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# Mayoury and Pheuiphanh Ngaosrivathana and the Construction of National Identity in Laos

*Martin Stuart-Fox*

While Mayoury and Pheuiphanh Ngaosrivathana are not names known to most Australians, this wife and husband team can claim to be among their country's most prominent intellectuals. Both were members of that first generation of young Lao whose secondary school studies coincided with the early years of independence. In fact, when both attended the French-language Lycée de Vientiane in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Laos had been independent for barely a decade.

Their academic success won them scholarships to university in France, where both took their undergraduate degrees at the prestigious École de Sciences Politiques in Paris. By this time, however, Laos had been drawn inexorably into the Second Indochina (Vietnam) War. Paris provided a stimulating environment for Lao students to debate what kind of a country to build (capitalist or socialist), what foreign policy to pursue (neutralist or aligned) and what it meant to be Lao. Mayoury and Pheuiphanh plunged into these passionate discussions on the future of their country as it alternated between civil war and political compromise.

In the 1970s both went on to take doctorates, Mayoury in law and Pheuiphanh in law and political economy, both in the Faculty of





Law and Economic Sciences at the University of Paris. Pheuiphanh's doctoral thesis (Doctorat d'État), on the role of taxation as a tool for economic development in newly independent countries, was awarded the prize for best thesis of the year (1973) at the University of Paris, an honour which guaranteed both publication and a university teaching position in France.[1]

Soon after they had completed their doctoral dissertations came the tumultuous year of 1975. The victory of revolutionary forces in Cambodia and South Vietnam in April prepared the way for the more gradual, indeed peaceful, seizure of power by the Pathet Lao revolutionary movement in December. The democratic constitutional monarchy that had guided the country since independence was replaced by the Marxist-Leninist Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR). Mayoury and Pheuiphanh were faced with a stark choice: remain as refugees in France, or return to Laos. Like many idealistic and patriotic young Lao, they hoped for national reconciliation and a future in which all Lao, of whatever political persuasion, would together contribute to building a unified, prosperous, socialist, Laos. In 1976 they returned to offer their services to the new regime.

The Lao PDR was very short of educated cadres. Not only were all senior Royal Lao Army officers confined to remote re-education camps (except those few who had fled to Thailand), but so were almost all senior civil servants, whose loyalty the new regime distrusted. Mayoury and Pheuiphanh were assigned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mayoury as Deputy-Director of the Consular Department and Pheuiphanh as Director of Political Department No. 2, charged with conducting relations with capitalist states. Both were highly politically sensitive appointments.

## The challenge of independence

It is easy to forget how traumatic decolonisation and its aftermath were for those caught up in its effects. The decisions people faced were often literally matters of life and death. In different parts of the world the process ranged from bloody and contested to remarkably peaceful. Some of the former colonies that regained their independence had proud and ancient histories within well-defined frontiers. Others, particularly in Africa, were the products of decisions and agreements made by colonial powers with very little recognition of ethnic affiliation or even geographic realities. All these newly independent states confronted one similar challenge: how to construct a nation-state that would not only meet the expectations of its citizens, but also take its place in an international world order still dominated by former colonial powers.

The enormity of this challenge has been insufficiently recognised. The ruling élites of independent states had not just to develop their economies and provide essential services in the form of education and health; they also had to construct from scratch all the apparatus of international relations (ministries of foreign affairs, diplomatic representations) in accordance with international law. And if that was not enough, leaders were expected to create a sense of common identity among often disparate populations in order to legitimise their own right to speak and act on behalf of the state and its citizens.

In Asia, some entirely new states were formed (such as Pakistan and later Bangladesh), while others regained an independence only briefly interrupted by colonial rule (Burma/Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam). Laos fell into neither of these categories. The country that gained its independence from France in 1953, though it was the product of





colonialism, was neither an entirely new creation nor the revival of an ancient kingdom within historically defined frontiers. Nor was it, like Indonesia and Malaysia, the extension of an earlier core polity; but rather the truncation of a once great kingdom. Moreover, it got off to an inauspicious start, situated as it was on the fault line of the Cold War.

