

INVOKING THE PAST: THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF LAO LITERATURE,  
1941-1975

A Thesis

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the role of Lao literature in the formation of Lao national identity from 1945 to 1975. In the early 1940s, Lao literary modernity emerged within the specific politico-cultural context of the geopolitical conflict between French Laos and Thailand. As a result, Lao literature and culture became increasingly politicized in colonial cultural policy to counter Thai expansionist nationalism that sought to incorporate Laos into Thai territorial and cultural space. I argue that Lao literature, which was institutionalized by Franco-Lao cultural campaigns between 1941 and 1945, became instrumental to the invention of Lao tradition and served as a way to construct a cultural boundary between Laos and Thailand. Precolonial Lao literature was revitalized as part of Lao national culture; its content and form were also instrumentalized to distinguish Lao identity from that of the Thai. Lao literature was distinguished by the uses of the Lao language, poetic forms, and classical conventions rooted in what was defined as Laos's own literary culture. In addition, Lao prose fiction, which was made possible in Laos with the rise of print capitalism and an emergent literate social class, offered another mode of "invented tradition." Despite its presumed novelty in terms of form and content, early Lao prose fiction was highly conventional in its representation of idealized traditional society in opposition to a problematic modern one. This invention of tradition through fiction was an attempt to contrast a "traditional" Lao nation with the modernized/Westernized Thai nation. Ultimately, Lao literary production between 1941 and 1945 was imbricated with the nativist discourse of a national idealized past that allowed literature to function as a defining feature of Lao culture. This close connection between Lao literature and national culture remained predominant during the post-WW II period in which Lao intellectuals from the colonial continued to employ literature to express Lao cultural identity, autonomy, and legitimacy for an emergent nation state.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Chairat Polmuk was born in Khon Kaen in Northeast Thailand on 30 March 1985. He received a bachelor's degree (first-class honors) from the Department of Thai, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, in 2008. He continued on in the same department, writing his first master's thesis on royal ceremony literature. After obtaining his degree in 2010, he accepted a position as a lecturer at the Department of Thai, Chulalongkorn University. In 2012, he was granted a Queen Sirikit scholarship to pursue his second master's degree and doctoral studies abroad. From August 2012 to May 2014, he studied for his master's in Southeast Asian Studies at Cornell University. He will return to wintry Ithaca as a PhD student in Asian Literature, Religion, and Culture in August 2014.

For Mom and Dad who told me tales, short and long.

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I am responsible for all errors and inaccuracies in this thesis.



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# **Chapter One**

## **Introduction**

In this study, I examine the construction of the notion of Lao culture from 1941 to 1975 by drawing on literary sources. The formation of Lao cultural identity through literature was a complex process of struggle and negotiation. First of all, the notion of Lao culture grew out of the colonial discourse of loss and restoration that primarily aimed to foster sympathy and loyalty toward the French. At times, Lao tradition was invented to challenge Thai political interference and cultural influence. I account for the ways in which Lao intellectuals negotiated colonial discourses and Thai influences to serve their own purposes. My analysis of Lao literary production therefore aims to show that Lao literature provided the Lao with expressions to assert Lao autonomy, identity, and nationality.

The politicization of Lao culture discussed in this thesis was historically grounded in the French campaign for National Renovation and the geopolitical dispute between French Laos and Thailand in the early 1940s. The Franco-Lao collaborative campaign to revitalize Lao culture was implemented in 1941 to foster a sense of a Lao homeland and to counter an irredentist “pan-Thai” movement. In this politico-cultural context, Lao literature, among other cultural forms, was infused with a nativist discourse and, thus, became an important vehicle for the invention of Lao tradition. First of all, the revival of Lao traditional literature challenged Thai expansionist ideology by asserting that Laos’s own literary culture was distinct from that of the Thai. Lao literature was distinguishable from Thai literature because it was composed in the Lao language and conformed to authentic and original Lao poetic forms and conventions. In addition, Lao prose fiction, which emerged as new form of writing during this period, invented Lao tradition

through its idealization of “traditional” society as opposed to problematic modern society. This emphasis on tradition rather than modernity distinguished Lao official nationalism under colonial rule from its Thai counterpart under Phibun’s regime, which strived to modernize/Westernize the Thai nation. Moreover, to invent Lao tradition, Lao prose fiction mostly drew on local folkloric and rustic elements rather than court culture, which was a dominant defining feature of Thai culture in official narratives of Thai nationalism. As such, Lao literature was not only revitalized as Lao culture, but its content was also instrumentalized to distinguish Lao national identity from that of the Thai.

Crucially, literary activity during the early 1940s established a solid relationship between Lao literature and the national culture. During the post-WW II period (1946-1975), Lao literature from the previous decade continued to be an integral part of the formation of a Lao national identity in response to the political and social transformations caused by national liberation movements and the continued interventions of foreign powers. Moreover, Lao intellectuals who previously worked for the colonial cultural campaign continued to work for an emergent state in the domain of literature. In this regard, literature is a valuable source to investigate processes by which Lao cultural space was shaped and reshaped by Lao intellectuals.

### **The Thesis Outline**

This thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 outlines the overarching arguments and includes a literature review. This chapter also provides the social and institutional background of the emergence of Lao literary modernity in the early 1940s. Chapter 2 examines the invention of Lao classical literature as an aspect of national heritage between 1941 and 1945. I situate this process within the historical and political contexts of the colonial project of cultural revival and

the geopolitical dispute between French Laos and Thailand. I investigate how Lao intellectuals strategically employed Lao literature as a marker of a cultural boundary between Thailand and Laos through the standardization of Lao literary traditions and the Lao language. Chapter 3 offers a textual analysis of Lao short stories and novels written in the early 1940s in terms of genre, style, and thematic content. I examine how these texts invent a Lao tradition through the fictional representation of an ideal traditional society as contrasted with a problematic modern one. I also link this mode of invented tradition with the traditionalist ethos in Laos and the pro-modern/Western cultural policy in Thailand during this period. Chapter 4 accounts for the continuity of literary activity and the continuing role of literature as the source of national identity into the post-WW II period. I detail processes through which Lao literature became institutionalized and instrumentalized by an emergent state between 1946 and 1975 to shape Lao national culture in response to political and social changes. Chapter 5 summarizes the main arguments of each chapter and emphasizes the significance of literature in the construction of Lao cultural identity over time.

### **Framing the Question: The Historiography of Lao Literature and the Politics of Criticism<sup>1</sup>**

Since French colonialists occupied Laos, they deliberately oppressed people throughout the country. They also constantly sought to uproot our national culture [*vatthanatham khong sat*]. Although they promised to bring progress [*khwamchaloen*] and civilization [*khwamsivilai*] to this so-called backward country, the reality that people witnessed for sixty years under colonial rule proved that their words and their actions were completely opposite.<sup>2</sup>

This passage is taken from one of the most comprehensive literary histories of Laos, written in 1987 by Lao socialist scholars. It succinctly captures the official representation of French

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<sup>1</sup> All translations are mine unless stated otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> Bosaengkham Vongdala et al, *Vannakhadi Lao* [Lao Literature] (Vientiane: Ministry of Education, 1987), 502.

colonialism that has been reproduced since the early 1970s. In revolutionary narratives of communism, colonialism is often condemned for its brutal oppression of the Lao people, its exploitation of “national culture,” and its hypocrisy in bringing Laos into “civilization” and “modernity.” Nonetheless, the primordialist notion of “national culture” is somewhat elusive.

In his discussion of Lao historiography written from the late 1960s to the post-1975 period, Søren Ivarsson points out that the dominant theme of cultural decline during the colonial regime has been reproduced over the decades to highlight the Communist Party’s resistance to colonialism. This official history, according to Ivarsson, dismisses the processes by which the idea of Lao nationalism was gradually formed under colonial rule.<sup>3</sup> In fact, as I will discuss later in chapter 2, terms such as *vatthanatham khong sat* (national culture), *khwamchaloen* (progress), and civilization (*khwamsivilai*) were introduced to Laos in the early 1940s as indispensable terms to describe intellectual production of Lao culture and literature.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the criticism of colonialism for its destruction of Lao culture, Lao literary history after 1975 harshly criticizes literature written during the colonial period for its lack of originality and its pro-French tendencies. Lao writers who wrote their works during the colonial period, such as Somchine Nginn, Thao Kene, and Thao Nhouthak, reveal “the imitation of French literature and the veneration of the French people and nation.”<sup>5</sup> Post-1975 Lao scholars, some of whom received their education in the Soviet Union in the 1980s, categorized modern Lao literary production into two groups. The first group is called, “ploen chit,” which literally

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<sup>3</sup> Søren Ivarsson, *Creating Laos: The Making of a Lao Space between Indochina and Siam, 1860-1945* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008), 11-20.

<sup>4</sup> Similar, equivalent terms appeared earlier in Thailand. For example, the term, “siwilai” and “watthanatham,” were translated into Thai in about the 1930s. The Lao terms were, therefore, likely derived from the Thai. However, due to the limitations of this study, an investigation of how these terms were borrowed by the Lao will have to await a later date.

<sup>5</sup> Vongdala et al, *Vannakhadi Lao*, 509.

means to amuse or lighten up the heart, referring to literary genres that lack seriousness, such as romance. The second group is called “satchathat sangkhomniyom,” or socialist realist literature which reflects the influence of Russian socialist realism.<sup>6</sup> This latter group emphasizes social problems such as class distinction and the revolutionary spirit of the working class. Literary works written under the colonial regime are generally categorized under the first group due to their “lack of social consciousness.”<sup>7</sup> This kind of criticism has been reproduced up to the present. A 1999 student textbook, for example, describes the content of the fiction of the colonial period as “superstitious” and “lighthearted,” giving *The Sacred Buddha Image* written by Somchine Nginn in 1944 as an example.<sup>8</sup> In short, Lao literary history and criticism since 1975 are in line with the official history in which the theme of the resistance against colonialism has been invoked to celebrate the victory of the Communist Party.

In exposing the dominant socialist ideology that has governed Lao literary history, I do not mean to downplay the anticolonial spirit of literary as well as cultural criticism during the postcolonial period.<sup>9</sup> Nor do I call for a redemptive history of colonialism. Rather, I use post-1975 literary history to illustrate two points. First, socialist literary history forecloses a critical assessment of literature and literary production during the colonial period. By labeling literary works written under the colonial regime as pro-French or unpatriotic, socialist literary scholars disregard the social and cultural functions of these texts within their actual historical context.

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<sup>6</sup> Russian socialist realism is a literary as well as politico-cultural movement that began in the early 1930s in the Soviet Union. The literary movement itself was influenced by Marxist philosophy and the pre-existing tradition of “proletarian literature.” See Herman Ermolaev, *Soviet Literary Theories, 1917-1934: The Genesis of Socialist Realism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963): 168-173; and Evgeny Dobrenko, *Political Economy of Socialist Realism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007): 215-219.

<sup>7</sup> Vongdala et al, *Vannakhadi Lao*, 509.

<sup>8</sup> Aunkaew Muannavong et al, *Baebhian Vannakhadi San Matthayomsuksa Pithi 6* [Student Textbook on Literature for Grade 12 Level] (Vientiane: Ministry of Education, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> As Natalie Melas argues, postcolonial readings of colonial texts are politically radical in their disengagement with the colonial discourse of civilization. See Natalie Melas, *All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 84-112.



Second, the conception of Lao national culture as a transcendental entity dismisses the complex process by which the notion of culture is historically constructed within a specific politico-cultural context.

In this thesis, I propose to offer an alternative approach to literature and culture in colonial Laos. Ultimately, I examine how the notion of Lao culture was constructed during the late colonial period (1941-1945) through literature. I choose this time period as my point of departure for two main reasons. First of all, Laos during this period witnessed a change in colonial policy that had a significant impact of Lao culture. After the French acquisition of Laos in 1893, French political and cultural investments in Laos were low compared with Cambodia and Vietnam. Only in the 1930s-1940s did the French begin to implement a cultural campaign in Laos to initiate cultural revival projects. The Lao literary scene in this period was active, witnessing both the revival of Lao traditional literature and the emergence of modern prose fiction. Second, this colonial cultural campaign established a strong connection between literature and culture. As such, literature remained a defining feature of Lao national culture even after the colonial period.

The French-sponsored cultural campaign implemented in Laos in 1941 was called the “Lao Nhay” or “Great Laos.” In the following section, I provide background information about the Lao Nhay and its significance to Lao culture and literature.

### **The Lao Nhay Cultural Campaign (1941-1945): The Formation of Lao Culture in the Colonial Context**

The Lao Nhay refers to the campaign implemented in Laos in 1941 as part of the French National Renovation campaign in French Indochina. Admiral Decoux, Governor-General of

Indochina, was in charge of this campaign throughout the colony, which included what became Vietnam and Cambodia as well as Laos. In Laos, Charles Rochet took charge of the Lao Nhay and formed the committee to spearhead the campaign. Its members consisted of both French officials such as Blanchard de la Brosse and French-educated Lao intellectuals such as Somchine Nginn, Nhouy Abhay, and Katay Don Sasorith. The committee launched a newspaper entitled *Lao Nhay* to be a mouthpiece of the campaign. To understand the rationale behind the implementation of the Lao Nhay, we have to consider two broader political contexts: the German occupation of France and the Japanese intervention in Indochina.

In the aftermath of the German occupation of France in May 1940, the new government of Marshall Philippe Pétain was formed in France's south. In the midst of political turmoil, humiliating defeat, and dislocation, the Pétain regime based at Vichy implemented a politico-cultural campaign known as the National Revolution. Seeking to restore national pride, the campaign placed great emphasis on folklore and cultural heritage. A group of traditionalist intelligentsia under Pétain's direction encouraged the French people to rediscover their national roots in rural areas, believing that modernity brought about the decadence of civilization and immorality.<sup>10</sup> Folk traditions and rural life were invoked by Vichy propaganda to create romantic nostalgia and a ruralist sentiment. The Museum of Folk Art and Tradition (Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires) was the main governmental body dedicated to the studies of folklore and ethnology and the preservation of regional cultures and traditions. Youth movements, especially those consisting of groups of young scouts who were trained to appreciate local art and sports, served as an important means to disseminate the ideas of national

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<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Karlgodt, *Defending National Treasures: French Art and Heritage Under Vichy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 17-28.

renewal.<sup>11</sup> Although regionalism was an essential characteristic of the National Revolution, regional cultures were subsumed under a national effort to promote homogenous cultural identity.<sup>12</sup>

Pétain's cultural policy was subsequently exported to the French colonial empire.<sup>13</sup> This can be viewed as an effort to mitigate the humiliation of the German occupation and to sustain French power in the colonies by deploying the National Revolution's rhetoric of cultural restoration. In Indochina, the French adopted the National Revolution campaign to grapple with the Japanese intervention and local resistance during the course of World War II. The presence of Japanese troops throughout Indochina and other parts of Southeast Asia since 1940 challenged European colonial power. In early 1941, French prestige in Indochina was severely damaged when Japanese-tolerated Thai irredentism forced the French to cede areas in Laos and Cambodia to Thailand. The "pan-Thai" nationalist movement under the military regime of Phibun Songkhram had rallied to reincorporate the "lost territories" resulting from the 1893 Franco-Siamese treaty and other agreements signed under pressure. Central to this irredentist campaign was an attempt to unite the so-called Thai race (referring to the Thai as well as other Tai speakers such as the Lao) across national borders. An eminent ideologue of the Phibun regime, Luang Wichit Wathakan, emphasized the ethnolinguistic and cultural affinities of Thailand and its neighboring countries in his novels, songs, plays, and speeches.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Christian Faure, *Le Projet Culturel de Vichy: Folklore et révolution nationale, 1940-1944* (Lyon: Centre régional de publication de Lyon, 1989), 214-224.

<sup>12</sup> Herman Lebovics, *True France: The Wars Over Cultural Identity, 1900-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 164-176.

<sup>13</sup> See Eric Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics: Pétain's National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe, and Indochina, 1940-1944* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> See Jiraporn Witayasakpan, "Nationalism and the Transformation of Aesthetic Concepts: Theatre in Thailand during the Phibun Period," (PhD diss, Cornell University, 1992); Pisanu Sunthraraks, "Luang Wichit Wathakan: Hegemony and Literature," (PhD diss, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1986), and

The campaign for national renovation in Laos known as the Lao Nhay was implemented to challenge the expansionist pan-Thai movement (*latthi Thai pen yai*) as suggested by the name of the campaign, Lao Nhay, or “Great Laos” (the term, *nhay* [great, grand] is equivalent to the Thai term, *yai*). The Lao Nhay also reflected an attempt to create the sense of a glorious Lao homeland or *patrie*, following the cultural “revival” campaign in Vichy France. In Laos, colonial officials and Lao intellectual elites alike called for the construction of a Lao cultural identity to oppose the Thai discourse of the inclusive Thai race. Charles Rochet, well-known for his deep affection for Laos and then Inspector of Education in Laos, was in charge of the Lao Nhay. Working under the supervision of Admiral Decoux, Rochet formed a committee that comprised of the first generation of French-educated Lao intellectuals. The Lao Nhay, therefore, was fundamentally based upon a French-Lao collaboration created in opposition to Thai expansionist efforts.

In attempting to promote Lao nationalism and to create a cultural boundary between Laos and Thailand, the Lao Nhay drew heavily on literature. The Literary Committee (*Comité littéraire* in French or *Phanaek Aksonsat* in Lao) was established in 1941 as an indispensable part of the campaign. The Lao Nhay shaped the Lao literary scene between 1941 and 1945 in three significant ways. First, it introduced print capitalism to Laos by founding a printing house in Vientiane to publish newspapers and books for the campaign. The Lao Nhay’s printing press launched the first Lao newspaper, *Lao Nhay*, in January 1941. Pieces of Lao traditional literature were republished and the first Lao short story and novel appeared in this newspaper. The press also published many books on Lao language, culture, and literature. Second, the Lao Nhay brought educated, mostly male, Lao civil servants together at French cultural campaigns and

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Scot Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the Creation of a Thai Identity* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993).

institutions. These Lao intellectuals who clustered around the Lao Nhay head office, the Buddhist Institute, and the Collège Pavie in Vientiane played an active role in Lao literary production in the 1940s. Finally, the Lao Nhay sponsored literary activity such as composition contests that gave rise to the first generation of Lao writers.

In the following section, I describe the social and institutional background of the production of Lao literature in the early 1940s. I identify social factors, that is, secular education, print technology, and the Lao Nhay's literary competitions, that contributed to the literary production of this period. I also provide brief biographies of Lao writers whose careers gradually linked Lao literature with the Lao nation.

### **Lao Literary Production in Context**

Prior to the 1940s, Lao literature was circulated among people through folk performance and other oral forms. Written literature was limited to the court and Buddhist temples, and was mainly used for entertainment and religious purposes. More importantly, literature before this period was not associated with a Lao nation until the idea of Lao nationalism was formed under French colonial policy in the 1940s. The Lao literary scene in this period also witnessed the emergence of Lao prose fiction as a new aesthetic medium. The Lao novel and short story came out relatively late compared with neighboring countries such as Thailand in which modern fiction first appeared around the 1870s.<sup>15</sup> The birth of Lao prose fiction coincided, however, with the emergence of modern Cambodian fiction, which also occurred in the 1940s under French

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<sup>15</sup> See Wibha Senanan, *The Genesis of the Novel in Thailand* (Bangkok: Thai Watana Panich Co, 1975). See also Sumalee Wirawong, *Roy Kaew Naew Mai Khong Thai, Phutthasakkarat 2417 Theung 2453* [Thai Prose Fiction from 1874 to 1910] (Bangkok: Siam, 2004).

rule.<sup>16</sup> This parallel might suggest that the late emergence of prose fiction in Laos and Cambodia was due to the low economic and cultural investment of the French in the two colonies. At the same time, the late formation of Lao prose fiction, occurring in a specific politico-cultural context, allowed it to be imbricated with nationalism from its onset. Here I contextualize Lao literary production in the early 1940s and its relation to the nation-building project by identifying various social factors that facilitated such production.

### **Secular Education**

French secular education, which became established in Laos in 1917, was instrumental in the emergence of modern Lao literature in several ways.<sup>17</sup> First of all, it familiarized the Lao with modern types of knowledge such as geography, history, and philosophy. Prior to this period, young Lao men normally received their education at Buddhist monasteries (*vat*) in which they studied Buddhism and other branches of traditional knowledge. Colonial education introduced Lao students to new ideas about society, politics, and culture based on a Western tradition. For example, a prominent Lao intellectual and politician, Katay Don Sasorith, recounted in his memoir his first experience with patriotism and emphasized that it was something that he learned from his French teacher in primary school.<sup>18</sup> French colonial education also familiarized Lao students with Western literary modernity. If, for example, French schools in Laos followed the French curriculum used elsewhere in Indochina, Lao students at the secondary level would have been required to read French literary works,

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<sup>16</sup> See Klairung Amratisha, “The Cambodian Novel: A Study of Its Emergence and Development, (PhD diss, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> This official establishment of secular education in Laos followed the Code of Public Instruction issued by the French administration in 1917. See Marjorie Emling, “The Education System in Laos During the French Protectorate, 1893 to 1945,” (MA thesis, Cornell University, 1969), 12.

<sup>18</sup> Katay Don Sasorith, *Souvenirs d'un ancien écolier de Paksé* [Memories of a Former Schoolboy of Pakse] (Saigon: Éditions Lao Sédone, 1958), 39.

especially romantic novels, such as *Graziella* by Alphonse de Lamartine and *Paul et Virginie* by Bernadin de Saint Pierre.<sup>19</sup> In his memoir, Katay Don Sasorith revealed his knowledge about French writers and philosophers when he wrote about “the beautiful language of Voltaire and Boileau.”<sup>20</sup> Another renowned Lao intellectual, Somchine Nginn, recounted in his autobiography that he learned to write poetry and aspired to become a professional writer while studying at the École Coloniale in Paris.<sup>21</sup> In short, French secular education produced literate members of a new social class who were familiar with Western ideas and modern forms of writing.

Colonial education increased literacy rates that helped expand the Lao reading public. According to Marjorie Emling, by the 1930s, about 49,800 total students had enrolled in French primary schools in Laos. In 1940, 1942, 1943, and 1944, the numbers of primary school students were 7,062, 7,901, 9,508, and 11,401 respectively.<sup>22</sup> For higher education, some Lao students were sent to Vietnam and France. From 1921 to 1944, there were about 3,000 Lao students who studied medicine, veterinary medicine, law, and agriculture at University of Hanoi in Vietnam.<sup>23</sup> In 1933, the Collège Pavie was established in Vientiane to provide higher education for students in Laos. Through these colonial systems of schooling, Lao students were taught to read and write both in French and Lao. By the early 1940s, when modern Lao literature emerged and traditional literature became available to the general public, there were more potential readers than ever of such literary works.

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<sup>19</sup> Hoang Ngoc Thanh, *The Social and Political Development of Vietnam As Seen Through the Modern Novel* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 19.

<sup>20</sup> Don Sasorith, *Souvenirs d'un ancien écolier de Paksé*, 35.

<sup>21</sup> Somchine Nginn, *Adit Anusorn* [Reminiscing about the Past] (Vientiane: Somchine Nginn Foundation, 1971), 18.

<sup>22</sup> Emling, “The Education System in Laos,” 78. There is no record for 1941.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 82.

The main purpose of French secular education was to train indigenous students for the colonial administration. Lao intellectuals involved in the literary production under investigation here can be described as what Benedict Anderson calls educational and administrative “pilgrims,” who, though coming from different backgrounds and localities in the colony, were brought together in colonial schools and administrative posts.<sup>24</sup> Thus both Katay and Somchine joined the colonial service after finishing their education in Hanoi and Paris. In the early 1940s, both of them became leading figures in the Lao Nhay cultural campaign.

