān Khun Boulom* [Legend of Khun Boulom] would refer to them as ‘*Khākao*’ (old slaves); Martin Stuart-Fox, *The Lao kingdom of Lan Xang: Rise and decline* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1998), pp. 17 and 164.

17 See James R. Chamberlain, ‘The origin of the Southwestern Tai’, *Bulletin des amis du royaume lao*, 7–8 (1972): 233; Terwiel, ‘Origin of the T’ai peoples’, pp. 252–3; and David K. Wyatt, *A short history of Thailand* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 5–6. For further details on the fallacious Nanchao thesis, see, for example, He Shengda, ‘The theory of the Nanzhao Thai kingdom: Its origins and bankruptcy’, *Social Sciences in China*, 3 (1995): 74–89. I would like to thank Sun Laichen for the latter reference.

18 Terwiel, ‘Origin of the T’ai peoples’, pp. 240, 249 (quotation). Terwiel’s spelling of ‘T’ai’ with an apostrophe is to indicate the aspirated consonant.

19 Stuart-Fox, *Lao kingdom of Lan Xang*, p. 23.

20 Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and memories of the nation* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 11.

the nation is multilayered, and the task of the nationalist historian and archaeologist is to recover each layer of the past and thereby trace the origins of the nation from its 'rudimentary beginnings' through its early flowering in a golden age [ages] to its periodic decline and its modern birth and renewal. In this way the myth receives apparent historical self-confirmation over the *longue durée*, and a rediscovered and authenticated past is 'scientifically' appropriated for present national ends.²¹

It is far from clear, however, whether this perennialist historiography will succeed in imposing itself as the master narrative in Laos. Although it is mediated via school texts and some mass-publication booklets, its audience is still restricted due to the country's poor educational infrastructure and general scarcity of reading materials. In addition, the Lao state lacks the mass media power (TV channels, programmes and movies) to popularise its nationalist history. Beside these material restrictions, the factors that impede this historiography from achieving a position of hegemony are also historical, political and ideological. In this way, a comparative view of the Thai nationalist historiography can highlight the pitfalls of an ethno-nationalist history in contemporary Laos. I argue, in effect, that divergent adaptations of the concept of nation in Siam (now Thailand) and in Laos explain to a significant extent the contrasting degrees of hegemony of the nationalist historiographies in these two countries.

One may argue that the ethno-nationalist historiography is in any case bound to fail in Laos because of the country's ethnic composition: less than half the population belongs to the Lao ethnic group. In Thailand, the Thai ethnic group (speakers of the Standard Thai of central and southern Thailand, including most Sino-Thai, but excluding the Northern and North-eastern languages) make up only half of the total population. All the censuses since the 1920s, however, have shown very little ethnic diversity for the simple reason that Thai population surveys do not include ethnic self-identification in their criteria.²² As a matter of fact, the supremacy of Thai nationalist historiography has been achieved through modern technologies (educational system, the technology of print, mass media), but also has relied on a sophisticated and pervasive nationalist discourse that since the late nineteenth century has shaped the Thai people's views of the outside world and of their own country – two nationalist resources which the Lao under colonial rule and successive regimes after the Second World War were, for various reasons, unable to experience and develop.

Thai notions of nation, race, ethnicity and identity were shaped to a great extent by both the appeals of European 'civilisation' and the threats of colonialism. In this regard, David Streckfuss offers a thought-provoking argument: French colonialism radically redefined Siam along racial lines. He suggests that in fact French colonialism was mainly responsible for the creation of the 'racialist consciousness or "Thai-ness", which has largely defined the Thai state and its ideology up to the present day'.²³ In the aftermath of

21 Anthony D. Smith, *The nation in history. Historiographical debates about ethnicity and nationalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press), p. 64 (emphasis in the original).

22 Charles F. Keyes, 'Cultural diversity and national identity in Thailand', in *Government policies and ethnic relations in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Michael E. Brown and Sumit Ganguly (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1997), p. 197. The breakdown of Thailand's population is from Keyes, 'Presidential address: "The peoples of Asia" – Science and politics of classification of ethnic groups in Thailand, China, and Vietnam', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 61, 4 (2002): 1178.

23 David Streckfuss, 'The mixed colonial legacy in Siam: Origins of Thai racialist thought, 1890–1910', in Sears ed., *Autonomous histories*, p. 134.

the Paknam crisis of 1893, when the French seized the left bank of the Mekong River and established a protectorate over Laos, the Thai elite was forced to reassess itself in the light of the threat of colonial expansion into the Mekong region. It is hardly a coincidence that this era saw the birth of modern Thai historiography, much of it penned by or published on the authority of the 'Father of Thai history', King Chulalongkorn's younger brother Prince Damrong Rachanubhab.

Streckfuss insists that above and beyond the massive economic, administrative and political efforts of modernisation that the kingdom made during that period, the most profound impact was ideological. The 'logic of race' employed by the French colonialists so as to legitimise their claims over the Lao and Cambodian populations of Siam following their annexation of Laos – namely the argument that a geographical and political entity can only claim to be a nation if it possesses a single language, culture and race – forced the Thai royalty to reappropriate and readapt the European concept of national identity. The Bangkok elite's response to the French threat was twofold: they reified the country's geographical space (by sending out armed surveying teams to demarcate the boundaries of Siam) and refashioned the population's (outer and inner) boundaries. Accordingly, the Siamese officials went on absorbing and homogenising the disparate 'Other' peoples of Siam through the most simple and yet ingenious process: the merger of the concepts of nationality/ethnicity (*chonchāt*), race (*chāt*, *cheuachāt*) and citizenship (*sanchāt*), within the single, all-inclusive and elastic term *chāt*.²⁴

The modern Lao state has in the same way tried to define a politics of conflation between race (*sonsāt*), ethnicity (*sonphao*) and citizenship (*sansāt*) by implementing a bureaucratic use of the racial category. Amongst the data included on Lao identification cards, for instance, are the individual's race, citizenship and ethnic group. Except for the citizens of Vietnamese and Chinese origins, the entire population – regardless of ethnicity – is classified as 'Lao' under both the 'race' and 'citizenship' categories, but ethnicity remains a vector of distinction and classification. The same nomenclature is also applied to the compulsory household booklet and to the immigration card that both Lao nationals and foreigners fill in upon entering the country. On all these documents, 'citizenship', 'race' and 'ethnic group' are required, with 'Lao' defining the first two qualities for the Lao nationals, no matter what their 'ethnic group'. It can be argued, however, that the official policy to absorb and homogenise the population has not – or perhaps not yet – captured the people's minds, especially among ethnic minorities, for three reasons: first, the weakness of the modern technologies of power in the hands of the state; second, a specific adaptation of the Western notion of the national identity from the early 1940s, which in contrast to Thailand's malleable and all-embracing concept of *chāt*, was intrinsically orientated towards the lowland Lao and had no assimilationist agenda; and third, the Marxist-Leninist-influenced ethnography applied nationwide after 1975 that would reinforce the distinction between ethnic and legal identities.

After Germany's defeat of France in 1940 and the establishment of the Vichy government, Indochina came under the control of Admiral Decoux's Vichy administration. With the rise of Thailand's pan-Thai movement and the apparent willingness of the

24 Ibid., p. 141. See also Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam mapped. A history of the geo-body of a nation* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1994), and Thongchai, 'The Others within: Travel and ethno-spatial differentiation of Siamese subjects 1885–1910', in *Civility and savagery. Social identity in Tai states*, ed. Andrew Turton (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000), pp. 38–62.