At its height in the seventeenth century, the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang (meaning a million elephants, a boastful statement of its military might) stretched across both banks of the Middle Mekong, between China and Cambodia, including all of what is today northeast Thailand. The Thai (Siamese) were only able to reduce the Lao to tributary status after Lan Xang split into three smaller and weaker principalities in the eighteenth century. When the French seized control of Lao territories east of the Mekong from Siam in 1893, it was both to provide a hinterland for their valuable colony of Vietnam and to serve as a springboard for further colonial expansion into northeast Thailand. But events in Europe intervened and no further expansion occurred. The French lost interest and their colony of Laos, half ruled by the King of Luang Prabang under French supervision and half directly administered by the French *Résident Supérieur*, was left to languish.

Independent Laos had a population of less than three million, fewer than half of whom were ethnic lowland Lao, the rest comprising over 50 upland minorities. At least four times as many ethnic Lao lived in northeast Thailand. Given these demographic realities and the reduced geographic extent of French Laos, Lao leaders faced an extreme challenge in creating a viable nation state. The Royal Lao government made as much as it could of the historical legacy and Buddhist culture of Lan Xang, but this had little appeal to animist tribal minorities who had never identified with the Lao. Meanwhile across the Mekong the Thai government crushed all signs of Lao irredentism.[2]

Under the terms of the Geneva Agreement that brought the First Indochina War to an end, Lao revolutionaries were allowed an area in the northeast of the country to regroup. The initial problem confronting the Lao government was how to reintegrate them into the political life of the kingdom. Three times, neutral coalition governments were formed only to collapse as Laos was drawn ever more deeply into the Second Indochina (Vietnam) War. Finally, in December 1975, the Lao revolutionary movement known as the Pathet Lao, which had been armed, advised and supported by North Vietnam, succeeded in abolishing the monarchy, seizing power and establishing the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR).

The new Lao leaders were core members of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP). Like the political leaders of the Royal Lao regime, they too were confronted with the daunting task of creating a nation state—this time a communist state allied closely to Vietnam and the Soviet Bloc. One advantage they had was that, because the 'liberated zones' of the Pathet Lao were situated in highland areas, the revolutionaries there had recruited many minority cadres, some of whom already held senior positions in the Party and the military. They were thus much better able to appeal to the upland minorities to contribute to building the new socialist state.

All this is by way of background. A major difficulty for those confronted with the challenge of creating an independent Lao nation state, whether royalist or Marxist, was to determine what it was to be Lao. In order to avoid pejorative terms such as *kha* (of low social status, slave) and *meo* (savage), the Royal Lao regime adopted a way of referring to Lao citizens as belonging to one of three broad cultural-economic categories. Those speaking Tai languages living in valleys and on the plains were Lao Loum; those speaking Austroasiatic languages





and living at moderate elevations were Lao Theung; and those speaking Sino-Tibetan or Hmong-Mien languages and living at high elevations were Lao Soung. The Lao PDR continued to use these terms. Together these three groups comprise the Lao 'race' (*seuasat*). Other citizens with Lao nationality (Vietnamese, Chinese, Indian, etc) are not of Lao race. Even if born in Laos, they have their own racial designations, which are noted on Lao identification papers.[3]

This solution works insofar as it includes all highland ethnic minorities within the same racial category, so guaranteeing them not just the same constitutional rights and obligations as lowland ethnic Lao, but the same claim to be Lao. What it skirts, however, is the challenge posed by the millions of Lao living in northeast Thailand. The Thai do not officially differentiate between nationality and 'race', but if they did, the Lao of northeast Thailand would be Thai citizens of Lao race, which would further bedevil relations between the two countries. As it is, the challenge for the Lao in defining what it is to be Lao lies in differentiating themselves from the Thai. For if more than 20 million Lao in northeast Thailand are Thai, what makes the Lao of Laos Lao?