### **Print Technology**

Print technology was introduced in Laos in 1941 as part of the Lao Nhay campaign. Prior to that, Lao books were printed by publishing houses in Northeast Thailand and Bangkok. These printed works were mostly in verse and were normally used by *mo lam* performers and monks as *aide-mémoire* for their performance and sermons rather than to be read silently by general readers.<sup>25</sup> In addition, there was no Lao newspaper through which the Lao people could share their common interests until 1941.

The first Lao newspaper, *Lao Nhay*, began publication on 25 January 1941. This irregular biweekly generally featured local and international news, literary sections, and short articles on topics ranging from politics to agriculture. Several thousand copies of the newspaper were printed and distributed from 1941 to 1945.

The *Lao Nhay* newspaper played a crucial role in Lao literary production during the Lao Nhay campaign. The newspaper regularly featured a column entitled, “*Aksonsat*,” in which

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<sup>24</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 121-140.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Koret, “Books of Search: The Invention of Traditional Lao Literature as a Subject of Study,” *Laos: Culture and Society*, ed. Grant Evans (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999), 231.



excerpts from classical literature were printed and widely circulated. Poetry by modern Lao poets who adhered to traditional poetic forms and styles were a typical feature of the column. The first Lao novel and short story also first appeared in the *Lao Nhay* newspaper.



Fig. 1: The *Lao Nhay* newspaper published between 1941 and 1945 was the first Lao newspaper and a mouthpiece of the Lao Nhay.

Source: *Lao Nhay* 15 February 1944

The Lao Nhay press published several books throughout the period. For example, an account on Lao classical poetry written by Nhouy Abhay was published in 1943 and a novel entitled *Phra Phouththahoup Saksit* (The Sacred Buddha Image) by Lao Chindamani (a penname of Somchine Nginn) was published in 1944. Songs, plays, and translations of French literary works were also published as part of the cultural campaign.

The Lao Nhay printing press resonates with Benedict Anderson’s identification of a relationship between print technology and nationalism. According to Anderson, printing

technology provides a primary means for readers to imagine themselves as members of a nation through its ability to circulate a shared language, shared ideas, and shared interests among a geographically dispersed population. Newspapers and novels are instrumental in the construction of a national community in their presentation of simultaneous events that allow readers to develop a sense of connection with others.<sup>26</sup> In this regard, the publications of the *Lao Nhay* newspaper and Lao literary works during the Lao Nhay cultural campaign were clearly linked with Lao nation-building.<sup>27</sup>

### **Literary Contests**

Literary activity was the main concern of the Lao Nhay cultural campaign. The Lao Nhay's Literary Committee which consisted of both French officials and Lao civil servants worked collaboratively to stimulate a lively atmosphere of writing. Literary contests were regularly arranged throughout 1941-1945. In his memoir, Charles Rochet gives a vivid picture of one meeting in which the committee, including Rochet himself, discussed the poetry contest which took place in March 1941.

It was up to the president of the evening to invite the gathered comrades to begin work as soon as the first dish had been eaten. That was done by Thao Nhot. He stood up and made himself heard over the racket: 'It's the time for a report...We will begin with the Literature Committee. Boun Tieng has the floor.

The tumult died down. Each person took out of their pocket some papers and prepared their presentation. Boun Tieng rose: "During the previous month the Literature Committee has met three times. The first meeting was taken up by the poetry competition: 31 entries have come from all provinces. The jury has made its decision on the winner."

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<sup>26</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 22-31; 46-47.

<sup>27</sup> In the summer of 2013, I had a chance to interview Kossadary Phimmasone, an alumnus of Collège Pavié and a former student of Sila Viravong and Somchine Nginn. In his eighties, Kossadary recounted to me his deep impressions of reading the *Lao Nhay* newspaper for the first time when he was very young. Now in exile in the United States, Kossadary has created a Facebook social media group called, "WE ARE LAO NHAY," that primarily aims to promote Lao national culture. This online group can be viewed in the following link: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/566502920054705/?fref=ts>

Who is it? Came the demand from all sides....They persuaded him and he revealed the name of the winner: Thao Nong, a young functionary from the south of Laos. Everyone clapped. Then they asked for the title of the poem. Boun Tieng pronounced: "It is 'The Lao Nation [*la patrie lao*].'"<sup>28</sup>

Four literary contests were held from 1941 to 1945. The first was a poetry contest on the theme, "the homeland of the Lao nation" (*Thin Than Ban Koet Khong Sat Lao*). Fifty competitors from all over the country and from other parts of French Indochina submitted their poems to the contest. The first prize winner was Thao Nhouthak, a young Lao administrator working in Phnom Penh. His winning poem was subsequently published in the *Lao Nhay* newspaper. As suggested by the theme of the contest and the title of the poem, the main purpose of this contest was to promote Lao nationalism by creating a sense of homeland or *patrie* inspired by the French policy of national renovation.

The second, held in early 1942, was a contest of compositions of short tales (*nithan kom*). Forty-five stories were submitted for the competition. An award-winning story was entitled, "Twenty Years Later" (*Saw Pi Lang*), written by a Lao medical student in Saigon, Thao Thongphet. This story and other prize-winning stories were published in the *Lao Nhay* newspaper the following year. Although they were called *nithan*, a term for folktale, these stories revealed a combination of forms, merging traditional folk narratives with modern-style.<sup>29</sup> In an advertisement of this contest, competitors were required to compose their stories in prose and use only the Lao language.

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<sup>28</sup> Charles Rochet, *Pays Lao: Le Laos dans la tourmente, 1939-1945* (Paris: Jean Vigneau, 1946), 74-75. The English translation is taken from Grant Evans, *A Short History of Laos: The Land in Between* (Chiang Mai: Silksworm Books, 2002), 79.

<sup>29</sup> See my discussion of the genre in chapter 4 of this thesis.

The third literary contest, which was held in 1944, was a contest of translations of French novels into Lao. The first prize winner was Thao Kene, a young schoolmaster in Vientiane. The novel he selected for translation was George Sand's *La mare au diable* (The Devil's Pool), which was well-known for its portrayal of an idealized rustic life and local customs. In his translation, Thao Kene changed rural settings in France to settings in the Lao countryside and replaced French local customs with Lao ones.<sup>30</sup>

The fourth literary contest, held later in 1944, was a contest of compositions of novels (*ruang an lin*). In a contest advertisement, the Lao Nhay's Literary Committee stated that the purpose of the contest was the promotion of modern Lao literature related to contemporary society. Competitors were also required to compose their stories in ordinary language and in prose. In August 1944, the Literary Committee announced that they received forty-four stories from Lao writers.<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately, these stories were never published due to the Japanese occupation of Laos in 1945 that resulted in the removal of French rule.

The Lao Nhay literary contests demonstrates that Lao literature in the 1940s was produced under the colonial state's direction and sponsorship. Under institutional imperatives, Lao literature became a vehicle to promote Lao nationalism. As can be seen from this brief background, Lao literature was associated with the idea of homeland, tradition, and the Lao language. These elements will be further analyzed in the following chapters.

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<sup>30</sup> Thao Kene, *Nong Phi Phet* [The Pond of the Hungry Ghost] (Vientiane: Ministry of Education of the Royal Lao Government, 1971. This version is a reprint. The first edition cannot be dated, but according to an earlier plan released by the Lao Nhay's Literary Committee, they planned to publish it in 1944-1945.

<sup>31</sup> "Kan Seng Ruang Nangsue An Lin [The Contest of Compositions of Novels]," *Lao Nhay* 15 August 1944.

## Lao Writers

In this last section, I offer brief sketches of the lives and works of Lao writers who were involved in Lao literary production in the 1940s. Most of them continued to be active in the spheres of Lao literature, culture, and politics in the 1950s-1970s. These writers, aside from Sila Viravong, have received little attention from scholars in Laos and scholars of Southeast Asian literature more broadly. Three writers discussed here wrote autobiographies that give us substantive information about their lives and works.<sup>32</sup> Many writers, especially those who submitted their stories for the literary contests, remained unacknowledged in other sources. I try to gather details about a few of these writers, whose works I discuss later in the thesis, from the piecemeal trails left in the newspaper and in their literary works.

### Katay Don Sasorith (1904-1959)

Katay Don Sasorith was born in July 1904 of a Vietnamese father and Lao mother. He began attending the newly opened colonial school in Pakse, a city in the southern province of Champasak. For his higher education, he went to Hanoi and returned to Laos to join the colonial service. Between 1941 and 1945, Katay joined the Lao Nhay campaign as one of its founding members along with Nhouy Abhay and Somchine Nginn. His book on the Lao alphabet, *Alphabet et écriture lao*, although written in French, was published by the Lao Nhay press in 1943.

In 1945, Katay joined Phetsarath's anticolonial campaign, Lao Issara (Free Laos), and later became Minister of Finance in the Lao Issara government-in-exile in Thailand. After the

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<sup>32</sup> In addition to their autobiographies, details about lives and works of these Lao intellectuals are drawn from Martin Stuart-Fox and Mary Kooyman, *Historical Dictionary of Laos* (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1992).

collapse of the Lao Issara in 1949, Katay returned to Laos along with other leaders such as Prince Souvanna Phouma. Upon his return, Katay became Prime Minister of Laos in 1954, following Souvanna Phouma in 1950. Katay penned his autobiography, *Souvenirs d'un ancien écolier de Paksé* (Memories of a Former Schoolboy of Pakse) in 1958. It was dedicated to his first French teacher in Pakse, and retrospectively recounted his everyday encounters with the French both in school and his neighborhood.

#### Nhouy Abhay (1909-1963)

Nhouy Abhay was born in January 1909 in southern Laos. He received his education in Vietnam before travelling to France to study art. He joined the colonial administration in 1933. His interest in Lao literature can be seen from his 1934 publication on the Lao classical masterpiece, *Sinsay*, in the *Bulletin de la Société des Études Indochinoises*. Between 1941 and 1945, Nhouy became one of the leading figures in the Lao Nhay campaign. In June 1941, he gave a speech on Lao poetry at the Lao Society of Vientiane. His speech was later published as a book entitled, *Kap Kon Lao* (Lao Poetry), by the Lao Nhay press in 1943. It was among the earliest attempts to systemize Lao poetic forms and conventions.

Like Katay, Nhouy joined the anti-colonial Lao Issara movement in 1945. He went briefly into exile in Thailand with other Lao Issara members, but he was the first to return to Laos in 1946. From 1949 to 1950 Nhouy was Minister of Education and Health in the Phouy Sananikone government, and from 1951 to 1954, he served as Souvanna Phouma's Minister of Foreign Affairs. His works on Lao culture, religion, and literature were published in Lao, French, and English throughout the 1950s-1970s. They included *Buddhism in Laos*, published by the RLG's Literary Committee in 1958, and *Sinsay: chef-d'œuvre de la littérature Lao* published in 1965.

### Sila Viravong (1905-1986)

Sila Viravong was born in August 1905 in Lao-speaking Roi Et, a province in Northeast Thailand. He received a monastic education in Thailand until he moved to Laos in 1929. He joined the Buddhist Institute and the Pali school established by the École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) in the early 1930s. Sila worked as secretary for Prince Phetsarath, Director of the Buddhist Institute, and taught at the Pali school and the Collège Pavie in Vientiane. Sila was keenly interested in Buddhism and Lao classical literature. Between the 1930s and 1940s, he penned several books on Pali grammar, Buddhist teaching, and Lao versification.

In 1945, Sila joined the Lao Issara movement and went into exile in Thailand. He returned to Laos in 1949 and continued to work at the Buddhist Institute. In 1951, he became a member of the RLG's Literary Committee. From 1953 to 1958, Sila served as an editor of *Vannakhadi San*, a literary magazine published by the Literary Committee. His articles on Lao literature, festivals, and Buddhism were also published in *Vannakhadi San*. Sila resigned from his position on the Literary Committee in 1963 to run his own publishing house called Phai Nam with his family.

### Somchine Nginn (1892-1977)

Somchine Nginn was born in June 1892 in Luang Prabang of a Khmer father and a Lao mother. His father, Nginn, was Auguste Pavie's principle Cambodian interpreter during his exploration of interior Indochina in 1885.<sup>33</sup> Somchine went to the Lycée Chasseloup-Laubat in Saigon before traveling to Paris for higher education at the École Coloniale. After his return to

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<sup>33</sup> Auguste Pavie, *Pavie Mission Exploration Work: Laos, Cambodia, Siam, Yunnan, and Vietnam*, trans. Walter E.J. Tips (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1999), 224-225.

Laos, Somchine began his career as an instructor at the Lycée Tafforin in Vientiane, then as a translator and interpreter for the French secret police force known as the Sûreté. In the 1940s, Somchine joined the Lao Nhay cultural campaign as a member of the Literary Committee. He published his first short story, “The Tiger of Justice” (Sia Yuttitham), in the *Lao Nhay* newspaper in 1941. His novel, *Phra Phouththahoup Saksit* (The Sacred Buddha Image), was published by the Lao Nhay press in 1944. Somchine also served as a manager of the *Lao Nhay* newspaper in 1944.

After World War II, Somchine worked for the Royal Lao Government (RLG) in many governmental bodies. In 1948, he was Minister of Information, Public Affairs, and Publication. He was one of the founding members of the RLG’s Literary Committee established in August 1951. His books and translations of Lao classical literature such as *Chanthakhat* and *Sinsay* were published by the Literary Committee throughout the 1950s-1970s. In 1971, Somchine penned his autobiography, *Adit Anusorn* (Reminiscing about the Past), which highlighted his achievements in the spheres of education, culture, and literature.

#### Thao Kene, Thao Nhouthak, and Thao Thongphet

Thao Kene and Thao Nhouthak were two important Lao writers whose names frequently appeared in the *Lao Nhay* newspaper. However, details about their lives are obscure. We learn from the announcements of the literary contests that Thao Kene was an instructor in Vientiane, Thao Nhouthak was an administrator in Phnom Penh, and Thao Thongphet was a medical student in Saigon. They were a younger generation of Lao intellectuals who received secular education in French schools and later worked for the colonial service. As the winner of the translation contest, Thao Kene must have acquired knowledge both in French and Lao, and must have been familiar with French literary works. Thao Nhouthak was highly praised for his poetic



skills and his knowledge of Lao literary conventions in composing his award-winning poem, “The Homeland of the Lao Nation.” He also penned two short stories, “The Enemy” (Sattu) and “The Orphan” (Sai Khampha), which published in 1943 in the *Lao Nhay* newspaper. Thao Thongphet, who won the short story contest in 1942, also demonstrated his familiarity with modern fiction in writing his award-winning story, “Twenty Years Later” (Saw Pi Lang).

After World War II, Thao Kene and Thao Nhouthak were still active on the Lao literary scene. In 1951, they became members of the RLG’s Literary Committee along with renowned Lao intellectuals such as Somchine Nginn and Sila Viravong. Thao Kene also taught at Collège Pavie and compiled student textbooks that included extracts from Lao literature for reading practice. In 1958, Thao Kene compiled a comprehensive catalogue of Lao manuscripts under the Literary Committee’s supervision.<sup>34</sup> Thao Nhouthak, who was also a member of the Literary Committee, continued to compose poems for publication in *Vannakhadi San*.

### Other Writers

As mentioned earlier, the Lao Nhay’s literary contests produced a new generation of Lao writers. Most of them can be described as amateur writers rather than professional ones. After the French-sponsored literary contests, only a few of them met any success with their writing careers. They were likely to have been students in French schools and civil servants in the colonial administration who were encouraged by teachers or French officials at their institutions to submit their writing for the competitions.

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<sup>34</sup> Thao Kene, *Catalogue des manuscrits de la littérature du Laos* (Vientiane: The Literary Committee, Ministry of Education, 1958).

There were also French officials who wrote novels and short stories in Lao. One of them was Blanchard de la Brosse who was known by his Lao name, Suphan. He was a former Governor-General of Cochinchina before joining the Lao Nhay campaign in Laos in the 1940s. His novel, *Khamson and Srisamut (Khamson Kap Srisamut)*, was serialized in the *Lao Nhay* newspaper from 1941-1942. This novel, along with Somchine Nginn's *The Sacred Buddha Image*, were the earliest novels written in Lao.

From this brief sketch of the social and institutional background of the emergence of modern Lao literature in the early 1940s, it can be seen that Lao literature was mainly produced under the Lao Nhay's direction and sponsorship. The Lao Nhay campaign illustrated the relation between colonialism and the formation of Lao culture in which literature, both traditional and modern, played a crucial role. Lao literature during the colonial period was neither unpatriotic nor merely imitative of French literature, as depicted in post-1975 Marxist literary histories. Literary production between 1941 and 1945 involved complex interactions between colonial policy and local participation in the campaign to create a Lao national identity. Literature in this period became a key instrument to foster nationalist sentiment and it became a defining feature of Lao national culture.

This thesis aims to account for this cultural and political significance of Lao literature during the colonial period and the decades before 1975. More broadly, it also aims to intervene in scholarship on colonialism, culture, and literature in Laos.

## **Literature Review**

In this section, I explore three themes in the scholarship on Laos related to my project: 1) studies on colonialism and nationalism in Laos, 2) studies on Lao cultural politics, and 3) studies of Lao

literature. Each part concludes with a discussion on how my project builds on, revises, or fills in the gaps in this existing scholarship.

### **Colonialism and Nationalism in Laos**

Laos has been recognized as a “colonial backwater” because of its lack of substantive social, political, and economic development during the colonial period. Martin Stuart-Fox, for example, argues that the French acquisition of Laos in 1893 was a part of an attempt to constitute the territorial unity of French Indochina. From the very beginning, Laos was perceived by French colonialists as an extension of Vietnam rather than as a distinct geographical and political entity.<sup>35</sup> Likewise, Grant Evans suggests that the French occupation of Laos should be understood as an expansion of French nationalism rather than an actual commitment to cultural and economic investments in the colony.<sup>36</sup>

Søren Ivarsson is among the pioneering scholars who have explored the relation between colonialism and nationalism in Laos. Three of his scholarly works offer new understandings about the colonial history of Laos. His co-authored article with Christopher Goscha entitled “Prince Phetsarath (1890-1959): Nationalism and the Royalty in the Making of Modern Laos,” discusses how one Lao intellectual elite’s ideas of culture and nation were formed under colonial rule through his experience in the French administration and his participation in colonial cultural projects. Phetsarath’s nationalist aspiration was finally transformed into an anticolonial movement after the Second World War. However, this movement has been dismissed in postcolonial Lao historiography because of the prince’s non-communist stance. Ivarsson and

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<sup>35</sup> Martin Stuart-Fox, “The French in Laos, 1887-1945,” *Modern Asian Studies* 29, 1 (February, 1995): 111-13

<sup>36</sup> Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, 39.

Goscha suggest the importance of taking into account non-revolutionary narratives and non-Communist actors in order to better understand the making of postcolonial Laos.<sup>37</sup>

Ivarsson's monograph, *Creating Laos*, examines the process by which the concept of the Lao nation and culture were formed under the colonial regime. Drawing primarily on Benedict Anderson's idea of the "imagined community," Ivarsson considers Laos a "contested space" between Siam and Indochina. In this regard, Ivarsson argues that Laos gradually came into existence through colonial policy that sought to dissociate Laos from Siam in terms of territory, history, and culture. In line with Anthony Smith's concept of cultural nationalism and Partha Chatterjee's notion of the spiritual domain of nationalism, Ivarsson further describes the formation of Lao cultural identity, especially during the Lao Nhay campaign, which eventually led to anticolonial nationalism.<sup>38</sup>

In another piece on colonialism and nationalism in Laos, Ivarsson examines two cultural domains of colonial Laos that were infused with nationalistic ideology: religion and language. By drawing on substantial French archival sources, Ivarsson provides French perspectives on the standardization of the written language and what they saw as a resurrection of Buddhism. These two French-endowed projects, with the collaboration of Lao intellectual elites, aimed to de-link Laos from Siam in religious, linguistic, and cultural spheres.<sup>39</sup>

This thesis builds on Ivarsson's work in that it seeks to better understand the relation between colonialism and the politics of national culture in a "colonial backwater." My

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<sup>37</sup> Christopher Goscha and Søren Ivarsson, "Prince Phetsarath (1890-1959): Nationalism and the Royalty in the Making of Modern Laos," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 30 (February 2007): 55-81.

<sup>38</sup> Ivarsson, *Creating Laos*.

<sup>39</sup> Søren Ivarsson, "Cultural Nationalism in a Colonial Context: Laos in French Indochina," *Recherches Nouvelles Sur Le Laos: New Research on Laos*, eds. Yves Goudineau and Michel Lorrillard (Vientiane: École Française d' Extrême-Orient, 2008), 237-258

intervention into Ivarsson's work, as well as into the scholarship on colonialism and nationalism in Laos in general, is my incorporation of literary analysis into a political and intellectual history of Laos during the colonial period. Although Ivarsson analyzes some literary texts in his monograph, he omits a number of classical and modern literary works because literature is not his main focus. Moreover, Ivarsson's time frame for his analysis is between 1860 and 1945. My project will go beyond that time frame to cover the royalist regime (1946-1975) in order to examine the lasting impact of the colonial cultural campaign.

### **Studies on Lao Cultural Politics**

The profound intertwinement between culture and politics in Laos has been recognized by several scholars. Remarkably, these scholars have generally focused on Lao culture after 1975, the year in which the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) came to power and established the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR). Grant Evans, for example, examines how culture was used by the communist regime to legitimate its power after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990. He identifies three main components of the legitimating discourse of the socialist regime, namely, Buddhism, royalty, and heritage, all of which involve recalling a glorious Lao past to create a nationalist sentiment. For example, the use of the That Luang (Grand Stupa) in place of the socialist symbols of the hammer and sickle in Lao official documents and banknotes in reveals the socialist regime's attempt to "re-legitimize" itself through the creation of national symbol that shift away from socialist iconography.<sup>40</sup> Another scholar who focuses on post-1975 cultural politics is Vathana Pholsena. Her work examines the relation between the socialist state and an ethnic minority. She describes the ways in which socialist regimes embrace ethnicity to

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<sup>40</sup> Grant Evans, *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance: Laos since 1975* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 114-128.

promote the state ideology of a multiethnic culture as part of the national culture. This rhetoric of inclusion is paradoxical in that the state's representation of ethnic minorities is dictated by the notion of cultural hierarchy, positing ethnicity as "primitive" and "exotic." Therefore, rather than acknowledging cultural difference, the real impetus of this policy is to promote a homogenous national culture.<sup>41</sup>

These works shed light on how the notion of national culture is exploited by the socialist state to assert its power and legitimacy. However, these scholars pay less attention on how national culture is constructed through time. Their time frame that starts from 1975 dismisses the three decades between 1945 and 1975 which, I argue, is the formative period for Lao national culture. This study, thus, aims to fill this gap in the study of Lao cultural politics by taking into account cultural movements during the pre-1975 period.

Scholars who study Lao cultural politics during the colonial period tend to focus on material culture versus the colonial politics of sentiment. In their study of the resurrection of Vientiane as the colonial capital, Marc Askew, William Logan, and Colin Long describe the French creation of Vientiane as a site of cultural activities. One of cultural investments undertaken during this period was the restoration of archeological sites. Throughout the 1920s to the 1930s, thirteen temples and historic buildings in Vientiane were listed in French plans for restoration. French architects were sent from the *École Française d'Extrême-Orient* (EFEO) to collaborate with Lao elites in this project. The French project of restoring Lao cultural heritage should be viewed, as argued in this book, as "paternalistic affection," an attempt to associate

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<sup>41</sup> Vatthana Pholsena, *Post-war Laos: The Politics Culture, History, and Identity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 46-76.

colonial authorities with the Lao royalty's role as the patrons of Buddhism.<sup>42</sup> Likewise, Patrice Ladwig perceptively argues that the French "patronage" of Buddhism can be viewed as "mimetic process" by which the French strategically imitated the local concept of Buddhist kingship. According to concepts of rule and statecraft in Theravada Buddhism, the ruling power of a king and the monastic order are always interdependent. To legitimate and maintain his power, the king becomes a chief sponsor of the *sangha* (monastic community) whose activities range from building and renovating of temples to performing religious ceremonies. In this light, Ladwig considers the French sponsorship of Buddhism in Laos as a technique to cement imperial rule.<sup>43</sup>

These insightful analyses of cultural revival and colonial politics serve as a background of my discussion on the revival of Lao literary heritage during the early 1940s. My analysis of literature, however, will focus on the works of local intellectuals rather than French officials. In the domain of literature, Lao intellectuals were actively involved and exercised their agency in negotiating between colonial discourse and foreign influences.

