THE POLITICS OF RITUAL AND REMEMBRANCE: Laos Since 1975

by KELVIN ROWLEY

The bookshelf on Laos is small, and it is unusual to see three additions to it coming out within a twelve-month period. It is also notable that all three of these books are by Australians. Martin Stuart-Fox has written the first book-length scholarly history of Laos in English. It will be a standard work for students of Southeast Asian history for many years to come. His narrative spans some 2,500 years, from the earliest recorded principalities in the middle Mekong valley to today's communist regime.

Stuart-Fox sees a basic unity and continuity over this long span of time. But this is not the case in terms of ethnic makeup, centralised political institutions, or territorial unity. Modern-day Laos had its origins in the kingdom of Lan Xang in the fourteenth century; however by the eighteenth century this had decayed into a string of local principalities tributary to the ascendant Siamese kingdom. It was French colonialism which created modern Laos as a territorial unit.

Stuart-Fox is well aware of all this. He argues that the continuity of Lao history lies at a local level, in the principalities of Luang Phrabang, Vieng Chan and Champassak, and in their distinctive shared culture. We know so little of the early principalities, however, that this is only an unverified hypothesis. More recently, much of this culture was shared with their Thai and Khmer neighbours, and Lan Xang is probably best understood as a successor-state emerging from the decomposition of the Angkorean empire.

The tragic story of Laos's fractious politics since 1945 takes up the larger part of Stuart-Fox's book. What would have been at best a weak state soon found itself caught in the military confrontation between the US, its military allies in Thailand, and the Vietnamese communists. Stuart-Fox gives a sympathetic account of the recurring efforts of Prince Suvanna Phuma to end this catastrophe by brokering a compromise. But these efforts were in vain.

The Lao communists assumed full power in late 1975. This reflected internal developments in Laos as well as external forces. Stuart-Fox argues that the French, and later the Americans, had thrown their weight behind conservatives who tried to create a nationalism based on royal legitimation and aristocratic patronage. The Royal Lao Government (RLG) created by these groups soon degenerated into a collection of regionally-based clans competing for the spoils of office and external patronage. They did little to rally support outside the lowland Lao population, and the king failed to become a focus of national loyalty. Backed by the Vietnamese, the Lao communists developed a politics of mass-mobilisation under the direction of a centralised, secretive leadership which was more inclusive (especially for the "minority" peoples of the highlands), and they eventually overwhelmed their opponents. But the result was a dictatorial regime allied with and, Stuart-Fox asserts, subservient to Vietnam. Following the formation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR), Stuart-Fox says that Lao independence remained incomplete until the collapse of the USSR, and the entry of Laos into ASEAN. But independence is a relative term, and the Lao communist leaders were quite capable of making their own mistakes.

In the last two decades, the LPDR leaders abandoned their initial hopes for a "socialist transformation" of Laos. They first sought to suppress, and then to develop, a market economy. They first cracked down on both traditional "superstitious" and Western "decadent" influences, and then permitted cultural liberalisation and a revival of Buddhism. "Reactionaries" were sent to reeducation camps or driven into exile, and then invited to rejoin the nation-building project. The king was forced to abdicate: he and his family were sent off to a remote part of the country for reeducation. From this they never reemerged, a fact about which government officials are still uncomfortable and evasive.

Amid all this confusion and backtracking, there was one constant -- the Lao communists sought to entrench the "leading role" of the ruling party they had created in control of a strong and centralised state apparatus. Stuart-Fox shows that in the 1980s and 1990s a superficial liberalisation has been accompanied by a revival of patronage politics, nepotism and
corruption, and, apparently in an effort to restore discipline, by the growth of the influence of the military within the ruling party and the government. Christopher Kremmer’s Stalking the Elephant Kings is one of reportage rather than scholarly analysis. He provides well-crafted sketches of Laos in the mid-1990s, and his book will be read with pleasure by armchair tourists with no special interest in Laos. But he also has a serious purpose. Kremmer sought to find out what happened to the king after his abdication. In the course of his search, he accumulated many confusing accounts. His conclusion is that most likely the king and queen were sent to the township of Viengsai, near the Vietnamese border. They were next moved to the nearby town of Sop Hao. Here they both died, between 1978 and 1982, apparently of old age aggravated by poor food and inadequate medical care. Grant Evans is also concerned with the fate of Lao royalty. The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance: Laos Since 1975 is focused on the resurgence of traditional culture as the orthodoxies of communism crumbled. Buddhism has been central to this revival, and traditional Buddhist political thinking is centred on the reign of a righteous king. From this perspective, the LPDR is mutating into something closely resembling the RLG -- but minus royalty. Evans concludes that communism achieved nothing positive in Laos, revolution was a pointless waste of lives and energy, and that contemporary Lao cultural and political life increasingly revolves around an absent centre -- royalty. This suggests that Thailand -- where a military regime achieved considerable legitimacy by consciously exploiting Buddhism and royalty, brought about economic development, and eventually underwent a transition to parliamentary democracy -- may be the most appropriate model for Laos to follow. This analysis leads Evans to re-evaluate the roles of the last king and the RLG. Contrary to the book’s subtitle, many of its pages are thus concerned with Laos before 1975. The most effective of these re-evaluations concerns the relationship between the Lao kings and the forest and mountain minority peoples. Evans shows that palace rituals not only incorporated them, but acknowledged their prior settlement in the region. In general, his evaluation of Lao communism is too negative. True, the attempt to create the utopian society was a cruel, costly failure. But in Laos the communists accomplished what in Thailand was accomplished by royal absolutism -- the creation of a centralised nation-state out of earlier polities. The contrasting destinies of the Lao and Thai royal families in the twentieth century flow from this pivotal difference. As Evans emphasises, Buddhism justifies social hierarchy and sacralises power, and kingship is the logical culmination of such thinking. But it is unwarranted to conclude that “the ritual structure of [am society strains towards this goal”. In political practice, logic is rarely carried through to its conclusion. In practice, Buddhist ideology docs not have to be anchored on the specific institution of kingship; it operates in looser, more diffuse ways. The recent history of Burma and Cambodia suggests the deference it nurtures can be tapped by political strong men and generals operating through an authoritarian state. Future Lao politics is more likely to feature figures cut from such moulds than a re-emergence of Buddhist kingship.

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http://www.questia.com/read/5001248138?title=THE%20POLITICS%20OF%20RITUAL%20AND%20REMEMBRANCE%3a%20Laos%20since%201975
This fascinating work of political anthropology examines the case of Laos from the heady days of the 1975 revolution to the more sober Communist revolutions in this century have suppressed existing ritual and symbolic structures and invented new ones. Armed with new flags, new national celebrations, or new school textbooks, they have attempted to reconstruct social memory. This fascinating work of political anthropology examines the case of Laos from the heady days of the 1975 revolution to the more sober "post-socialist" present. Grant Evans traces the attempt at ritual and symbolic