This is not just a matter for debate, it is a real historical and political issue. The Lao have no difficulty differentiating themselves, historically, linguistically and culturally, from Chinese, Vietnamese or Cambodians; but Lao and Thai are closely related, mutually intelligible, languages and both peoples claim a common ancestry from the mythical Khun Borom.[4] Identity is always most difficult to define in relation to those most similar to oneself—as Australians discovered in the 1890s as federation and independence from Britain approached. As late as the First World War, Australians would refer to themselves as Australian Britons and as being of British race.

## Relations between Laos and Thailand

Apart from fear of American retaliation, in 1976 relations with Thailand posed the most important immediate problem for the new Lao regime. The communist victories of 1975 divided mainland southeast Asia into an 'Indochina Bloc' comprising Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, backed by the Soviet Union; and staunchly anti-communist Thailand, backed by fellow members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN; then comprising Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei), China, and the United States. In Burma a neutralist military regime held power, whose economic policies may have been socialist, but which had long opposed the Burmese Communist Party. The new frontline of the Cold War thus ran along the Thai border with Laos and Cambodia. In order to contain the 'virus' of communism, Bangkok promptly closed that border, thus severing the principal routes by which landlocked Laos traded with the world.

For Mayoury and Pheuiphanh, working in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, relations with Thailand were *their* immediate problem. Suspicion and resentment between the two states ran deep. During the Second Indochina War, most of the American aircraft that had bombed Laos (particularly the Plain of Jars and the Ho Chi Minh Trail) had flown out of U.S. bases in Thailand. Even after the demise of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) on 30 June 1977, the U.S. presence in Thailand remained substantial. Lao anti-communist insurgents were operating out of Thailand with official Thai support. So it is little wonder that Thailand was seen as a significant threat by the Lao regime.

From the Thai side, Laos, as the frontline state of the Indochina Bloc, also posed a threat. Although the 'domino theory' that one





state after another would inevitably fall to communism was never very convincing, Pathet Lao support for Thai communist insurgents operating in northeast Thailand caused alarm in Bangkok. When in July 1976 Thailand agreed to partly open its border, it still embargoed a list of 273 items of 'strategic' significance which could not be traded or transported to Laos. After the Thai military coup of October 1976 relations again became frosty, but with the change of government in Bangkok a year later, they thawed a little.

Just when Lao-Thai relations began to improve in 1979, the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia, overthrew the Khmer Rouge and precipitated a new alignment of powers in mainland southeast Asia which seriously threatened Lao security. The Vietnamese invasion brought an immediate Chinese military incursion into northern Vietnam. After some hesitation, Laos sided with Vietnam, bringing upon it the ire of China, which entered into a de facto alliance with Thailand. Vietnamese troops not only occupied Cambodia but also entered Laos (by invitation from the Lao government under the terms of their joint Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation) Lao foreign relations were becoming tense and complicated.

This was an extraordinarily difficult period for the Lao Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As Thailand counted as a capitalist state, Pheuiphanh was deeply involved in how best to manage not just Lao-Thai relations, but also relations with Thailand's principal backer, the United States. The circuit breaker with Washington (which had downgraded, but never broken diplomatic relations with Laos, in contrast to Cambodia and Vietnam) came through the search for Americans missing-in-action (MIA) in Laos after the Second Indochina War. The Lao took a much more conciliatory approach than the Vietnamese and in December 1983 a team from the Joint Casualty Resolution Center in

Hawai'i conducted a first survey of the crash site of a U.S. aircraft in southern Laos.

The following year, relations with Thailand took a turn for the worse when an incident known as the 'three villages' dispute sparked an outbreak of fighting between the two states. Thai troops drove local Lao militia out of three villages situated just inside the border of the Lao province of Xainyaboury, and occupied the area. Negotiations to resolve the issue, which centred on where the unmarked border should lie, began in Bangkok but were broken off by the Thai. Laos then took the matter to the United Nations where it was eventually resolved in favour of the Lao, thanks largely to the historical research undertaken and presented by Pheuiphanh.

