CONFLICTING CONCEPTIONS OF THE STATE: Siam, France and Vietnam in the Late Nineteenth Century

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The first advance of French imperialism in Indochina had by 1867 gained for France the colony of Cochinchina and a protectorate over some two-thirds of present-day Cambodia. The Franco-Prussian war and events in Europe briefly distracted French attention from the Far East, but not for long. Once the expedition of Doudart de Lagrée and Francis Garnier had shown conclusively that the Mekong could never serve as "a river road to China," interest shifted to the Red River. Hanoi was seized in November 1873. Attempts by Vietnamese Emperor Tu Duc to reactivate Vietnam's tributary dependence on China (1879) only provided an excuse for further French encroachments. Tonkin was occupied and brought under French control (1883–1885), though resistance of one form or another continued well into the 1890s.

The seizure of Tonkin and imposition of French protection over the Court of Hué (Annam) marked the second phase in the advance of French imperialism in mainland Southeast Asia, a phase which included the seizure of Lao territories east of the Mekong in 1893 plus later extensions in 1904 and 1907 comprising two Lao areas west of the Mekong plus the western provinces of Cambodia. The territories that came to constitute French Laos were surrendered to France through a series of treaties with Siam, which implicitly at least recognized prior Siamese suzerainty. Moreover they were claimed in the name of Vietnam, on the basis that these territories had at some time in the past paid tribute to the court of Hué.

What is interesting about these developments is that the actors involved—rulers and statesmen of Siam, France, and Vietnam—held very different notions of sovereignty, territoriality, the nature of the state, and interstate relations. Most of the maneuverings and misunderstandings occurred because these different conceptions—Siamese, deriving ultimately from India; European; and Vietnamese derived from China—came into contention and were manipulated by the parties involved, either deliberately in order to gain advantage, or through ignorance of the position of others. This paper seeks to analyze these conceptions of the state and show how they influenced the actions and responses of the three nations involved.

CONCEPTIONS OF THE STATE

Historians of Southeast Asia often face problems in using terms drawn from and applicable to European polities and societies to refer to non-European equivalents that do not conform to European models. Even terms like "divinity," "kingship," and "power" need to be glossed to bring out regional cultural differences, and to reveal the complexities that distinguish non-European from European understanding of relationships and meanings implicit in their connotations.

One such is the term "state" and cognate referentials in which the word "state" appears—"state formation," "state power," "inter-state relations," and so on. To use "state" to refer to historical phenomena and processes presupposes that what we are describing conforms to what readers understand by the term. Use of the word "state" implies a notion derived from European experience. It refers to the state as it developed in Europe or elsewhere under European influence, to the modern state as we know it in the late twentieth century. Political scientists may be able to get away with using the term to apply to present-day political entities, as in "the Indonesian state" or "Asian inter-state relations," but the historian has to be more careful.

Modern state structures are a relatively recent development in Southeast Asia where traditional polities differed considerably from modern states. In Europe too changes have occurred, but there the term "state formation" refers to an indigenous process, an organic development that owed much less to outside forces and influences than did the relatively late process in Southeast Asia (Winzeler 1976). The term "state" applied to

traditional polities in Southeast Asia prior to the impact of European colonialism becomes positively misleading, unless the altered meaning of the word in a Southeast Asian context is described in sufficient detail to preclude misunderstanding. Use of an alternative word, not weighed down with inappropriate Eurocentric connotations, is preferable.

Various attempts have been made in the literature to define the differences between European and Southeast Asian notions of the state. Of these the ones that have attracted most attention are the "hydraulic state" (Wittfogel 1957) and the Asiatic Mode of Production (Sawer 1978) by which Marxists have attempted to differentiate Asian from European political economies; Clifford Geertz's (1980) *negara* or "theatre state;" and the "galactic polity" (Tambiah 1977) or *mandala* (Wolters 1968, 173–6). Of these, the Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP) at least has the advantage of providing an alternative schema to Marx's sequence of slave society–feudalism–capitalism. Later studies have, however, cast doubt upon its applicability to Southeast Asia, and thus vitiated its usefulness (Liere 1980). Geertz's "theatre state" stresses the ceremonial and symbolic aspects of the state as legitimizing a hierarchy of status. Power comes not from coercive force, but from popular recognition of privileged access to divine potency. Geertz's conception of the theatre state rightly drew attention to this important aspect of legitimation, but because his examples were drawn from nineteenth–century Bali, he tended to overemphasize ceremonial at the expense of other bases of power such as economic and military (Tambiah 1985, 316–38).

