

INTRODUCTION

Histories of nation states lie under something of a cloud in these post-modern times. Such histories have a narrative structure and centralizing rhetoric, and largely of necessity they focus on the activities of political elites; thus they legitimize the authority of those elites at the expense of repressed minorities – whether of gender, ethnicity, or religious or political belief – which alternative histories might go some way towards empowering.

Foreigners writing the histories of nation states not their own labour under an additional burden of criticism, for to their methodological assumptions are joined those, often unconscious, cultural presuppositions that so easily shade into ‘orientalist’ arrogance. That such histories are not designed primarily for readers from the nation written about does not in any way excuse unexamined assumptions; for they create the images by which readers ‘see’ the world. Moreover, their impact on indigenous historiography cannot be ignored.

Historians writing broad national histories at the end of the twentieth century must at least be reflectively aware of where they stand and what they anticipate their histories will achieve, and be prepared to reveal as much to their readers. Once written, of course, such histories become open to criticism from alternative perspectives; that is, they enter into the discourse of historiography conducted both within and across national borders. So let me try to put my case for writing the kind of history I have written about modern Laos, a history that to some may seem old-fashioned in terms of both its narrative structure and its political emphasis.

To begin with, the writing of Lao history is impoverished – in each of the sequential four phases into which Lao historiography naturally falls. The first of these phases comprised the chronicles of the early Lao kingdoms. These accounts of the unified Lao Kingdom of Lān Xāng and the successor kingdoms into which it divided (Luang Phrabāng, Viang Chan, Champāsak and Xiang Khuang) provided legitimation for a dynasty (and subsequently dynasties) of kings. The chronicles legitimized kings both by tracing their descent from Khun Bôrom, the mythical first ancestor of all the Tai peoples, and by exhibiting their karmic credentials as Buddhist monarchs whose merit, accumulated in both previous and present existences, gave them the right to rule. Though this historiography fulfilled its ideological purpose, the legitimation it provided allowed more powerful (Siamese) kings claiming the same descent, and presumably exhibiting greater merit, to reduce the Lao kingdoms to tributary status.

French imperialism transferred some parts only of the former

Kingdom of Lān Xāng from Siam (Thailand) to France. The French ascendancy produced the second phase of Lao historiography. Not surprisingly, the writing of this history, while acknowledging the earlier greatness of the Lao kingdom, portrayed the Lao as a people under threat, needing the continued protection of France simply to survive. As a historiography that legitimized French rule, it hardly empowered a nationalist movement to prepare to lead an independent Lao state. Moreover, it portrayed Siam as the arch-enemy and at the same time camouflaged the French intention to reduce Lao territories to the status of the mere hinterland of French Indochina, an intention whose principal beneficiaries would have been the Vietnamese.

Even so, the groundwork for a third phase, a nationalist Lao historiography, was being laid. Studies of the chronicles of Lān Xāng by Lao scholars (Prince Phetxarāt, Silā Viravong) formed the basis for narrative histories, closely modelled on the chronicles, that glorified the earlier Lao kingdom and served as a foil to counter French assumptions. Both the second and the third phase, however, were equally partial: for if the French stressed the period of Lao division and Siamese domination, the elite Lao nationalists all but ignored those unfortunate two centuries. They linked the modern Kingdom of Laos that finally achieved independence from France in 1953 directly with the Kingdom of Lān Xāng.

This elite Lao nationalist historiography was deficient, moreover, in another sense, for its concentration on ethnic Lao political domination excluded all those upland ethnic minorities which together by then constituted almost half the total population. In other words, it was no longer adequate as a nationalist historiography, for it failed to draw together the ethnically diverse population that remained within modern Lao borders. The fourth phase of Lao historiography emerged from the Pathēt Lao movement that waged a thirty-year revolutionary struggle against the Royal Lao government. The Pathēt Lao constructed an alternative historiography based on an inclusive tradition of resistance to domination, whether of peasants to nobility, Lao to Thai, or minority groups to the imposition of French rule.

Once the revolutionary movement gained power in 1975 and established the Lao People's Democratic Republic, the challenge facing this historiography of revolutionary struggle was how to include the Kingdom of Lān Xāng, previously all but ignored, in a way that both glorified Lao achievement and included other ethnic groups. Yet before this challenge could be met, Lao Marxism (or what passed for it as official ideology) was itself in crisis as economic market forces again took precedence and the country opened up to foreign capital investment. By the 1990s, Marxism in Laos had given way to one-party authoritarianism, and a need was evident for a new Lao historiography.