In 1985, Pheuiphanh was invited to write an article for the University of California journal *Asian Survey*.[5] In it he argued that the timing of the Thai occupation, following quickly as it did upon a visit to China by the Thai Army Commander-in-Chief, indicated deliberate Thai-Chinese collusion to destabilise Laos, reinforced by Thailand's immediate closure of the whole 1,650 km Thai-Lao border. He went on, however, to place the Thai choice of a border incident, entailing occupation of Lao territory, in the context of a history of Thai 'big nation' chauvinism, expansionism and irredentism. The whole argument was backed up by reference to dozens of primary and secondary sources in 54 footnotes, a typical example of Pheuiphanh's scholarly approach.

By 1986, Lao-Thai relations improved and Pheuiphanh took a momentous decision: he became a monk for the three months of the Lenten rainy season. It was a turning point in his career. He had time to think. He and Mayoury decided to leave government service and return to academia. Both took up fellowships at Harvard University in 1988 and 1989. They were subsequently visiting scholars, singly or





together, at the East-West Center in Hawai'i, the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, the Centre for the Study of Australia-Asia Relations, Griffith University, Australia, and the National Council for Scientific Research in Paris. While Mayoury investigated Lao culture and gender issues, Pheuiphanh concentrated on international relations and history. A stream of conference papers and publications followed until their respective interests came together in their book on Lao-Thai relations.

No one has studied the problematic relationship between Laos and Thailand with such diligence and perspicacity as Mayoury and Pheuiphanh Ngaosrivathana.[6] Their first book was entitled *Kith and Kin Politics: The Relationship Between Laos and Thailand* (1994), reflecting their own experiences, plus research and writing over several years.[7] *Kith and Kin Politics* probes the complex relationship between Lao and Thai. It deals with ethnicity, culture, economics, geo-political and strategic issues and the post-1975 relationship, which Mayoury and Pheuiphanh had helped to shape.

The authors make the point that ethnically Thai and Lao are very close. The myth of Khun Borom, as recounted in the Lao chronicles, posits a common origin for all peoples speaking Tai languages, which both peoples accept.[8] Khun Borom is said to have had seven sons who migrated in different directions and founded Tai kingdoms across Southeast Asia. The oldest son took up residence at Luang Prabang and was the progenitor of the Lao. A younger son settled at Ayutthaya, which makes the Thai (or Siamese) younger brothers of the Lao. Mayoury and Pheuiphanh refer to this myth in order to reject Thai references to the Lao as younger brothers, and so inferior. At the same time they question Lao attempts to identify with a people referred to in ancient Chinese texts as the Ai-Lao, by pointing out the

lack of evidence in support of such a connection, either historical or linguistic. In fact, as they show, the terms 'Lao' and 'Thai' are relatively late designations for the peoples of the Mekong and Chao Phraya river systems. Their point is that historical myths should never be allowed to colour relations between peoples or states.

The authors then go on to establish the cultural differences that divide the two peoples, symbolised by the distinction between glutinous and white rice cultivation, the former the staple grain of the Lao, the latter of the Thai. Around this distinction adheres a whole spectrum of cultural differences beginning with that quintessential Lao custom of the *baci* ceremony, performed to concentrate the physical and spiritual forces of the recipient. And even though Lao and Thai share the same form of Theravada Buddhism, popular festivals differ.

Culture defines difference but does not get at the roots of prejudice. For this one must turn to history. Mayoury and Pheuiphanh examine the economic exploitation the Thai have been able to exert, due to Lao dependency on Thailand for trade and transit. The obverse of dependency is an arrogant assumption of power. But as the authors go on to show, the sense of superiority that this engenders is offset by a strategic insecurity, which derives from the fact that northeast Thailand is historically, as well as culturally, Lao.