Japanese to sacrifice Laos to the expansionist aims of their Bangkok ally, the Vichy government implemented an educational and cultural reform policy so as to prevent the loss of Laos from French Indochina. The urgency of the situation subsequently led to the development of a new *politique indigène* (native policy) in Laos.²⁵ This change in colonial policy was in fact guided by an overall strategy whose objective was to reinforce the loyalty of the constituent parts of Indochina to the Metropolitan power (and hence to diminish the risk of implosion in the course of the Second World War) by enhancing their place within the broader framework of the colony. As Søren Ivarsson notes, 'for Decoux and the French authorities to build up this specific Lao identity was not viewed as a goal in itself but as a means to integrate Laos further into the Indochinese Federation and make it a more viable member of this entity'.²⁶ Thus, under the leadership of Decoux, who remained governor-general of Indochina from 1940 to 1945, a campaign for national renovation was launched within the smaller domains of French Indochina, 'Laos' and 'Cambodia'.

In Laos a series of social, economic, administrative and political reforms was initiated in tandem with a programme of road construction, in order to make the Lao elite feel that they had a future in French-Lao cooperation, and at the same time to counter the pan-Thai appeal of Bangkok. Greater financial resources from the general Indochinese budget were thus allocated to various spheres of Lao society. More significant for the constitution of a distinct Lao identity was the creation of a 'Lao Renovation Movement' in 1941 under Decoux's auspices, the 'first genuinely nationalist organization in Laos'.²⁷ Charles Rochet, the Director of Public Education, played a key role in this reform movement, along with a small group of young, educated Lao led by Nhouy Abhay and Katay Don Sasorith. Rochet believed that Lao culture and identity had to be restored and preserved by the Lao people themselves. His initiatives were actually based on a conviction that the main threat to Lao identity came not from Thailand, but from the very Indochina entity envisioned by the French. A disquieted Rochet warned in a book published after the war that '[t]he Lao people were being steadily turned into aborigines in their own land [for which reason] he foresaw a real danger that a coherent Lao identity would eventually disappear altogether', mainly because of the French plans for massive Vietnamese immigration in Laos (as well as Cambodia) in order to build up their administration.²⁸

Nor was Rochet the first person to warn against the danger of unchecked Vietnamese immigration to Laos. As a matter of fact, as early as 1931, Prince Phetsarath, the highest-ranking Lao civil servant, clearly expressed in an interview his concerns over this immigration and the need to control it to avoid creating in Laos 'a state within the state'. In other words, although the Lao Renovation Movement supported the development of a young Lao elite who would lead the cultural renovation, the movement itself did not

25 Clive Christie, *Ideology and revolution in Southeast Asia 1900–1980. Political ideas of the anti-colonial era* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001), p. 114.

26 Søren Ivarsson, 'Towards a new Laos: *Lao nhay* and the campaign for national "reawakening" in Laos, 1941–45', in *Laos. Culture and society*, ed. Grant Evans (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999), p. 64.

27 Christie, *Ideology and revolution*, p. 114.

28 Charles Rochet, *Pays Lao: Le Laos dans la tourmente 1939–1945* (Paris: Jean Vigneau, 1946), cited in *ibid.*, p. 116. For more details on French migration policy for Laos, see Martin Stuart-Fox, 'The French in Laos, 1887–1945', *Modern Asian Studies*, 29, 1 (1995): 123–34.

create the emerging Lao nationalist identity, which already existed before the start of the war. Prince Phetsarath, in the same interview, asked for the unification of 'Laos'; for him, 'Laos' existed, but not 'Indochina'.²⁹

The Lao Renovation Movement was primarily cultural, focusing on the rediscovery and promotion of Lao literature, theatre, music, dance and history as a means of stimulating a sense of Lao identity. The movement's journal, *Lāo Nhay* (Great Laos), was first published in January 1941, and regular meetings were organised. In brief, this project to restore Lao culture and identity sent a clear message of unity and homogeneity to the population of Laos. However, although it held that the Lao people were encompassed by a common identity, the latter was defined purely in terms of ethnic Lao cultural traits. The strong emphasis that both Rochet and Nhouy Abhay gave to the fundamental role of Buddhist religion in the restoration of Lao identity well illustrates this perspective, which was later reconfirmed in the 1947 Constitution, where Buddhism and the monarchy were given a special and linked status as the key symbols of Lao identity.³⁰

The historiography penned by the late Maha Sila Viravong quintessentially embodied that mindset: the Lao race and identity were to be defined *vis-à-vis* the other 'national' races in Asia rather than the other peoples of Laos, who remained invisible and unbounded until the Communist revolutionaries decided otherwise. Unfortunately, Maha Sila Viravong does not mention any of his sources, not least the Chinese ones. He also admits that different versions of the origins of the 'Lao race' exist, although he does not try to refute them. As a matter of fact, it is his moral and personal convictions that eventually seem to be the determining factor, as he concludes:

As far as I am concerned, the word Lao derived from the words *Long*, *Lee*, *Lung* or *Lwang* and the word *Lwang* itself could very well become *Luang* which, in turn, means big or civilized. In any case, our Lao race had come to existence in the universe at the same time as the Chinese and can be considered on this ground as one of the most ancient races of the world, which had known a wide range of splendor and progress no less than any other races of the same era.³¹

Undoubtedly a national consciousness had developed in Laos, but it remained confined to lowland Lao culture and society. Early Lao nationalism developed in reaction against other nationalist visions, real or potential, specifically the political projects of pan-Thaism and a Vietnamese-dominated Indochina. It was therefore primarily an elite lowland Lao nationalism intended to ensure a viable nation-state at the international level. Moreover, the boundaries of Laos, once fixed, were not threatened by any further colonialist expansion: except for the 1941–46 period, its outer borders remained overall unchanged after the Siamese–French treaties at the turn of the century.³² Consequently,

29 'La question laotienne: opinions du Prince Phetsarath', *France-Indochine*, 21 Mar. 1931, quoted in Christopher E. Goscha, *Vietnam or Indochina? Contesting concepts of space in Vietnamese nationalism, 1887–1954* (Copenhagen: NIAS, 1995), p. 58.

30 Søren Ivarsson, 'Towards a new Laos', p. 115; Ivarsson's chapter is a very informative study of the newspaper's role in the awakening of a national 'imagining' among the young Lao elite. For the constitution, see Katay Don Sasorith, *Le Laos. Son évolution politique, sa place dans l'Union française* (Paris: Éditions Berger-Levrault, 1953), p. 100.

31 Maha Sila Viravong, *History of Laos*, p. 9.

32 In 1941, the Phibun Songkram regime in Thailand forced French Indochina to cede the southern Lao territory of Champassak and the Sayaboury region of the Luang Prabang kingdom. These territories were returned to Laos after the end of the war in November 1946.

in contrast to the Siamese elite in the late nineteenth century, Lao nationalists were not forced to re-think the territorial basis of the nation-state. As a matter of fact, the 1947 Constitution conferred equal citizenship upon all the races of Laos, including the upland minority groups and resident Vietnamese and Chinese. However, the politics of national culture and identity during the war and in the immediate post-war period were not deliberately assimilationist; again, Lao nationalism was more outward- than inward-looking and, in any case, the state would have been unable to enforce integrationist policies given the weakness of the Royal Lao Government (RLG).

This weakness was reflected in the educational system. As Bruce Lockhart notes: 'It can be argued that education under the RLG never succeeded in broadening its vision to build a Lao nation because it failed to incorporate the various ethnic groups whose position – though strategically important – was psychologically and culturally peripheral from the perspective of the ruling élite in Vientiane and Luang Phabang.' Although in the aftermath of the Second World War Laos was no longer a French colony in the full sense of the term, education was still very much embedded in the colonial framework.³³ On the other hand, the insufficient degree of 'Laocisation' under the RLG schooling system seemed to be compensated for in the textbooks by an overwhelming focus on the lowland Lao lifestyle and religion (Theravada Buddhism), which automatically excluded a large portion of the population. In other words, in the school manuals the ethnic minorities were invisible.