### **Studies of Lao Literature**

Scholarship on Lao literature is still limited. It can be categorized into three groups: traditional literature, modern literature, and literary history and criticism.

Studies on traditional literature tend to focus on linguistic and aesthetic dimensions. For example, Carol Compton examines linguistic patterns such as repetitions of sound and parallel

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<sup>42</sup> Marc Askew, William Logan, and Colin Long, *Vientiane: Transformations of a Lao Landscape* (London: Routledge, 2007), 73-96.

<sup>43</sup> Patrice Ladwig, "Re-materializing empire and the mimesis of colonial rule: The reconstruction of sacred Lao monuments and the patronage of Buddhism in French Indochina," paper presented at Lao Studies Conference, Wisconsin, 21 April 2013.

structures in the songs of *mo lam* traditional performance.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, Peter Koret identifies various literary techniques, especially parallelism, in creating aesthetic values in Lao traditional literature. Whereas the studies on traditional literature focus on the aesthetic dimension, studies on modern literature focus more on social and cultural dimensions. For example, Koret's discussion on the contemporary Lao short story highlights recurring themes in Lao fiction such as class difference, nationalism, and self-sacrifice, most of which have been inspired by socialist ideology.<sup>45</sup> Lao fiction during the colonial period, however, is also briefly discussed in Koret's piece in which he argues that Lao fiction written during the colonial period was influenced by French literary styles.<sup>46</sup>

Studies on Lao literary criticism and literary studies offer interesting perspectives on political and cultural dimensions of Lao literature. In his article on Maha Sila Viravong, an influential Lao literary scholar, Koret discusses the role of Maha Sila in inventing traditional culture and literature as academic subjects of study. Beginning in the late colonial period, the making of a national literary canon and the standardization of literary composition, as in the works of Sila, aim to challenge Thai cultural and literary influences. Koret points out that although Sila attempts to create a cultural boundary between Laos and Thailand, his scholarship on Lao literature is greatly influenced by Thai literary scholarship.<sup>47</sup>

This present study aims to contribute to the scholarship on Lao literature in three ways. First, it builds on Koret's initial study of the revival of Lao traditional literature to explore the

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<sup>44</sup> Carol Compton, *Courting Poetry in Laos: A Textual and Linguistic Analysis* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1979).

<sup>45</sup> Peter Koret, "The Short Story and Contemporary Lao Literature," *Modern Short Fiction of Southeast Asia: A Literary History*, ed. Teri Yamada (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Association for Asian Studies, 2009), 79-109.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Koret, "Books of Search," 226-257.



cultural politics of such a literary revival during the colonial period. Second, it is the first scholarly attempt to offer an analysis of the Lao prose fiction that emerged in 1941 in relation to its politico-cultural context. Finally, it explicates the sociocultural function of the literary through an investigation of the relationship between literature and the construction of a Lao cultural identity from 1941 to 1975.

## Chapter Two

### **Reviving Word, Forging Frontier: The Lao Nhay Revival of Lao Literature and Lao-Thai Geopolitics (1941-1945)**

The literary scene in Laos during the early 1940s witnessed a dramatic shift in the status and role of literature in society. Previously, written Lao literature had largely been created and consumed in court or religious institutions as a form of entertainment or devotional practice. During the late colonial period shortly before the Second World War, literature began to be seen as a cultural heritage that represented Lao national identity. This emergent conception of literature was part of a larger French cultural campaign in Laos which was highly political in its nature. The French-sponsored Lao Nhay cultural campaign was implemented in 1941 to counter an irredentist “pan-Thai” movement that sought to incorporate parts of Laos’s territory into Thailand’s national space. To legitimate its expansionist ideology, the Thailand’s pan-Thai movement also asserted ethnolinguistic and cultural affinities between Thailand and its neighboring countries such as Cambodia and Laos. The Lao Nhay cultural campaign in Laos thus primarily aimed to construct a cultural boundary between Thailand and Laos by claiming to restore Lao heritage. At times, the French also employed the rhetoric of cultural loss and restoration to portray themselves as heroic, selfless rescuers of Lao tradition. This political struggle and negotiation between the French, the Thai, and the Lao transformed Lao cultural space and led to the formation of a Lao cultural identity.

In this chapter, I examine the relation between the revival of Lao literature during the early 1940s and the construction of a cultural frontier between Laos and Thailand. I argue that Lao literature during this period began to be infused with nationalistic ideas and became a defining feature of Lao culture. To situate this literary revival project within a broader politico-

cultural context, I will first of all discuss general ideas about cultural “restoration” under French colonial policy from the pre-1940s period to the early 1940s. I pay particular attention to French revival projects during the 1930s-1940s in relation to the geopolitical dispute between French Indochina and Thailand. The second part of this chapter delineates various strategies employed by Lao intellectuals to articulate Lao cultural identity through the notion of literature/literary studies (*aksonsat*). These strategies include the revitalization of Lao classical literature, the systematization of Lao literary convention, and the standardization of the Lao language.

It should be noted that although the campaign to revive Lao literature was originally part of French colonial policy, Lao intellectuals actively involved in the colonial project had their own ideas about Lao culture. Moreover, some Lao intellectuals, especially Prince Phetsarath and Sila Viravong, revealed their affiliation with the Thai and their familiarity with Thai literary scholarship. However, their accomplishments in cultivating a Lao cultural space relied on their ability to negotiate French colonial discourse and Thai literary influence. The formation of a Lao cultural identity was therefore an intricate process by which collaborations and contestations between various actors took place.

### **The Colonial Rhetoric of “Restoration” and Its Political Implications**

The École française d’Extrême-Orient (EFEO), founded in 1898, played a major role in French cultural investment and knowledge production in Indochina. For example, in 1910, the EFEO initiated a project to compile an inventory of Lao manuscripts collected from Buddhist temples and indigenous officials. This project culminated in the first comprehensive account of Lao literature composed by Louis Finot, the first president of the EFEO. In his 1917 article entitled, “Recherches sur la littérature laotienne,” published in *Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-*

*Orient*, Finot described different genres of Lao writing: Buddhist canonical texts, noncanonical literature such as stories about sacred relics and local *jatakas*, popular folktales, treatises (*sastra*) on law and divination, and historical texts such as legends and chronicles. The last section was a catalog of Lao manuscripts, mainly Buddhist texts, which had been collected and preserved by French scholars like Finot.<sup>48</sup> Finot's painstaking effort demonstrated that colonialism was not merely a political domination but also an intellectual investment. To be sure, the pursuit of knowledge about indigenous cultures can form part of the colonial rhetoric of domination by claiming the colonizer's superior "understanding" about colonized countries.<sup>49</sup> In fact, the EFEO colonial project on the preservation of Lao manuscripts began with the lament of the Résident supérieur in Laos about the insufficiency of sources to "understand the history of Laos."<sup>50</sup> As such, Finot's extensive summary of Lao literature served as a source for the French to gain understanding about their colony.

Apart from the project to preserve and study Lao manuscripts in the 1910s, the French remained unenthusiastic about cultural investment in Laos compared to Cambodia and Vietnam. Only in the early 1930s did the French begin to undertake significant restoration projects in Laos alongside the establishment of cultural institutions to take charge of such projects. In 1931, the Buddhist Institute (Institut bouddhique) was established in Laos, following the founding of the same institution in Cambodia in 1930. According to Penny Edwards, the establishment of the Buddhist Institute in Cambodia and Laos revealed a concerted effort in French colonies to diminish the influence of Buddhism from Siam, a center of Buddhist learning at that time.<sup>51</sup> This

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<sup>48</sup> Louis Finot, "Recherches sur la littérature laotienne," *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 17, 5 (1917): 1-218.

<sup>49</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003).

<sup>50</sup> Ladwig, "Re-materializing empire."

<sup>51</sup> Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 203-208.

attempt to de-link local religious networks between Siam and French Indochina signaled that the anti-Thai sentiment of French colonial policy would be drastically intensified during the 1940s.

The founding of the Buddhist Institute in Laos coincided with the restoration of important Buddhist monuments. In the early 1930s, a team of EFEO architects led by Léon Fombertaux, who had previously worked at Angkor, commenced the renovation of the most important *stupa* (Buddhist relic shrine) in Laos, the That Luang. This was followed in 1937 by the restoration of Vat Ho Phra Kaeo, the temple which had formerly housed the Emerald Buddha, in collaboration with local authorities such as Prince Phetsarath, the first president of the Buddhist Institute, and his half-brother Prince Souvanna Phouma, who had obtained his degree in architecture and engineering in France. Meanwhile, Sila Viravong was actively involved in French projects in restoring Buddhist manuscripts and sponsoring monastic education at the EFEO-sponsored Pali school (École de Pali à Vientiane), founded shortly after as the Buddhist Institute.

During the early 1940s, French cultural policy in Laos as well as in Cambodia was highly charged with the anti-Thai sentiment. This was in part due to the Franco-Thai War between 1940-1941 during which the French were forced to cede areas of Laos and Cambodia to Thailand. The French implemented the Lao Nhay cultural campaign to address this geopolitical conflict between French Laos and Thailand. The primary mouthpiece of the Lao Nhay campaign was the *Lao Nhay* newspaper which aimed to promote Lao nationalism as opposed to pan-Thai nationalism. In this period, the restoration of Lao cultural heritage from the previous decade was

publicized, or “narrativized,”<sup>52</sup> through a new medium, that is, the newspaper. The narrative structure of cultural loss and restoration was constantly reproduced in articles, cartoons, and poems published in the *Lao Nhay* newspaper. This kind of narrative constituted a scenario in which a tripartite characterization of historical agents was enacted: the victim, the perpetrator, and the rescuer. As Laos was portrayed as a “victim” of the Thai perpetrator’s political and cultural invasions, French colonialists asserted themselves as protectors and preservers valiantly coming to the rescue of Lao culture.

The *Lao Nhay* newspaper regularly featured articles and cartoons that highlighted the theme of the Siamese destruction of Lao culture and France’s role in its restoration. For example, a cartoon published in the *Lao Nhay* newspaper in 1941 compared a Thai military attack during the 1940s with its destruction of Vientiane in 1827. The picture showed a young boy and a monk looking at a burning temple with a helicopter of the Thai army flying above. A caption read, “In the past, they burnt our temples with torches, now they used bombs. Bangkok people never change their habits.”



Fig. 2: A Thai military attack during the 1940s is compared with the Siamese destruction of Vientiane in 1827.

Source: *Lao Nhay* 15 February 1941

<sup>52</sup> I use the term, “narrativize,” here in the same sense as Hayden White’s definition of narrativization as an arrangement of chaotic events into a coherent story to create a productive meaning of historical past. See Hayden White, “The Narrativization of Real Events,” *Critical Inquiry* 7, 4 (1981): 793-798.

The narrative of cultural restoration was employed by the *Lao Nhay* to foster anti-Thai sentiment and sympathy toward the French. The restoration of Vat Ho Phra Kaeo aptly illustrates this point. When the Siamese sacked Vientiane in 1827, they burnt Vat Ho Phra Kaeo to the ground and took the most revered Emerald Buddha (Phra Kaeo) to Bangkok. In the 1800s, the symbolic meaning of taking Buddha statues from vassal states was to (re-)assert the power of the rulers.<sup>53</sup> As such, the taking of the Emerald Buddha by the Siamese was not necessarily considered theft by the Lao until this incident was strategically interpreted in the 1940s by French colonialists and Lao nationalists alike to assert national ownership of cultural objects. In a brief chronicle of the Emerald Buddha published in the *Lao Nhay* newspaper in 1941, the author, who identified himself as Buddhist monk, wrote in his conclusion that “The Emerald Buddha has been Lao heritage [*moladok*] since ancient times. But now it has been in the hands of the Thai for 163 years.”<sup>54</sup> This new conception about the Buddhist statue as national heritage, thus, juxtaposes the “thieving” Thai with the French “rescuer.”

As mentioned earlier, the EFEO had begun to renovate Vat Ho Phra Kaeo in the late 1930s. The celebration ceremony which took place in 1942 was vividly described in the *Lao Nhay* newspaper. A parade of monks, administrators, and laypeople marched from Vat Srisaket to Vat Ho Phra Kaeo. Arriving at Vat Ho Phra Kaeo, the procession halted to pay homage to the statue of the late Auguste Pavie. This ritual expressed a mixture of Buddhist ceremony with the memorialization of the French explorer and administrator. In other words, a religious devotion was merged with the worship of the colonizer. The ceremony ended with the speech of Admiral Decoux, Governor-General of Indochina, who concluded, “I cordially wish Ho Phra Kaeo,

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<sup>53</sup> See for example, Tamara Loos, *Subject Siam: Family, Law, and Colonial Modernity in Thailand* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 94-99.

<sup>54</sup> “Phuen Phra Kaeo [The Chronicle of the Emerald Buddha],” *Lao Nhay* 1 March 1941.

which the French government has renovated, to be an enduring token of a long-lasting relationship between France and Laos.”<sup>55</sup> In this regard, the rhetoric of cultural restoration, though not a direct colonial imposition, supplemented colonial governmentality by generating sympathy and loyalty toward the French.



Fig. 3: Vat Ho Phra Kaeo, before and after the French renovation  
Source: *Lao Nhay* 15 February 1941

The discourse of restoration/renovation (*kanfuenfu* in Lao) during the early 1940s was also an export of the National Renovation policy of Occupied France’s chief, Pétain, into the colony.<sup>56</sup> As a mouthpiece of the National Renovation campaign in Laos, the *Lao Nhay* actively promoted the idea of *kanfuenfu sat* (the renovation of the nation). In an article entitled, “Duties of the Lao People and the Renovation of the Nation” (*Nathi Khong Lao Hao Lae Kanfuenfu Sat*), the author remarks that:

Now our country is seeking to renovate the nation [*fuenfu prathet sat*] in the same way as France and other French colonies. We would like to invite all the Lao people to bring progress [*khwamchaloen*] to Laos. This is an important mission that requires a clear understanding in order to be accomplished. That is to say, only an unflinching

<sup>55</sup> “Vat Phra Kaeo Patisangkhon Laew [Vat Phra Kaeo Has Been Renovated],” *Lao Nhay* 15 March 1942.

<sup>56</sup> See my discussion on the Vichy politico-cultural campaign of the National Revolution in chapter 1 of this thesis.



attempt is not enough. You need to know how to search for old Lao traditions [*hit khong an kao kae khong Lao*].<sup>57</sup>

The Vichy-inspired campaign of National Renovation in Laos was intertwined with the concept of progress (*khwamchaloen*). As can be seen from this passage, the concept of progress here does not signify the process of modernization as we might assume from the general meaning and usage of the term. Rather, it suggests that progress requires a search for “old Lao traditions.” In his study of the relation between European Orientalist concepts of cultural heritage and royal antiquarianism in Thailand, Maurizio Peleggi notes that the concept of progress, translated in Thai as *khwamcharoen*, is often conflated with the trope of *siwilai*, the Siamese appropriation of the Western discourse of civilization.<sup>58</sup> In the case of Laos, the term *khwamchaloen*, which might have been derived or borrowed from Thai terminology, reflected a similar civilizing discourse. At the same time, the search for an ideal past was also in line with Vichy traditionalism that governed French cultural policy both in the métropole and colonies.

The French campaign of cultural restoration in Laos during the early 1940s resonates with Eric Hobsbawm’s notion of “invented tradition,” which he describes as “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seeks to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviours by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.”<sup>59</sup> This kind of “tradition,” according to Hobsbawm, is the

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<sup>57</sup> “Nathi Khong Lao Hao Lae Kanfuenfu Sat [Duties of the Lao People and the Renovation of the Nation],” *Lao Nhay* 1 February 1943.

<sup>58</sup> Maurizio Peleggi, “Royal Antiquarianism, European Orientalism and the Production of Archeological Knowledge in Modern Siam,” *Asia in Europe, Europe in Asia*, eds. Farid Alatas, Srilata Ravi, Mario Rutten, and Beng-Lan Goh (Leiden: International Institute for Asian Studies, 2004), 139.

<sup>59</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1.

product of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries and is associated with the emergent concepts of nationalism, the nation-state, national symbols and so on.<sup>60</sup>

I employ Hobsbawm's notion of invented tradition to investigate the formation of a Lao cultural identity that emerged under the colonial campaign seeking to "restore" Lao tradition. The colonial discourse of national renovation contributed to new meanings and uses of cultural artifacts as the national heritage (*moladok khong sat*). Historically, this emergent concept of culture was grounded in the geopolitical conflict between French Laos and Thailand during the pre-WWII period. In this regard, the invention of Lao tradition primarily aimed to construct Lao national identity as distinct from the Thai.

### ***Aksonsat Lao: The Invention of Lao Literature as National Heritage***

French colonial policy during the early 1940s heavily focused on two cultural domains in Laos, literature and Buddhism, which would persistently remain as two defining features of Lao national culture. The Literary Committee (*Comité littéraire* or *Phanaek Aksonsat* in Lao) was formed in 1941 as part of the *Lao Nhay* cultural campaign. Its members consisted of both French officials such as Charles Rochet and Blanchard de la Brosse and Lao intellectuals such as Somchine Nginn and Nhouy Abhay. Their mission was to promote the "restoration" of Lao literary heritage through various activities such as publishing classical and modern poetry and launching literary contests. Throughout 1941-1945, the *Lao Nhay* newspaper featured the literary section entitled, "Aksonsat," which regularly published excerpts from classical Lao literature and modern poetry.

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<sup>60</sup> Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," 1-13.



Fig. 4: The literary section, “Aksonsat,” was a regular feature of the Lao *Nhay* newspaper throughout 1941-1945. This image shows an excerpt from *Sinsay*, the most popular piece of Lao classical literature together with a newly composed poem by a well-known Lao poet of the period, Thao Nhouthak.

Source: *Lao Nay* 15 July 1943

The term *aksonsat* is derived from Sanskrit. The word *akson* means “letter, consonant, alphabet, word, sound, writing” while the word *sat* means “text, book, treatise, scripture, science, knowledge, study.”<sup>61</sup> This term is also found in Khmer as the term for literature, *aksarsastr*. According to George Chigas, this Cambodian term for literature was just coming into use in the late 1930s and the early 1940s. It first appeared in *Kambujasuriya*, a periodical of the Buddhist Institute in Cambodia. Similar to the “Aksonsat” literary section in the *Lao Nay* newspaper, *Kambujasuriya* also featured a literary section called, “Phnaek Aksarsastr,” beginning in 1943. Intellectual activity on literature found in this literary section, Chigas argues, played an important role in the formation of the Cambodian literary canon.<sup>62</sup> Although I have

<sup>61</sup> “Askon” and “Sat” accessed April 5, 2014. <http://www.sealang.net/lao/dictionary.htm>

<sup>62</sup> George Chigas, “The Emergence of Twentieth Century Cambodian Literary Institutions: The Case of Kambujasuriya,” *The Canon in Southeast Asian Literatures: Literatures of Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam*, ed. David Smyth (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000), 135-146.

not encountered any clear evidence to indicate the connection between literary movements in Laos and Cambodia, these parallel movements demonstrate the way in which literature became a significant part of cultural campaigns during the French colonial period in both countries.<sup>63</sup>

Unlike the Cambodian term, *aksonsat* in Lao does not mean literature. The Lao term for literature is “vannakhadi,” which is probably borrowed from the Thai term, “wannakhadi,” coined around 1913.<sup>64</sup> What, then, does *aksonsat* signify? I argue that this term can be translated as the study of literature or literary studies since the word *sat* also means “science,” “knowledge,” and “study.” In other words, Lao literature in the early 1940s became a subject of study. As I will show in the following sections, the notion of *aksonsat* denotes processes by which Lao literary conventions became systemized, Lao classical literature was canonized, and the Lao language was standardized. Through these processes, Lao intellectuals and French officials alike claimed to “restore” Lao literary heritage.

### **Fixing Literary Conventions**

On 12 September 1941, the Lao Nhay committee gathered at their main office in Vientiane to make a final decision on the winners of its first literary contest. The president of the jury was the governor of Vientiane, Phaya Khammao, who received his education from the École pratique de commerce in France. Charles Rochet, Director of the Lao Nhay campaign,

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<sup>63</sup> The term, “aksonsat,” in Thai appeared much earlier than in Lao and Cambodian. For example, the Khana Aksorasat or Aksonsat (Faculty of Arts), Chulalongkorn University, devoted to the study of the humanities, was established in 1917. However, due to the limitations of this study, an investigation of how this term was borrowed by Lao or Cambodian intellectuals will have to await another project.

<sup>64</sup> See Thanapol Limapichart, “The Prescription of Good Books: The Formation of the Discourse and Cultural Authority of Literature in Modern Thailand (1860s—1950s),” (PhD diss, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2008), 90-95. According to Thanapol, this term was used by Siamese authorities to signify “a work of higher value and status” as contrasted with lowbrow writing (*ruang an len*). As such, the use of the term *wannakhadi* in early twentieth century Siam was part of the struggle over the cultural authority of Siamese intellectual elites.

also attended the meeting; he recalled its convivial atmosphere in his memoir.<sup>65</sup> Out of fifty competitors, eight were selected for an award. The first prize winner was Thao Nhouthak, a young Lao administrator who worked for a French forestry unit in Phnom Penh.<sup>66</sup> His poem, entitled, “The Homeland of the Lao Nation,” (*Thin Than Ban Koet Khong Sat Lao*), which was also the theme for the competition, was published in the *Lao Nhay* newspaper. After its publication, the poem received a positive reception from readers and the newspaper editor gave his comments on the poem. Nhouthak was highly praised for his poetic talent and, more importantly, his emulation of the old masters and his conformity with classical conventions. Nhouthak served as an exemplary poet whose poetic creation was considered to have “restored” the Lao literary tradition which had been in decline for three centuries and neglected by modern poets.<sup>67</sup> As Ivarsson rightly observes, such comments were framed within the narrative structure of “the golden age-decadence-resurrection.”<sup>68</sup>

This incident succinctly captures the Lao Nhay campaign to restore Lao literary conventions in several ways. First of all, rather than search for creative voices, the campaign encouraged modern poets to faithfully follow literary conventions transmitted from past generations. Second, the restoration of Lao literary conventions was infused with a nostalgic sense of national glory. As the title suggests, the poem portrayed “the homeland of the Lao nation” as an ideal traditional Lao society, peaceful and prosperous. As such, both the poetic form and the content of the poem conveyed the message about the restoration of Lao glorious past.

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<sup>65</sup> Rochet, *Pays Lao*, 74-75.

<sup>66</sup> “Nak Kap Kon Lao Mi Sue Siang [Lao Poets Become Famous],” and “Notre concours de poésie,” *Lao Nhay* 15 September 1941.

<sup>67</sup> “Thin Than Ban Koet Khong Sat Lao [The Homeland of the Lao Nation],” *Lao Nhay* 15 January 1942.

<sup>68</sup> Ivarsson, *Creating Laos*, 182.