The point about the three later phases of Lao historiography is that, unlike the chronicle phase, they remained undeveloped, each superseded by another responding to new circumstances. As a result Laos, among the countries of Southeast Asia, has the most poorly developed nationalist historiography to provide ideological support for construction of an inclusive national identity. This poses a considerable

challenge for Lao historians, for arguably the fragile construct that is modern Laos requires firm support for a national identity from an inclusive and centralizing historiography. Such history must be written before it can be deconstructed in ways that are beginning to be evident in, for example, Thai historiography.

I see the historiography of Laos, therefore, as requiring *at this stage* a narrative that provides support for the existence of a nation state now internationally recognized as such. In this I believe I reflect the desires, beliefs and convictions of Lao people, not only in Laos but also among the refugee community outside the country. The history I have written is *not*, of course, for the people of Laos: that history can be written only by Lao historians. This history is written for those who view Laos from the outside, including the Westernized children of the Lao diaspora.

This history seeks to tell a number of stories. It endorses the Lao claim for the continuity of Lao history from the Kingdom of Lān Xāng to the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR). In this it opposes those who would, in their new orientalist hubris, deconstruct that continuity ('Who are the Lao?') without ever considering the real political dilemmas facing the Lao nation state. It traces the struggle for independence and unity in the face of forces, both internal and external, making for division. And it recounts some of the attempts that have been made to grapple with the challenge of constructing a new nationalism appropriate to the nation state the Lao now possess. In doing this, I freely admit, my sympathies have been with the Lao against those who would subordinate, divide, or disempower them.

I begin with a brief outline of the rise and decline of the Kingdom of Lān Xāng, showing how it was weakened by shifts in population and trade and by internal division, yet arguing for the continuity of Lao history. In Chapter 2 my contention is that French failure to create a unified Laos which might make its way towards self-government and independence was due to a fundamental ambiguity in French policy over what to do with the Lao territories. For although Laos was administered as a separate entity, its future was seen as providing a hinterland for Vietnamese expansion and exploitation. Thus I argue that it was the Lao themselves, and Prince Phetxarāt in particular, who took the lead in reconstructing a unified and independent Lao state.

Independence and unity are the themes of Chapter 3, which determine its periodization and that of subsequent chapters. Thus it was not the external events of two international conferences at Geneva (1954 and 1962), nor internal *coups d'état* that marked off significant phases of post-independence Lao history, but those occasions when unity was either briefly re-established (1957), or irrevocably broke down (1964). But there is also a sub-text in this chapter, and that is the failure of the governing elite to construct an appropriately inclusive nationalism to reinforce Lao unity and independence, once established. Despite some notable exceptions (such as Suvanna Phūmā), far too many of the Lao political elite during the Royal Lao regime placed self-indulgence and self-interest above national considerations.

Chapter 4 begins to shift focus from Lao efforts to create an independent and unified nation state to those forces preventing them from doing so. As the disastrous results of and implications of intervention by the United States became apparent, a last attempt was made to re-establish the unity that had been lost – alas, too late. Laos was already being drawn into the maelstrom of the war in Vietnam, better referred to, since it spilled over into both Laos and Cambodia, as the Second Indochina War (following the First against the French). The sub-text here is the increasing disempowerment of the Lao elite – of the right by the United States, and the left by (North) Vietnam.

The impact of war is considered in Chapter 5. It was massive not only in terms of material damage in those areas most heavily bombed, but also in terms of social disruption as a quarter of the population became refugees in their own country. During these years, disempowerment of the Lao elite resulted in political frustration and growing corruption on the one hand, and on the other a resigned war-weariness that sought only an end to conflict on whatever terms. So was the way prepared for the Pathēt Lao accession to power.

Declaration of the Lao People's Democratic Republic restored the unity of the country, but at the expense of subservience to Vietnam. Independence was thus, in a sense, still partial. Only with the collapse of the Soviet Union, which had provided most of the financial support for the Lao regime, did the power configurations in mainland Southeast Asia shift sufficiently to permit the LPDR to open up relations with the states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the West. Thus the 1990s found Laos at last both unified and independent, but still with a fragile sense of national identity. The unity, like the independence, was still partial, for the Pathēt Lao victory, rather than healing the social divisions of war and ideology, instead had resulted in a new exodus of population.