The lowland Lao elite were not forced to radically change the ways they thought and ruled the country's space – at least not until the national landscape became increasingly threatened by the increase in territory and population under Pathet Lao control during the First and Second Indochinese Wars, as the revolutionaries expanded their control over the provinces and the districts in the northern and the eastern areas of the country. However, RLG policies of integration proved to be too little, too late in terms of both scope and means, whether through educational programmes or military operations.³⁴ The lowland Lao elite and leadership were less concerned about assimilating the upland and highland population than strengthening their culture, language and traditions in their own backyard, i.e., among the lowland Lao population themselves. Lockhart acutely remarks that the hierarchy between the ethnic Lao and the highlanders, pejoratively named *Kha* or *Meo*, was defined not along cultural lines or by degrees of civilisation, but rather in terms of ethnicity and socioeconomic ranking ('*khā*' is commonly translated as 'slave'). 'By contrast', he notes, 'the Vietnamese terms [for highland minorities] . . . have

33 Bruce M. Lockhart, 'Education in Laos in historical perspective', in *Education and social change in Southeast Asia: From colonialism to ASEAN*, ed. Thomas Clayton (forthcoming). French remained the main language of instruction above the primary level, thus creating a *de facto* barrier for those wishing to pursue secondary studies, since children in rural and poorer areas would be most unlikely to have had the opportunity of acquiring a good level of French. Moreover, the curriculum still reproduced to some extent the colonialist history tainted with racist representations of the indigenous population.

34 In contrast, as Thongchai has brilliantly shown, the threat and influence of colonialism, along with the introduction of Siam to the world market and commodity economy, led the Siamese authorities to implement a new style of territorial management as early as the late nineteenth century. In Thongchai's words '[t]he space of *chao bannok* [a derogatory term for peasants, equivalent to 'bumpkins'] was becoming administratively domesticated, economically exploitable as natural and human resources. The trope of the narratives of the "Docile People" is that of state-territorial exploitation, for production, for civilisation'; Thongchai, 'Others within', p. 50.

clear connotations of cultural primitiveness'. In his view, accordingly, '[e]ducation . . . was perceived mainly in the context of socioeconomic development (and thus of nation-building) rather than as part of a top-down *mission civilisatrice*'.³⁵ The RLG, in fact, perpetuated the political system and society based on the centre–periphery dichotomy. In other words, it is reasonable to presume that the majority of the lowland Lao leaders in the mid-twentieth century were still guided by the traditional Buddhist concepts and taxonomy that defined the relationships between rulers and ruled in terms of centre and periphery, on the one hand, and class and status (more than race), on the other.³⁶

Marxist-Leninist ethnography and collective autochthony

Another major contributing factor to the lesser impact of the lowland-Lao-based historiography is arguably the radically different change in the new concept and discourse of identity compared to what was propagated by the Communist leadership before 1975. The Party promoted – at least during the first 15 years of its rule – a policy of equality dominated by the class issue and the diktat of progress. The regime change in 1975 opened a new era for the country: at the international level, Laos promptly joined the camp of socialist states. The internal changes were perhaps most dramatic, however, as the leadership began to redefine the very essence of the Lao nation in an attempt to 'cleanse' the country from the 'reactionary' legacy of the past. In speeches, policies and textbooks the Communists promoted a new image of the nation, moving from a seemingly monoethnic portrait reproduced under the 'old regime' to a multiethnic representation of the national community in which equality, diversity and unity were now the key parameters and propaganda tools. Ethnic diversity was no longer overlooked; quite the contrary, it became a national trademark. The new regime in Laos explicitly recognised the 'hill-tribe question' from the early years of the movement.

35 Lockhart, 'Education in Laos'. In the organisation of the Lao *mandala*, the religious-political order served to legitimise the relations of inequality by providing the subject population with an explanation of their position in the merit-ranked social order. Each individual's position corresponded to a social and political status as well as to a specific position in the production system, to which were attached privileges and duties. The hierarchy was also justified by religious principles. Accordingly, the non-Tai-speaking peoples (or non-ethnic Lao in the Lan Xang kingdom) were believed to be condemned to the most degrading tasks because of their original exclusion from the religious (Buddhist) mainstream as recounted in the ethnic Lao myth of the origin of mankind. The earliest law code to have survived from the Lan Xang period, known as the *Law of Khun Boulom* and written in Xieng Khouang in north-eastern 'Laos' in 1422, refers in detail to the structure of early Lao society. The latter consisted formally of three categories: aristocracy, free peasants or commoners (*phai*) and slaves (*khā*). The non-ethnic Lao were excluded from this socio-religious hierarchy and their status was considered as even lower than the slaves; Stuart-Fox, *Lao kingdom of Lan Xang*, p. 47.

36 The Indianised conception of the world being centred on a point, hence the often-quoted Hindu concept of *mandala*, defined the political system that governed the pre-modern Southeast Asian states. The *mandala* system was formed of several 'circles of power', the centre of which was dominated by a Buddhist king who ruled by right of (divine) descent and right of merit. The expansion or contraction of the *mandala* would depend on his ability to gain the allegiance of smaller political structures and lesser rulers. The Tai leaders borrowed the concept and turned it into a political principle to organise and legitimate their rule. As long as the chieftains of the *meuang* complied with the king's requirements, they had a rather wide margin of freedom. Unlike the Chinese empire, the Buddhist polities therefore lacked the centralised and bureaucratic organisation to control the margins; in addition, their rulers never sought to civilise the 'savages' living on the frontiers of their empires; Keyes, 'Presidential address', pp. 1172–3. Accordingly, the frontiers of the kingdom were relatively fluid, their definition and spatial extent depending upon the power of the monarch at the centre.

Kaysone Phomvihane, the late President of the Lao PDR and celebrated at present in Laos as the inspirational figure of the regime, called for greater attention to be paid to promoting education among ethnic groups, improving their living conditions and increasing production in remote minority areas. Furthermore, he insisted on respect being paid to the 'psychology, aspirations, customs, and beliefs of each ethnic group'.³⁷

The principle was to give every member of the multiethnic state official recognition on an equal footing. The real objective was not to build a society based on national consciousness, though; rather, the concept of class was thought to be the new society's main axis of identification. During the first years of the Lao PDR, the socialist revolution planned to create a loyalty to the new state greater than the loyalties to particular ethnic identities. The ultimate goal for the Lao Communists, as it had been for their Soviet, Chinese and Vietnamese counterparts – guided by a historicist and evolutionist vision – was to eradicate the 'old' identities and replace them with a new socialist one.³⁸ National antagonisms and mistrust, however, had first to be dissipated by a period of 'national equality'; this policy came to be known as 'the flourishing of the nation' (*khvāmchaloen sāt*). Although for Lenin nationalism was a secondary problem, it was essential to keep it under control. His strategy for neutralising the national question was guided by his perception of nationalism as the result of past discrimination and oppression. The programme of promoting 'national equality' was, nonetheless, only a prerequisite for a higher stage in the movement towards assimilation that Lenin perceived as progressive and inevitable. It was predicated upon the belief that nations would naturally move closer together, a process described in the official Marxist vocabulary as the '*rapprochement*' or 'coming together' of nations.³⁹

Lenin's apprehension about the risk of ethnic awareness in the Soviet Union led him to initially promote the policy of 'national equality'; so too did the Lao PDR, as had previously the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). This vision of the achievement of historical progress thus became the hallmark of the early Communist projects in these three countries. Their governments all sent cadres to the highland areas to list the various ethnic populations and to collect data dealing with the material aspects of their lifestyle. Ethnographic studies and censuses reflected the belief that cultural recognition would narrow the gap between peoples.⁴⁰ The political objective was to classify the ethnic groups according to their degree of cultural development, since the ethnographic studies were strongly identified with a

37 Kaysone Phomvihane, *La révolution lao* (Moscou: Editions du Progrès, 1980), p. 233.

38 Vatthana Pholsena, 'Nation/representation: Ethnic classification and mapping nationhood in contemporary Laos', *Asian Ethnicity*, 3, 2 (2002): 191.

