

Book Review

Soren Ivarsson. *Creating Laos: The Making of a Lao Space between Indochina and Siam, 1860-1945*, Copenhagen: NIAS, 2008. 238 pp. (ISBN 9788776940232)

In this provocative study, Soren Ivarsson argues that French colonialism in Laos fashioned an idea of Laos and the Lao which was unprecedented in history. He repeatedly states that the French brought Laos “into existence,” or made it “manifest,” with an origin point in “French discourse on the Lao” that provided a “basic grammar for this notion of a Lao-ness” (1, 8, 19, 25, 40, 49, 93-94, 116, 167). Before the French, he refers to Laos by awkward impersonal terms like: “the territories east of the Mekong to become Laos” (25-28, 30, 32, 35-36). Ivarsson’s work is a significant contribution to the long moribund field of Lao history. This study is especially important for its analysis of French-Lao collaboration and complex, hybrid personalities among the Lao, both of which are normally vilified in Lao and Western historiography. Ivarsson recognizes the colonial period as a unique moment in Lao history where many diverse conceptions of Lao were brought under a unitary sign of “Laos,” but as his thesis makes clear, he denies Laos truly existed before the French thought of it (214). This has serious implications, suggesting that a distinct Lao history is nothing more than an invention of French colonial policy. Another result is that major actors are mostly French, sometimes Thai and Japanese, while Lao are left, aside from a few elite examples, as the passive object upon which dynamic forces of history act.

Ivarsson’s innovative approach to the colonial period stems from his appreciation that French-Thai competition over Laos did not end in 1893. However, as he does not ever question the traditional account, which privileges French and Thai actors, it becomes the starting point of problems for his analysis. The entire

book is structured around French-Thai rivalry, leaving Lao in a necessarily secondary role. In major historical change, narrative is from the point of view of French actors: they are the first to recognize the Lao as a unique people (45-46) and when the Japanese gain ascendancy in March 1945, the French hand over the Lao as though they were mere baggage (208). Moreover, Ivarsson's reliance on Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* leads him to treat the Lao state as a radically modern construction. Ivarsson's denial that the nation is timeless is critically sound; however, it also had to come from somewhere (besides France) and needs to be recognized as a complex transition rather than simply a violent severing. Instead, Ivarsson all-too-neatly sweeps away nineteenth century Lao history as a non-event vis-à-vis Lao nationalism. The most crucial problem lies in Ivarsson's thesis, which claims that the idea of Laos and the Lao did not exist until the colonial competition for the area (8). Laos is to Ivarsson nothing more than a colonial product, with no genuine existence before "instrumental" French effort (11). This leaves meager space for Lao agency. They are relegated to the subordinate position of "participants," supporters who merely provide a formless content that must be molded and shaped by a mastering colonial "grammar" (11, 19, 216). Fundamentally, Ivarsson's work suffers from an overdrawn distinction between the premodern and modern periods.

To take one example, his discussion of the etymology of the term "Lao" considers Siamese and European views exclusively without any consideration for how the Lao have seen themselves (24). Ivarsson's discussion of Lao history prior to 1893 stresses Siamese domination, which reinforces his contention that, in reality, Laos did not exist in any political sense prior to the French (28-29). He later argues that Laos in 1945 was vastly changed from the 1880s, but it requires a leap in logic to deduce from this that Laos did not exist prior to the French (215). There were in fact major changes occurring in northern Laos which had nothing to do with either the French or the Thai, who only came afterwards as opportunists. The nature of Lao society was changing as early as the 1860s when northern Laos witnessed a major Khmu revolt, followed by a migration of Chinese,

Hmong and Iu-Mien, which precipitated violent conflict.¹ Ivarsson's treatment of the colonial contest for control of Laos ignores these events in Lao history, instead following the traditional wisdom that the most important events took place outside Laos, and that the most important actors were not Lao. As a last example of this thinking, Ivarsson states that by the efforts of the French imperialist Auguste Pavie "the Lao were given a written history," which disregards the palm-leaf manuscript tradition in which the Lao wrote their own history for centuries (49). In focusing on the colonial period, Ivarsson not only fails to take precolonial Lao history seriously, but he also exposes his valuable reappraisal of French cultural influence in Laos to claims of Eurocentricism.