Remarkable economic and social changes are already sweeping Southeast Asia. As in previous centuries, Laos again finds itself at the crossroads of important trade routes. But as the country opens up to foreign investment and modern technology, its very cultural, if not national, identity is once again threatened. Not the least of the challenges facing the multi-ethnic Lao people as the country is buffeted by the global forces of the twenty-first century will be construction of a historiography that can serve to reinforce an inclusive Lao identity. If this book contributes in any way to this end, it will have fulfilled at least part of its purpose.

A NOTE ON TRANSCRIPTION AND SPELLING

Transcription of Lao names into roman script presents something of a problem, for the system worked out by French writers can be quite misleading for speakers of English. Since no officially endorsed system of transcription exists, this book uses a modified version of the one used by Peter Koret in his 1994 doctoral dissertation on Lao literature

submitted to the University of London. I have preferred 'ch' to Koret's 'j' and have retained the French distinction between 'x' and 's' for different Lao letters, both of which, however, are pronounced as 's'. Other consonants are pronounced as in English. An 'h' following any consonant simply indicates that it is aspirated. Even though Pathēt Lao cultural tsar Phūmī Vongvichit decreed the elimination of 'r' from the Lao alphabet, I have retained it, on the urging of Lao friends, where it indicates Sanskrit or Pali derivation. Thus I have preferred 'Xainyaburī' to 'Xainyabulī', where '-burī' derives from '-pura' meaning 'town'.

Because words are transcribed as they sound, and certain Lao letters are pronounced differently depending on whether they occur in the initial or final position in a syllable, the same Lao letter may be transcribed in two or three ways. A case in point is the letter pronounced half-way between a 'v' and a 'w' at the beginning of a syllable. I have preferred 'v', as in *vat* (temple). But where the same letter represents a semi-vowel, I have transcribed it as 'u' when it occurs at the beginning of a glide (as in *Luang Phrabāng*), and 'o' where it occurs at the end of a syllable (to preserve the accepted spelling *Lao*).

Vowels in Lao are either short or long. Simple short vowels are pronounced as in *about*, *pet*, *pēt*, *pöt*, and *put*, while their long counterparts, marked by a bar over the letter, are pronounced as in *fāther*, *dāiry* (the long 'e'), *machine*, *story*, and *rule*. The 'ō' in *Nakhôn* is pronounced approximately as the 'or' in *corn*. As for digraphs, the 'eu' in *Attapeu* is a sound which does not exist in English but is approximately the 'u' in *fur*; the 'ae' in *Nāpae* is approximately the 'a' in *can*; while the 'oe' in *Khamkoet* is the 'oe' in *Goethe*. Three glides are pronounced as follows: the 'ia' in *Viang* as the 'ia' in *India*; the 'eua' in *meuang* roughly as the 'eu' in *masseur*; and the 'ua' in *Luang* as the 'ua' in *truant*. Regarding the diphthongs, the 'ai' in *Khamtai* is pronounced as the 'ai' in *aisle*; and the 'au' in *chau* is the short 'ow' as in *cow*. Finally, although 'Lao' is pronounced and more properly written as 'Lāo', the long vowel in this combination has been left unmarked.

Applying this transcription alters some familiar spellings, but corrects pronunciation. Thus the French 'Vientiane' becomes 'Viang Chan', though 'Vientiane' is retained where it occurs on the title page of publications. I have, however, inconsistently retained 'Mekong' in preference to 'Maekhông', and 'Issara' rather than alternative possible spellings such as 'Tsala'. Where dialectal differences exist, as in *nam* (water, river) where the vowel can be either long or short, I have adopted the alternative as written in Lao. Finally, while most proper names are written as a single word (King *Sisavāngvong*), I have retained *Suvanna Phūmā* in order to use the shortened form *Suvanna*. For the names of Lao authors of published works, I have retained the spelling used in the publication.