39 Walker Connor, *The national question in Marxist-Leninist theory and strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 201. While the work of Marx and Engels centres on a critique of capitalism and includes analyses of societies characterised by slavery and feudalism (the stages thought to be the immediate predecessors of capitalism on the evolutionary scale), they draw heavily on the work of Lewis Henry Morgan when they turn to analyse 'primitive' societies. Morgan's theory of social evolution outlined three main stages – savagery, barbarism and civilisation; Lewis H. Morgan, *Ancient society* (New York: Holt, 1877).

40 The Soviet authorities were careful to avoid using the term 'assimilation', however, for they argued it conveyed a negative meaning as it was connected with capitalist societies and their coercive process of acculturation conducted by the state's dominant group towards the minorities. On the contrary, the Marxist-Leninist approach was claimed to be different: the process of merging together was doctrinally based upon absolute national equality and voluntary cooperation.

civilizing project *vis-à-vis* ethnic minorities. Criteria for distinguishing or grouping ethnies were also thought of as criteria for determining backwardness. The state as a vector of ethnicity actively manipulates, creates and suppresses (or maintains) ethnic boundaries, the ultimate objective being the definition, categorisation and classification of a national population out of real ethnic heterogeneity. As in China and Vietnam, the census and classification of the post-1975 Lao population ultimately had ‘the effect of officially reducing [and] fixing diversity’.⁴¹

After 25 years of Communist rule, the ‘ethnic problem’ has not faded away, and Lao nationalist historiography still oscillates between the demands of Communist orthodoxy and a primordialist narration. As a result of this Marxist and Stalinist orthodox legacy (which is, however, increasingly weakened by a culturalist form of nationalism), Lao Communist nationalism appears now to be defined, in Grant Evans’ words, by a ‘peculiar combination of both civic and ethnic nationalism’.⁴² On the one hand, citizenship is granted to all, regardless of ethnicity; on the other, the process of re-traditionalisation since the early 1990s overwhelmingly focuses on ethnic Lao customs and religion. The theory of collective autochthony exemplifies this irresolute nationalism, balancing the search for an inclusive identity against the revival of a dominant lowland-Lao ethnic identity.

It is in this context that another version of the origins of the Lao nation has recently emerged, in particular among institutionally sponsored history texts. Lao professional historians (some of them formerly affiliated with the now defunct Research Institute on Social Sciences and currently working under the History Department of the Ministry of Information and Culture), much influenced by the national question in Marxist-Leninist theory and policy as well as by Vietnamese Communist historiography, depict a historiography that is much less focused on the origins of the ethnic Lao people. There is no mention in these texts of an ancient kingdom located in some remote area of China, and little attention is paid to the trope of migration. The ‘nationalist genealogy’, meaning the manipulation of cultural and historical elements to produce ‘blood’ continuity between the past and the present, is being replaced by its antithesis: the celebration of the *mélange*, intermingling, interactions between the different ethnic groups of Laos on the country’s present-day territory.⁴³ Thus, according to the authors of a history of Laos published in 1996,

during the first millennium, continuous movements, intermingling and interbreeding between tribes took place on the Lao territory. The process of evolution can be summed up as follows: from the beginning of the Christian Era in the seventh and eighth centuries, Laos’ main area was constituted by the Mon-Khmer speaking ethnic population, of which the main group was the Lawa. Some of the Thai [*sic*] people might also have lived with the Mon-Khmer population in some areas, notably in northern Laos. From the seventh century, the Lao-Thai grew with the addition of those originating from the North,

41 Keyes, ‘Presidential address’, p. 1187.

42 Grant Evans, ‘Laos. Minorities’, in *Ethnicity in Asia*, ed. Colin Mackerras (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), p. 215.

43 On ‘nationalist genealogy’, see Charles F. Keyes, ‘Who are the Tai? Reflections on the invention of identities’, in *Ethnic identity: Creation, conflict and accommodation*, ed. Lola Romanucci-Ross and George DeVos (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1995), p. 143.

progressively incorporating all the Mon-Khmer tribes to become the main ethnic group in Laos. Afterwards, following historical evolution and development, the Tibeto-Burman, Hmong, Yao, Vietnamese and May (Meuang) [*sic*]-speaking communities who came to settle down on the territory formed a community of Lao ethnic groups that has existed to the present day.⁴⁴

This thesis moves away from the linear and homogenising migration narration, and instead insists on the cohabitation among the peoples of Laos, and especially between the ‘communities’ of Lao-Thai and Mon-Khmer speakers.⁴⁵ This historiography actually suggests a collective autochthony in Laos, which Yves Goudineau suggests allows the central lowland Lao authorities ‘to assert that all the ethnic or social groups have – in principle – the same rights on the national soil and that there are no identifiable first settlers on the territory’. In other words, he adds, ‘there are no truly indigenous minorities, no “indigenous peoples”, yet the interbred population is still led by the Lao-Thai ethno-linguistic category’.⁴⁶ The authors of the 1996 history state that

The specificity of the living conditions and the relations between various ethnic groups engender favorable conditions for national harmony thanks to their [ancient] origins in Laos. Those large communities have unified and the population is united. It is the population of Laos, with the Lao-Thai speaking community [i.e. the ethnic Lao] as its core, in a multi-ethnic structure.⁴⁷

The influence of Vietnamese historiography and ethnology is blatant here. For example, in 1980 a Vietnamese author wrote:

The Viet [ethnic Vietnamese] have an important role, being the principal and largest (almost 90 per cent) group in the population of our country, with a long historical evolution, and a major contribution to the task of building and maintaining the country. In history, the Viet are the nucleus, the core of solidarity among the fraternal peoples who together have built and protected the Vietnamese fatherland.⁴⁸

The two late socialist regimes have been using the same metaphors to euphemise the power relations and the political hierarchy between the ethnic Lao and *Kinh* (the ethnic Vietnamese, meaning ‘city’ or ‘capital’, as opposed to *Thượng*, or ‘upland’) and

44 Ministry of Information and Culture, *Pavatsāt Lāo*, vol. I (Vientiane: Ministry, 1996), p. 11.

45 Members of the Austroasiatic family, found throughout the country in both upland and lowland environments, are generally acknowledged to be the original inhabitants of the country.

46 Yves Goudineau, ‘Ethnicité et déterritorialisation dans la péninsule indochinoise: Considérations à partir du Laos’, in *Logiques identitaires, logiques territoriales*, ed. Marie-José Jolivet (Paris: Éditions de l’Aube, Institut de Recherche pour le Développement, 2000), p. 24.