An emphasis on poetic forms was predominant in the campaign to restore Lao literary conventions. In May 1941, following the announcement of the poetry contest, the *Lao Nhay* newspaper published an article on Lao versification ostensibly to advise competitors about appropriate prosodic conventions. After briefly discussing three categories of verses, that is, *kon patthayavat*, *kon lilit*, and *kap*, the author describes the most popular form of *kon patthayavat* with details about meter, rhyming, and tones. Examples of poems which were “composed correctly according to the rules [*labiap* — rule, order, discipline]” were taken from classical literature.<sup>69</sup> Such an emphasis on form reveals an attempt to fix the “rules” of poetic composition in order to preserve “authentic” classical conventions.

On 11 June 1941, Nhouy Abhay, a prominent Lao intellectual who received his arts degree in France, gave a speech on Lao poetry at the Lao Society of Vientiane. Two thousand copies of his speech were later published and distributed by the *Lao Nhay* in November 1943.<sup>70</sup> The *Lao Nhay* newspaper also encouraged readers who desired to publish their poems in the “Aksonsat” column to study poetic rules from the book.<sup>71</sup> In this book, Nhouy begins his discussion on Lao versification by comparing Greek, French, and Lao literary traditions in which verse (*kham kon* or *kham khong*) predated prose (*hoykaew*). Then he describes two types of poets according to French parlance — the *versificateur* (versifier, verse-maker) and the *poète* (poet). The verse-maker only “puts letters, words, and rhymes together without any profound meanings.” The poet, by contrast, “knows the rules of poetic composition” and possesses the ability to perceive the beauty of nature and to apprehend the joy and sorrow of fellow human

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<sup>69</sup> “Vannakhadi [Literature],” *Lao Nhay* 31 May 1941.

<sup>70</sup> Nhouy Abhay, *Kap Kon Lao* [Lao Poetry] (Vientiane: The Lao Nhay Printing House, 1943).

<sup>71</sup> “Kan Taeng Kap Kon Khao Su Lao Nhay [How to Compose Poetry to Publish in the *Lao Nhay*],” *Lao Nhay* 15 March 1944.

beings. This categorization encouraged contemporary Lao writers to be poets rather than verse-makers.

In a section entitled, “Contemporary Poets” (*Nak Kavi Samai Patchuban*), Nhouy harshly criticizes poets of his day for neglecting to learn how to write good poetry. He laments, “Our literature [*vannakhadi*] is in decline because other domains [of culture and society] are also in decline. We forget our nation. We neglect everything.”<sup>72</sup> As such, the decline of literature indicates the decline of the whole nation. To give contemporary poets guidance, Nhouy offered a detailed account of Lao versification. He describes four types of verses, that is, *sala luan*, *pathayavat*, *sapphakot*, and *kon lilit*. For each type of poetic form, the author explains the rules of composition and gave examples from classical works such as *Lam Phavet* (Vessantara Sadok), *Sinsay*, and *Kalaket*. In his conclusion, Nhouy remarks that: “Literature is similar to other subjects of study like science [*vitthayasat*], music [*duliyangsat, musique*], philosophy [*atthayatanavitthaya, philosophie*], and patriotism [*khvam hak sat*]. Literature must reveal its doctrines and benefits through essential principles.”<sup>73</sup> In this regard, literature is seen as a subject of study that modern poets need to learn from and emulate in order to rescue literature from decline.

In inventing Lao poetics as a subject of study, Nhouy posits literature as an index of Lao civilizational status. This can be seen from his comparison between Lao literary culture and Greek tradition, which he describes as “more civilized [*sivilai*] than in other countries during ancient times.”<sup>74</sup> His attempt to link the decline of literature with the decline of the nation also suggests the same idea. This sense of the loss of civilization generated by a narrative about the

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<sup>72</sup> Abhay, *Kap Kon Lao*, 18.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 30.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 5.

decline of literature aims to strengthen the consciousness of Lao national identity.<sup>75</sup> Notably, Nhouy relates literature with patriotism (*khwam hak sat*). According to Nhouy's formulation, the study of literature, which he considers to be the restoration of literary heritage, is infused with the patriotic motivation for national renovation.

### **Sila Viravong and Lao Poetics**

Sila Viravong was an eminent Lao scholar whose work on Lao literature left a lasting impact on Lao national culture. Sila's unique trajectory deserves a separate discussion from the Lao Nhay campaign on literature. Sila's autobiography explains his affiliation with Thai intellectual traditions. He was born and raised in Northeast Thailand, where he received a religious education as a Buddhist monk. In 1929, after ten years as a monk, Sila disrobed and traveled to Vientiane to join a newly established Pali school in Vientiane. His reason for leaving his long monastic life was somewhat emotional, deeply intertwined with historical violence between Laos and Siam. On reading a book written by a Thai noble entitled, *The Suppression of the Rebellion of Ai Anou Viangchan*, Sila learned of Siamese discrimination against the Lao King who defied Siamese power in 1827. After recalling his resentment, Sila expressed his strong resolution to undertake the task of national rescue (*kanku sat*).<sup>76</sup>

Sila's participation in colonial projects at the Buddhist Institute as personal secretary to Prince Phetsarath and at the Pali school expressed anti-Thai sentiment and the colonial discourse of national renovation predominant during the 1930s-1940s. His work on Lao literature reveals his attempt to negotiate Thai influences with which he had been familiarized during his years in

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<sup>75</sup> For a discussion of the rhetoric of loss and the formation of national identity in other French colonial contexts, see for instance Anthony Barnett, "Cambodia Will Never Disappear," *New Left Review* 180 (March-April 1990), 101-125.

<sup>76</sup> Sila Viravong, *My Life: Autobiography* (Vientiane: Mantaturat, 2004), 41- 43.



Thailand. Sila's literary scholarship was certainly influenced by Thai academic styles and approaches,<sup>77</sup> but his main goal was to search for Lao literary traditions that were distinct from their Thai counterparts.

In the preface to his book on Lao versification written in 1942, Sila recounts his long, ten-year research on Lao prosody that had begun in 1932. His inspiration came from a book written by Khun Sunthornphasit, a Thai poet and scholar during the late 1920s and 1930s, in which the author wrote, "The principles of Thai *khlong* [a type of verse] composition are derived from the principles of Lao *khlong* composition."<sup>78</sup> Sila began to undertake laborious research on the principles of Lao poetic composition. He drew these principles from Lao classical literature such as *Thao Hung Thao Chuang*, *Sinsay*, and the *Vessantara Sadok*. During his teaching career at Collège Pavie and the Pali school in Vientiane, Sila included his findings about Lao poetic principles in his curriculum.<sup>79</sup>

Sila's account of his "discovery" of the principles of Lao poetic composition demonstrates his attempt to negotiate, or even challenge, Thai literary influences. In this account, Thai prosodic principles derived from Lao poetics. As such, Sila cites a Thai scholar to make the claim of Lao cultural ownership of this shared literary convention. Remarkably, in this book, Sila tries to explain the etymology of the name of each type of verse in the Lao language and to cite the works of Lao classical literature in which these terms appear. For example, Sila explains the etymology of the *kap* poetic form in the following manner: "*Kap* is originally from Sanskrit, *kavya*, which means 'words of the poet [*kavi*].' In our language [that is, the Lao

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<sup>77</sup> See Koret, "Books of Search," 239-240.

<sup>78</sup> Sila Viravong, *Baep Taeng Kon Thai Viangchan Lae Baep Tang Kap San Vilasini* [Methods of Composition of the Poetry of the Vientiane Thai and Kap San Vilasini] (Vientiane: Phai Nam, 1993 [1942]), 4.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

language], *kap* means thin petals that have multiple layers such as flower petals, palm tree bark, or the layers of bamboo shoots. Therefore *kham kap* means to put rhyming words [*kham*] in order like making layers.”<sup>80</sup> He continues to cite Lao classical literary works such as *Kap Pu Son Lan*, *Kap Phra Muni*, and *Kap Soeng* as examples of this type of verse. In tracing word origins and citing classical literature, Sila attempts to account for the “authenticity” and “originality” of Lao poetic conventions.

The standardization of Lao literary conventions in Sila’s work underscores his nationalistic ideas about literature. As can be seen, Sila’s assertions about the authenticity and originality of Lao poetic conventions gave Lao literary traditions a “national character.” It tried to explain what made Lao literature “Lao.” Moreover, Lao literary heritage is not only “Lao” because it is different from that of the Thai but also because it is superior. While Lao poetic conventions are described as authentic and original, Thai poetic conventions are viewed as derivative.

### **The Making of a Lao Literary Canon**

In their accounts of Lao literary conventions, Nhouy Abhay and Sila Viravong uphold Lao classical literature as ideal aesthetic models for modern poets. This process of selection and citation gave way to the making of a literary canon, which was closely linked to a nation building project. In fact, the process of literary anthologization had already taken place in the *Lao Nhay* newspaper. The newspaper frequently featured extracts from classical literature. In his response to a reader’s request concerning the publication of classical works, the editor of the “Aksonsat” literary section stated that:

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<sup>80</sup> Viravong, *Baep Taeng Kon*, 16.

Many of our friends have expressed their desire to read old poetry [*khamkon buhan*] in addition to modern ones. We agree with such an idea. Although modern poetry is also beautiful, our old objects [*khong buhan*, signifying old poetry] which have been handed down until today still retain their exceptional value. Hence, we will select excerpts from classical works to publish in this column to entertain our readers.<sup>81</sup>

The repeated use of the word, *buhan*, which means “old,” “ancient,” or “antique” here, suggests that Lao traditional literature is primarily valued for its antiquity. Literature in this conceptualization loses its practical meaning in everyday contexts and becomes an aesthetic object associated with the notion of a national heritage.<sup>82</sup> Throughout 1941-1945, the *Lao Nhay* published many selected pieces from Lao classical literature that would later become known as the Lao literary canon or the national literature (see Table 1).

This publication thereby made classical literature available to the Lao reading public. To some extent, print culture introduced to Laos in the early 1940s changed the way people “read” literature. In the past, Lao traditional literature, as in other Southeast Asian cultures, was normally composed for various types of performance such as *mo lam*, the most popular folk performance in Lao.<sup>83</sup> During the early 1940s, traditional literature became available to the general public in written form to read with eyes rather than with ears.

Table 1: A list of excerpts from Lao traditional literature published in the *Lao Nhay* newspaper (1941-1945)

<b>Title</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Date/issue of publication</b>
<i>Siang Miang</i>	Tales of trickery, well-known in Laos and Northeast Thailand	15 February 1941 31 May 1941
<i>Inthiyan Son Luk</i>	Didactic literature	1 March 1941
<i>Sinsay</i>	A literary tale, later known as the national epic of Laos	15 October 1941 31 October 1941 15 November 1941

<sup>81</sup> “Aksonsat [Liberal Arts],” *Lao Nhay* 15 October 1941.

<sup>82</sup> See Peleggi, “Royal Antiquarianism,” 138.

<sup>83</sup> See Compton, *Courting Poetry in Laos*.

		15 April 1942 15 July 1943 15 January 1945 1 February 1945
<i>Panchatanta</i>	A tale taken from a well-known Sanskrit collection of tales, <i>Panchatantra</i>	15 May 1942
<i>Ya Son Lan</i>	Didactic literature	15 July 1942
<i>Phu Thao Phu Nang</i>	A legend explaining the origin of Lao geography	1 June 1943 1 July 1943
<i>Tamnan Phu Malong</i>	A legend explaining the origin of Lao geography	15 August 1943

*Sinsay* was the work most often selected for publication throughout this period. In fact, Nhouy Abhay wrote an article on this Lao masterpiece for publication in the *Bulletin de la Société des Études Indochinoises* in 1934.<sup>84</sup> In his account on Lao poetry mentioned earlier, Nhouy cited certain lines from this classical work to give modern poets examples of poems with high aesthetic value. In 1944, the Lao Nhay's Literary Committee agreed to publish an annotated edition of *Sinsay* under the supervision of Nhouy Abhay. However, this project was interrupted when the colonial regime ended in the following year. Until the 1950s-1960s under the RLG regime, Nhouy Abhay, Somchine Nginn, and Sila Viravong published their completed versions of *Sinsay*.<sup>85</sup> In this regard, the "renovation" of Lao literary heritage during the 1940s heralded the making of *Sinsay* as the "national epic," and the formation of national literature in general.

What does this literary canonization tell us about Lao-Thai geopolitical conflict during the 1940s? As in the case of *Sinsay*, the making of the literary canon asserted the idea of national cultural ownership which reified the cultural frontier between Laos and Thailand. The story of *Sinsay* had widely circulated among people in what became Laos, northeastern Thailand (Isan)

<sup>84</sup> Nhouy Abhay, "Xine-Xay," *Bulletin de la Société des Études Indochinoises* 9,4 (October-December 1934), 75-91.

<sup>85</sup> See Nhouy Abhay and Somchine Nginn, *Sinsay: chef-d'œuvre de la littérature Lao* (Bangkok: Liang Ziang Chong Charoen Press, 1965); Sila Viravong, *Sang Sinsay: Vannakhadi Khamkon San Yot Khong Lao* [Sang Sinsay: The Masterpiece of Lao Literature] (Vientiane: Ministry of Education, 1969).

and even central Thailand. To canonize such a literary work as a work of Lao national literature was to assert the cultural authenticity and authority of the newly produced Lao version of the work over the Thai version. Moreover, the Lao literary canon was also linked to the glorious past of Laos' avowed predecessor state, the kingdom of Vientiane. Sila Viravong remarks that:

If literature is an indicator of human progress/civilization [*khwamchaloen*], the Kingdom of Srisattanakhanahut Viangchan [Vientiane] will be no less civilized than other kingdoms in the same period. The prosperity of the kingdom can be seen from ancient sites or antiquities [*buhan vatthu*] such as the splendid That Luang [...] It can also be seen from poetry that had been handed down as heritage [*moladok*] to our generation today [...] such as *Sang Sinsay, Kalaket, Champa Si Ton, Kap Pu Son Lan, Inthiyan Son Luk*.<sup>86</sup>

Here again, traditional literature is associated with a national glorious past through the notion of heritage (*moladok*). Literature is compared with “ancient sites and antiquities” that represent Lao civilization. As an indicator of civilizational status, Lao literature signifies that the kingdom of Laos was as “civilized” as other kingdoms. The persistence of many traditional literary works, which confirms their value and preserves their places in the canon, suggests that present-day Laos can regain its civilization through the “restoration” of its literary heritage. In this regard, it can be concluded that during the early 1940s, Lao literature began to function as a source of national pride and national identity.

### **Standardizing the Lao Language**

As discussed earlier, the word, *akson* (as in *aksonsat*), means “letter, consonant, alphabet, word, sound.” These definitions signify an emphasis on the linguistic dimension of literature and literary studies. One of the main concerns of the Lao Nhay’s Literary Committee (*Phanaek Aksonsat*) was a standardization of the Lao language. Their goal was to prevent the penetration

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<sup>86</sup> Viravong, *Baep Taeng Kon*, 3.

of Thai influence. For example, in an announcement for short story and cartoon contests held in 1942, the organizing committee urged competitors to avoid using foreign language terms and, if possible, to use the Lao language exclusively.<sup>87</sup> The increasingly rapid replacement of oral tradition with a written culture fueled by printing technology brought about the standardization of literary composition, discussed above, and of the language itself.

Emblematic of efforts to standardize the Lao language as the national language was the endeavor to distinguish between Lao and Thai orthography, which shared many similarities. In general, Lao and Thai consonants and vowels are very similar both in terms of written form and pronunciation. One important differentiating feature between the Thai and Lao alphabets is that the Thai has extra letters which represent the same sound. For example, the /s/ sound can be represented by four different letters [ส, ส, ส, ส] in Thai, while this same sound can be represented by only two letter [ສ, ສ] in Lao. Another differentiating feature is that some borrowed terms from Pali and Sanskrit in Thai have a special marker known as *thantakhat* or *karan* (as it is called when put above letters), while Lao terms from Pali-Sanskrit often omit such a marker.

An unexpected event in Thailand in 1942 blurred the distinction between Thai and Lao spelling. In the middle of that year, the Committee for Promoting Thai Language Culture led by Prime Minister Phibun himself reformed the Thai spelling system by eliminating extra letters that had the same pronunciation and canceling the use of the *karan*. In his letter to Somchine Nginn, Georges Cœdès, then Director of the EFEO, warned Lao intellectuals about the expansionist “pan-Thai” political motives behind Phibun’s “unification” of the Lao and Thai

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<sup>87</sup> “Seng Nithan Kom Lae Houp Talok [The Short Tale and Cartoon Contests],” *Lao Nhay* 15 January 1942.

writing systems.<sup>88</sup> From a Lao perspective, however, the reform of the Thai alphabet was considered an imitation of Lao orthography.

We were informed that from 29 May 1942, the Thai government decided to eliminate eighteen letters (thirteen consonants and five vowels) from the Thai alphabet. We all know that both the Thai and Lao alphabets share an Indian origin. The Thai alphabet, however, consists of two, three, or four extra letters, while the Lao alphabet has only letters that correspond to spoken Lao. When the Thai reduced their alphabet, the number of Thai letters became almost the same as in Lao. We are glad to hear such news. We are glad not only because our ancestors were so visionary to foresee the great benefit of this simple writing system but also because the Thai government agreed with us on that idea.<sup>89</sup>

By referring to the wisdom of the Lao ancestors, the author asserted the authenticity and superiority of the Lao language over the Thai. In his book on the Lao alphabet published by the Lao Nhay press in 1943, Katay Don Sasorith even claimed that King Ramkhamhaeng of Sukhothai, eulogized in Thai official narratives for his “invention” of the Thai alphabet, was in fact a Lao king. The Thai language and literature, according to Katay, were derived from those of the Lao as he stated that: “It is well known that the Thais themselves, when speaking about old traditions and their secular literature, always refer uniquely to old Lao traditions – to the classical Lao literature.”<sup>90</sup> This claim challenged the pan-Thai ideology that sought to incorporate other ethnic groups into an inclusive Thai race.<sup>91</sup> It was, precisely, an assertion of the idea of “Greater Laos (Lao Nhay)” to challenge the Thai irredentist movement of the Phibun regime during this period.

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<sup>88</sup> Cited in Ivarsson, *Creating Laos*, 193-194.

<sup>89</sup> “Nai Prathet Thai [In Thailand], *Lao Nhay* 15 June 1942.

<sup>90</sup> Katay Don Sasorith, *Alphabet et écriture lao* (Vientiane: Éditions du Pathet Lao, 1943), 8-10. The translation is taken from Ivarsson, *Creating Laos*, 194.

<sup>91</sup> For a discussion of pan-Thai ideology, see Eiji Murashima, “Opposing French colonialism: Thailand and the independence movements in Indo-China in the early 1940s,” *South East Asia Research*, 13, 3 (2005): 338-342.

Through the making of a Lao national language and literature, the cultural boundary between Thailand and Laos became forcefully hardened. Behind this fortification was a French struggle to maintain its power in Laos and in Indochina as a whole. In addition to military confrontations which sporadically took place throughout the period, the French strategically invested in the cultural domain. In this regard, although it seemed that Lao literati were granted considerable autonomy in the sphere of literature, the literary “restoration” during the Lao Nhay period was greatly imbued with political meaning. French scholars and administrators such as Charles Rochet, Georges Cœdès, and Blanchard de la Brosse worked in collaboration with Lao intellectuals to ensure the survival of the Lao literary heritage and to construct a connection between language, literature, and the nation.

## **Conclusion**

The Vichy-sponsored campaign of cultural restoration in Laos during the early 1940s contributed to new meanings and uses for Lao traditional literature. Due to the concept of heritage (*moladok*) that predominated during this period, Lao literature came to represent Lao national identity. Literature functioned to signify *khwamchaloen* (progress, civilization) of the nation. As such, the “restoration” of the Lao literary heritage signified the revival of the nation. Lao traditional literature invoked a nostalgic sense of national glory and provided a source of national pride. More importantly, literature became a defining feature of Lao culture which distinguished it from its neighbors. The transformation of literature in the Lao language into Lao national literature involved an intricate process of drawing distinctions with Thai literary, linguistic, and cultural influences.

To an extent, Lao literature in the 1940s shared some qualities with other cultural artifacts such as Buddhist statues and historical sites in that it was instrumental in the invention



of Lao tradition. However, literature was different from other cultural artifacts because it expressed national identity verbally rather than physically.<sup>92</sup> Verbal expressions were powerful in forging cultural identity in several ways. First of all, language was a fundamental way to construct an idea of nationhood through a collective identity. As can be seen, the Lao Nhay attempted to make Lao a national language by the process of standardization. In addition, literature was important in the promotion of nationalism because, in contrast to material culture, it was widely circulated through print capitalism. Thus, by looking at literary sources we can gain a nuanced understanding of the formulation of a Lao identity.

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<sup>92</sup> See Christine Yano, *Tears of Longing: Nostalgia and the Nation in Japanese Popular Song*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002).

## Chapter Three

### **New Forms, Old Spirits: The Emergence of Lao Prose Fiction and the Critique of Modernity (1941-1945)**

In the previous chapter, I discussed the invention of Lao tradition through the revival of Lao traditional literature as an element of cultural heritage. In this chapter, I examine another mode of “invented tradition,” the Lao prose fiction which emerged in the 1940s as a new aesthetic medium. To understand how early Lao novels and short stories were specifically instrumental in the construction of a Lao cultural identity, I situate these texts within two interrelated political contexts: French colonial policy and Thai nationalism in the 1940s.

Due to its institutional background described in chapter 1, Lao prose fiction emerged as part of the Lao Nhay campaign, which was inspired by the French campaign for National Renovation in Vichy France and similar campaigns in other French colonies. As scholars have pointed out, the dominant ideologies of the Vichy regime were nativist and traditionalist ideas of culture and criticism of modernity.<sup>93</sup> Laos in the 1940s witnessed a parallel cultural movement that vigorously attempted to promote Lao culture and to denounce problematic modernity. In other words, French colonial policy in the 1940s attempted to invent Lao society as “traditional” society. The Lao people were encouraged to conform to “traditional” values such as Buddhism. Women were warned not to dress in Western styles such as wearing makeup and red lipstick, otherwise they would look like “wives of Westerners,” or, in a sense, loose women.<sup>94</sup> They were encouraged to follow an ideal model of “traditional” women. The critique of modernity can be

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<sup>93</sup> Karlsgodt, *Defending National Treasure*, 17-28.

<sup>94</sup> “Ying Nakhian Bo Khuan Tha Paeng Lae Sai Nam Daeng Pai Honghian” [Female Students Should not Wear Makeup and Red Lipstick to School], *Lao Nhay* 1 April 1941.

found in various forms of expression. For example, cartoons from the *Lao Nhay* newspaper often depicted the tension between modernity and tradition, or sometimes directly criticized modernity.

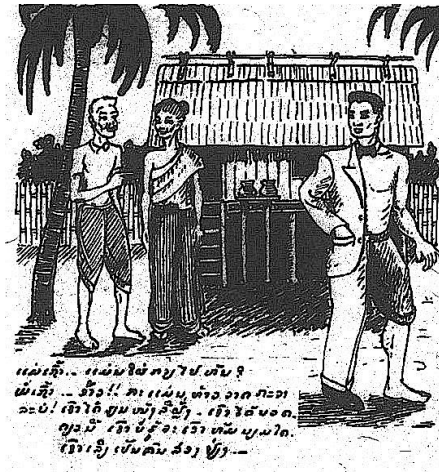


Fig 5 (left): A man, dressed in a half-modern half-traditional style, does not know which custom he should conform to. A caption reads “He studied with the French and he also ordained [suggesting that he also received monastic education]. He does not know which custom he should conform to. He is caught between two things.” Source: *Lao Nhay* 15 February 1941.