CHAPTER 1

THE KINGDOM OF LĀN XĀNG

The construction of Laos as a modern nation state dates only from 1945. Before then Laos was administered as a province of French Indochina, conceived more as a hinterland for Vietnamese expansion and French exploitation than as a political entity in its own right. But the independent Lao state constructed after 1945 comprised the territory established by treaty between France and Siam (Thailand) between the years 1893 and 1907. Thus any history of modern Laos must begin with the fifty years of French colonial rule. For the Lao themselves, however, their history is far more ancient, reaching back well before the mid-fourteenth century when the Kingdom of Lān Xāng was founded. For the Lao today, their right to self-determination and independence rests firmly on that early history, to which Lao historiography gives considerable prominence. The official *History of Laos* produced by a team of writers under the direction of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party consists of three volumes, though only the third at the time of writing had been published.¹ These cover the period before the founding of Lān Xāng, its rise and decline, and the period since 1893. Thus the communist regime is as anxious as was the previous Royal Lao government to establish that Laos has a long and glorious past and that a continuity exists between that past and the present Lao state.

Apart from archaeological excavations of prehistoric sites, especially in northeastern Thailand, the earliest sources for the history of the central Mekong basin come from Chinese dynastic records. These mention a people inhabiting southwestern China known as the Ai-Lao (Āy-Lao), the term used subsequently by the Vietnamese to refer to the Lao. But whether the Ai-Lao were ancestral to the Tai² peoples who eventually spread over much of mainland Southeast Asia, let alone the subgroup that became the Lao, seems extremely doubtful. The Chinese texts also name a number of small kingdoms apparently located in the middle Mekong region, though exactly where is disputed. What we do know from bringing together archaeological evidence, Chinese sources and, more doubtfully, references in later Lao texts is that in the second half of the first millennium of our common era (CE), small polities were beginning to form on the Khōrāt plateau of northeastern Thailand and along the middle Mekong. As 'men of prowess' built concentrations of political, economic and military power, they borrowed notions of legitimation from Indian religions (Hinduism and Buddhism).³ Ritual centres of religious worship, closely associated with secular rule, pro-

vided ideological justification for the exercise of power, which fluctuated in accordance with the resources available to a ruler from trade, tribute, or military conscription.

To call such developments 'state formation' is to import European notions of administration over a defined territory that are inappropriate to describe these 'circles of power'. A preferable term is *mandala* which better captures both their segmentary structure (larger power centres extracting tribute from similarly organized smaller ones), and variability of power relationships.⁴ In the middle Mekong basin such *mandalas* were established in the region of Champāsak (with its ritual centre at Vat Phū), Thākhaek (ritual centre Thāt Phanom), in the upper Xi valley (Meuang Fā Daet) and on the plain of Viang Chan. While the first appears to have been Khmer and Hindu, the other three were in all likelihood Mon and Buddhist in both culture and language. By the end of the twelfth century, all had been absorbed within the expanding Khmer empire.

In northern Laos, on the Plain of Jars and in the region of Luang Phrabāng, formation of early *mandalas* is shrouded in mystery and myth. A millennium earlier on the Plain of Jars a megalithic iron-age culture had flourished, characterized by standing slabs and vast stone jars.⁵ But who the people of the jars were, and why the culture declined, remains a mystery. Nor do we know when the first *mandala* was established in the region of Luang Phrabāng. Legend tells how two brother hermits consolidated territories protected by snake kings, who were probably guardian spirits (protective *phī*); how the throne was offered to a sandalwood merchant from Viang Chan; and how the region was seized from a certain Khun (Lord of) Xua (as Luang Phrabāng was then called) by the first Lao ruler, Khun Lô. Who occupied the region before the arrival of the Lao, and who Khun Xua was, we can only speculate. It seems likely that these early inhabitants were ethnically and linguistically akin to the Austroasiatic-speaking peoples still found throughout the region, the Lawa (Lavā) of northern Thailand and Khamu of northern Laos, and possibly even descendants of the people of the jars.

In the version of the Lao chronicles known as the *Nithān Khun Bôrom* (The Story of Khun Bôrom) containing the origin myths of the Tai peoples, Khun Lô is the eldest son of Khun Bôrom, the original ancestor of all Tai. Different versions agree that Khun Bôrom was sent by the king of the *thaen* (celestial deities) to rule over the earthly realm. They also recount that life on earth was threatened by the growth of a gigantic vine. An elderly couple volunteered to chop it down, but were crushed to death when the vine fell. The vine bore two or three giant gourds, from inside which cries could be heard. Holes were made in the gourds using first a red-hot poker, then a knife. From the blackened holes came the *khā* (literally 'slaves', the pejorative term for those Austroasiatic-speaking minority tribes now known collectively as the Lao Thoeng, or 'Lao of the mountain slopes'); from the holes cut with a knife came the Tai – and in that order.⁶