47 Ministry of Information and Culture, *Pavatsāt lao*, vol. I, p. 13.

48 Nguyễn Dương Bình, ‘Về một số vấn đề dân tộc học người Việt trong những năm qua và phương hướng sắp tới’ [Concerning some ethnological issues of the ethnic Viet in past years and future directions], in Viện Dân tộc học (Institute of Ethnology), *Góp phần nghiên cứu bản lĩnh bản sắc các dân tộc ở Việt Nam* [Contribution to studying the character and identity of ethnic groups in Vietnam] (Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 1980), p. 85; quoted in Bruce Lockhart, ‘Looking down from a tightrope: Ethnology in Vietnam’ (unpublished paper, 1985), p. 23. Grant Evans has discussed the Vietnamese influence on Lao ethnography in his ‘Apprentice ethnographers: Vietnam and the study of Lao minorities’, in Evans ed., *Laos. Culture and society*, pp. 161–90.

the minority populations.⁴⁹ Patricia Pelley, in her study of the constitution of a national history in postcolonial Vietnam, notes that the presence of ethnic minorities posed a problem in the re-writing of national history in the DRV. The treatment of ethnic differences was erratic, oscillating between the two extremes of concealment and recognition of ethnic heterogeneity. When the latter option was adopted, Pelley argues, it was done in a way that transformed the ethnic minorities. The metaphor introduced a ‘new sense of topography and borders’ by ‘converting strange and hostile landscapes into familiar ones and [changing] barbarian others into brothers’.⁵⁰ When post colonial North Vietnamese scholars ‘talked about ethnic differences in Viêt-Nam’, she writes elsewhere, they ‘often borrowed from the idioms of horticulture . . . The sixty-four ethnic groups in Viêt-Nam, for example, were reconfigured as flowers in a garden. The ideal garden is an exercise in order: everything is in its place.’⁵¹ ‘Diversity in order’ has likewise been expressed by encompassing botanical metaphors in Laos; Kaysone poetically claimed that ‘[e]ach ethnic group has a nice and beautiful culture and belongs to the Lao national community, just as all kinds of flowers grow in a garden of various colours and scents’.⁵²

The ethnic Lao myth of the origin of humankind that tells of the origins of the first inhabitants of Laos is likewise diverted so as to reinforce this version of a collective autochthony. The myth divides the world cosmologically between the descendants of the deities (Khun Boulom, the mythical first ruler of the Lao, was himself the son of the king of deities), called *thaen*, and the human beings who were born in gourds that grew on earth. Originally, inside these vegetables, the ethnic Lao and non-ethnic Lao were similar, but as soon as they came out (from two different holes), they became distinct from one another. From then on, there were the ethnic Lao on one side and the ‘*Khā*’, i.e., the non-ethnic Lao, on the other. Lao Communist historians presume that ‘this legend is perceived to throw a light on the realities of the history of the ethnic groups of Laos, that is, on their common origins . . .’⁵³

Amongst other functions, the myth helps to give legitimacy to the existing social order by conflating it with a putative natural order. It asserts the right of the ethnic Lao to rule over the indigenous peoples. It also justifies the politico-religious order by placing the Buddhist kings in the rank of deities, since they are the descendants of Khun Boulom, whose seven sons (the Lao kings, as the legend goes, descending from the oldest) went on to establish different kingdoms in mainland Southeast Asia. Instead of legitimising a social and political hierarchy, the Communist re-appropriation of the myth asserts, on the contrary, the pacified and idealised metaphor of brotherhood. In the shortest possible argument, it hints that the ‘multiethnic Lao people’ are rooted in and were born on the same soil. The authors explain:

49 Lockhart, ‘Looking down from a tightrope’, p. 23.

50 Patricia Pelley, ‘“Barbarians” and “younger brothers”: The remaking of race in postcolonial Vietnam’, *JSEAS*, 29, 2 (1998): 379.

51 Patricia Pelley, ‘The history of resistance and the resistance to history in post-colonial constructions of the past’, in *Essays into Vietnamese pasts*, ed. K. W. Taylor and John K. Whitmore (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1995), p. 242.

52 Ministry of Information and Culture, *Pavatsāt Lāo*, vol. I, p. 13.

53 *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12. In his study of Lao religious structures, Charles Archaimbault shows that the unequal relationships between the ethnic and non-ethnic Lao peoples were inscribed in the Khun Boulom myth; Charles Archaimbault, *Structures religieuses lao (rites et mythes)* (Vientiane: Éditions Vithagna, 1973), p. 77.

The gourd myth that has been told among the Lao illuminates historical realities with regard to the origins and national harmony in our country, Laos: the first group to be born are the *Lāo Thoeng* [upland Lao]; they are the eldest. Then, the *Lāo Loum* [lowland Lao] followed, the younger of the two. And the last people are the *Lāo Sung* [Lao of the highlands], the youngest of the three.⁵⁴

The ill-defined legend connects blood ties (brotherhood, family) and territorial roots (country, soil). In this sense, the Lao historians remain devoted to Stalin's definition of the nation, which, as is well known, insists on the conflation of people, culture and territory. (Stalin defined a 'nationality' by five criteria: a stable community of people, a language, a territory, an economic life and a psychological make-up or 'national character'.)

This historiography, which celebrates the ethnic *mélange* of Laos – though at the same time maintaining the hierarchy with the Tai-speaking community on the top and at the forefront – serves not only the government's indigenist agenda, but also the idea of a country. This 'horizontal' historiography, by stressing and linking together the concept of territorial roots (geographical space) and kinship bonds (population), aims at transforming the geographical shape of Laos into a national space. In order to circumscribe a country, however, it is also necessary to fill and control that space, namely to define the people in it; Lao ethnography has been pursuing this task over the last 20 years. In brief, the politics of classification (by defining a population) and the historiography of cohabitation and collective autochthony (by stressing the modern concept of a demarcated territory) define the very basis of a country through a top-down process of nation-shaping.

The theory of a (seemingly) ethnic Lao autochthony that has been evoked lately in Lao official circles nevertheless shows how delicate a balance exists between the demands of Communist orthodoxy and the needs of primordial identity. Phongsavath Boupha, the Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, for instance, explains succinctly in the opening page of the English edition of his *The evolution of the Lao state* that 'there are two principal schools of thought among the historians who have attempted to discover the authentic identity and roots of the Lao people'. The Nanchao theory is one of them. 'However', he hastens to add, 'modern Chinese, Lao and Thai historians have found sufficient evidence for seriously thinking that the Lao people were the original inhabitants of their land.' He is obliged to admit, though, that 'while rigorous scholarly attempts are still underway to prove this point of view with the help of archaeological and anthropological findings the final verdict is still awaited'.⁵⁵

This point, however, begs the question of whether 'Lao' for Phongsavath refers to (a) ethnic Lao or (b) all Lao nationals, including those ethnic minority peoples of Austroasiatic origins who are considered as the first occupants of the soil of Laos. The thesis he articulates is still therefore at a very preliminary stage, but it shares common ground with a more sophisticated and enduring historiography that has developed over

54 Ministry of Information and Culture, *Pavatsāt Lāo*, vol. I, pp. 11–12. The last category refers to Tibeto-Burman speakers, who arrived recently from south-western China, and to the Hmong-Mien (Miao-Yao) peoples, likewise recent arrivals from southern and south-eastern China. These latter two families are confined primarily to highland areas in the northern provinces.

55 Phongsavath Boupha, *The evolution of the Lao state* (New Delhi: Konark Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 2002), p. 1.

the last few years which focuses on the idea of an indigenous civilisation in present-day Laos. This latest theory, though, does not entirely succeed in disentangling the vexed issue of the origins of the Lao people, as it once again conflates the concepts of ethnicity and citizenship.