Fig. 6 (right): A woman and a man dressed in traditional styles criticize modern young men and women who waste their time and energy with trivial activities such as dancing. Source: *Lao Nhay* 15 May 1941.

To be sure, the invention of tradition that occurred in Laos during this period also happened elsewhere in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>95</sup> In order to understand the politics of “invented tradition” in Laos, we need to consider the relations between Laos and Thailand during this period. As discussed earlier, the *Lao Nhay* campaign was implemented to counter “pan-Thai” nationalism by distinguishing Lao cultural identity from that of the Thai. The invention of Lao tradition can also be considered in relation to Lao-Thai political and cultural tensions. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, the Thai government’s conception of

<sup>95</sup> See Hobsbawm and Ranger, eds. *The Invention of Tradition*.

nationalism under Phibun's first military regime heavily stressed the idea of modernization. The Phibun government issued twelve guidelines, called *Ratthaniyom* cultural mandates, which aimed to promote modern/Western ideals of a "civilized" nation.<sup>96</sup> Phibun's cultural mandates emphasized "proper" manners of Thai citizens based on modern/Western standards. For example, Thai men and women were required to dress and behave according to Western styles. Some Thai traditional performances were prohibited or "modernized." One of the important means to promote Phibun's cultural policies was to radio broadcast conversations between two fictional characters, Nai Man Chuchart and Nai Khong Rakthai, in which some old Thai traditions were mocked or criticized.<sup>97</sup>

There is evidence in the *Lao Nhay* newspaper that French officials and Lao intellectuals were aware of the radio broadcasts in Thailand.<sup>98</sup> They were also likely to have become conscious of the pro-modern/Western Thai cultural policies of the 1930s-1940s. Interestingly, in a poem entitled, "Advice for Women," published in the *Lao Nhay* newspaper in 1943, a poet warned both "Thai" and "Lao" women to learn their "traditional" roles such as weaving silk and spinning cotton.<sup>99</sup> It can be implied that the poet was warning Lao women not to follow the "modernized" Thai women but to conform to the ideals of Lao tradition.

In this politico-cultural context, the invention of Lao tradition aimed to distinguish Lao identity from that of the Thai. "Lao-ness" here was defined by an adherence to "tradition" as opposed to highly modernized "Thai-ness." In this chapter, I examine Lao prose fiction as a means to invent Lao within the framework of Lao-Thai cultural politics.

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<sup>96</sup> See Thinaphan Nakhata, "National Consolidation and Nation-Building (1939-1947)," *Thai Politics: Extracts and Documents, 1932-1957*, ed. Thak Chaloeontiarana (Bangkok Social Science Association of Thailand, 1978), 243-260.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.* 269-276.

<sup>98</sup> "Vitthayu Bangkok [Bangkok Radio]," *Lao Nhay* 25 January 1941.

<sup>99</sup> "Son Ying [Advice for Women]," *Lao Nhay* 1 March 1943

As the first attempt to offer an analytical study of Lao fiction during the colonial period, this chapter will first describe the characteristics of modern Lao writing in its initial stage. The following sections, then, examine the varying themes of novels and short stories that, I argue, call modernity into question. The second section, “Modernity on Trial,” focuses on the idea of justice as a contested terrain between modern juridical systems and traditional ethical tenets. The third section, “Romantic Backlash,” examines the didactic dimension of modern Lao love stories. The last section, “Imagining Traditional Communities,” discusses the idea of the nation as an idealized traditional society in Lao fictional travel writing.

Novels and short stories analyzed in this chapter were written or published between 1941 and 1945. The term “Lao fiction,” here, refers to literary works written in the Lao language, whether by Lao or French authors. It should be noted that although this present study focuses more on textual analysis rather than readership and reception, it takes into account the wide contemporary circulation of these literary works through effective means such as the widely-distributed newspaper in which they appeared and literary contests in which a number of writers and readers from all over the country as well as from other parts of French Indochina participated. In the following decades, many of these works were reprinted and recognized in academic scholarship in both Lao and Western languages. This evidence suggests that fiction does not merely float in imaginative worlds, but also helps shape, articulate, and reproduce certain cultural and social values.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> As Stephen Greenblatt, a prominent New Historicism scholar, notes on the relation between literature and culture, “[literary] texts are not merely cultural by virtue of reference to the world beyond themselves; they are cultural by virtue of social values and contexts that they have themselves successfully absorbed.” See Stephen Greenblatt, “Culture,” *The Greenblatt Reader*, ed. Michael Payne (Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2005), 11-17.

## Conceptualizing Genres: *Nithan Kom* and *Ruang An Lin*

The short story and novel were altogether new when they first appeared to the Lao reading public in the early 1940s. As in many other Southeast Asian countries, written Lao religious and court literature has been preserved, while folk narratives which deal more with everyday subject matters were a part of oral tradition, much of which has been lost. Modern Lao fiction, which tells stories of mundane experiences in written form, finds its origin in Western literary influences. However, as scholars have pointed out, the appropriation of Western narrative genres in different cultural contexts is not merely a direct imitation or translation but features complex interactions with preexisting literary products.<sup>101</sup> This is also the case for Lao short stories and novels, known as *nithan kom* (short tales) and *ruang an lin* (stories to read for fun) at the inception of the genre.

To chart the emergence of Lao prose fiction, it is helpful to consider its parallel with the prose fiction of Laos' neighboring country, Thailand. Although modern Lao fiction came out considerably late compared with that of Thailand, in which modern short fiction first appeared in the early 1870s,<sup>102</sup> it resembled its Thai counterpart in terms of the development of the genre. Both early Thai and Lao short stories derived from traditional folktales, as suggested by being referred to as *nithan* (folktales/fables), or more specifically in Lao, *nithan kom* (short tales/fables).<sup>103</sup> The terms for early Thai novels were *ruang an len* or *nangsue an len* (stories/books to read for fun) while early Lao novels were called *ruang an lin* (stories to read

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<sup>101</sup> See for example, Itamar Even-Zohar, "Polysystem Theory," *Poetics Today* 11, 1 (1990), 9-26.

<sup>102</sup> See Susan Kepner, "Thai Short Fiction of the Modern Era," *Modern Short Fiction of Southeast Asia: A Literary History*, ed. Teri Shaffer Yamada (Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies, Inc., 2009), 19-20.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.* 20.

for fun).<sup>104</sup> The Lao short story and novel genres have since been known as *ruang san* (short stories) and *nawaniyai* (novels), terms almost identical to their Thai equivalents. The terms, *nithan kom* and *ruang an lin*, however, were consistently used throughout 1941-1945.

In 1942, the Lao Nhay launched the *nithan kom* contest in which forty-five stories from all over the country were submitted. The contest announcement required that stories had to be originally written by the competitors and not taken from other sources. This emphasis on originality revealed an attempt to create new or modern types of “fables” rather than drawing from traditional folktales. To encourage a variety of content, it also suggested that the subject matters could be “amusing, sentimental, tragic, or fantastical.”<sup>105</sup> Confusion concerning the forms of composition occurred when some competitors composed their stories in verse (*kon*). The Lao Nhay competition committee therefore had to explain that the stories had to be in prose (*hoykaew*) and written in “ordinary speech/language.”<sup>106</sup> An award-winning story, “Twenty Years Later” (*Saw Pi Lang*), written by a Lao medical student in Saigon, Thao Thongphet, was exemplary for what modern Lao “fable” should look like according to these new literary criteria. The story, written in prose and in everyday language, drew its realistic qualities from its depiction of the believable experiences of lifelike characters in contemporary society, its reference to real places such as existing towns and cities as settings, and its use of colloquial dialogue for the characters’ conversations. The plot developed in the classical pattern for modern short stories, beginning with conflicts which meant to create suspension before reaching its climax, a point at which the conflicts were resolved. All these characteristics distinguished

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<sup>104</sup> For a comprehensive treatment of *ruang an len* in Thai literary history, see Limapichart, “The Prescription of Good Books,” 106-139.

<sup>105</sup> “Seng Nithan Kom Lae Houph Talok [The Short Tale and Cartoon Contests],” *Lao Nhay* 15 January 1942.

<sup>106</sup> “Seng Nithan Kom [The Short Tale Contest],” *Lao Nhay* 15 May 1942.

modern *nithan kom* from traditional oral, court, or religious literature. In short, Lao “short tales” during the early 1940s bore similarities to modern short fiction.

I would like to draw two important points from this background on emergent Lao short fiction. First, the emphases on prosaic form, ordinary language, and realistic qualities in modern short tales reveals the new concept of verisimilitude as a new aesthetic in Lao literature. In her analysis of verisimilitude and Thai literary modernity, Phrae Chittiphalangsri defines verisimilitude as both “the persuasive,” the narrative’s ability to convince readers, and “the probable,” the narrative’s internal logic which creates “a sense of contingency, a condition suggesting that fictionalised events in the narrative can happen in reality.”<sup>107</sup> Looking at early Thai prose fiction, Phrae argues that verisimilitude, introduced to Thai writers and readers through translations of Western novels, offers a way to appreciate a “literariness” of prosaic form as contrasted with classical verse form.<sup>108</sup> Through this lens, we can view the emergence of modern Lao short tales as a landmark of Lao literary modernity. However, and here is my second point, modern Lao short stories did not completely break with their roots in traditional folktales. In fact, key characteristics of folktales such as didacticism, amusement, and magical elements persisted in modern tales. In short, early Lao short stories can be described as a combination of Lao folk and Western literature.

The hybrid nature of early Lao prose fiction can also be found in the early Lao novel, *ruang an lin* in Lao. The term was coined around 1944 when the Lao Nhay launched the *ruang an lin* contest. The main purpose of the contest was to promote “modern knowledge and

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<sup>107</sup> Phrae Chittiphalangsri, “The Emerging Literariness: Translation, Dynamic Canonicity and the Problematic Verisimilitude in Early Thai Prose Fictions” (forthcoming). Her discussion of verisimilitude draws upon literary theorists such as Tzvetan Torodov and Nicolas Desmolets.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.



wisdom”<sup>109</sup> by creating books that were related to the “contemporary time” and written in “ordinary language” rather than in classical verse.<sup>110</sup> The genre of *ruang an lin* was described in the contest announcement by the French term for the novel, *roman*. Different types of novels such as *roman sentimental* (sentimental novel), *roman d’aventure* (adventure novel) and *roman policier* (detective novel) were suggested in the announcement to give competitors guidelines for their own contributions.<sup>111</sup>

In the same year, the Lao Nhay published Somchine Nginn’s *The Sacred Buddha Image* (*Phra Phouththahoup Saksit*), the earliest known Lao novel.<sup>112</sup> The subtitle on the novel’s front cover reads, “a book to read for fun [*nangsue an lin*] composed in easy to understand Lao.”<sup>113</sup> This statement was likely to attract Lao readers who might, by that time, have thought of written texts as treating serious subjects using erudite vocabulary as found in classical literature. The preface written in French describes the novel with the term, “*vraisemblance*,” the quality of being close to reality, which is related to the concept of verisimilitude discussed above. It also characterizes the novel as a combination of the modern adventure novel (*un moderne roman d’aventures*) and the good tradition of old Lao legends (*la bonne tradition de vieilles légendes lao*).<sup>114</sup> Somchine Nginn’s hybrid novel, for example, relied on the use of magical power,

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<sup>109</sup> The word, “modern,” here is translated from *khwam than samai* in Lao. The Lao term is similar to the Thai *khwam than samai* which Thak Chaloemtiarana translates as “being in step with the present era, or the new age.” See Thak Chaloemtiarana, “Khru Liam’s Khwam Mai Phayabat (1915) and the Problematics of Thai Modernity.” *South East Asia Research* 17, 3 (2009): 458.

<sup>110</sup> “Prakat Samkhan [Important Announcement],” *Lao Nhay* 15 February 1944.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Koret, “The Short Story and Contemporary Lao Literature,” 81.

<sup>113</sup> Somchine Nginn, *Phra Phouththahoup Saksit* [The Sacred Buddha Image] (Vientiane: The Literary Committee, 1966 [1944]).

<sup>114</sup> Ibid. It should be noted that although the text I use in this thesis is the second edition published in 1966, it is clearly stated that the preface is taken from the first edition written in June 1944. The text most likely remained unchanged from its first publication. The preface for the second edition simply states that Literature Committee decided to “reprint” the novel and does not mention any changes made.

specifically the power of the Buddha image, in a story about crime and investigation happening in contemporary world.

I argue that the hybrid nature of early Lao prose fiction reveals not only negotiation between Western literary influences and the conventional motifs of folk narratives but also the tension between “modernity” and “tradition,” both invented, in their sociocultural context. In other words, the internal hybridity of literary texts can be interpreted in relation to cultural hybridity in the society in which such texts emerged. In the following sections, I examine how certain literary elements in the new literature representing the demarcated worlds of “tradition” and “modernity” illustrate the conflicts between the two opposed poles, and how such conflicts invoke nostalgic yearning for the former and criticism of the latter.

### **Modernity on Trial: Judicial Tyranny and Poetic Justice**

The first instance of the critique of modernity in early Lao prose fiction can be found in the literary presentation of justice. Texts discussed in this section juxtapose the ineffectiveness of modern legal institutions in bringing about justice with traditional ethical values stemming from sources such as Buddhism that can restore moral order to society. These texts are the short story, “The Tiger of Justice” (*Sia Yuttitham*), by Somchine Nginn, published in the *Lao Nhay* newspaper in 1941; the novel, *The Sacred Buddha Image* (*Phra Phouthahoup Saksit*), written by the same author and published by the Lao Nhay in 1944; and the short story, “Twenty Years Later,” an award-winning story from the first *nithan kom* contest in 1943, written by Thao Thongphet. These stories share common features in their portrayals of modern legal institutions such as courts, the police, and prisons. Their aims are to expose the limits and corrupt tendencies of such institutions and to suggest other means to mend injustice and moral decline. I will

discuss these texts by providing a brief synopsis of each followed by my interpretation of the story.

“The Tiger of Justice” (1941)

A man named Nai Mo loses his wife when his son is still very young. After her death, Nai Mo leaves his son with his mother-in-law while he travels to find a job in another town. There, he falls in love with a beautiful woman. After he proposes to her, she expresses her worry about the classic problem between stepmother and stepson. If she is strict with her stepson, other villagers will accuse her of being cruel, but she might also be condemned for spoiling the child if she is kind to him. Left with an ultimatum, Nai Mo chooses his lover over his son. He returns to his hometown with a vicious plan. He tells his mother-in-law that he will bring his son to stay with him for a few days. Nai Mo takes his son to “a deep forest in which dangerous wild beasts such as tigers dwell.” He leaves his son in the midst of the forest, lying to him that he will go pick some fruits and flowers for him. He never comes back.

When night comes, the boy’s grandmother is awoken by abrupt noises of “someone” breaking a door and a weeping child. When she comes out to check, she finds out that it is her grandson. He tells her about his father who left him in the forest and the “big cat” who brought him home. The grandmother suddenly understood her son-in-law’s evil mind. Feeling grateful to the “big cat,” whom she recognizes as a “tiger king” (*phaya sia*), she invites him, in his absence, to eat her pig. At dawn, she hears the pig screaming. To her surprise, she finds the bony remains of her own pig along with a new fat living pig in her pigsty.

She then goes to see Nai Mo, who is now totally obsessed with his lover, and asks him about her grandson. Unknowingly, he tells her that his son suddenly died during the trip, so he

buried him in the forest. His mother-in-law suggests that he should bury his son's clothes with his corpse. He thus follows her to her house to collect his son's clothes and finds out that his son is still alive. He is shocked and runs away. His mother-in-law reports the events to the colonial court and Nai Mo is soon arrested. During his imprisonment, Nai Mo suffers from great unfulfilled passion for his lover. He bribes a judge and finally gains his freedom due to the judge's crooked verdict that the case "lacks sufficient evidence." One day while Nai Mo is walking in a field, dreaming about his happy life with his lover, he is suddenly attacked by the tiger. This tiger has been crouching in a bamboo grove for a sole reason—to take away his life. "The tiger king," the last line concludes, "fixes human injustice to the right path."<sup>115</sup>

At the outset, "The Tiger of Justice" bears many similarities with folktales such as its depiction of a world in which humans and animals (and also supernatural beings) coexist and communicate. At the same time, there are some elements that resemble the contemporary world as well, such as legal institutions and judicial processes. Although it is arguable that such systems of justice can also be found in traditional folktales, the internal logics of the demarcation of worlds in the story offer another plausible explanation. The main conflict of the story relies on its stark juxtaposition between two systems of justice, one belonging to the mythical or natural world and another to social institutions. The world of nature, "a deep forest in which dangerous wild beasts such as tigers dwell," viewed as a place of danger, chaos, and moral disorder, turns out to be the only recourse for victims of social injustice. The social world in which a certain corrupt order is well established, on the other hand, is filled with moral decline and problems.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Somchine Nginn, "Sia Yuttitham [The Tiger of Justice]," *Lao Nay* 15 June - 1 July 1941.

<sup>116</sup> In a celebrated article, David Chandler proposes "the forest" and "the field" as a conceptual framework to understand the notion of moral order in nineteenth-century Cambodian society. He argues

The tiger and the judge embody two different worlds and two different systems of justice. In bringing about justice, the tiger requires nothing in return. When the boy's grandmother offers him her pig, he accepts her offer by eating the pig. In doing so, he acknowledges her gratitude and allows her to perform her virtuous act of thanks. Through his magical power, he gives her back another pig, an even better one. By contrast, the judge can be easily bribed to commit an unjust act against his own role in making justice. Moreover, the tiger possesses omniscient knowledge, while the judge's knowledge is limited and exploitative. The tiger's actions in two critical scenes in the story, the one when he rescues the abandoned boy and the other where he fixes the court's injustice by killing the wrongdoer, occur without any background or "rational" explanation. This suggests that the tiger is a personification of an abstract idea of justice rather an instrument to create justice. As justice itself, the tiger operates his own law to maintain social and moral order. The judge, as an instrument of fallible state legal system, has limited knowledge. He is incapable of detecting crime and injustice outside his sensorium. His verdict that the case "lacks sufficient evidence" reveals the way in which empirical evidence and judicious reasoning can be abused by corrupt legal authority.

Excessive passion, especially that of a sexual nature, is considered in the story to be the root of human immorality. Nai Mo's obsession with his lover's beauty is repeated again and again in the story. Early on, his lover is described as "young and the most beautiful." His passion for her youth and beauty leads him to maliciously plan, the killing of his own son. In another scene, Nai Mo is described as suffering from his ardent desire for his "young and beautiful woman" during his imprisonment. This leads to another immoral action: bribing the judge. The

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that the forest can function as a refuge from rigid hierarchal order and social discipline. See David Chandler, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest: Perceptions of Order in Three Cambodian Texts," *At the Edge of the Forest: Essays on Cambodia, History, and Narrative in Honor of David Chandler*, eds. Anne Hansen and Judy Ledgerwood (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2008), 31-46.

man's passion is contrasted with the tiger's compassion. The boy recounts to his grandmother with tenderness how the "big cat" rescued him and returned him to her. Abandoned by his father, the boy asks the tiger to be his playmate. The tiger then puts the boy on his back and rides him home. This presentation of passion and compassion resonates with Buddhist concepts of *kama* (desire) and *karuna* (compassion). According to Buddhist teachings, desire causes ceaseless suffering, while compassion, an ability to comprehend the pain of others, evokes the wish to remove suffering.<sup>117</sup> As such, the idea of justice in Somchine Nginn's "The Tiger of Justice" is intertwined with nature, mythical power, and Buddhism.

This similar theme is explored in *The Sacred Buddha Image*, Somchine's first full-length novel published three years after the short story. Its originality relies on the author's appropriation of the Western genre of the detective story, but it incorporates local elements such as Buddhist beliefs. This hybridity, I argue, raises interesting questions about justice as a contested terrain between modern legal reasoning and local religious logics.

*The Sacred Buddha Image* (1944)

One day, the most venerated Buddha image at Srisaket temple mysteriously disappears. This incident leaves monks and villagers grief-stricken. The two police officers in charge consist of a half-French investigator named Antoine and his Lao assistant, Thao Suvan. On the way to their investigation, Antoine and Thao Suvan park their car and take a rest in a tranquil forest. There they encounter a miraculous incident. The shadow of the tree under which they are lying suddenly turns into the shape of a cross mark. In their contemplation, they recognize this as the

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<sup>117</sup> My discussion of the Buddhist concepts of *kama* and *karuna* is culled from William Theodore De Bary, *Sources of Indian Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958) and Roger Jackson, "Karuṇā (Compassion)" *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, ed. Robert Buswell (New York: Macmillan Reference, 2004), 419-421.

power of the Buddha who may try to give them guidance about the case. They drive further to meet a local investigator named Kham Chan. Antoine and Thao Suvan had never met Kham Chan before, so they do not realize that the real Kham Chan has been killed by one of perpetrators. This perpetrator disguises himself as Kham Chan in order to kill the investigators. Although Antoine and Thao Suvan are unaware of Kham Chan's true identity, they are curious about his appearance because he has a large, hideous scar in a shape of cross mark on his left cheek.

The disguised perpetrator leads Antoine and Thao Suvan to a dark, dense forest. In the darkness, he attempts to kill them. As it turns out, he instead mistakenly kills another perpetrator who has been waiting for him at the forest. He hastily flees the scene with the Buddha image that they stole from the temple. Antoine and Thao Suvan chase after and successfully arrest him. The perpetrator, who reveals his true identity as Sinuan, is taken to court. In his testimony to the judge, Sinuan recounts the plan to steal the Buddha image. This plan was actually the idea of another perpetrator, Nai Thong. Nai Thong was not a local villager but a stranger from "another side," that is, Thailand. He persuaded Sinuan to join his vicious plan. One night, they broke into the temple and stole the Buddha image. While they were crossing through the temple's gate, they fell down. Their left cheeks were injured and became permanent scars. After giving the court all the details about his crime, Sinuan is sentenced to a life in prison. Antoine and Thao Suvan are rewarded and promoted to higher ranks for their successful investigation.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Nginn, *Phra Phouthahoup Saksit*.

*The Sacred Buddha Image* can be described as detective fiction in that it mainly concerns an investigator's attempt "to solve a crime and to bring a criminal to justice."<sup>119</sup> Its plot also closely follows a popular plot of detective fiction, that is, the "whodunit". This conventional plot can be summarized in the following manner: a crime has been committed then a detective undertakes an investigation by gathering clues from different sources, organizing evidence logically, and finally unraveling the truth through deductive reasoning. In brief, the "whodunit" plot privileges rationality as a means to uncover the truth and, thus, to restore justice.<sup>120</sup> *The Sacred Buddha Image* seems to diverge from this conceptual underpinning of detective fiction due to its incorporation of supernatural power in the investigation process. Throughout the story, the magical power of the Buddha image intervenes in human activities. With this intervention of supernatural agency, the truth is revealed and justice restored.

However, the magical intervention does not necessarily contradict the basic foundation of "reason" for the genre. The novel, I argue, replaces the deductive reasoning that lies at the heart of detective fiction with local religious logics. The text suggests that the power of the Buddha image is not something superstitious, but the Buddhist law of karma. At the beginning, the Buddha image is said to possess protective power for people who "behave righteously" (*suchalit*). On the other hand, this power can also punish one who behaves wrongly (*thuchalit*). When the perpetrator tells the court the origin of the scar on his left cheek, he says, "I believe that the Buddha created this mark to explicitly show that we are wrongdoers (*khon thuchalit*). It

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<sup>119</sup> Heta Pyrhönen, "Detective Fiction," *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, eds. David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan (London: Routledge, 2005), 103-104.