These were the peoples over whom Khun Bôrom ruled. In time he sent his seven sons to found seven new kingdoms, from Burma (Shan

state) to Vietnam (the Tai highlands), and from southern China to Laos, including both Luang Phrabāng and Xiang Khuang. As we would expect, no mention is made of the middle Mekong, which until the twelfth century was still dominated by non-Tai peoples. As historical sources, it would be easy to dismiss these myths as valueless. But myths preserve ancient folk memories of migration and displacement, as well as providing a sense of identity. The myth of Khun Bôrom and Khun Lô, founder of the first Lao dynasty of Luang Phrabāng, not only suggests how the Lao Lum (the Tai-speaking 'Lao of the valley floor') came to dominate the Lao Thoeng; it also provided, through annual repetition in performance and recital, an anchor in time for what it was to be Lao. This identity was regularly reinforced in the annual festivities associated with the Lao New Year. Royal rituals reiterating the relationship between Lao Lum and Lao Thoeng were performed right up to 1975 when the monarchy was abolished, while figures representing the old couple who had cut down the vine bearing the gourds still continue to be paraded each year through the streets of Luang Phrabāng.

Debate continues over the origins of the Tai peoples, but historical, linguistic and comparative anthropological evidence suggests that they originally occupied a region of southern China covering southeastern Yunnan and western Guangxi provinces. Their dispersal and migration was probably associated with the extension of Han Chinese control south as far as northern Vietnam during the last century BCE and the first centuries CE. Movement was slow as population increased slowly, but as early as the eighth or ninth century a small Tai principality (*meuang*) probably already existed in the region of Chiang Saen in the far north of Thailand. Tai peoples also moved into the high valleys of northwestern Vietnam, and it is possible that at about this time Meuang Thaeng (Dien Bien Phu) became a point from which further migration occurred. By the end of the first millennium, Tai peoples were evidently widely spread, from the Shan highlands across northern Thailand and into the upper Mekong basin, in a region between contending *mandalas* in southern China (Nanzhao) and mainland Southeast Asia (Mon and Khmer).

The pattern of Tai expansion is evident from the *Nithān Khun Bôrom*, as sons of local rulers (*chau meuang*) led their followers from one mountain valley to another. The linked settlements so formed were held together by common descent (as 'clan-based' *meuang*). Where riverine plains opened out, however, more extensive 'principality-like' *meuang* developed.⁷ As Tai-Lao settlers spread south they left behind them the heavily forested mountains and steep, narrow valleys of northern Laos with their high rainfall and fast-flowing rivers for the broader plains of the middle Mekong basin. There they encountered the well-watered western slopes of the Sây Phū Luang (Truong Son) cordillera separating Laos from Vietnam, and the sandier soils, more open forest and lower rainfall of the Khōrāt plateau.

Whereas the Mekong river once formed the axis of the Lao world, it now marks most of the country's western frontier with Thailand. Two sets of rapids, one between Luang Phrabāng and Viang Chan, the

second near Savannakhēt, and the 13-kilometre-wide cataracts of Khôn on the Lao–Cambodian border, divide the river into three geographically distinct regions of population and political organization, each with its own historically defined identity. To the north, centre and south, strategically important high plateaux (respectively the Xiang Khuang plateau, known colloquially as the Plain of Jars, the Khammūan plateau and the Bôlavēn plateau) support higher concentrations of population. By the mid-thirteenth century, Tai-Lao were widely settled throughout the Mekong basin and the time was ripe for the next stage in their political evolution.

The second half of the thirteenth century was a time of great turmoil. The Mongol armies of Kubilai Khan overran the last independent kingdom in Yunnan in 1253, and pressed on south. Pagan, the capital of the Burmese *mandala*, was destroyed, and a Mongol army marched down the middle Mekong to invade Cambodia. By then, however, Khmer power was already on the wane. In its wake Tai rulers founded the first powerful Tai *mandalas* of Lān Nā, centred on Chiang Mai, and Sukhothai, further to the south. Both were tributary to the Mongol Chinese Yuan dynasty, and Mongol influence remained strong. In fact, it has been suggested that Mongol intervention may have been directly responsible for the rise of the first Lao *mandala* on the upper Mekong.⁸