History lies at the core of the Lao-Thai relationship—particularly the history of Thai domination over the Lao principalities imposed in the 1770s, followed by the Lao attempt to throw off that domination 50 years later in a war that saw the wholesale destruction of the Lao capital and the deportation of thousands of Lao families to what is today northeast Thailand. Mayoury and Pheuiphanh examine this crucial period in their most important book, entitled *Paths to Conflagration.*[9]





The Lao-Siamese war of 1827–28 still looms as a defining moment in Lao-Thai relations, for in its aftermath the Siamese attempted to assimilate the Lao into an expanded Kingdom of Siam. What Mayoury and Pheuiphanh set out to do is to recover the historical reality of the difference between Lao and central Thai (Siamese) as the basis for a modern Lao national identity. But they do this not as the previous independence generation of Lao intellectuals did, by reference to the earlier greatness of the Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang, but by rescuing from history the sense of Lao identity present in the all-or-nothing struggle of King (Chao) Anou of Viang Chan (Vientiane) to resuscitate that kingdom by throwing off the yoke of Siam. Chao Anou failed, but the distinction he embodied between Lao and Siamese sustained, in epic poetry and popular song, a sense of Lao identity that resurfaced once historical circumstances permitted.

In making the argument they do, Mayoury and Pheuiphanh reinforce the modern construction of Lao identity as grounded in an historical struggle for liberation by showing that its roots lie in the Lao-Siamese war of 1827–28. It is one thing to legitimise political power, as the present regime does, through the claim to have led the liberation struggle against first France and then the United States. But Lao identity, if it is to become the basis for a Lao nation-state, must still differentiate itself from what it is to be Thai, as Mayoury and Pheuiphanh clearly saw. Theirs is history written from the perspective of Lao nationalists, which provides a powerful counter-narrative to the dominant Thai view that regards Chao Anou as an ungrateful rebel—an account which deeply colours Thai attitudes to Laos and the Lao.

For reasons of political sensitivity *Paths to Conflagration* was published outside Laos in English—which gives some indication of the difficulties faced by Lao scholars.[10] Laos may not be socialist in

anything but name, but it is still a single-party state where the Ministry of Information and Culture censures all publications in Lao.

Mayoury and Pheuiphanh still live in Laos where they are sought out to undertake studies on law and economics by NGOs and international organisations. Their activities as independent scholars helps prise open a small intellectual space free from the supervision of the LPRP. For that courage and integrity are essential. Their example should be a reminder to those of us who take our far greater freedoms for granted

But there are other lessons too that we as Australians can take from the work and thought of Mayoury and Pheuiphanh. They remind us of the challenges faced by newly independent states in constructing some unifying sense of national identity and of the contribution that history can, and must, make. Timor Leste faces just such a challenge, but so do other of our Pacific neighbours, under conditions far more demanding and difficult than we ever faced in forging our own Australian identity. And they teach us that the relations between states, even if as unequal as between Laos and Thailand, can only be built on mutual respect free of the prejudices of the past.



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# Syed Hussein Alatas: Malaysia's Wise Muslim Rationalist, Culturally Grounded Cosmopolitan (1928–2007)

*Clive S. Kessler*

Born in Bogor, Java in 1928 into a leading Hadhrami Arab family, Syed Hussein Alatas received his early education in Johor, Malaya, amidst the anti-colonial Malay ferment demanding political independence in Malaya, later Malaysia. By the time that goal was achieved in 1957, Syed Hussein was pursuing postgraduate studies in Amsterdam in the sociology of religion. He returned to Malaya, became a research officer at the highly political National Language and Literature Agency (*Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka*) and lectured in Malay Studies at Universiti Malaya. In 1967 he was appointed Professor of Malay Studies at the University of Singapore, from where he closely followed developments in Malaysia.

He was centrally involved in efforts to create an ethnically inclusive or non-ethnic political party in the run up to Malaysia's fateful elections of 1969. The *Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia* ('Malaysian People's Movement') challenged the ruling coalition of unapologetically ethnic parties, then known as the Alliance Party and since the 1970s as the *Barisan Nasional* ('National Front'), which has ruled uninterrupted since independence. When Malaysian political life resumed following the 1969 post-election ethnic trauma and an ensuing period of regime reconstruction, Syed Hussein Alatas served briefly as a *Gerakan*-nominated Senator in the Malaysian parliament. He occupied his