<sup>120</sup> See Carl Malmgren. "Anatomy of Murder: Mystery, Detective, and Crime Fiction," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 30, 4 (1997): 115-135. Literary and academic works have called such positivist, humanist, and rationalist ideas in detective fiction into question. See Patricia Merivale and Susan Sweeney, *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).



is karmic retribution for our immoral action.”<sup>121</sup> Hence, the perpetrators are not primarily punished by the law of the state but by the law of karma. What constantly chases after them from the very beginning is not state authority but their own bad karma. The Buddhist concept of karma, or, more aptly, the author’s interpretation of this concept, gives Lao readers convincing explanations for the novel’s resolution.

Similar to “The Tiger of Justice,” the novel closely links Buddhism with nature. The Buddha image, or the Buddha himself, manifests his power through nature. In the forest scene in which the two investigators first encounter such magical power, nature is described as a peaceful place: “We walk into the forest, watching trees which are moved by a gentle breeze and listening to birds that are singing so sweetly. The deeper we wander, the more peaceful we feel.”<sup>122</sup> The peacefulness of nature sets the stage for the manifestation of the Buddha’s power which comes in the form of the tree’s shadow. The choice of the kind of tree, the bodhi tree (*ton pho*), well-known throughout Buddhist countries in South and Southeast Asia, has unmistakable significance. The significance of the tree in Theravada Buddhism is culled from various sources, but the most important must be the accounts of the Buddha’s enlightenment under its branches.<sup>123</sup> In the novel, the shadow of the bodhi tree magically forms the shape of the Buddha image, and then the cross mark, to give the investigators some “insights” about the case. It is as if the tree under which the Buddha once attained the ultimate truth tries to cast a glimpse of worldly truth onto human knowledge.

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<sup>121</sup> Nginn, *Phra Phouthahoup Saksit*, 26.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.* 8.

<sup>123</sup> See Yohei Shimizu, *Bodhi Tree Worship in Theravāda Buddhism* (Nagoya: Nagoya University Association of Indian and Buddhist Studies, 2010).

Legal institutions are not directly criticized in this novel. Yet they are portrayed as ineffective due to their limited knowledge, as contrasted with the omniscient knowledge of the Buddha and the universal law of karma. Although Antoine and Thao Suvan are described as intelligent and well-trained investigators, they still need magical guidance to solve the crime. Human flaws are projected onto a minor character, the village headman, who lets the foreign perpetrator stay in his house for a couple of days. He is harshly criticized by the investigators for his inattentiveness to his duty. Again, human agency and social institutions fail to guarantee justice. In such circumstances, only traditional beliefs such as Buddhism and nature can reestablish moral order. As such, the novel creates a nostalgic yearning for an ideal traditional moral values.

The critique of modern legal institutions and the call for traditional ways of living is strongly expressed in another short story, “Twenty Years Later,” written by Thao Thongphet.

“Twenty Years Later” (1943)

A clerk named Santi moves from his hometown to work in Xiangkhoang province. There he has a secret relationship with Kongkaew, a fatherless girl from a well-to-do family. When Kongkaew finds out that she is pregnant, Santi is sent to Vientiane. Twenty years later, he finally becomes a chief judge of the Vientiane court and never returns to Xiangkhoang. Kongkaew becomes poor after her mother’s death and raises her son, Simongkhon, alone. She dies when he turns eighteen, leaving him a ring which meant to remind him of her teachings. Simongkhon sells the family house and leaves Xiangkhoang. Impoverished, he also decides to sell his mother’s ring. He ends up joining a bandit gang, forgetting his mother’s last words. One night, after having robbed a wealthy family, the bandits are arrested and taken to the Vientiane court. The chief judge Santi is in charge of the case. While looking at Simongkhon’s profile, which

indicates his hometown and his mother's name, Santi is utterly curious about his identity. At night, Kongkaew appears in Santi's dream, accusing him of being merciless.

At the trial on the next day, Simongkhon undergoes interrogation and reveals his background. Santi then realizes that Simongkhon is his own son. Simongkhon is sentenced to five years in prison, but, due to his plea of guilty and due to the fact that he had never committed any crime before, he is set free. A month after the trial, the Vientiane court receives a letter from Santi, who is now on vacation. In this letter, Santi tells his colleagues the truth about his relationship with Simongkhon and the help he provided to free his son from any guilt. He believes that Simongkhon is by nature a good person who has been corrupted by the bandit gang. The letter ends with Santi's request to resign from his position in order to make possible his wish to begin a new life as a farmer with his family in the peaceful countryside.<sup>124</sup>

At the heart of "Twenty Years Later" is an ethical dilemma that involves a conflict between familial bonds and professional responsibilities at the scene of judicial decision-making. Santi is caught up between his role as the father of the criminal and his position as a judge. As the story unfolds, he chooses his son over his profession. His decision is not only based on this natural bond, but his sense of guilt for abandoning his child. Once realizing that Simongkhon is his own son, Santi reflects, "Oh Simongkhon...my son...you killed people because of my cruelty." In his letter, he repeats this self-blaming statement: "I cannot punish my son because this crime is actually due to my own cruelty and heartlessness."<sup>125</sup> In this sense, the judge blames himself as the real "criminal." His judgment, which seems unjust from a judicial perspective, is justified by his moral responsibility as a father.

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<sup>124</sup> Thao Thongphet, "Saw Pi Lang [Twenty Years Later]," *Lao Nhay* 1 January 1943.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

The judicial system is criticized for its rigidity and its overwhelming power to take one's life regardless of personal moral judgments or the possibility of "innocent crimes." It leaves no room for the randomness of human fate which Santi and his son experienced. In his letter to the court, Santi expresses his strong will to resign from his position by describing his job as "the way to earn one's life on the edge of Hell. I can fall into Hell any day if I make moral errors [*khwam phitphat thang tham*]." <sup>126</sup> He thus decides to leave an office (*hongkan*) for a field (*haina*) to live a simple and happy life far from the rigid and fragile legal system. The comparison between the court and the edge of Hell signifies the fragility of worldly justice in juxtaposition with the ideal Buddhist law of nature as suggested by the word, "tham," which derives from the Pali term "dhamma" (the law of nature, the teaching of the Buddha).

In fact, Buddhist vocabulary appears earlier on in the text. When Simongkhon's mother is about to die, she gives him a ring with her last words: "You're fatherless. You must stand on your own two feet. Never forget that your actions will determine your virtue (*bun*) and vice (*bap*)." <sup>127</sup> Once Simongkhon sells the ring, he forgets his mother's moral instructions and in the end becomes a thief. As such, familial obligation is closely linked with moral duty according to the Buddhist notions of *puñña* (*bun* in Lao, generally translated as merit or virtue) and *pāpa* (*bap* in Lao, generally translated as wrong-doing). From the internal logics of the text, it seems that family, rustic life, and Buddhism is put on the one side and legal institutions on the other side. The former provides ethical guidance, recourse, and justice which the latter fails to recognize or even obstructs.

"Twenty Years Later" shares significant similarities with the two previous texts, "The Tiger of Justice" and *The Sacred Buddha Image*. First of all, Buddhism stands out in these three

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<sup>126</sup> Thongphet, "Saw Pi Lang."

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

texts. As literary interpretation and representation of Buddhist discourses, Buddhist figures in the stories take various forms and make use of various forces. They can be the compassionate mystical tiger, the magical Buddha image, or direct preaching. In this literary imagination, Buddhism is also associated with other discourses such as the natural world and parental love. In all cases, Buddhist figures possess reparative and redemptive power to fix injustice and to reestablish moral order. In this regard, Buddhism provides philosophical grounds for the literary discourse of poetic justice in early Lao fiction.

I have culled from these three texts the idea of justice as a contested terrain between what can be conceptualized as “traditional” and “modern.” In using these terms, I attend to the internal logics of the texts, the certain ways in which fictional worlds are constructed. In all these texts, the question of justice always involves two distinct sets of ideas or beliefs which generate the main conflicts in the stories. The first set includes what I categorize, consistent with the logics of the emergent literature, as “traditional,” such as Buddhist teachings, the natural world, rustic life, and mythical power. The second belongs to “modern” judicial institutions such as courts, judges, and prisons. Such a categorization does not assume that what can be called “traditional” or “modern” is unitary or authentic. They are both constructed, in this case, through literary world-making. My purpose is to understand meanings and sentiments that the fictional logics of these demarcated worlds create. My analysis of the short stories and the novel shows that the juxtaposition between “traditional” and “modern” worlds calls modernity into question and calls for nostalgic longings for an ideal past.

This tension between “traditional” and “modern” worlds will be further examined in another type of fiction—love stories. As the previous section pays attention to justice, the

following section focuses on the notion of love, and how this notion is employed to criticize modern society.

### **Romantic Backlash: Love Stories as Modern Didactic Texts**

Love is another common theme in early Lao prose fiction. These texts portray modern Lao society as one filled with love, desire, and scandal. I argue that these love stories can be considered as modern didactic literature for their employment of the theme of love to give moral instructions to modern readers. Texts discussed here are two short stories published in the *Lao Nhay* newspaper in 1943. The first one, “The Enemy” (*Sattu*) is another award-winning story from the 1942 *nithan kom* contest written by Thao Nhouthak; another one, “The Orphan” (*Sai Khampha*), is written by the same author. Both stories center on romantic relationships between young men and women in contemporary settings. Love is depicted in these texts as the cause of suffering. Buddhist concepts, again, are introduced as ideal solutions to such problematic romances.

#### “The Enemy” (1943)

One evening in Vientiane in which the streets are crowded with cars and people, a well-dressed man, Nivong, is on his way to a local cinema. At the cinema, he meets a beautiful young woman named Thongsi. Flirtatiously, he offers to buy her a movie ticket and asks her to join him. While enjoying a romantic movie, Nivong and Thongsi are disturbed by a man who keeps staring at them aggressively. After the cinema, Nivong and Thongsi take a walk to Thongsi’s house. Thongsi tells Nivong that the curious man in the cinema is Khammi, who has attempted to approach her many times. Suddenly, someone throws a stone and hits Nivong’s head. The lovers take a taxi to a hospital. Thongsi believes that Khammi is the perpetrator.

During his days at the hospital, Thongsi takes care of Nivong and their love steadily deepens. They are finally engaged and plan to get married soon. Before their marriage, someone breaks into her house and tries to rape Thongsi but fails to do so. Thongsi does not recognize his face. This incident brings great pain to Nivong, but he is determined to marry Thongsi out of true love. After four months of their happy life as a couple, Nivong plans to take revenge on Khammi, whom he believes to have committed all those vicious acts. One night, Nivong and his comrades catch Khammi on his way home. Khammi confesses his guilt to all the crimes. The kind-hearted Nivong releases Khammi because he does not want to commit any sinful actions. Before releasing Khammi, Nivong makes him vow that he will never do such crimes to anyone again.<sup>128</sup>

The romantic relationship in “The Enemy” is set in Vientiane, the colonial capital and cosmopolitan city that allows modern lovers to express their desire in public space through Western lifestyles. For their evening’s entertainment at the *sinema* (from *cinéma* [cinema] in French), Nivong wears a *kalawat* (from *cravate* [necktie] in French) and Thongsi wears *sangdan* (from *sandale* [sandal] in French). Their Western sartorial garb accentuates their sensuality and sexual desire. The cinema, for example, gives them sensation and pleasure with which they willingly identify their desire. The author sets the romantic scene: “The movie [*sinema*] for tonight is very entertaining. The main actor and actress are good-looking. They perform as if they expose their hearts [to the audience]. They hug and kiss. They sing and dance to their hearts’ delight. This will definitely stir up young people’s desire for love! For heavenly joy!”<sup>129</sup> The author seems to suggest that the cinema as a public space and as an affective medium

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<sup>128</sup> Thao Nhouhak, “Sattu [The Enemy],” *Lao Nay* 15 February 1943.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

engenders excessive desire that blinds the young lovers from the dark side of the modern city.<sup>130</sup> Outside the cinematic space, their love and fancy suffers from jealousy, assault, and attempted rape.



Fig. 7-8: Cartoons from 1942-1944 depicting the theatre and the cinema as new sensations in modern Laos.

Source: *Lao Nhay* 1 September 1942 and *Lao Nhay* 15 February 1944

Love in this love story is deemed vulnerable due to its exposure to two kinds of “enemy.” First is its own excessiveness created by Western/modern practices of pursuing pleasure, and second are outside threats from one malicious man. Toward the end of the story, the main character ends such threats with not revenge but forgiveness. Buddhist vocabulary appears in two scenes in which Nivong and Khammi meet. When Nivong is attacked by Khammi, he wonders why he deserves such suffering since he has never done wrong (*baṇ*) to anyone before. Once he has a chance to take revenge on Khammi, he instead decides to release him because he does not want to do wrong (*baṇ*). The story ends with Nivong’s moral statements about

<sup>130</sup> In his discussion of the cinema in early modern Thailand, Scot Barmé accounts for public view toward the cinema as both space of pleasure and threat. See Scot Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok: Love, Sex, and Popular Culture in Thailand* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 69-96.



forgiveness and karma. Thus, this short story begins with the lighthearted tone of the romantic relationship and ends with a didactic tone that underlines Buddhist values.

This similar interplay between romanticism and didacticism is repeated in another short story, “The Orphan,” written by the same author. It was published in the *Lao Nhay* newspaper almost ten months after the previous story. In this story, Buddhism not only protects romantic love from threats, but love itself is renounced upon one character’s wish to enter his life into the realm of Buddhism.

#### “The Orphan” (1943)

After his father dies when he is still very young, Sulin is brought up by his mother and his uncle. At the age of ten, he studies at a monastery and later ordains as a novice monk. Sulin is an intelligent young novice and has a bright future. However, he has to disrobe and leaves his promising monastic life to take care of his mother. Sulin works on his rice field as his father once did to provide for his family. There is severe drought one year, so Sulin has to leave his hometown to work in a coffee farm in another town. He falls in love with Nitsai, the daughter of a coffee farm owner. Unfortunately, their different social and economic statuses prevent them from expressing their feelings for each other. Two months later, Sulin returns home upon learning of his mother’s serious illness. Before she dies, Sulin’s mother makes him promise that he will marry Chantha, his own cousin. Sulin makes the promise to her. He tells his uncle that he will come back again in the rainy season.

Upon his return to the coffee farm, Sulin finds out that Nitsai has been sick since he left. He takes care of her until she fully recovers. Nitsai’s parents realize that their daughter has fallen in love with Sulin and they agree to arrange a marriage for them. One day, Sulin suddenly

disappears from the farm. He leaves Nitsai a letter, telling her that he will ordain until the end of his life. Nitsai collapses. Her eyes are full of tears, her heart broken. Sulin sends a similar letter to his uncle with a ring for Chantha as a token of his apology.<sup>131</sup>

At first glance, “The Orphan,” seems to follow conventional romance plots in several ways. First of all, its plot is based on the popular conflict between arranged marriage and independent love. While arranged marriage belongs to traditional practices, romantic love is associated with Westernized/modernized notions of a romantic relationship. Another conventional conflict is the class differences between the two lovers: a poor man from a rural background and a rich woman from a capitalist family. Centering on the romance between individual lovers that develops in the somewhat capitalist setting of the coffee farm, the story seems to celebrate the idea of independent love that promises to transcend class conflicts. However, the final resolution of the story undoes all such conventions. Sulin’s decision to renounce both romantic love and the arranged marriage to enter the realm of Buddhism reflects a Buddhist view toward love and worldly pleasure as the causes of suffering.

Sickness is a key trope in the story’s representation of romantic love. Sulin’s mother’s sickness at the beginning leads to the development of their relationship, while Nitsai’s sickness in the middle of the story reveals her great affection to Sulin. This trope of the “lovesick” helps create the emotional intensity of the romance. Yet this sickness is not cured through their romantic union that provides affirmation and emotional stability to the relationship. Rather, lovesickness is put to an end with the act of refusal. Toward the end of the story, the fancy of Westernized/modernized notions of independent love and cross-class romance is replaced by the Buddhist ideal of the renunciation of worldly pleasure.

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<sup>131</sup> Thao Nhouthak, “Sai Khampha [The Orphan],” *Lao Nhay* 15 September 1943; *Lao Nhay* 15 November 1943.

The didactic message of “The Orphan” is clarified in an editorial note of the *Lao Nhay* newspaper which states that: “The tale [*nithan*] about an orphan is too long for the newspaper. However, we decided to publish the whole story because it gives moral lessons that suit general readers.”<sup>132</sup> The orphan, Sulin, serves as a role model who overcomes his privation through his “goodness.” In this statement, which guides readers on how to read the story, the romantic aspect of the text is completely dismissed and the didactic dimension is highly emphasized. For the newspaper editor, the story is meant to be read as a modern folktale that provides readers “moral lessons” (*khamson*), not entertainment based on a celebration of love and desire.

Like the notion of justice discussed in the previous section, the theme of love in early Lao prose fiction reveals the tension between traditional and modern worlds. In both cases, the modern world is portrayed as so problematic that its characters can only be rescued by their return to the traditional world. As legal injustice is repaired through Buddhist values, mythical power, and other recourses found in nature and rustic life, vulnerable love in modern society can also only be eradicated by Buddhist teachings. Literary representations of problematic modernity, thus, create nostalgic imagination about the idealized past. This kind of imagination, as I will argue in the next section, can also be linked to the idea of the nation.

### **Imagining Traditional Communities: The Search for National Roots**

In his theorization of modern nations as “imagined communities,” Benedict Anderson provocatively introduces the role of the novel, as well as the newspaper, in the construction of nationalism. The novel as a powerful device for imagining the nation relies on its capability to conjure up social space which different characters inhabit and in which different events occur *at*

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<sup>132</sup> Nhouthak, “Sai Kampha.”

*the same time*. This simultaneity, or what Anderson calls “homogenous, empty time,” allows readers to imagine themselves as members of the bounded community, namely, the nation.<sup>133</sup> I draw on Anderson’s insights about the imaginative power of fiction and the nation in my analysis of early Lao prose fiction. My question concerns what kind of community its members should imagine. So far, I have argued that the internal logic of early Lao fiction posits the traditional world as a refuge from problematic modernity. In this section, I pursue this inquiry by arguing that the traditional world is also portrayed as an ideal community for the nation.

The text that I will discuss in this section is a novel entitled, *Khamson Kap Srisamut* (Khamson and Srisamut), written in Lao by a French author, Blanchard de la Brosse. It was serialized in the *Lao Nhay* newspaper from 1941 to 1942. In 1944, the same year that *The Sacred Buddha Image* was published, the Lao Nhay literary committee planned to publish *Khamson and Srisamut* to promote modern Lao writing.<sup>134</sup>

The story of *Khamson and Srisamut* centers on the journey of a young boy named Khamson and, later, another boy named Srisamut. Khamson lives with his father and his pitiless stepmother in a small and peaceful town in Champasak. After having suffered from his stepmother’s cruelty for three years, Khamson accompanies his father on an overseas trading trip. During their time aboard ship, Khamson enjoys learning about Lao geography and history from his father. Unfortunately, the ship is struck by a storm and finally sinks into the sea on their return trip. Khamson survives, but his father disappears into the wild sea. Khamson becomes a close friend with another survivor, Srisamut, who is also an orphan. They decide to run away

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<sup>133</sup> See Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 22-31. For critical commentary on Anderson’s account on the novel and the nation, see Jonathan Culler, “Anderson and the Novel,” *Diacritics* 29, 4 (1999), 20-39; Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>134</sup> “Aksonsat Lao [Lao Literal Arts],” *Lao Nhay* 1 March 1944.

from home and travel to many cities and towns in Laos and Northeastern Thailand. The rest of the novel follows the journey of the two orphans in which they learn about Lao geography, history, and culture.

*Khamson and Srisamut* can be described as a fictional travel account that combines factual information with fictional elements. For each city and town that the two characters visit, the author provides details about landscapes, natural resources, and its population. Thus, their journey throughout many important provinces and cities such as Champasak, Pakse, Savannakhet, Thakhek, and Vientiane conjures up the national space as a bounded community in which its members can feel affinity with each other without knowing or meeting in the real world.<sup>135</sup> The feeling of affinity in this novel also involves a geopolitical dispute between Thailand and French Laos during the 1940s. When Khamson and Srisamut are traveling to Nakhon Phanom, a border province in Thailand, Srisamut explains to the young Khamson that “A long time ago, the two sides of the Mekong river used to be in the same kingdom under the power of kings of Lan Xang. Once we visit the other side of the river, you will see that people in those towns still uphold the same traditions as in ours.”<sup>136</sup> Upon his arrival, Khamson notices that villages and people there look similar to those in his hometown in Champasak. He sees a group of students walking back from school. They are talking to each other in Lao but holding Thai textbooks in their hands. Srisamut advises his younger companion, “My brother, you will better understand why one country was split up into two parts like this when you grow up. For now, my beloved brother, you should love these children just as your friends in your hometown.

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<sup>135</sup> Benedict Anderson describes the nation as “imagined” because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” See Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

<sup>136</sup> Blanchard de la Brosse, “Khamson Kap Srisamut [Khamson and Srisamut],” *Lao Nhay* 30 September 1941.

My brother, love these people like our own elder relatives because we all share the same blood and the same origin.”<sup>137</sup> As such, the imagining of the nation not only stems from the literary depiction of its geographical boundary but also from a quest for cultural roots.

From the very beginning of the novel, the author portrays Laos as an ideal traditional society. Khamson’s hometown is described as “peaceful and joyful” like “our country in the past.” Traditional society in the text is characterized by the continuity of traditions and the prosperity of Buddhism. When Khamson accompanies his father to a small town called Mueang (city, town) Song, his father explains to him that: “Muang Song is an old town...which has been ruled by the same lineage of town rulers from generation to generation. The town therefore continues to be prosperous and Buddhism is still practiced today. There are many temples and learned monks. Please keep in mind that in any towns in which Buddhism flourishes, people are always knowledgeable, generous, and kind.”<sup>138</sup> Similar descriptions of Laos as a traditional, Buddhist society appear throughout the novel as if the journey of the two orphans is a search for the ideal past in the present.

Traveling is a process of learning culture both in the metaphorical and the literal sense in the novel. Khamson and Srisamut travel throughout Laos with a traditional drama troupe. Khamson practices traditional dance and music with the troupe and develops a passion for Lao arts. After having mastered traditional dance, Khamson is selected to perform as the hero from the classical Lao piece of literature and national epic, *Sinsay*. His aesthetic admiration for Lao traditional arts is linked with nationalist sentiment as the troupe master explains the benefits of practicing music: “Music brings joy and other benefits. Music sweetens your heart and reminds

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<sup>137</sup> Blanchard de la Brosse, “Khamson Kap Srisamut,” *Lao Nhay* 30 September 1941.

<sup>138</sup> Blanchard de la Brosse, “Khamson Kap Srisamut,” *Lao Nhay* 1 April 1941.

you of love for family and love for the nation.”<sup>139</sup> Traditional arts, in this sense, cultivate one’s mind to be capable of imagining and loving the nation. This idea is, of course, in line with colonial policy to restore traditional Lao literature and music, linking them to nationalism (see chapter 2).



Fig. 9: Khamson practices traditional Lao dance and music and performs as the hero of the Lao national epic.  
Source: *Lao Nhay* 15 October 1941.

Khamson’s journey, as a search for traditional society and cultural literacy begins with a conflict. This conflict is the only one in the narrative structure of the novel, that is, the conflict between Khamson and his stepmother. Khamson’s stepmother is cruel and bad-tempered. Her striking character might be explained by her past. “She used to be a wife of a Frenchman.

<sup>139</sup> Blanchard de la Brosse, “Khamson and Srisamut,” *Lao Nhay* 31 October 1941.