Both the Marxist and Geertzian conceptions focus on the nature of the state per se. The *mandala* conception of the state takes into consideration both state structure and relations with neighboring states. It refers to a kind of state whose power derives not only from its immediate resources in the form of manpower, wealth and weapons, but also on the support it can draw from surrounding tributaries which recognize its suzerainty. Tambiah (1977) proffers the term "galactic polity" as an English translation of the word *mandala* first used by O. W. Wolters (1968) to refer to traditional Southeast Asian kingdoms. However the images implied by the two terms are not equally apposite. "Galactic" suggests power orbits centered on a gravitationally massive state—a system in which small states are drawn into the sphere of influence of a large powerful central state. *Mandala* draws on the Indian notion of "circles of kings," a more dynamic, less structured image of multiple centers, each striving to serve as an expanding focus of power. In Wolters's (1982, 17) by now classic definition:

> the *mandala* represented a particular and often unstable political situation in a vaguely definable geographical area without fixed boundaries and where smaller centres tended to look in all directions for security. *Mandalas* would expand and contract in concertina-like fashion. Each one contained several tributary rulers, some of whom would repudiate their vassal status when the opportunity arose and try to build up their own networks of vassals.

As Ian Mabbett (1971, 38–9) has pointed out, the notion of a *mandala* is not geographic, much less cartographic. "The units in the *mandala* are not areas but governments. The orientation implied is related to the dimensions not of space but of politics, and diplomacy ... " The term *mandala* has principally been applied to the formation of early Southeast Asian polities. It is equally applicable to later polities, as Wolters (1968) and Sunait Chutintaranond (1990) have both shown in relation to the Buddhist polities of mainland Southeast Asia in the sixteenth century. Though its derivation and early application is Indian, Wolters (1982, 12–3) has argued for the deep historical roots of the *mandala* system in Southeast Asia going back well before the impact of Indian civilization, while Charles Higham (1989) has demonstrated its applicability to the earliest formation of centers of political power in mainland Southeast Asia. Its persistence as characteristic of political relationships into the classical period, however, owes more to Buddhist than to autochthonous beliefs—the popular notion of *karma*–endowed kings and rulers with the moral right to govern. To have arrived at the top of any local hierarchy of power was never accidental: it was a function of positive *karma* accumulated through the merit of former existences. *Karma* determined individual circumstances—enlightenment or power, Buddha or *cakravartin*. Just as every man (if not woman) was potentially a Buddha, so every ruler was potentially a *cakravartin*. To recognize superior power was to recognize superior merit. Tribute from one ruler to another gave formal expression to this recognition. The superior ruler was not one who destroyed all others in the *mandala* system, but one whose righteous conquests forced the others to recognize his superior merit and pay him appropriate tribute (Sunait 1988).

Instability was inherent in the system because it was open to any ruler to test his own merit against that of other rulers. The system was also extraordinarily flexible for it gave rulers an opportunity to play one power off against another by paying tribute to two or more power centers. Also the *mandala* system was remarkable for the liberty it allowed tributary rulers in the administration of their own fiefs. The only requirements were payment of the stipulated tribute (both symbolic and economic), and provision of armed forces in proportion to the population available for mobilization in the event that the suzerain power went to war (the military component). Apart from these demands, local rulers were free to do virtually as they wished, local customs permitting (Vella 1957, 86–7; Breazeale 1979, 1668–70).

TRADITIONAL INTER-"STATE" RELATIONS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Wolters (1968) has shown how the *mandala* structure underlay both the kingdom of Ayudhya itself and its relations with surrounding powers—Burma, Lān Nā, Lan Xang, Cambodia, not to mention Malay, Mon and Shan principalities—in the sixteenth century, and how the same set of beliefs was applied when European powers began to impinge on the Siamese world in the following century. By the time of its demise under the

impact of the Burmese invasion of 1767, Ayudhya consisted of three concentric rings of *muang* (power centers whose governors or rulers or hereditary princes enjoyed the loyalty of surrounding villages). The inner circle comprised *muang* whose rulers were closely involved in the ceremonial cycle at court and which were subject to the scrutiny of the king and his officers. The second circle comprised more distant semiautonomous *muang* which themselves might claim tribute from local subsidiary *muang*. Beyond these again were tributary kingdoms whose rulers acknowledged the superiority of Ayudhya, but which might also acknowledge the superiority of other powers (cf. Tambiah 1985, 262–4). Whether or not outer tributary kingdoms would assist Ayudhya in time of need depended not simply on bonds of loyalty symbolized by tributary relations, but also on the perceived balance of power and the interests of the tributary kingdoms themselves. The same structure was recreated under the Bangkok dynasty.

Not all power centers in Southeast Asia functioned as *mandalas*. The Burmese kingdom under the Shwebo dynasty was so constructed—a *mandala* which had expanded by drawing into its orbit outlying regions such as the Mon kingdom and Shan principalities. To the east, however, the expansion of Vietnam, the third major power in mainland Southeast Asia, at the expense of the Cham created an imperium reflecting very different notions of the structure of the state, one derived from the Chinese model.

The Chinese state was centrally organized and administered by a bureaucracy trained and appointed for the purpose. Outlying areas were gradually sinicized by establishing Chinese military colonies, by imposing imperial administration, and by encouraging the gradual adoption of elements of Chinese culture. Chinese cultural imperialism was remarkably effective in incorporating non–Chinese peoples into the Chinese imperium. The close–knit structure of Chinese society, centralized hierarchical administration and a shared set of values and cultural imperatives centering on recognition of the mandate to rule of the Son of Heaven, all worked to counteract the political ambitions of powerful regional families. The result was a state with a clear philosophy of government applied within well–defined geographical limits. Beyond the boundaries of imperial administration lay barbarian states, all of which in the Chinese view of the world recognized the superiority of Chinese culture through acceptance of the symbols and rules of behavior demanded of tributary states by the Chinese court (see Yang, Wang, Mancall and Fairbank in Fairbank 1968).