A third way? The indigenous civilisation

A third thesis on the origins of the Lao people has recently developed in Laos that may be interpreted to some extent as a combination of the perennialist narrative and the Stalinist indigenist model. At the same time, however, the emergence of an 'indigenised' historiography also expresses the desire among Lao historians and other authors to write a history which is autonomous *vis-à-vis* both the Thai nationalist version of the past and Vietnamese ideological influence. One of the leading figures of this new historiography is Souneth Photisane, a Lao professional historian who co-authored the massive 1310-page *Pavatsāt Lāo (deukdamban-pachuban)* (History of Laos [ancient times to the present]), published in 2000 by the Ministry of Information and Culture. The book is in fact an expanded and edited version of two prior publications, one published in 1989 and covering the period since 1893 and the other published in 1996 and spanning the period from prehistory until French colonial rule. The 2000 edition is apparently becoming a master reference within official circles, including university teachers.⁵⁶

Souneth is one of the few Lao historians to have completed a doctorate in a non-socialist country. Following training in Mongolia, he undertook his doctoral studies in Australia under the supervision of Martin Stuart-Fox, the best-known foreign historian of Laos. From the outset, the historical perspective in Souneth's work appears unconventional. He shows no interest in the trope of migration southwards, whether from Central Asia, Sichuan or the region between the Yellow and Yangzi Rivers. He also refutes the story of the Ai-Lao ancestors and Nanchao as a Tai kingdom. Neither is he convinced that the ethnic Lao were the original indigenous people of the present-day territory of Laos, acknowledging instead that the ethno-linguistic theory whereby the Tai-speaking people were originally from an area that encompassed present-day southern China and the northern regions of Vietnam and Laos is the most plausible and accepted hypothesis.⁵⁷

This Lao historian clearly expressed in a conference paper his desire to move away from the partial and traditional versions of the history of Laos, including 'Buddhist', 'traditionalist', 'royalist' and 'Tai-ist', but also 'nationalist' and 'Marxist' historiographies. He supports instead what he calls 'the modernist history', which 'emphasises historiography according to principles of historical research, with the appropriate use of data, evidence, documents, under the scrutiny of research and analysis'.⁵⁸ Souneth thus

56 Interview with a Lao professor in history at the National University of Laos, April 2002. See Thongsā Sanyavongkhamdi *et al.*, *Pavatsāt Lāo lēm III: 1893 thoeng pajuban* [Lao history Vol. III: 1893 to the present] (Vientiane: Ministry of Education and Social Science Research Institute, 1989); and Souneth Photisane *et al.*, *Pavatsāt Lāo (deukdamban-pajuban)* [History of Laos (ancient times to the present)] (Vientiane: Ministry of Information and Culture, 2000).

57 Souneth Photisane, 'A new trend in researching the ancient history of Laos', in *Kānseuksā prawattisāt lae wannakam khōng klum chattiphan Thai/Studies of history and literature of Tai ethnic groups*, ed. Sarasawadee Ongsakul and Yoshiyuki Masuhara (Bangkok: Chiang Mai University, 2002), p. 66.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 66.

demonstrates his attachment to the historian's scientific credentials based on standards of logic and evidence. Helped by this methodology, he has been pursuing for a number of years – along with his archaeologist colleagues – the reconstruction of the prehistory of Laos. Indeed, between the appearance of the 1996 volume and the publication of the longer book in 2000, a sophisticated theory has emerged that argues for the existence of a culture and society on the present-day territory of Laos (and beyond) that predated any Indian or Chinese influence. In his 2001 conference paper, Souneth outlined the 'the tendencies of Lao contemporary history, from the Stone Age to the period prior to [fourteenth-century ruler] Fa Ngum'. He bluntly claims that:

One may therefore correctly declare that Luang Prabang, in northern Laos, has been for a long time the [*sic*] cradle of civilisation. In any case, with the knowledge that the Lao are originally from the lower Mekong, what we will take into account afterwards is the expansion of the Indian and Chinese civilizations on the borders of the Mekong and the mixing with the population's indigenous culture of this area, which have laid down the cultural foundations of the lower Mekong as well as the creation and the development of the city-states in the region.⁵⁹

Souneth's conference paper is important because it facilitates our understanding of this apparently positivist historiography, whose objective is nothing less than the rewriting of the history of Laos as an autochthonous and autonomous history. In this regard, Souneth's conviction is evident: 'the society of clans and ethnic groups embraced a mixing of cultures that were their own and were very advanced in many areas, before receiving the cultures from India and China'.⁶⁰ This reassessment of the prehistory of Laos prior to Indian and Chinese influences is constructed around two main arguments: the predominance of a cultural substratum (even of an indigenous civilisation) and the capacity to adapt to external influences. In other words, a sociocultural matrix appears to have developed and consolidated in the period prior to the first Indian and Chinese contacts in the lower Mekong in general and in Laos in particular.

The description and reconstruction of technological progress and of the formation of socioeconomic, political and administrative centres – in short, of an earlier type of urbanism – between the prehistorical and protohistorical periods (i.e., between Neolithic and post-Neolithic) is a major element that reinforces the theory of an advanced autochthonous society:

The increase in population is such that it allows the construction of dykes, and from dykes of irrigation systems When there are natural resources, such as iron, salt, etc., this configuration leads to exchanges, hence the creation of social, economic, political and administrative and cultural centers. This process starts off in small *muang* [Tai sociopolitical units], and then expands to become a village farming society. It is also the era of agricultural production⁶¹

Likewise, a capability for artistic production – the process of the indigenisation of history is fuelled with details, especially with respect to material culture, which aim at

59 Ibid., p. 66.

60 Ibid., p. 74.

61 Ibid., p. 68.

authenticating the remote past – is revealed and seemingly identified with a nascent religious orientation:

During this period [6000–1200 BC], several cultural activities worth examining appeared: ceramic and pottery that, in Laos and in the lower Mekong, are similar to those in other regions of the world. They are in use among populations that permanently settle in villages and carry out subsistence activities, such as agriculture (rice, corn) and farming Decorative pottery possesses esthetical qualities, or denotes applied arts. The highly esthetical features of this period result from a certain ideal, a philosophy and belief⁶²

The second major characteristic of this early historiography is its perennialist aspiration, that is, a search for a cultural continuity extending from ancient times to the present. Archaeology is therefore expected to follow a linear narrative and, as such, to overcome the problematic periodisation between prehistory and history, that ‘sharp discontinuity between the Neolithic “tribes” of Southeast Asian prehistory and the “Indianized” and “Sinicized” states’.⁶³ That continuity is made possible through the process of localisation. The late eminent historian Oliver W. Wolters once defined the process and its consequences as follows: ‘The term “localization” has the merit of calling our attention to something else outside the foreign materials. One way of conceptualizing “something else” is as a local statement, of cultural interest but not necessarily in written form, into which foreign elements have retreated.’⁶⁴ In other words, this approach allows us to look at something foreign from a local point of view rather than to interpret something local from an external source. Yet the process of reappropriation, of writing back, as Craig Reynolds argues, ‘against the foreignness – of “influences” and of evidence . . . must constantly be negotiated because of the nature of the sources for early history’ so that ‘the thing that has an Indic name or is written in Chinese characters is . . . made demonstrably Southeast Asian’.⁶⁵

Souneth suggests that some contemporary Indianised cultural items in Laos – in this case, stone boundaries in Buddhist pagodas – developed originally from indigenous materials. He explains:

the standing stones [in Sam Neua, north-eastern Laos] represent the belief in spirits back to 3000 years ago under prehistory. During the following period, under the Indian influence, the standing stones were transformed into the cities’ [*sic*] pillars, then into stone boundaries of Buddhist pagodas, which were used to delineate the temples, often decorated with beautiful carvings, such as lot us, spears, pagodas, the Jakata and the life of Buddha, devoted to Buddhism These stone boundaries are therefore an improved form of the standing stones and constitute an ancient Lao culture, for such practices do not exist neither [*sic*] in Sri Lanka nor in India. These stone borders are located in Laos and in northeastern Thailand, which demonstrate that these populations who were interested in standing stones or stone boundaries belonged to the same groups since very old times.⁶⁶

62 Ibid., p. 62.

63 Carter G. Bentley, ‘Indigenous states of Southeast Asia’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 15 (1986): 276.