Although she is now married to a farmer husband, she still behaves and dresses like a *madam* [from *madame* in French]<sup>140</sup> Khamson's father, on the other hand, is from a noble family in Xiangkhouang before he becomes a farmer. Such a characterization juxtaposes Khamson's stepmother, who was exposed to and corrupted by Westernization/modernization with Khamson's father who embodies traditional ways of life, both as a noble and as a farmer. Khamson himself finds his refuge from corruptive modernity in the journey that helps develop his sense of belonging to an ideal traditional community, namely, the Lao nation.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I examined the invention of Lao tradition in early Lao short stories and novels. Despite their assumed novelty as modern forms of narrative, early Lao short stories and novels display hybridity both in terms of genre and thematic content. The combination of Western literary styles and traditional folk narratives in these works of fiction resonates with their shared theme: the conflict between the traditional world and modern society. These texts represent modern society as problematic in its corruptive nature and emblematic of social decline from moral values. The traditional world, on the other hand, is represented as an ideal solution, recourse, and refuge from problematic modernity.

Buddhism is a key element in this literary representation of ideal traditional society. Buddhist discourses are appropriated in these texts to grapple with problematic modernity such as to repair the injustices of the modern legal system and to cure excessive desire in a Westernized society. Buddhism is also linked to nature, the rustic life, and, ultimately, the nation. The invention of traditional society and the critique of modernity in early Lao short stories and novels, thus, reflects the colonial ideology of the Lao Nhay, the backdrop against

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<sup>140</sup> Blanchard de la Brosse, "Khamson and Srisamut," *Lao Nhay* 15 March 1941.



which these texts were written, published, and circulated. Moreover, the depiction of the Lao nation as an idealized traditional society also suggests a juxtaposition between “Lao-ness” and “Thai-ness.” In this fiction, Lao national identity is defined by an adherence to tradition as opposed to the modernized/Westernized national character promoted by the Thai government. It should also be noted that Lao fiction rarely refers to royalty and court culture, which was a dominant defining feature of Thai official nationalism. Rather, Lao novels and short stories draw heavily on local folkloric and rustic elements to serve as pillars of a Lao national identity.

## Chapter Four

### The Persistence of the Past: Lao Literature and National Culture in the Post-WW II Period (1946-1975)

The French-sponsored Lao Nhay campaign ended in March 1945 after the Japanese occupation of Laos. Former members of the Lao Nhay led by Prince Phetsarath formed a nationalist movement known as the Lao Issara (Free Laos) that sought to set Laos free from French colonialism. With Japanese support, the Lao Issara proclaimed the country's independence in April 1945. Four months later, the French reoccupied Laos and members of the Lao Issara were forced to flee to Thailand. Following the Franco-Lao *modus vivandi* signed in August 1946, French administrators remained in Laos until 1953. Post-WW II Laos can therefore be viewed as continuing to experience French colonialism. This continuity was not only due to French presence in Laos until the early 1950s but also continued operation of projects in the domains of culture and literature from the previous decade. Apart from those who joined the anticolonial Lao Issara, Lao intellectuals who previously worked for the Lao Nhay such as Somchine Nginn, Thao Kene, and Thao Nhouthak continued to actively write Lao literature under the pro-French royalist regime and later under the American-supported government after 1954.

Grant Evans describes postwar Laos as politically and economically underdeveloped, and largely dependent on foreign aid. Yet he recognizes a flourishing of intellectual activity during this period.<sup>141</sup> Despite the political and economic dependency of the country, Lao intellectuals steadily undertook a nation-building project in the cultural sphere. Shortly after the establishment of the Royal Lao Government (RLG) under French auspices in 1947, Somchine Nginn and his associates launched a monthly "cultural magazine" (*nangsue vatthanatham*)

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<sup>141</sup> Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, 150-152.

called *Kinnary* that, like the Lao Nhay press, featured articles on Lao literature, music, festivals, and theatre. In 1948 the Division of Literature (*kong vannakhadi*) was established by royal decree. It was elevated to the Literary Committee (*Comité littéraire*) in August 1951. The committee launched a magazine entitled *Vannakhadi San* (Literary Magazine) in 1953 that played a major role in forming the contemporary conception of Lao national culture. During the late 1960s to early 1970s, Laos witnessed the emergence of new groups of intelligentsia who continued to revise notions of Lao literature and culture. Meanwhile, the Lao communist party, known as the Lao Patriotic Front (Naeo Lao Hak Xat) developed its own literary movement called revolutionary literature (*vannakhadi pativat*) to promote communist ideology.

This chapter focuses on the continuation of literary activity in post-WW II Laos. I argue that literature which began to be infused with nationalist sentiment during the early 1940s continued to play a major role in Lao political culture during the postwar period. Despite continuity in terms of practice, literature as an intellectual project on literature also reveals a shift in terms of its role and ideology in this new political context. With the new political idiom of national liberation during the postwar period, Lao literati rapidly withdrew from the colonial messianic discourse of cultural restoration to a celebration of national independence. To examine the relations between literature and politics, this chapter will, first of all, outline the political contexts in which intellectual activity on literature emerged. The second part discusses processes through which literature was institutionalized between the late 1940s and the 1950s with the establishment of the Division of Literature in 1948, followed by the Literary Committee in 1951. The final section focuses on new voices of intelligentsia who clustered around a progressive periodical, *Mittasone*, and a literary magazine under Sila Viravong's tutelage, *Phai Nam*. These

emergent intellectuals, some of whom retain their prestige until today, utilized literature to shape and reshape Lao national identity in ways that left an ineradicable impression on Lao culture.

### **Break and Continuity: From the Lao Issara to the Royal Lao Government**

French colonial policy during the early 1940s inadvertently led to the anticolonial nationalist movement in several ways. First of all, the Vichy-inflected traditionalism of the Lao Nhay contributed to the formation of a Lao cultural identity grounded in the nostalgic sense of cultural loss and recovery as discussed in the previous chapters. This identity was further strengthened through the construction of a cultural boundary between Laos and Thailand. The colonial cultural campaign that primarily aimed to foster Lao loyalty towards the French thus led to the inception of a feeling of Lao nationalism that finally turned against colonialism.

The anticolonial movement was mobilized by local leaders whose ideas of nationalism stemmed from their experiences in the colonial administrative system. Prince Phetsarath, a leader of the Lao Issara, best exemplifies the case. In their study of Phetsarath's biography, Christopher Goscha and Søren Ivarsson highlight two important activities in Phetsarath's career in the colonial administration that shaped his later understanding of Lao nationalism. One is his travels throughout Laos on inspection tours that helped him form an idea of the territorial unity of Laos as a nation; another is his participation in the colonial project of cultural revitalization in Laos, especially during the 1940s, which engendered, in part, Lao cultural identity.<sup>142</sup> As such, although the formation of the Lao Issara can be considered a break from French colonialism, it found its origin in colonial policy and practice. In a book on the Franco-Lao relationship penned by a member of the Lao Issara, Katay Don Sasorith, the author compares the Lao Issara with the *bang fai* (the traditional Lao rocket), which is made by the hands of Lao but is powered by the

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<sup>142</sup> Goscha and Ivarsson, "Prince Phetsarath," 55-81.

fuel of the French.<sup>143</sup> By the “French,” Katay specifically means Charles Rochet, the French administrator who was the real impetus of the Lao Nhay campaign. In this regard, Lao Issara intellectuals can be viewed as continuing an understanding of nationalism formed during the Lao Nhay period.

The Japanese overthrow of French Indochina in March 1945 provided an opportunity for Phetsarath and his followers to fulfill their nationalist aspirations. However, their failed attempt to win the country’s freedom and absolute sovereignty led to their exile to Thailand. In 1949, the Lao Issara finally collapsed as a result of disunity among its leaders, especially between the pro-French Prince Souvanna Phouma and the pro-Vietnamese Prince Souphanouvong.<sup>144</sup> The members of the Lao Issara such as Katay Don Sasorith, Nhouy Abhay, and Sila Viravong gradually returned to Laos. Phetsarath himself remained in Thailand until 1956 before he ended his exile, marking the end of the short-lived Lao Issara nationalist movement.

Following the Japanese defeat, the French reasserted colonial control in Indochina. The French return to Laos, which was welcomed by the pro-French Luang Phrabang monarchy, led to the establishment of the Royal Lao Government in 1947 under French auspices. Because of the rise of anticolonial sentiment in many of its colonies in the late 1940s, the French agreed to grant political and administrative autonomy to indigenous governments. Historians of Laos point out that by 1950 Lao officials had taken control over all French positions.<sup>145</sup> The political

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<sup>143</sup> Katay Don Sasorith, *L'amitié ou la haine!: pour une entente franco-lao contre le colonialisme désuet et périmé* (Bangkok: Éditions Lao-Issara, 1948). Katay dedicates this book to Charles Rochet.

<sup>144</sup> Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong are Phetsarath’s half brothers. They were educated in Hanoi and then in France where they received degrees in engineering. Souvanna Phouma married Monique Allard, daughter of a French father and a Lao mother. Souphanouvong, on the other hand, married Le Thi Ky Nam, daughter of a Vietnamese civil servant, while he was working for the French in Vietnam. Having worked in Vietnam for many years, Souphanouvong developed connections with the Vietnamese communist leader, Ho Chi Minh.

<sup>145</sup> See, for instance, Evans, *Short History of Laos*, 94.

autonomy of the RLG allowed Lao nationalism in the domain of culture, what can be called “cultural nationalism,” to continue to flourish.<sup>146</sup> In October 1953, the Franco-Lao Treaty was signed, granting full independence and sovereignty to the country. By this time, Lao intellectuals who had previously joined the Lao Issara returned to Laos and began to work in collaboration with the RLG to shape a cultural space for the new nation state.

After the demise of French power in Laos, the RLG was subsequently supported by the United States, whose primary aim was to prevent communist penetration in the region. American intervention in Laos, as in other Southeast Asian countries, came in the form of a financial aid program for military purposes and for infrastructural and social development.<sup>147</sup> Beginning in the late 1940s, Laos also witnessed the political intervention of Thailand under the pro-American governments of Phibun Songkhram and Sarit Thanarat. Following the Geneva Conference of 1954, the Thai government formed an alliance with the RLG by facilitating exchanges between Thailand and Laos both for military and cultural purposes.<sup>148</sup>

Laos during the American era witnessed both the stability of RLG-sponsored cultural projects and rapid social and cultural changes in urban areas such as Vientiane. Groups of Lao intellectuals who worked for the RLG continued to publish articles and books on classical literature, Buddhism, history, folktales, and rituals. These included the Literary Committee, who published the monthly *Vannakhadi San* (1953-1958), and scholars of the *Bulletin des Amis du Royaume Lao* (1970-1973). At the same time, new groups of intelligentsia who had newly

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<sup>146</sup> John Hutchinson defines cultural nationalism as an attempt to provide a cultural repository in order to construct a historic identity and ethnic community, whereas political nationalism as an attempt to rationalize the state through a legislative system. See John Hutchinson, *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism: The Gaelic Revival and the Creation of the Irish Nation State* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987).

<sup>147</sup> See Martin Goldstein, *American Policy Toward Laos* (Rutherford, New Jersey: Associated University Press, 1973), 179-200.

<sup>148</sup> See Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism*, (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, 2007), 159-167.

returned from overseas studies in France, Canada, and United States began to express their concerns about social, political, and cultural problems. These voices of a new generation of Lao intellectuals included members of the Association of Lao Alumni (*Samakhom Adit Naksuksa Lao* or *Organe de l'amicale des anciens étudiants Lao*) who launched a periodical called *Mittasone* (1967-1971), and Sila Viravong and his family who ran the literary magazine, *Phai Nam* (1972-1973). Literary works produced by these groups of intellectuals expressed cultural anxiety and sometimes criticism of capitalism, urbanization, and social problems brought to Laos through the often irresponsible and unaccountable projects funded by foreign aid. As such, literary production under the royalist regime revealed both the continuity and dynamism of Lao culture and society during the post-WW II period.

This brief outline of the political situation in Laos after 1945 shows that foreign powers constantly intervened in Laos, impeding local political resistance until 1975. The French reoccupation led to the exile of the non-communist Lao Issara whereas the subsequent American intervention suppressed the communist movement. During a watershed moment of national liberation from colonialism in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, Lao political nationalism was relatively weak. Crucially, only in the domain of culture was the project of nation building still actively shaped by Lao intellectuals. As I will argue in the following section, literature played an important role in providing the expression of national sovereignty (*ekkarat*) for Laos as a new nation state.

### **The (Unfinished) Literary Project: Literature, Institutions, and Nation**

Literary institutions established during the postwar period grew out of the Lao Nhay cultural campaign. The Literary Committee (*Comité littéraire*), for example, resembled the Lao Nhay

Literary Committee whose projects on classical literature and modern prose fiction began to link literature with nation. Its first five members consisted of former members of the Lao Nhay and intellectuals who had previously worked for the French administration: Somchine Nginn, Sila Viravong, Kou Abhay (brother of Nhouy Abhay, a founding member of the Lao Nhay Literary Committee), Phouy Panya, and Bong Suvannavong. In the following years, members also included Thao Kene (a winner of the Lao Nhay translation competition) and Thao Nhouthak (a winner of the Lao Nhay poetry and short tales contests). Moreover, the Literary Committee completed publication projects that had been begun by the Lao Nhay but were interrupted by the war. For example, Thao Kene's award-winning translation of George Sand's novel, *La mare au diable* was reprinted in 1971. Somchine Nginn's *The Sacred Buddha Image* was also reprinted in 1966. More important, the Committee's view of literature as an integral part of national identity formation revealed its inheritance from the literary projects of the Lao Nhay.

The establishment of literary institutions by the state during the postwar period, from the Division of Literature in 1948 and the Literary Committee in 1951 to the Royal Academy in 1970, made clear an attempt to link literature with nation building. This process can be called the "institutionalization of literature," by which literature becomes a source of cultural legitimacy and authority through its delimitation, production, and consumption by various social institutions.<sup>149</sup> In postwar Laos, literature provided sources of cultural legitimacy for the new state to claim its autonomy as a nation. In the following sections, I will discuss the ways in

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<sup>149</sup> I draw this definition from Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "cultural consecration" which he describes as a process in which art and literary "production, reproduction and diffusion" are "mediated by the structure of relations between the instances or institutions claiming to exercise a specifically cultural authority." See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 120-121.



which literary institutions shaped Lao national culture through institutional practices on literature and language.

### **Literature as a Historical and Cultural Repository**

In the first issue of *Vannakhadi San*, a literary magazine published in 1953 by the Literary Committee, Sila Viravong, who was the editor of this issue, describes literature and its significance in the following manner:

What is “literature” (*vannakhadi*)? What is its importance? Why does the government have to establish the literature section [within the governmental body]? I would like to briefly explain as follows:

The term, “literature,” means books or writing similar to books (*nangsue, thang nangsue*). It can be composed in verse or in ordinary language, but it has to be beautiful and logical and also popular among the people. In essence, literary works are books with high value.

Literature is an important national treasure [*sombat khong sat*] because it records national culture [*vatthanam khong sat*], history, customs and tradition. [...] Now that our nation is beginning to flourish, the Royal Lao Government recognizes that literature is as important as other kinds of governmental affairs, and implements a literary restoration policy by establishing the Division of Literature [later known as the Literary Committee].<sup>150</sup>

This explanation of the meaning and importance of literature aims to give the *raison d'être* for the Literary Committee. Literary values according to this formulation rely on the notion that literature communicates the aesthetic, cultural, and historical repository of the nation (*sat*). The renovation of the nation in the aftermath of WW II thus necessitates the restoration of literature as an indispensable repertoire for the rediscovery of the cultural roots of the nation.

Consistent with this definition of literature as a repository of the emergent nation, the nonfiction contents of *Vannakhadi San* covered a wide range of subjects beyond literature, including history, religion, language, and festivals (see Table 2). Notably, although several of

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<sup>150</sup> Sila Viravong, “Bannathikan Thalaeng [Editor’s Note],” *Vannakhadi San* 1,1 (August 1953), 4-5.

these subjects did not directly deal with literature, the authors tended to draw evidence from literary sources or to link such cultural practices with literary texts. At the same time, in analyzing literary texts, authors also situated them in social, historical, or religious contexts. In doing so, these authors highlighted the value of literature in the nation's cultural repository and its relations with other expressions of culture.

**Table 2:** A Summary of contents of *Vannakhadi San* (1953-1954/1958)<sup>151</sup>

Note: Serialized articles are mentioned only for the issue of first publication.

Issue	Article	Topic/Description
1,1 (August 1953)	Songkran festival Various types of Buddha postures Rules of poetry composition Old Lao proverbs <i>Vessantara Sadok</i> <i>Vatthanatham</i>	Annual festival, also traditional New Year Buddhist iconography Versification Proverbs taken from classical literature Buddhist literature Definitions of the Lao term for “culture”
1,2 (October 1953)	<i>Siaw Savat</i> <i>Thao Hung Thao Chuang</i> Principles of Lao spelling	Folk literature Classical literature Language
1,3 (November 1953)	<i>Sinsay</i> Lao grammar	Classical literature Language
2,1 (January 1954)	Lao dictionary <i>Kam Sud Khwan</i>	Language Ritual text
2,2 (March 1954)	The tale of Nang Sangkhan Lao vocabulary for military ranks	Folktale explaining the origin of Songkran Language
2,3 (April 1954)	Vientiane Official language Chants for the wedding ceremony Birth rite	History Language Ritual text Folk ritual and belief
2,4 (October 1958)	Opinions on the Lao language Luang Phrabang Poetry composition <i>Samatsongsan</i> <i>Siang Miang</i>	Language History Versification Classical literature Folk literature
2,5 (October 1958)	<i>Matsa Chadok</i> A Chronicle of Champasak	Buddhist literature History

<sup>151</sup> The magazine stopped publishing for unspecified reasons from 1955-1957. It resumed publication in October 1958. The volume number continues from the last issue in 1954.

Most of articles on classical literature were written by Sila. His work can be viewed as the continuation of a project of literary canonization from the Lao Nhay period. A distinctive feature of these articles is the detailed annotations that provide historical background for each text, including the writer's biography. For example, in his analysis of *Sinsay*, Sila reconstructs the biography of Pangkham, a poet who was believed to have composed this epic, by drawing on various historical accounts or *phongsavadan* (chronicles) such as the *Chronicle of Champasak* and the *Chronicle of Lan Xang*. He concludes that Pangkham might have been the Chao Pangkham mentioned in the *Chronicle of Champasak* as the ruler of the city of Nong Bua Lamphu who lived around 1641, or he might have been King Ton Kham who ruled Vientiane in 1642 according to the *Chronicles of Lan Xang*.<sup>152</sup> In his articles, Sila uses historical evidence to reconstruct a literary history. At times, he also uses literary texts to supplement historical accounts.

Sila's annotations of literature in *Vannakhadi San* are attempts to write Lao literary history in a modern sense. This kind of literary history is embedded with the notion of periodization for which, according to Fredric Jameson, "history is seen in some 'linear' way as the succession of such periods, stages, or moments."<sup>153</sup> In his attempt to figure out a "period" (*samai*) in which the tale of *Siaw Savat* was composed, Sila laments the difficulties he faces to "uncover the truth about the period since which our literature has flourished." He then lists the titles of classical literary works for which he found historical evidence that indicates the dates of their composition, all in the Lan Xang period:

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<sup>152</sup> Sila Viravong, "Sinsay," *Vannakhadi San* 1, 3 (November-December, 1953), 10-13.

<sup>153</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative As a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 28.

- 1) *Sinsay* was composed by Thao Pangkham.
- 2) *Kap Pu Son Lan* was composed by Kaew Duang Ta in the city [*mueang*] of Lan Xang (Viang Chan).
- 3) *Phaya Patsen Tham Het* was composed by Phia Ratsamat.
- 4) *Inthiyan Son Luk* was composed by the learned poet named Inthiya.
- 5) *Nithan Panchatanta* was composed by Somdet Phra Maha Ratsakhru Visunmahaviharathibodi in Luang Phrabang during the reign [*samai*] of King Visunrat
- 6) *Tamnan Phra Kaew Morakot*, *Tamnan Phra Khaek Kham*, and *Tamnan Phrabang* were composed by Phra Ariyavangso in Viang Chan during the reign of Somdet Phra Chao Saiya Setthathirat.
- 7) *Nithan Khun Burom Rasathirat* was composed by Phra Maha Thep Then Ton at the temple of Visunmahavihan and Phra Maha Mungkhunsitthi in Luang Phrabang during the reign of King Visunrat. [...]

The book of *Siaw Savat* itself might be composed after *Thamnan Phra Kaew*, that is, during the reign of King Soulingna Vongsa (during the 17<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>154</sup>

Here Sila constructs a literary history of the Lan Xang period by grouping different literary texts into a unified historical time frame limited by specific places (especially Viang Chan and Luang Phrabang, the ancient capitals of the Lan Xang Kingdom) and reigns. This literary history aims not only to give readers information about literature but also to conjure up the image of a glorious past. In his speculation that *Siaw Savat* was composed during the reign of King Soulingna Vongsa, Sila writes that: “Laos [ prathet lao] was powerful and prosperous during this period [...] It was the period in which Lao and Thai literature was flourishing to the highest level.”<sup>155</sup> In short, the Lan Xang Kingdom was the golden age of Laos, and the key evidence of such glory was the flourishing of literature.

In 1953, the same year that this article was penned, Sila completed his major work on Lao history, *Phongsavadan Lao* (literally *A Chronicle of Laos* but better known as *History of Laos* due to its later English translation) which was published as a school textbook by the Ministry of Education beginning in 1957. In his foreword to the first edition of *Phongsavadan*

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<sup>154</sup> Sila Viravong, “Nangsue Siaw Savat [The Book of Siaw Savat],” *Vannakhadi San* 1,2 (October 1953), 35-36.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.* 37.

Lao, Sila expresses his nationalistic view of history: “The purpose of writing a history or chronicle is to inspire [its readers] with a deep love of their nation. Because when we learn that during certain periods in the past, our nation was prosperous and powerful, able to drive out all our enemies or evil forces, we are proud [of our nation].”<sup>156</sup> In his analysis of this historical writing of Sila, Chalong Soontravanich points out that Theravada Buddhism and Lao literature were key components of Sila’s conception of Lao national culture. In recounting the history of the Lan Xang Kingdom, Sila describes most Lao kings, such as King Visunrat and King Soulingna Vongsa, mentioned above, as the chief patrons of Buddhism and literature. Since the golden age of Lao culture, he believes, Buddhism and literature have been sources of national pride, unity, and identity throughout the history of Laos.<sup>157</sup>

As can be seen, Sila’s literary history is subsumed under national history in several ways. First of all, the history of literature is embedded within the national historical time frame. It is plotted within the linear historical narrative of the nation. Second, literature and history supplement each other in the task of historical analysis. While historical evidence sheds light on historical background of literature, literature itself can also serve as historical evidence to elucidate the study of history. Finally, literature is considered an integral part of the historical construction of the national culture. Literature symbolizes the glorious past of the nation and, with such a symbolic function, invokes national glory in the present.

The idea of “national culture” (*vatthanam khong sat*) animates the contents of *Vannakhadi San*. In fact, we see for the first time an attempt to define *vatthanatham*, the Lao

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<sup>156</sup> Sila Viravong, *Phongsavadan Lao* (Vientiane: Ministry of Education, 1957) cited in Chalong Soontravanich, “Sila Viravong’s *Phongsawadan Lao*: A Reappraisal,” eds. Christopher Goscha and Søren Ivarsson, *Contesting Visions of the Lao Past: Lao Historiography at the Crossroads* (Copenhagen: NIAS, 2003), 116.

<sup>157</sup> Soontravanich, “Sila Viravong’s *Phongsawadan Lao*,” 114-116.

term for “culture” in this literary magazine.<sup>158</sup> One of regular features of *Vannakhadi San* was a column entitled, “Vatthanatham,” penned by Thao Kene. His definition of *vatthanatham* was based on the idea of sympathy (*khwam vetthana*), that is, the recognition of suffering and joyfulness of others that developed into “mutual affection and respect.”