After 1893, Ivarsson is on firmer ground, but there are still some problems with his otherwise excellent account. The main issue is that the bulk of his sources originate in French archives and these subtly bias his view of events because he does not read against the grain with them. In his discussion of French road construction, he appreciates it as an event in the spatial unification of French Laos; however, he makes no analysis of the impact of road construction on local people – rather he recounts the self-congratulatory mood in Paris (97-100).² The center-piece of his analysis is the series of newspapers which were established after the Thai-French war ended in 1941. In the many articles which Ivarsson gradually pieces together, he reconstructs a unique picture of early articulations of nationalism. He demonstrates brilliantly the validity of Anderson's thesis in Laos, as he describes the new political horizon afforded by the *Lao Nhay* newspaper, which offered Lao a novel representation of their country (159-160). However, as fascinating as these documents are, it is important to remember their origin in an organ of French colonial

¹ Frank Proschan, "Cheuang in Kmhmu Folklore, History and Memory" in *Tamnan keokap thao hung thao chuang: miti thang pravattisat lae wattanatham* [Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Literary, Historical, and Cultural Aspects of Thao Hung Thao Cheuang], ed. Sumitr Pitiphat (Bangkok: Thammasat University, 1998).

² Mai Na Lee's work has described the effects of these road projects on the Hmong in Laos: "The Dream of the Hmong Kingdom: Resistance, Collaboration, and the Legitimacy under French Colonialism (1893-1955)," (PhD. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2005).

propaganda. Here again, Ivarsson takes his French sources at face-value, which presents a one-sided view of Lao nationalism in this period. One major omission that is germane to the subject of Lao nationalism is the Lao Issara movement. He includes an oblique reference to “a group of about forty Lao” crossing to Thailand, but does not discuss them, much less identify them until the last chapter (149, 212-213). More strange is that in Chapter Two, which covers the rise of pan-Thai nationalism and a competing vision of Laos, no mention is made of the many years which members of the Lao Issara movement spent living in exile there. In general, Ivarsson disregards any anti-colonial veins in the development of Lao nationalism before 1945. Therefore, the broad support the Japanese found among Lao, or Lao refusal to return to the *status quo ante* after August 1945, appears as if out of nowhere, isolated from earlier developments. The first shots of the Indochina war were in fact fired in Laos during the French invasion of 1945-1946, which belies the ardent French-sponsored nationalism Ivarsson depicts.

Ivarsson’s work will remain significant for many years to come; however, it raises deeper questions for the field of Lao history: what directions are we moving in, by what methods do we get there, and finally, how do we advance the field? The idea that the French created a crudely artificial political entity in Indochina, a matter of convenience more than a “real” state has long haunted Lao history. But, held up to the same criteria which Ivarsson applies to Laos, what nation on earth constitutes a “natural” nation-state (8)? The question then becomes, why is it so common to use this epithet for Laos? In ways that Ivarsson fails to appreciate, it has much to do with the French. It was a strategy of the French colonists to always describe Laos as artificial and incomplete, therefore assuring the possibility of future expansion to the right-bank of the Mekong.³ It is also related to one of the major tensions in Ivarsson’s thesis, which he deftly explores: the French never really knew what to do with their Lao possessions, so they debated the question, to expand Laos to Thailand or inundate it with Vietnamese settlers? All of this could be

³ See for example the opening passage of an early work on Laos: “Il ne comprend que le tiers environ de la superficie des pays connus sous le nom de principauté laotiennes et c’est la partie la moins riche et la moins peuplée de ces territoires.” François Tournier, *Notice sur le Laos français*, (Hanoi: F. H. Schneider, 1900) p. 1.

cleared up if there was more research done on Lao as primary historical actors because no matter what political unit they lived in, they still had a sense of community that was lived, not artificial. In the end, one's opinion of Ivarsson's book will likely hinge on whether one is satisfied with new variations on old questions, or whether one is still waiting for fresh questions to be posed to Lao history.

Reviewed by

Ryan Wolfson-Ford

Department of History, University of Wisconsin-Madison