64 Oliver W. Wolters, *History, culture, and region in Southeast Asian perspectives* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1982), p. 55.

65 Craig J. Reynolds, ‘A new look at old Southeast Asia’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 54, 2 (1995): 433.

66 Souneth, ‘New trend’, p. 71.

More strikingly, Souneth argues strongly that the ancient stone chairs found in northern Laos

are thought to be older than the bronze drums due to their simple aspects that prove their antiquity. New findings have been made in the province of Luang Prabang. It is said that there are more, albeit only few, in polished metal, in the regions of Phu Sam Sum and Phu Khao Lêp in Luang Prabang province Some have drawings of frogs or toads on them, others of birds, which are found bountifully on bronze drums. These stone chairs probably preceded the bronze drums, which actually originated from the former. . . . And scholars, who had been unable to do so previously, find out now that the origins of the bronze drums are located in Laos, and that the latter are a result of the evolution pattern from the stone chairs.⁶⁷

The ‘cult of antiquity’, in Pelley’s perspicacious expression, is thriving in neighbouring Vietnam as well. The Bronze Age culture (from the first millennium BCE) and in particular the Đông Sơn bronze drums that epitomise it have in fact become one of the country’s most powerful national symbols, endlessly replicated in plaster factories as a whole or in distinctive pieces, for ‘pedagogical’ reasons that somehow recall the mass techniques that give birth to imagined communities.⁶⁸ The fact that recent Lao-language historiography claims that these bronze drums actually originate from the present-day territory of Laos – and, moreover, that they derive from older archaeological artifacts, also found in this area – suggests that official narratives of the Vietnamese and Lao pasts may be engaging in a nascent battle for antiquity, reminiscent of the heated debates that have opposed Vietnamese and Chinese scholars on the origins of the bronze drums, each group trying to make exclusive claims. The diffusion centre of these drums still remains undetermined, but except for Lao historians and archaeologists, no-one has proposed Laos as a possible option. Although a few bronze drums from the Đông Sơn period have been found in central and north-eastern Laos, these pieces have been acknowledged to most likely be ‘imports’.⁶⁹

The line is thin between the capability for agency and the modern nationalist agenda. Bruce Trigger suggests that archaeologists establishing their regional or national prehistoric sequences could provide a justifiable collective pride in the past and help resist colonial and imperial domination.⁷⁰ Philip Kohl and Clare Fawcett, on the other hand, warn against an archaeology in the service of the state, which in their view runs the greater risk of distorting evidence in order to promote a chauvinistic nationalism by

67 Ibid., p. 72.

68 Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam*, p. 156.

69 Madeleine Giteau, *Art et archéologie du Laos* (Paris: Éditions A. & J. Picard, 2001), p. 56. For more details on the disputes between Vietnamese and Chinese scholars on the origins of the bronze drums, and their political ramifications, see the very informative article by Han Xiaorong, ‘The present echoes of the ancient bronze drum: Nationalism and archeology in modern Vietnam and China’, *Explorations*, 2, 2 (1998): 27–46. I would like to thank Haydon Cherry for this reference.

70 Bruce G. Trigger, ‘Romanticism, nationalism, and archaeology’, in *Nationalism, politics, and the practice of archaeology*, ed. Philip L. Kohl and Clare Fawcett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 277.

promoting the interests and domination of one particular ethnic group.⁷¹ I would argue, however, that modern Lao historiography focused on the early periods is less – or at most as much as – about supporting policies of domination and control over the rest of the population within the country than about a desire to write an autonomous history against foreign influences. The will to ‘write back’ in Lao historiography is perhaps even more acute than elsewhere because of the successive and various kinds of political domination to which the different Lao kingdoms and then the state of Laos were subjected – from the Siamese and Vietnamese subjugations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, through French colonial rule, followed by the civil war triggered by foreign powers and finally the integration into a Vietnamese-dominated socialist alliance since 1975. The interpretations of the prehistoric excavations in Khorat Plateau in present-day north-eastern Thailand (commonly called ‘Isan’, which means ‘Northeast’ in Pali) must be interpreted to some extent under this geopolitical rationale. In this way, the interpretations that the Lao archaeologists and historians have formulated from the excavations that took place in the Thai archaeological sites of Non Nok Tha and Ban Na Di are particularly revealing.

The Khorat Plateau, where these two sites are located, has a long history of archaeological research stretching back to the French colonial period and the pioneering works of the cohort of scientists it brought with it, including archaeologists and amateur anthropologists. Nearer to our time, the search for prehistoric artifacts began again in this region in the mid-1960s.⁷² The authors of the 2000 *Pavatsāt Lāo* have included Charles Higham’s authoritative *The archaeology of mainland Southeast Asia* in their references yet have devised significantly different archaeological reconstructions from his findings. They write, for example, that ‘with respect to the culture (*vatthanatham*) of Non Nok Tha, studies of the terracotta objects and the grave-digging techniques have shown that the population that lived on this site have had one unique and same culture throughout all the ages, namely, [the culture of] the ancient Lao (*Lāo bouhān*) . . .’⁷³ It is not certain whom they are referring to when they use the term ‘the ancient Lao’ – ethnic Lao only or the whole population of present-day Laos. Again, the absence of distinctive Lao-language terms that could differentiate between the two notions of ethnicity and citizenship regarding the ethnic Lao group is a handicap, while favouring the ethno-nationalist project.

Archaeological evidence has indeed suggested that human settlements in the Isan region stretch back to at least 2000 years ago.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, ethnicity can never be securely traced if one adopts the constructivist perspective. Even with a less relativist position which accepts that a partially apprehensible objective reality cannot be totally

71 Philip L. Kohl and Clare Fawcett, ‘Archaeology in the service of the state: Theoretical considerations’, in Kohl and Fawcett ed., *Nationalism, politics*, p. 6. Grant Evans has argued that the search for a deeper ‘indigenous’ cultural layer – that is, for the ‘real’ cultural essence underneath (and outside the influence of) foreign imports – is methodologically flawed, partly due to its nationalist modern agenda; Grant Evans, ‘Between the global and the local there are regions, culture areas, and national states: A review article’, *JSEAS*, 33, 1 (2002): 158.

72 Charles Higham, *The archaeology of mainland Southeast Asia. From 10,000 B.C. to the fall of Angkor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 95.