Application of this model by imperial Vietnam encountered certain problems. Like the Chinese, the Vietnamese considered themselves bearers of a superior civilization, beyond the expanding frontiers of which lay barbarian nations whose proper relationship with the imperial court was conceptualized in terms of the Chinese tributary system. The difference was, of course, that whereas the might of the Chinese empire was universally recognized, Vietnam was a regional power, one of a number in the fourteenth century, one of three by the early nineteenth, of similar standing. One effect of this was that in order to reinforce the prestige of the emperor, Vietnam sought always to enlarge the number of its vassals, even if that meant including, as in the list published by Gia Long in 1815, powerful states such as Britain and France on the one hand, and diffuse groups of montagnard villages on the other (Woodside 1971, 237–8).

The Vietnamese saw theirs as a dynamic civilization before which all tributary states would eventually bow. The southward march of Vietnam after the eleventh century at the expense of Champa provided a practical example of this process at work. To the north the frontier with China was well demarcated, both on the ground through the work of periodic border commissions and in the official geographical treatises produced by both countries (Nguyen Van Anh 1989, 65–9). To the south and to the west the frontier was much more fluid. There conflict arose in large part owing to differing conceptions of the structure of the state and inter–state relations: the Vietnamese imperium with its borrowed Chinese notion of tributary state relations came into direct contact with the *mandala* system of Hindu–Buddhist Southeast Asia. To the south and west, for the Vietnamese, quite other considerations applied than on the Sino–Vietnamese border where shared concepts rendered demarcation straightforward.

> The notion of frontiers in the space west and south of the Indochinese peninsula was always, for the Vietnamese state, a limit established as a function of the momentary balance of forces. Imperial power legalized the steps of this advance by creation of administrative districts or the acceptance of tribute which very often preceded a real occupation, military, political and human. (Lafont 1989a, 17)

Once that occupation was achieved, the area became fully incorporated into the Vietnamese imperium. Before that occurred, however, tributary states could be nominally incorporated while remaining effectively outside it.

There was an important difference, however, between Vietnamese expansion south at the expense of Champa (between 1069 and 1693), south and west at the expense of Cambodia, and west into central Laos. While the struggle between Dai Viet and Champa was often one of open warfare between similarly matched powers, interference in the affairs of Cambodia was more often than not at the invitation of some Cambodian claimant to the throne to counter Siamese support for some other candidate (Chandler 1983). Vietnamese migration and settlement in the Mekong delta prepared the way for successive annexations of Cambodian territory, until by about 1780 all of what later became known as Cochinchina was in Vietnamese hands (compare Nguyen The Anh 1989a and Mak Phoen 1989). This process of migration and settlement was possible precisely because the Khmer concept of the state and its frontiers differed significantly from the Vietnamese. For the Cambodians their kingdom was "an ethnically and culturally dominated space corresponding to the extension of royal power" (Lafont 1989a, 20). People occupying social space in villages, not territory extending to defined frontiers, comprised the Cambodian pol-

ity. Khmer villages acknowledged that they formed part of the Khmer kingdom. A Vietnamese village situated between them did not. The notion of a frontier for the Khmer was thus ambiguous, as it was also for the Cham. Or to put it another way, the notion of sovereignty was not tied to territory per se, but to territory comprising the social space of Khmer villages. For the Vietnamese, by contrast, sovereignty was much more closely linked to territory per se. Thus the notion of a frontier was more clearly defined: it marked the area over which the writ of the Emperor was stated to extend. Such territory was duly documented in the imperial records. Thus was the judicial basis of possession established, even if in reality Vietnamese settlement, and indeed control, was minimal (Lafont 1989a, 14). For the Vietnamese, extensions to imperial territory defined areas which could in future be consolidated as social space for Vietnamese communities. Sovereignty was not linked exclusively to actual social space as in the cases of the Indianized *mandala*, but comprised also potential space for future Vietnamese settlement.

To the west, the border between Vietnam and Laos was even more uncertain in a mountainous region inhabited by numerous different ethnic minorities. Little attempt was made to administer these regions for they were not areas of Vietnamese settlement and aggressively resisted Vietnamese penetration. In effect the Vietnamese accepted a more fluid frontier to the west based on payment of tribute (Nguyen The Anh 1989b). So too did the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang to its east. The *Nithan Khun Borom*, a Lao text whose earliest version dates to the early sixteenth century, records a fourteenth century agreement between Lan Xang and Dai Viet under which two potentially conflicting criteria are used to demarcate their common frontier: the watershed, and the way houses were constructed. If people built their houses on piles, they owed allegiance to Lan Xang; if on the ground, to Dai Viet (Maha Sila Viravong 1964, 29). Perhaps this is why the legend of the earliest known Vietnamese map (1490) notes that to the west the country of Dai Viet "overlaps" Laos, a term not used in respect to any other frontier (Tam 1989, 33).