Mutual affection and respect derive from the fact of being born in the same lineage, living in the same country, speaking the same language, eating the same things, sharing the same ideas, behaving the same way, and conforming to the same customs. This [sameness] will foster love for nation, for freedom (*issaraphap*), and for national sovereignty (*ekkarat*).<sup>159</sup>

For society to have culture, its members must cultivate their minds to love other members. A precondition for this feeling is commonality, the idea of a shared lineage, community, language, and way of life. Culture, according to this conceptualization, is characterized by homogeneity, coherence, and collective identity. Essentially, this definition of culture is based on a nationalist idea of a national culture that aims at creating an official version of culture and linking cultural affinities with national unity and autonomy.

Since culture is defined as the cultivation of the mind, literature can serve as a key device for this purpose. In the same “Vatthanatham” column, Thao Kene cites a well-known Lao didactic text, *Kap Lan Son Pu* (The Grandson Teaches His Grandfather) which is believed to date back to the reign of King Soulingna Vongsa, the golden age of Lao literature. This citation aims to give readers ideas about “thoughts and cultural values in the past” and “ethical values of

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<sup>158</sup> It should be noted that the Lao term for culture is similar to the Thai term, “watthanatham.” According to Thanapol Limapichart, the term “culture” was translated into Thai as *watthanatham* in 1934 as part of larger debates about Thai national identity during the 1930s-1940s. The translation of the term and the concept of culture into the Thai context transformed the status and value of literature, as well as other cultural artifacts, into representations of national identity. See Limapichart, “The Prescription of Good Books,” 140-187.

<sup>159</sup> Thao Kene, “Vatthanatham [Culture],” *Vannakhadi San* 1,1 (August 1953), 18-19.

the ancient mind [*chitchai buhan*].”<sup>160</sup> Based on Buddhist ethics, this text lists various types of people whose behaviors deviate from Buddhist values such as “people who do not look after their parents,” “people who tell lies to gain money,” or “people who always kill animals and drink alcohol.”<sup>161</sup> Here Thao Kene draws ethical values essential to the cultivation of the “cultured mind” from Lao classical texts in the same manner that Sila extracts historical evidence from Lao national epics. Moreover, both Thao Kene and Sila employ the concept of an ideal past from literary sources to shape Lao national culture in the present.

### ***Aksonsat* and a National Language**

The Lao term for literary studies is *aksonsat*. As discussed in the previous chapters, this term was first used as the title of the literary column in the *Lao Nhay* newspaper. The term *akson* which literally means “letter, alphabet” signifies an emphasis on the linguistic aspect of literary studies. As can be seen in chapter 2, language standardization was one of the main concerns of the Lao Nhay Literary Committee in the construction of Lao identity as contrasted with the Thai. During the postwar period, the Literary Committee of the RLG undertook a similar project. Its main goal, however, was not primarily to construct a cultural boundary between Laos and Thailand. Rather, it sought to standardize a national language for the emergent nation. According to the constitution of Laos promulgated by royal decree in May 1947, Lao was declared to be an independent kingdom with Lao as its official language and Buddhism as the state religion.<sup>162</sup> In his preface to the first issue of *Vannakhadi San*, Somchine Nginn, Director of

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<sup>160</sup> Thao Kene, “Vatthanatham,” *Vannakhadi San* 2,6 (April 1954), 40-41.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Stuart-Fox and Kooyman, *Historical Dictionary of Laos*, 67-68.

the Literary Committee, describes the mission of the Literary Committee under such constitutional laws as follows.

Letters [*tua akson*] are roots or symbols of nations. All civilized [*sivilai*] countries have their own letters to transcribe speech. Countries that lack letters to transcribe their speech lack national roots and symbols and, thus, have no civilization. Our Lao nation has its own letters from an ancient time. [...] Whenever the country is in decline, letters and language [*phasa*] are in decline too. By contrast, when the country is prosperous and independent [*pen ekkarat*], letters and language are also independent. This is evident in Section 6 of the Lao constitution which states that “Lao is the official language.” To follow this constitutional law, the Division of Literature was set up [to take charge of language policy].<sup>163</sup>

In this statement, institutional policy on language is linked with the discourse of civilization and national independence. Like literature, language represents national culture and autonomy. The making of Lao as the official language (*phasa ratsakan*) suggests two important points. First, the Lao nation was divorced from the French language that had been used in administration during the colonial period. Second, the declaration of Lao as the official language signified an attempt to create a homogenous national culture through language policy, that is, to standardize language use.

The lack of Lao terms to use in different social situations was a primary concern of the Literary Committee. Sila recounted that “We don’t have enough Lao vocabulary. We don’t have such terms in Lao. Lao terms are inadequate. Lao terms are less suitable than French.... We have heard this kind of complaint many times in conversations among civil servants and we agree on those ideas.”<sup>164</sup> Sila continued to explain that this insufficiency was due to the fact that “our Lao language has been neglected for 200 years without any restoration and improvement.” He noted that the Literary Committee was concerned about this problem and undertook laborious tasks to

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<sup>163</sup> Somchine Nginn, “Kham Thalaengkan Khong Pathan Kammakan [The Director’s Statement],” *Vannakhadi San* 1,1 (August 1953), 1.

<sup>164</sup> Sila Viravong, “Bannathikan Thalaeng [Editors’ Note],” *Vannakhadi San* 2,2 (March 1954), 1.



“restore” the Lao language and literature which also represented the restoration of the nation (*kanfuenfu sat*).<sup>165</sup> Throughout its three decades of existence, this literary institution published a number of articles and books that aimed at enriching the Lao language as the official language of the new nation state.

One of the main tasks of the Literary Committee was to coin new words for government sectors that had previously used French terms. Reports of the committee’s meetings were published in *Vannakhadi San* to make them available to the general public.<sup>166</sup> Another important project was the compilation of Lao-Lao and French-Lao dictionaries. The Committee began to serialize a Lao-Lao dictionary in *Vannakhadi San* in January 1954. The first Lao-Lao dictionary entitled, *Nangsue Vatchananukom Lao khong Kom Vannakhadi* (A Lao Dictionary of the Division of Literature), was published in 1956. This was followed by *Vatchananukom Phasa Lao Khong Kasuang Suksathikan* (The Ministry of Education Edition of a Lao Dictionary) compiled by Sila Viravong in 1962. A French-Lao glossary of law terms was published in 1973 when the Literary Committee was elevated to the Royal Academy. These attempts to standardize the Lao language were in line with a number of articles on a Lao grammar published in *Vannakhadi San*. In 1959 a school textbook on a Lao grammar was published by the Committee to use in primary schools. This was followed by Sila’s book on Lao grammar published in 1962. The Royal Academy published its edition of a Lao grammar in 1972. Through these extensive works on Lao dictionaries and grammar handbooks, the Literary Committee and educational institutions alike set up standards for the Lao language and expanded the Lao lexicon to serve social sectors and public needs.

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid. 3.

<sup>166</sup> For example, titles and ranks of the Department of Forestry and Water (18 July 1952), the Office of National Post and Telecommunication (22 August 1952), and the Department of Public Works (16 October 1952).

The Literary Committee's projects on literature and language reveal the narrative structure of golden age-decline-restoration pattern that preoccupied postwar cultural politics. This persistent emphasis on the rise-and-fall pattern of periodization offers evidence of continuity from the effort of the Lao Nhay cultural campaign, which employed this nostalgic mode of cultural policy to construct a Lao cultural identity in the early 1940s. During the postwar period, however, literary projects were infused with a new political idiom, including terms for national sovereignty (*ekkarat*) and freedom (*issaraphap*). Literature and language became integral to the shaping of the national culture. As cultural heritage, they represent the past, the golden age, that provided sources of national pride to the new state. In short, the past was invoked by this literary institution to celebrate national independence and autonomy against foreign occupation and intervention.

### **Emerging Voices: Urban Literati, Cultural Anxiety, and Social Criticism**

While the Literary Committee steadily worked on crafting a Lao national culture, new groups of intelligentsia critically responded to the rapid social changes and to express cultural anxiety through literary works. One prominent group was a young generation of overseas students who had newly returned from Western countries such as France, Canada, and the United States to serve as civil servants for the RLG. This group clustered together in the Association of Lao Alumni (*Samakhom Adit Naksuksa Lao*) to discuss various political, social, and cultural issues. Their critical comments on such issues were published in the association's periodical, *Mittasone*, which began publication in 1967. Another group that began to critique rapid social change was the Viravong family, consisting of Sila himself who resigned from his position in the Literary Committee in 1963 and his three children, Pakiat, Dara, and Duangdeuan, all of whom remain

among the best-known Lao writers today. In 1972, they began publishing a monthly literary magazine, *Phai Nam*, devoted to literature and culture.

These urban literati witnessed rapid changes in urban areas such as Vientiane, which were brought to Laos mostly by American aid programs. They began to make critical social commentary through their literary works on corruption, the negative effects of capitalism, and the degradation of traditional values. These similar themes were found in Thailand during the same period. In his study of Thai short stories written between 1967 and 1979, Benedict Anderson discusses the impact of what he calls the “American Era” as reflected in literary works of a young generation of Thai intelligentsia. According to Anderson, these works reflect dramatic transformations of Thai social life and cultural landscape during this era. These writers, most of whom were from rural areas, subtly expressed their anxieties and dissatisfaction towards the American discourse of development and capitalism.<sup>167</sup> In this light, I propose to analyze a mode of social criticism in Lao literature that responded to the impact of the American Era in Laos. Specifically, I examine the ways in which this kind of social commentary offers dynamic perspectives on national culture in post-WW II Laos.

The new generation of Lao intellectuals was concerned about Lao national culture and, quite often, remained conservative in their views about it. For them, culture was something to restore and preserve. However, their critical stances towards contemporary social issues offered a more dynamic version of Lao “national culture” compared with the official version of the Literary Committee. If nationalist literary institutions like the Literary Committee invoked the past to construct an idealized, harmonious, and homogenous version of national culture, these

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<sup>167</sup> Benedict Anderson and Ruchira Mendiones, *In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era* (Bangkok: Duang Kamol, 1985).

new urban literati employed the past to convey their social commentary and to expose cultural disruption in Lao society.

My first example is taken from a poem by Somphavan Inthavong, the most prolific writer of *Mittasone*. Somphavan received a degree in mathematics from France and in architecture from Switzerland before returning to work at the Ministry of Public Works and Transportation from 1961 to 1969. He wrote a number of articles for *Mittasone*, both in Lao and French, concerning social and political issues such as “Nationalism and Development” and “An Exegesis on Democracy.”<sup>168</sup> Somphavan also displayed his ardent admiration for the Lao classical poet, Pangkham. In some of his poems, he called Laos “the country of Pangkham” to express his romantic view towards his country. The poem I will discuss here was published in French in *Mittasone* in 1969. It was entitled, “A Man Is Dead...”

A Man Is Dead....

Put on your most lovely white costume  
And smile broadly  
It is only a simple burial  
The celebration of one who has departed.

A man is dead  
And that is not all  
Fa Ngum is also dead  
And Anou and Pangkham too.

A man is dead  
And that is not all  
Hate has been inherited  
And vengeance hoped for.

A man is dead  
Who wished to live one hundred years  
The latest victim

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<sup>168</sup> Somphavan Inthavong, “Nationalisme et développement [Nationalism and Development],” *Mittasone* 1, 2 (April-June, 1967), 7-8; Somphavan Inthavong, “Exégèse de la démocratie [An Exegesis on Democracy],” *Mittasone* 2, 8 (October-December, 1967), 14-20.

Of our Twenty Year War.

A man is dead  
And that is not all.<sup>169</sup>

Here great kings and a poet of Laos are invoked to express Somphavan's concern about the ongoing political and social situations in Laos. He criticizes intractable political conflicts, war, and a lack of public awareness about the role of social problems in bringing about social decline. The deaths of Fa Ngum, Anou, and Pangkham are symbolic, signifying the end of Lao civilization. The images of the man's death and burial ceremony, rather than referring to a particular individual, intensify the melancholic tone and present urgency of the author's contemplation of cultural loss. A sarcastic tone in the first stanza criticizes people who lack social consciousness and who celebrate hatred and vengeance that, after all, lead to the "death" of Lao cultural heritage.<sup>170</sup>

The invocation of the past to make social and political commentary on the present can also be found in the literary magazine, *Phai Nam*. The magazine's title, which literally means "thorny bamboo," is taken from the name of an ancient city mentioned in a historical narrative written by the French.<sup>171</sup> This narrative recounts an event after King Fa Ngum attacked Vientiane (Viang Chan) and then led his army to attack a nearby city, Viang Kham. This city was hard to besiege because it was circled by a dense forest of thorny bamboos. The wise King, therefore, ordered his soldiers to make arrows of silver and gold and shoot them into the bamboo forest. After the people of Viang Kham found out about those silver and gold arrows, they

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<sup>169</sup> Somphavan Inthavong, "UN HOMME EST MORT [A Man Is Dead]," *Mittasone* 3, 10 (April-July 1969), 10. The English translation is taken from Evans, *A Short History of Laos*, 152-153.

<sup>170</sup> It is ironic that the poet wrote this poem in French. His implied readers might have been his colleagues at the association, many of whom were educated in France and other Western countries.

<sup>171</sup> So Viravong, "Mueang Phai Nam [The City of Phai Nam]," *Phai Nam* 1, 1 (June 1972), 49-52.

ventured out into the forest and cut down the thorny bamboo to collect the valuable projectiles. His trick enabled King Fa Ngum to seize and rule the city. According to the editor of *Phai Nam*, the magazine was named after the city for the following reasons:

The city of Viang Kham had the forest of thorny bamboos [*phai nam*] as a wall to protect itself from enemies, so some people called it the city of thorny bamboos. Unfortunately, this wall was destroyed by the greedy people of Viang Kham who were concerned about their own benefit rather than the nation [*sat banmueang*]. We recall the merit of thorny bamboos in this story and so we use it as the title our monthly.<sup>172</sup>

The thorny bamboo has an allegorical function in this statement. In the historical narrative, the bamboo forest functions as a city wall that protects people from enemies. It is, however, destroyed by the very self-interested people who it was intended to protect. In naming the magazine after the thorny bamboo, the editor subtly criticizes people in contemporary society who are concerned about “their own benefit rather than the nation.” The magazine thus sees itself as a safeguard of society. It aims to promote desirable values to protect society from decline.

Literary representation of Lao cultural life in short stories published in *Phai Nam* offer a dynamic view of culture. One example is a series of short stories called “Vientiane, My Hometown” (Viang Chan Ban Koet) written by Panai (Pakiat’s penname). In this series, Lao folk culture is not idealized nor romanticized as rustic. Rather, it is depicted as facing the ongoing social problems of contemporary society. The portraits of Vientiane in these short stories offer conflicting images of material improvement and moral decline. In a short story entitled, “I Told You So!” (Bok Laew Bo Suea), Panai laments that *Bun Phavet*, a festival based on the *Vessantara Sadok* and considered one of the most important Buddhist festivals, has lost its meaning in the minds of young people. Young women in a village can no longer perform the

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

traditional dances. Therefore Panai argues that they have to be trained to “dance politely, not to shake like a dog when hot water is thrown at it as in modern dance.”<sup>173</sup> The contemporary reality of the local religious festival here does not represent an ideal traditional way of life but the deterioration of traditional values in modernized society.



Fig.10: The letterhead of a series of short stories, “Vientiane My Hometown,” portrays a conflicting image of the city.

Source: *Phai Nam* 1,10 (March 1973)

In another short story, Panai tells a story about the rocket festival to convey critical comments about corruption. The story revolves around a group of boys who plan to steal rocket fuel from Thit Chum, a man well-known for his excellent skill in making traditional rockets. Under this simple plotline, the author conflates the naïve plan of the boys with corruption in larger social sectors. For example, when the boys plan to steal the fuel, they reflect that: “This is the same thing that corrupt civil servants do to gain money before they waste it easily in the bar.”<sup>174</sup> At the end of the story, when one of the boys is punished for his role in the crime, he

<sup>173</sup> Panai, “Bok Laew Bo Suea [I Told You So!],” *Phai Nam* 1,10 (March 1973), 46-50.

<sup>174</sup> Panai, “Thot Phai [Whom to Blame?],” *Phai Nam* 1,12 (May 1973), 35-38.

ponders, “I am finally punished for my wrongdoing. But what about those civil servants who are corrupt? Who will punish them?”<sup>175</sup> Again, Lao folk culture is employed to convey critical messages about social problems.

The poem, essay, and short stories I analyze here offer a more dynamic view of culture. Through their representations of Lao society during the American Era, we can see how the urban literati responded to rapid political, social, and cultural changes. Instead of idealizing national culture as something static and homogenous, they viewed culture in a realistic way during a time of social transformation. They draw various elements and references relating to the Lao past such as ancient kings, a classical poet, a historical narrative, and folk culture to discuss social problems such as political conflicts, moral decline, and corruption.

## **Conclusion**

Laos during the post-WW II period witnessed a continuity of literary activity from the previous decade as can be seen from the establishment of literary institutions by the state in late 1940s and early 1950s. An analysis of the literary projects of the Literary Committee elucidates how the emergent nation state promoted its ideologies about national independence and autonomy through institutional projects relating to language and literature. Literature played a crucial role in shaping the national culture by providing historical and cultural repertoires from which the cultural roots of the nation could be rediscovered. At times, literature also functioned as a means through which Lao intellectuals expressed cultural anxiety in response to rapid and worrying changes in society. Looking at literature as a mode of social criticism reveals the dynamism of the culture-concept in postwar Lao society. Therefore, by attending to the production of

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid.



literature, we can gain a nuanced understanding about the relationship between Lao national culture and literature.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Conclusion**

My thesis explicates the formation of Lao national culture through literature from 1941 to 1975. It offers: 1) an examination of the politics of the Lao literary revival from 1941 to 1945 in tandem with the colonial rhetoric of restoration in the context of Lao-Thai geopolitics; 2) a review of the mode of nostalgia for an idealized traditional society in Lao prose fiction from 1941 to 1945 in relation to traditionalist cultural campaigns in Laos and pro-modern/Western cultural policy in Thailand; and 3) an investigation of the institutionalization and instrumentalization of literature to shape Lao national culture in response to political and social changes from 1946 to 1975. I argue that literature functioned as a key instrument in the invention of Lao tradition that served as the foundation of national cultural identity throughout this period. This “invented tradition” emerged within a specific politico-cultural context which I summarize below.

From its onset, Lao literary modernity emerged comparatively late in the early 1940s and was already shaped by its political and institutional contexts. Significant social factors that contributed to the emergence of Lao literary modernity such as secular education, print capitalism, and literary campaigns were all linked to colonial institutions. Lao writers who actively participated in literary production in this period were members of an emergent literate social class clustering around colonial schools and French-sponsored cultural campaigns. Lao intellectuals and writers such as Somchine Nginn, Nhouy Abhay, and Sila Viravong, played a crucial role in shaping Lao literary culture and cultivating the Lao nation.

The institutionalization of literature in the early 1940s was part of two interrelated political circumstances. The first was the import of the Vichy campaign for National Renovation in Laos that aimed to create a sense of the Lao homeland based on a nativist discourse and traditionalist ethos. The second was the intractable geopolitical conflict between French Laos and Thailand that worsened in the aftermath of the Franco-Thai War of 1940-1941 in which the French were forced to cede areas in Laos and Cambodia to Thailand. As a result, the French-sponsored cultural campaign known as the Lao Nhay (Great Laos) was implemented in 1941 to foster a sense of national identity among the Lao and to counter a Thai expansionist movement.

In this politico-cultural context, Lao intellectuals negotiated French colonial discourses of cultural restoration and Thai cultural influences through the campaign for the revival of Lao literary heritage. The term, *aksonsat*, was introduced to the Lao literary scene as a conceptual tool in this campaign. As the term suggests, to restore literature means to standardize it. Through a fixation on Lao literary conventions, the formation of a literary canon, and the standardization of the Lao language, Lao intellectuals accounted for the distinctiveness of Lao literature. Lao literature was specifically Lao because it was composed in its own language, forms, and conventions that were distinct from other literary cultures such as that of the Thai. As such, these processes gave Lao literature a “national character” that allowed Lao intellectuals to assert cultural ownership, authenticity, and superiority. In this way, the restoration of a specifically Lao literary heritage was linked to the renovation of the nation.

In the early 1940s Laos also witnessed the emergence of prose fiction as a new aesthetic medium. Early Lao prose fiction was highly hybrid in its nature and origin. On the one hand, Lao prose fiction emerged within a French-sponsored cultural campaign. The first Lao novel and short story were published in the *Lao Nhay* newspaper and came from the Lao Nhay’s literary

competitions. However, these novels and short stories did not explicitly reveal French literary influences. On the other hand, many Thai literary terms concerning form and genre such as *roy kaew* (prose) and *ruang an len* (novel) also suggested that modern Thai fiction, which emerged much earlier, might have influenced Lao prose fiction. Yet Lao writers, deliberately or spontaneously, did not acknowledge the borrowing of such Thai terms. Moreover, Lao fiction did not follow modern Thai literature in terms of plot and content. Early Lao prose fiction can be best described as a combination of Lao folk and modern literature.

A thematic analysis of short stories and novels showed that the hybrid nature of these texts resonated with their representation of overlapping worlds, “traditional” and “modern.” These texts invented “tradition” through a depiction of modern society as problematic in contrast to an ideal traditional society. In this literary representation, Lao tradition was defined by a moral order founded on Buddhist values. Traditional moral values were portrayed as possessing reparative power for mending the injustices of the modern legal system and for curing excessive desire in a modernized world. As such, these texts generated a nostalgic longing for an idealized past. In addition, this nostalgia was linked to nationalist sentiment in that the essence of the nation was also depicted as an ideal traditional society.

The depiction of the Lao nation as ideal “traditional” society in Lao fiction can be situated within an ideological framework of Lao nationalism that sought to distinguish Lao national identity from that of the Thai. During this period, Thai nationalism under Phibun Songkhram’s military regime strongly emphasized modernization and Westernization as a means to build the Thai nation as “civilized.” The Phibun government issued cultural policies that sought to diminish some Thai traditions and to promote modern/Western values. In this regard, the invention of Lao tradition illustrated an attempt to define “Lao-ness” by the

preservation of and the adherence to tradition as contrasted with highly modernized “Thai-ness.”

Literary production from 1941 to 1945 revealed two modes of “invented tradition.” The revival of classical Lao literature invented tradition through its antiquarian value as cultural heritage, whereas modern prose fiction invented tradition through its critique of modernity and its idealization of traditional values and society. With regard to its background, the invention of Lao tradition was politically motivated in that it primarily aimed to counter Thai expansionist nationalism by constructing distinctive Lao national culture.

During the post-WW II period, literature which had begun to be infused with nationalist sentiment during the early 1940s continued to play a major role as a defining feature of Lao national culture. With the rise of national liberation movements in Southeast Asia and elsewhere during this period, literature provided a medium for the expression of aspirations for the independence of the new nation state. Literature became institutionalized through the establishment of literary institutions as part of governmental affairs. This process established literature as a historical and cultural repository for the emergent nation. Moreover, the continuing project of language standardization also aimed to create a sense of cultural autonomy and legitimacy.

During the 1960s, the Lao literary scene witnessed a rapid transformation due to the impact of the American activities. Literature written during this period offered a dynamic view of national culture. Rather than invoking a nostalgic sense of an idealized past to solidify national culture, these texts employed Lao traditions to articulate social criticism in response to the social and cultural changes in urban settings.

My thesis ultimately offers a nuanced understanding of Lao literature. Despite Laos' rapid transition from a "colonial backwater" to an international flashpoint, Lao literature was generally viewed as stagnant. This study identifies the active roles played by literature throughout three decades in response to these social and political transformations.

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