The mid-fourteenth century saw the founding, within three years of each other, of two imperial *mandalas* which, together with Lān Nā, divided the Tai world between them over the next four centuries. These were the Tai-Siam *mandala* of Ayutthaya formed in 1351, later strengthened through its absorption of Sukhothai in 1438; and the Tai-Lao *mandala* of Lān Xāng with its capital at Xiang Dong Xiang Thong, as the Lao then called Luang Phrabāng.⁹

A Lao *meuang* of limited extent had existed at Xiang Dong Xiang Thong since the region had been seized by Lao warriors from its earlier, probably Khamu, inhabitants. The earliest recorded date in the Lao chronicles to which any credence can be attached is 1271. In that year a dynasty took power whose rulers bore the title 'Phrayā', a Pali term meaning 'He Who Upholds', suggesting strong Buddhist influence. Fā Ngum, founder of the imperial *mandala* of Lān Xāng, was a hereditary prince of the Phrayā dynasty.

Like many great founders of kingdoms, Fā Ngum's person became surrounded by legend. More space is devoted to his exploits in founding Lān Xāng in the Lao chronicles than to the next two centuries of Lao history. Briefly, he is said to have been exiled from Xiang Dong Xiang Thong for reasons that are unclear but are quite likely to have included an attempt to seize the throne, either by his father or himself. By one means or another he made his way to Cambodia. There at the court of Angkor he eventually obtained a Khmer princess, and an army with which he fought his way back to Xiang Dong Xiang Thong, forcing the scattered *meuang* along his invasion route to accept his suzerainty. He is also said to have put into place the administrative structures that held together the *mandala* of Lān Xāng over the next three and a half centuries, the frontiers of which were established through treaties with surrounding powers (Vietnam, Lān Nā, and Ayutthaya).

The *mandala* that Fā Ngum constructed is known in the chronicles as *meuang Lao*, for the term applies to both larger and smaller political entities. How far it extended is debatable, though it probably did not at first include the region of Champāsak. What held together the *meuang* of northern Laos in their narrow mountain valleys and the scattered *meuang* of the central Mekong were bonds, essentially feudal in nature, of loyalty and patronage. The mode of production was not, however, feudal in the European sense. Rather than serfs toiling for a lord, a free peasantry owed certain obligations at times of planting and harvest to work the land of the hereditary ruling family; to contribute on special, usually festive, occasions; and to fight when called upon.

Fā Ngum is also credited with introducing Buddhism into Laos, though this is manifestly incorrect. Discoveries at Luang Phrabāng make it certain that Buddhism was known well before the time of Fā Ngum, though his Khmer queen may well have introduced a new Theravāda school, the form of Buddhism now practised in Laos. As for organization and borders, the accounts of these attributed to Fā Ngum probably reflect expansion and accommodations arrived at over the century and a half separating Fā Ngum and Vixun, the king on whose instructions the earliest recension of the *Nithān Khun Bōrom* was composed (in 1503). For Lao historians, however, Fā Ngum remains a heroic figure of epic proportions, even though he was eventually exiled from his own kingdom.

Why this was so is something of a mystery. He is said to have offended the aristocratic families of Xiang Dong Xiang Thong by taking their wives and daughters as his concubines. In fact, the exile of Fā Ngum is far more likely to have resulted from a struggle between powerful court factions which probably pitted the old aristocracy against upstart newcomers, many of them foreigners (Khmer), who had arrived with the King. Two events in 1368 probably weakened the Khmer faction: the death of Fā Ngum's Khmer queen, and the overthrow of the Yuan dynasty in China by the Ming, especially if Fā Ngum's position rested in part on a Khmer–Lao tributary alliance with the Mongols. In any event, Fā Ngum's eldest son, Unheuan, succeeded to the throne, taking as his throne name *Sāmsaenthai*, literally 'Lord of 300,000 Tai', the number a census revealed could be called upon to fight in the King's armies.

Over the next century, the organization of the Lao *mandala*, and thus the pattern of Lao power, became established. So did Theravāda Buddhism, though not to the exclusion of the worship of powerful spirits (*phī*) associated particularly with regions (*meuang*) and striking landmarks. Society consisted of three classes – aristocracy, free peasantry, and slaves. Below these came the Lao Thoeng, the indigenous minorities also commonly referred to as slaves (*khā*). Free men became slaves because they were captured in war, were being punished for crimes committed, or because they were indebted. They were not badly treated, however, as early law codes indicate. By no means did Lān Xāng rest on anything that could be called a slave mode of production.

The wealth of the Lao court came from tribute, taxation and trade.