The principality of Xiang Khuang, situated on the Plain of Jars, provides a good example of conflict arising as a result of different notions underlying the *mandala* and the Vietnamese imperium. Xiang Khuang was incorporated into the kingdom of Lan Xang in the mid-fourteenth century. As the power of Lan Xang waned during the prolonged succession crisis of the 1430s, Xiang Khuang attempted to gain a degree of independence by paying tribute to Dai Viet (as of 1434). In 1448, in response to the threat of a resurgent Lan Xang, Xiang Khuang demanded a closer relationship with Dai Viet. For the Vietnamese the only closer relationship possible for a tribute-paying client state was to be included within the frontiers of the imperium. Xiang Khuang was thus incorporated as the Vietnamese *châu* (district) of Qui-hop, not administered by imperially appointed mandarins, however, but by its traditional Lao-Phuan ruler duly invested with a Vietnamese title (Nguyen The Anh 1989b, 191).

None of these events find even a mention in the Annals of Xiang Khuang (cf. Archaimbault 1966). For the Phuan ruler the request for closer relations with Dai Viet was a mere temporary expedient to protect the independence of Xiang Khuang. Within thirty years, however, an attempt to bring the new district under direct administration by Vietnamese mandarins provoked a Phuan revolt aided and abetted by Lan Xang. Following the defeat and withdrawal of Vietnamese forces, Xiang Khuang reverted to its tributary relationship with Lan Xang. For the Vietnamese, however, it continued to be considered an integral part of the imperial domain. It thus remained a contested area.

The partitioning of Lan Xang at the beginning of the eighteenth century into Luang Prabang, Viang Chan and Champasak left each kingdom in a precarious situation. The game of counterbalancing tribute had to be played with consummate skill in order to maintain independence. Of the three, only Viang Chan paid tribute to Hanoi (in return for assisting a successful claimant to the throne) and later to Hué (Woodside 1971, 239-40). With the destruction of the kingdom of Viang Chan by Siam in 1828, this tributary relationship lapsed. Vietnam seized Xiang Khuang, which was administered as the *phu* (prefecture) of Tran Ninh under the direction of a Vietnamese mandarin. Even so, the Phuan rulers who remained in place continued to pay tribute to Luang Prabang (Saveng 1989, 200). Luang Prabang meanwhile, in order to counter Siamese influence, itself entered into a tributary relationship with Hué—another instance of the *mandala* system in action (Le Boulanger 1931, 203).

Further south, all of central and southern Laos fell under Siamese domination. In return for regular tribute, however, local rulers remained remarkably independent. Where previously the *muang* of central Laos had owed allegiance to Viang Chan, they now owed allegiance to Bangkok. Little else changed. Vietnam, however, was eager to push its own claims. *Muang* in the area of Khamkoet and Xepon west of the Annam cordillera, which had previously paid a small tribute to Vietnam (though primary allegiance was to Viang Chan), were incorporated in the Vietnamese records as administrative regions west to the Mekong, despite the fact that no Vietnamese military posts were established and no Vietnamese administration was in place (Saveng 1989, 200). By upgrading these Lao territories from tributary *muang* to administrative *phu*, the Vietnamese court was staking a stronger claim to the area in the face of mounting Siamese influence to redirect the allegiance of the Lao *muang* from Viang Chan to Bangkok. The form this claim took was the natural response of an imperium (Vietnam) faced with a powerful expansionist *mandala* (Siam).

THE INTERVENTION OF FRANCE

Into this Southeast Asia contest between the Vietnamese imperium and the Siamese *mandala* for control over Cambodia and the weakened Lao *muang* came France, a modern European state with altogether different notions of territorial possession and sovereignty. In 1862 the French seized Saigon; in 1863 they established a protectorate over Cambodia; in 1865 they prevailed on the court at Bangkok to recognize that protectorate.

Immediately the French began defining these territories by lines drawn on maps, subsequently given form in surveys and border markers on the ground (see the first French map of Cochinchina and Cambodia, dated 1867, in Maitre 1909, 111). These were methods of defining territory better understood in Hué than in Bangkok. However the European concept of defined borders went further than the Vietnamese in identifying territory with sovereignty, and sovereignty with administrative control of population within the defined area. Cham or Khmer villages that remained within Vietnamese *phu* were free to abide by their own laws. In the European state, the application of law was coextensive with territory. The territorial limits of the European state define neither actual nor potential social space, but the area within which sovereignty is exercised in the form of laws applicable to all citizens. The European state is thus defined territorially in a much stricter sense than the traditional Vietnamese imperium, especially on frontiers where compromise with the *mandala* system of the rest of mainland Southeast Asia had been necessary (Solomon 1970).[1]

For France the seizure of Cochinchina was but a first step in the extension of French influence in the Far East, both north to China and west to Siam. The protectorate over Cambodia gave France control of the lower Mekong. When exploration of the upper reaches proved it to be unnavigable, French attention shifted north to the Red River. By 1885 all Vietnam was in French hands.