73 Souneth et al., *Pavatsāt Lāo*, p. 17.

74 Volker Grabowsky, ‘The Isan up to its integration into the Siamese state’, in *Regions and national integration in Thailand 1892–1992*, ed. Volker Grabowsky (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1995), p. 110.

reduced to invention or social construction, it is difficult to agree with the assumption of continuity and homogeneity for one particular group of people ‘throughout the ages’ because of the inevitable changes that the group will experience over time, i.e., ethnomorphosis.⁷⁵ For the authors of the 2000 history, ‘ancient Lao’ may not refer to the contemporary ethnic Lao, a few pages further on they mention a wave of migration of ‘present-day Lao’ (*Lāo pajuban*) from what is now the province of Vientiane to the site of Non Nok Tha between 0 and 800 CE, during which period they suggest that the civilisation of these ‘present-day Lao’ emerged and developed in this area. Their conclusion, however, adds to the uncertainty as to whom they are referring: ‘[i]n short, Non Nok Tha reflects the traces of the Lao from different periods and provides additional evidence that the Lao have migrated from territories outside Indochina’.⁷⁶

Archaeology arguably plays an important role in reinforcing the conception in Lao contemporary historiography of a collective, (ambiguously) perennial and primordial identity. Equally important, it moves the roots of the ‘Lao people’ away from ‘Indochina’ and further West, closer to the Tai-speaking world, as if the end of the Cold War in Southeast Asia and the resultant reduced imperative for showing international socialist solidarity has had an impact on the prehistory of Laos. To put it another way, contemporary Lao historiographers reconstruct the early period by expanding ‘Lao’ autochthony to include the right bank of the Mekong (present-day Northeastern Thailand), seemingly re-creating the landscape of the former Lan Xang kingdom. They stress the antiquity of the areas and their people by arguing that knowledge of the working and production of bronze was gained by local people (the ‘ancient Lao’) in Non Nok Tha 4,700 years ago, well before the first Indian and Chinese contacts. Moreover, although Higham dates the excavations in Non Nok Tha and Ban Na Di from roughly 3600–3000 until about 500–300 BCE, the authors of *Pavatsāt Lāo* estimate that the sites may be as old as 7000 years.⁷⁷

Modern Lao-language historiography pushes back the date of a distinctively and autonomous ‘Lao’ culture and society in the interests of establishing an authentic pre-Chinese and pre-Indian civilisation, as Vietnamese postcolonial historiographers have done through an intensive work of desinicisation.⁷⁸ ‘The stress on localizing agency’, as Reynolds comments, ‘shifts the focus on Southeast Asia and their future, away from their suspect origins as mere borrowers and culture brokers.’ Pelley has similarly remarked that the rewriting of Vietnamese history in this westward perspective, which she labels a ‘self-generating instead of derivative mode’, ‘establishes Vietnam as a focal point of Southeast Asia rather than an insignificant periphery of East Asia’.⁷⁹ Nonetheless, it remains equally important to bear in mind the political orientation of archaeology, which is almost inevitable as long as nation-states remain the dominant type of polity,

75 Philip L. Kohl, ‘Nationalism and archaeology: On the constructions of nations and the reconstructions of the remote past’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 27 (1998): 232.

76 Souneth *et al.*, *Pavatsāt Lāo*, p. 19.

77 *Ibid.*, pp. 16 (7000 years) and 20 (bronze); Higham’s dating is in *Archaeology of mainland Southeast Asia*, p. 99.

78 Tran Quoc Vuong, ‘Traditions, acculturation, renovation: The evolutionary pattern of Vietnamese culture’, in *Southeast Asia in the 9th to 14th centuries*, ed. David G. Marr and A. C. Milner (Singapore and Canberra: ISEAS and ANU Research School of Pacific Studies, 1986), p. 272; Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam*, pp. 148–56.

79 Reynolds, ‘New look’, p. 431; Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam*, p. 156.

especially where postcolonial states are concerned. Nationalist archaeology involves the misuse of evidence to pursue the creation and the consolidation of national identities, often by undermining the identities of others within and/or outside the state.⁸⁰ Contemporary Lao historiographers likewise localise, indigenise and – because the process occurs within the boundaries and through the agency of civil servants – nationalise ‘Lao’ culture by stressing pre-Chinese and pre-Indian local genius and creativity. They tend to do so, however, by emphasising the Tai ethnic roots of a segment of the population at the expense of the non-Tai segment.

Conclusion: Geographies of the national body

The key distinction between the present and former regimes lies in their conception of the national identity, its practice and discursive content. While the RLG focused on the definition of the inner ‘essence’ and qualities of a people, i.e., the ethnic Lao/Majority identity, the Marxist-Leninist-inspired regime turned the perspective upside down and pursued a more systematic definition and classification of the ethnic minorities. They incorporated into the national space – or in Thongchai’s seminal expression, the geo-body of Laos – the peripheries, i.e., the upland and highland minorities, which were traditionally located outside the national lens under lowland Lao politics and nationalist historiography. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the newly independent state of Laos lacked the administrative grip to integrate the ‘savages’ on the frontiers of the kingdom and was less concerned about a ‘civilising project’ than consolidating its centre of power, the lowland Lao areas – at least in the first years of its leadership. Unlike Thailand from the late nineteenth century, the central authorities in Vientiane were never able to establish territorial and population management throughout the country.

Only Communist ethnography, guided by the so-called policy of ‘national equality’ embedded in an evolutionist vision, went on defining, categorising and classifying the whole population of Laos, except the ethnic Lao themselves; although the latter are categorised as an ‘ethnic group’ in the census, they are not scrutinised or analysed in terms of a fixed, stereotyped image. The Communist rulers, ethnographers and historiographers have collectively engaged in the redefinition of the ‘nation’ by emphasising territory and Marxist-Leninist rhetoric and politics. The trope of migration associated with the Ai-Lao version is incompatible with this diversity-cum-equality ideology. The huge wave of migration of the Lao race descending from the far North and marginalising all the ‘weaker’ and ‘backward’ people on their way by absorbing them is undoubtedly not the right discourse to promote in this context. History and especially prehistory have to be modified accordingly.

The recent new trend in officially endorsed Lao historiography that stresses collective autochthony rather oddly aims at reconciling the demands for Communist orthodoxy – based on the principle of equality among all the ethnic groups and the Stalinist conflation of people, culture and territory – and the call for a perennial and primordial identity, based on the domination of the ethnic Lao. At the same time, however, the trope of migration – especially the Ai-Lao narrative, considerably influenced by the former regime’s textbooks – remains unrevised in school textbooks and prevails

80 Kohl, ‘Nationalism and archaeology’, p. 226.

in mass-circulation publications as well. This form of nationalism, attempting to balance Communist convention and ethnic nationalism, inevitably leaves the writing of the origins of Laos unsettled in modern Lao-language history books.

The writing of an autonomous history requires a quest for local and authentic creativity; it demands a beginning that is not derivative. The objectives of the recent and growing 'indigenous civilisation' narrative promoted by Lao historians and archaeologists are threefold: to establish an autonomous history for Laos prior to external influences, one which is capable of adaptability and creativity; to engage in a race to claim antiquity for nationalistic purposes; and to move the origins of the 'Lao' (whether the ethnic Lao in particular or the population as a whole will always remain ambiguous) closer to the territories of the former Lan Xang kingdom. In that latter sense, the prehistoric period in contemporary Lao historiography is also a bid to win very current debates: Lao scholars reinterpret the early period in accordance with a geopolitical rationale that erodes the country's 'Indochinese' links. Finally, the westward displacement of Lao origins in the reconstruction of the country's prehistorical past, outside the actual national boundaries but embedded in a perennialist perspective, suggests that history practitioners in Laos have yet to come to terms with the nation's modern spatial identity. To reverse Chris Baker's straightforward expression (inspired, in turn, by Thongchai), this nationalist history does not take (only) the present-day national territory as its space.⁸¹

81 Baker's exact sentence is: 'National history takes the national territory as its space, and tells the story of the rise and fall of the state inside that container, usually overlooking that the definition of the territory and the idea of the state are very recent'; Chris Baker, 'Afterwords: Autonomy's meanings', in *Recalling local pasts. Autonomous history in Southeast Asia*, ed. Sunait Chutintarinond and Chris Baker (Chiang Mai: Silk-worm Books, 2002), p. 170. Through this remark, Baker succinctly recalls Thongchai's argument that 'a national history is the biography of a spatial identity' – imagined, conceptualised, materialised and reified where it did not exist before Western colonialist expansion in Southeast Asia; Thongchai Winichakul, 'Writing at the interstices. Southeast Asian historians and postnational histories in Southeast Asia', in Abu Talib and Tan ed., *New terrains*, p. 9.