A first concern for the French was to define the territorial limits of their new possessions. There were various ways in which this could be done: by defining the extent of actual Vietnamese settlement; by endorsing the administrative claims of the Vietnamese imperium; or by incorporating all tributary states. To establish the border with China was relatively straightforward. It did not take the French long to realize that the very ambiguity of the concept of frontiers of the Vietnamese imperium provided opportunities to extend French control, opportunities that were all the greater given the notion of even more fluid frontiers in the *mandala* system.

For this reason the French were not interested in immediately defining the border between Vietnam and Siam. Instead they were determined to push as far west as possible, at the very least to the Mekong. Their reasons were many: a lingering hope in the commercial viability of the Mekong as a trade artery; the strategic defense of Vietnam; the "rounding out" of France's Indochinese possessions; and as a further step in the extension of French influence in and even over Siam (de Reinach 1911; Grossin 1933). At this point the struggle was joined. It was to end through the use of military force in 1893 with the invasion of Lao territories by French troops literally backed up by gun boat diplomacy during the so–called "Paknam incident" (Le Boulanger 1931, 303–18; Manich 1971, 188–204). From 1885 to 1893, however, the claims of both sides rested on opposing conceptions of sovereignty and territoriality. Those eight years marked the final defeat of the *mandala* as a model for political relations in mainland Southeast Asia and the ultimate triumph of the modern European conception of the state.

THE CRUCIAL YEARS: 1885–1893

Two events occurred in 1885 which set the scene for the contest that lay ahead over where the frontier should lie between French Indochina and Siam. The treaty between France and China which formally acknowledged the French protectorate over Tonkin and Annam effectively put an end to almost a millennium of tributary relations between China and Vietnam, and left France free to press whatever Vietnamese claims she might consider in her interests to pursue. In Siam, it took King Chulalongkorn the best part of two decades to complete the transfer of power from the ministers of his father's generation to his own appointees, many of them his own brothers (Wyatt 1984, 192–4). Not until 1885 was he able to respond positively to a petition from eleven young patriotically motivated Siamese calling for a complete reform of the political system.

From this point on, for both sides, it became a race against time. The French were intent on extending their territory to the west; the Siamese were desperate to maintain their hold on as much of their empire as possible. At the center of this struggle were the Lao territories—no longer the powerful *mandala* of the seventeenth century, but a congeries of larger and smaller *muang* all paying tribute to neighboring powers (Whitmore 1970). The methods by which France and Siam each pursued their interests reveal how the conceptual ground shifted in favor of the European concept of the state. For whereas France revived the Vietnamese imperium as a temporary expedient only nominally on behalf of Vietnam in order to further creation of a French colonial state ("Indochina"),[2] Siam was forced to abandon its own *mandala* conception of empire in order to redefine itself as a state in the European sense of possessing fixed frontiers to the limits of which the writ of Siamese law and administration extended.

The French enjoyed the advantage: they possessed superior military power and the contest was to be fought on their terms. But the Siamese were aware of the threat, prepared to change ground (in a way the courts of neither Hué nor Mandalay had been), and could rely on a corps of foreign advisers, few of whom had much love for the French. In the event, it was the Siamese who moved first to reinforce their control over the outer ring of tributary Lao *muang*. A mapping mission was sent to the Sipsong Chau Tai under the English geographer James McCarthy (1900), followed by a military expedition against the Ho (Forbes 1987, 1988). Two Siamese commissioners (*khaluang*) were appointed to oversee the civil administration of Luang Prabang. A series of Siamese military posts was established on the western slopes of the Annam cordillera, and an attempt made to demarcate the border with Annam by unilaterally placing markers. In 1886 an agreement with France permitting establishment of a French consular post at Luang Prabang explicitly recognized Siamese suzerainty over the kingdom (as acknowledged by the French jurist, Iché [1935, 155]).

These measures were taken, however, in the context of the *mandala* conception of the state. This is most evident in the methods applied by the Siamese expedition to the Sipsong Chau

Tai that led to the sack of Luang Prabang. The Black River *muang* were treated as outer tributary states. No Siamese commissioners were appointed. Instead members of the ruling family were taken hostage to Bangkok, just as were members of the ruling families of the Lao kingdoms incorporated into the Siamese *mandala* by the conquests of King Taksin. The result was disastrous for Siam. Luang Prabang was sacked by the White Tai chieftain Kham Hom (Deo Van Tri), giving the recently appointed French consul there, Auguste Pavie, just the opportunity he needed to press France's offer of better protection (Pavie 1942). For the Lao this was a game well understood. Whenever a distant center increased in power, the response of outlying *muang* was to counter this through a countervailing tribute offered elsewhere. After the sack of Viang Chan in 1827–1828, numerous Lao *muang* sent tribute missions to the Vietnamese emperor Gia Long, who duly incorporated them into the Vietnamese imperium as *phu* or *huyen*, prefectures or districts in name only. Thus, ironically, was the Vietnamese imperium extended just at the time when the Siamese *mandala* was at its strongest. When those same *muang* had fallen under the closer control of the Lao *mandala*, tribute payments to Vietnam had usually lapsed. Only when Lan Xang was weak had Xiang Khuang been tempted to greater independence by sending tribute to Vietnam. Conversely, only when Lan Xang was weak did Vietnam see and seize the opportunity to detach Xiang Khuang from its primary allegiance. The point is that the behavior of the Lao *muang* in the late nineteenth century—whether the Sipsong Chau Tai, Luang Prabang, or central Laos *muang* east of the Mekong—was in all cases an expression of their understanding of the *mandala* system. The French had merely taken the place of the Vietnamese.

The French took their defense of Vietnamese interests seriously because it was in their own interests to do so, and because British interests in Siam forced them to adopt a legalistic rather than the purely military approach they had taken in Tonkin. Instructions were given to search the Vietnamese archives for any possible evidence to serve as a basis for French claims to territory west of the Annam Cordillera; that is, west of any actual areas of settlement of Vietnamese.[3] It was immaterial to the French that tribute offered to the court of Hué by Lao *muang* had been in order to preserve a degree of independence in the face of Siamese power. Nor did it matter that Vietnamese administration of the phantom Lao *phu* was virtually nonexistent. All that did matter was that documents were available to provide a legal basis for French claims. And claims were all they were. As their own reports made clear, claimed Vietnamese frontiers were in no case backed up by formal treaties of the kind necessary to establish the borders of European states.[4] In some cases Vietnamese mandarins had been appointed to oversee the administration of *muang* by the Vietnamese–endorsed traditional Lao elite. In others there was no Vietnamese presence at all. Such administrative districts existed only in the Vietnamese archives.

The flimsiness of Vietnamese claims to the Lao territories as a basis for French intervention was demonstrated by the French jurist François Iché in his doctoral dissertation published in 1935. For Iché (1935, 138) a much stronger case for French intervention rested on France's capacity to ensure order and defend the inhabitants, which Siam could not do. Iché recognized that at the time of the French occupation in 1895, the court of Hué could not lay claim to anything like all of central and southern Laos. Therefore some other justification was required for the French occupation. Iché (1935, 155) found that "the countries of the Mekong valley properly so called depended on Siam which abandoned its rights to [France] by the treaty of 1893." French rights, Iché argued, rested in occupation as "a mode of acquisition" which to be valid had to entail "effective possession" demonstrating both the power and the will to exercise sovereignty (Iché 1935, 146). This applied in the case of Laos.

French readiness to act in pursuit of what were claimed to be Vietnamese interests was encouraged by the readiness of Lao *muang* to respond to French overtures. In the context of the *mandala* system such responses were designed to reduce Siamese influence. Its apparent effect was to revive the Vietnamese imperium. In reality French action on behalf of Vietnam was a mere expedient. Even though French Laos was for long regarded as little more than a hinterland to Vietnam (Meyer 1931, 7, 62), an area for eventual Vietnamese migration and exploitation,[5] it was never included as part of an extended Vietnamese state.

The Siamese response to manufactured French claims was to reiterate their own, backed up by the presence of Siamese agents and military posts on the ground. Siamese moves were slow in coming, however, depending as they did on reforms to government undertaken during the period 1888–1892. Siam was forced in December 1888 to recognize French rights over the Black River cantons of the Sipsong Chau Tai, thanks to Pavie's diplomacy and a show of French military force in the region. Luang Prabang, however, was still dependent on Bangkok.

In 1889, Pavie explored the Khamkoet region only to discover a Siamese military presence already there. French troops thereupon occupied Napé on the western side of the Annam cordillera. There the status quo rested, by agreement, until Pavie had obtained the means to mount his massive "second mission" designed to provide the necessary information for delimiting the frontier, but in fact establishing a French presence throughout a region where none had previously existed. Three French commercial posts were set up, all in west bank towns. The French were rapidly developing interests in Laos which they could subsequently claim to be defending.[6]

The Siamese were unsure how to respond to this French challenge. The traditional response, taken within the context of the *mandala* system, would have been to leave the frontier areas fluid. Frontier *muang* between two power centers were never left with an either/or choice. Tribute was normally offered to and accepted by both contending powers. This had been the pattern followed in relations of Lao *muang* with Vietnam, except that each tributary *muang* was, unbeknown to the Siamese, formally included in the Vietnamese imperium. But the Vietnamese were flexible. Whatever their records might say, the de facto situation conformed to the *mandala* system. Local rulers were confirmed in their hereditary rights to administer their *muang* in the name of the emperor. It was a game all knew how to play.

The French played differently. They wanted a fixed border which drew a clear line between French Indochinese and Siamese citizens, not a fuzzy freedom to pay lip service and tribute to both powers at once. The Siamese understood that they would have to meet French demands, but in the period 1888 to 1892 they let the French make the running. No Siamese survey mission was despatched to map the Lao east bank territories as McCarthy had done for Siam in the Sipsong Chau Tai. Instead the Siamese concentrated their energies on drawing the west bank Lao territories on the Khorat Plateau more closely under the administrative control of Bangkok (Breazeale 1975).

Pavie, after his "second mission," returned to Bangkok in March 1892 as France's resident minister and consul general, determined to make Laos French. The expulsion of two French "commercial agents" and the suicide of the French representative in Luang Prabang were seized upon by the colonial lobby to whip up emotions against Siam. In May 1893, having failed to obtain "proper compensation" from Bangkok, three French military columns invaded the east bank Lao territories to force the withdrawal of all Siamese military posts in the region. Siamese resistance led to the death of a French officer and several Vietnamese soldiers. France seized upon this incident as a *casus belli*. French warships forced their way up the Chao Phraya River to Bangkok. An ultimatum was delivered, and ultimately accepted, demanding that Siam should renounced sovereignty over all territory east of the Mekong, and pay a substantial indemnity. A formal treaty was signed on 3 October 1893. In the end it had taken crude gunboat diplomacy to force a Siamese surrender.

Pavie had wanted French military columns to occupy all the Lao territories on both banks of the Mekong (Iché 1935, 53). Their orders were not to cross the river. However the treaty of 1893 established a twenty–five kilometer zone the length of the west bank where Siam could station no troops and where French nationals were free to circulate. The threat of further French territorial demands thus remained real. All that the treaty of 1893 had done was to open the way for France to establish a protectorate over the kingdom of Luang Prabang and direct colonial administration over central and southern Laos east of the Mekong. It did not define the border between the two states. The status of the Lao territories on the Khorat Plateau thus remained undecided.[7]

Attention shifted, however, to the Sipsong Phan Na on the upper Mekong, an area in which Siamese claims were weak or nonexistent. The players in the drama that unfolded there were England and France. After a year of negotiations, the confrontation was defused through signature of an agreement (15 January 1896) to preserve the independence of Siam in the Chao Phraya basin, thus leaving open the possibility for both Britain and France to make further territorial demands, on the Malay peninsula and in the Mekong basin respectively. This both did, the British gaining the northern Malay states in 1909 and France the three western provinces of Cambodia and two trans–Mekong Lao territories (Xainyaburi province in the northwest and an extension of Champasak in the south) through treaties signed in 1904 and 1907.[8] All treaties defined frontiers that were subsequently surveyed and marked on the ground. The territory within these boundaries was then administered by centrally appointed officials, and Siamese law applied throughout. Together these developments marked the transition from Siam as *mandala*, to Siam as a member state in a European defined and dominated world system.

In summary, the claims recorded as administrative extensions of the Vietnamese imperium over Lao territory, both on the Plain of Jars and on the middle Mekong, defined the kind of territorial limits nineteenth–century Europeans thought they understood. The fact that, in stating such claims, the Vietnamese had deliberately disregarded Southeast Asian *mandala* relations was overlooked by the French, who reasserted Vietnamese claims in their own interests at the expense of Siam. The "struggle for the Mekong banks" was waged initially on the basis of two entirely different conceptual systems. The French reinterpreted Vietnamese claims based on the Chinese model to fit the European concept of the territorial state, and maneuvered the Siamese into playing on the same ground. The Southeast Asian *mandala*, the political system of the last and only uncolonized traditional polity in Southeast Asia, was forced to give way to the European state. Division of territory into the states of modern Thailand and Laos was the result. But the fact that modern day political systems conform to European nations should never be permitted to mask the fact that political relationships in Southeast Asia traditionally conformed to a very different pattern.

IRONIES AND IMPLICATIONS

The border agreements worked out with the British (in Burma and Malaya) and the French (in Cambodia and Laos) left Siam with a clearly defined set of frontiers. Territories lost were for the most part inhabited by non–Siamese. In the case of the Malay areas lost to British Malaya and Cambodian areas lost to French Indochina, the people were non–Tai. In losing them, it is now evident with hindsight, Siam was freed from what would inevitably have been a great deal of subsequent ethnic and nationalist unrest. The Shan, though Tai–speaking, have historically had far more to do with the Burmese than with the Siamese of the Chao Phraya valley. Only Laos could be said to represent a "loss" to Siam—something vigorously disputed by the Lao. Still souring Lao–Thai relations is the lingering Thai belief that if the Lao of the northeast (Isan) region of present–day Thailand could be relatively easily assimilated and become Thai, why not the fewer Lao in Laos?

Siam was renamed Thailand in 1939 with historic "loss" very much in the minds of its leaders. In proclaiming itself the "land of the free" (Thai), of all Tai–speaking peoples, the Phibun Songkhram government was in fact staking irredentist claims. Immediately the opportunity arose after the outbreak of the Second World War, the government took advantage of French and British weakness to extend its frontiers—just as the *mandala* model of the state and inter–state relations prescribes. In the event, very little of Laos was regained, only territories west of the Mekong. But Thailand also occupied two provinces of

western Cambodia and subsequently the northern Malay states and the greater part of the Shan states. All were returned after the war when prewar boundaries were reinstated.

The concept of the *mandala* also underlies the flexibility of Thai foreign policy. The support of one power is sought to balance that of another—always in the interests of Thailand. Britain was cultivated as a counter to France; Japan to obtain from France and Britain areas lost to the Siamese *mandala*; America to defend Thailand against the threat of Vietnamese communism; China to counter Vietnamese influence in Laos and Cambodia. This flexibility in pursuit of Thai interests is more than a policy of power-balancing of the kind pursued by Britain in Europe. Rather it is a reflection of the thinking that underlies the *mandala* conception of interstate relations. The interests of the *muang* were protected by paying tribute to whichever neighboring *mandala* might be in a position to bring its power to bear in some unforeseen contingency to counter some threat to the *muang*. To a notable extent, Thailand still shapes its responses to international pressures in a similar way.

Turning to Indochina, it has been claimed that "ironically, through their adaptation of Vietnamese ambitions and traditional relationships, the French created in Southeast Asia a colonial empire that was a fulfillment of long-standing goals of Vietnamese expansionism" (Solomon 1970, 5). But the Lao territories claimed from Siam on behalf of Vietnam, though increasingly viewed as a hinterland for Vietnam in French Indochina, were still given separate administrative status. French Laos was demarcated from Vietnam and Cambodia through a series of executive orders that left it with almost precisely the border the Siamese had previously claimed (with the exception of the Sipsong Chau Tai, most of which went to Vietnam).

What protected Laos from absorption into a greater Vietnam was the fact that state-building was never a priority for the French. Vietnam remained divided into Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina. Laos was divided too, but with the French in possession only of the underpopulated half. Only Luang Prabang regained most of its west bank territories. No attempt was made to reconstitute the kingdoms of Viang Chan and Champasak. This distinction was carried over into judicial status, with Luang Prabang remaining a protectorate, while the rest of Laos was a de facto colony.[9] Unlike Vietnam, however, the status of neither portion was formalized by treaty, and the French were never sure what to do with Laos, either the parts or the whole. The exploitation of Lao resources, it was widely believed, would require Vietnamese labor, but the implications of massive Vietnamese migration for the future status of Laos within a Vietnamese-dominated federation was never thought through.

It took the Second World War and its aftermath to change French thinking on Laos. The nationalist movement, the Lao Issara, was forced to oppose both French and Vietnamese in claiming Laos for the Lao. The "thirty-year struggle" that culminated in a Pathet Lao victory in 1975 was in essence a succession dispute with one side backed by Thailand and the United States, the other by the Vietnamese. Since 1975, the victorious regime has been gently freeing itself from over-dependency on its Vietnamese mentors. In the *mandala* system of inter-state relations, border *muang* maintained a degree of independence by recognizing the suzerainty of more than one power. In the mid-nineteenth century Luang Prabang paid tribute to China, Siam and Vietnam. In the late twentieth century the Lao People's Democratic Republic pays court to and receives aid from all three. Frontiers are now considered inviolate, however, and bitterly fought over.[10] In this respect, the European model of the state has been adopted. In inter-state relations, however, the concept of the *mandala* still influences the perceptions and responses of government in mainland Southeast Asia.

NOTES

1. "The character of the modern state necessitates the establishment of clear–cut limits of its area of authority and organization ... its territory must be clearly bounded, not by frontiers, but by unmistakable lines. Such lines are inter–state boundaries" (Moodie 1961, 73, quoted in Solomon 1970, 1). Solomon goes on to state that according to the European conception, "A state is ... defined *territorially*, and state sovereignty resides within the totality of the national territory" (p. 2. Italics in original).
2. Cf. "Note de M. Pavie," Dépôt des Archives d'Outre–Mer (AOM), Aix–en–Provence, Fonds des Amiraux, 14333, in which Pavie while discussing the organization of territories "reoccupied by the mission in the name of the government of Annam" admits that "this immense region has no direct relationship with Annam or Cochinchina."
3. Cf. the report prepared for the Governor General of Indochina entitled "Exposé des Droits historiques de l'Annam sur le Laos central," AOM, Aix–en–Provence, Fonds des Amiraux, 14488.
4. Ibid., p. 1.
5. Plans were still being drawn up to encourage Vietnamese migration into Laos in the early 1940s. See Pietrantoni (1957, 243).
6. This had been Pavie's intention all along. See Malleret (1934, 59).
7. Many in Laos argued strongly for an extension of French control west of the Mekong. For example, A. Masie, French consul at Luang Prabang to the Governor General of Indochina, 28 July 1889, AOM, Aix–en–Provence, Fonds des Amiraux, 14405.
8. For texts of these treaties, see "Conventions et Traités entre la France et le Siam rélatif au Laos (1893-1947)," *Péninsule* nos 16-17 (1988).
9. This was Iché's conclusion (1935, 155). The French Conseil de Legislation, however, ruled that all of Laos was a colony (*Journal Officiel de la République Française*, 5 June 1930, p. 459), though this decision was subsequently reversed and the Kingdom of Luang Prabang endorsed as a Protectorate.
10. Laos and Thailand have fought two recent skirmishes over border disputes, one in June 1984, the other November 1987 to January 1988.

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