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## Red Lotus in the Twenty-First Century: Dilemmas in the Lao Performing Arts

The small and sparsely populated country of Laos is squeezed between Thailand and Vietnam, and receives information, financial investment, and cultural influence from both – arguably overwhelming the development of its own modern identity. While theatre has often been a popular and important means of disseminating cultural information and values in societies with low literacy levels, in today's Laos the mass media have become the most influential source of information and influence, with Thai television dominating the Lao airwaves – and Vietnamese-style socialist realism still the model for the live performing arts. Although the troupes disseminate didactic messages deemed important by the central government, they are supported primarily by foreign aid agencies that also dictate their content. In the following article, Catherine Diamond traces the history of the three major performing arts in Laos, describes their present state, and assesses the difficulties they face in developing along their own creative and artistic paths. Catherine Diamond teaches theatre and ecology in literature at Soochow University in Taipei, Taiwan. She is a theatre reporter in Southeast Asia, and has previously written about theatre in Burma, Vietnam, Turkey, and the Czech Republic for NTQ.

IN JANUARY 2003, a grand ceremony marking the 650th anniversary of the founding of Lan Xang took place in the centre of Vientiane with the unveiling of King Fa Ngoum's statue.

The statue of King Fa Ngoum is not only meant to be a symbol for the nation but also to inspire courage among Lao people of all ethnic groups for national development. Dreams of a newly civilized nation comparable with the ancient kingdom are already afoot.<sup>1</sup>

King Fa Ngoum (1316–74) is credited with being the first Lao ruler to unite several kingdoms under one aegis, Lan Xang Hom Khao, the 'Land of a Million Elephants under the White Parasol'. By bringing with him important religious texts from the Khmer capital of Angkor and installing the sacred Phra Bang image of Buddha in the northern capital of Xiengthong that he renamed Luang Phrabang, he also helped establish Theravada Buddhism as the state religion.

The five-day ceremony celebrating King Fa Ngoum as a symbol of national identity included a parade of ethnic minorities, a religious procession featuring the gold Phra

Bang statue, and a procession escorting King Fa Ngoum and Queen Keokengga on elephants, as well as performances of singers and traditional folk dancers in the evening. In addition, 231 actors were directed to perform a modern drama detailing the exploits of the king. Every effort was made to recreate traditional costumes and props accurately representing his life and times. Boula Phanthavong, who wrote the script and directed it, also aimed to keep the flavour of linguistic antiquity of the historical texts on which he based his script, but he had to make concessions for the actors whose difficulty with the ancient words was the cause of hilarity during rehearsals.<sup>2</sup>

Recapturing a moment of glory belonging to the inception of a Laotian empire, the government in Vientiane hoped to inspire people with pride in their ancestors; yet Fa Ngoum established his capital in Luang Phrabang, not Vientiane and, despite the official rhetoric, it was the presence of the paladium of Luang Phrabang, the Phra Bang statue, that received the most reverence from the crowd. Threatened by powerful kingdoms in neighbouring Thailand, Cambodia, and

Vietnam during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; divided into the three internal kingdoms of Vientiane, Luang Phrabang, and Champasak in the eighteenth century; and then subjected to French colonial interference in the nineteenth: Laos has had little opportunity to consolidate its nationalism within its current borders. Since its establishment in 1975, the Lao People's Democratic Republic has struggled to develop a national identity that both has roots in Lao ethnicity and includes the many minority groups.

### Nationalist Project from Royal Antecedents

The government's current project to instil a sense of pride in the nation and its history has revolved around another key figure besides Fa Ngoum: King Anouvong (1804–29), the last king of Lan Xang. In contrast to Fa Ngoum, Anouvong, is more controversial.

The uprising of Chao Anou (Anouvong), King of Vientiane, against his Chakri [Thai] overlord in 1827 has become a legend central to modern Lao nationalism, as he was the last to attempt to revive the glories of Lan Xang. The story is surrounded by intense emotions and protected by an almost sacred untouchability that resists attempts to place his actions in historical perspective.<sup>3</sup>

His campaign to repatriate thousands of Lao people living in the Saraburi area of Thailand continues to be a source of contention today. In 2001, emotions ran high in Laos when Thai producers announced plans to make a film, *Thao Suranaree*, a tale of a legendary Thai heroine who was supposed to have thwarted Anouvong's invasion. In 1824, when the Thai king Rama II died and Anouvong thought the Thai would be busy fending off the British, he deceived local governors by telling them his army was marching to Bangkok to defend it against the British, and then tried to evacuate the Lao residents back to Vientiane.<sup>4</sup> One governor's wife, Suranaree,

gathered all the women and took the Lao guards by surprise when they were half-drunk and half-asleep. Their weapons were seized and the guards were killed. Anouvong sent down fifty men to see what was happening and they were ambushed. 3,000 soldiers were then sent but were routed. Thus the trickery of Suranaree marked the turn-



ing point in Anouvong's career and the end of his dreams for a greater Laos. When he retreated from the oncoming Thai armies, he fled to Hue in Vietnam. The Thai king was so infuriated with Anouvong's treachery, he ordered the total destruction of Vientiane (except for one temple). Anouvong and his family were captured and brought to Bangkok.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the differing national perspectives on Anouvong's act, it was not merely a question of one man's 'freedom fighter' being another man's 'terrorist', as the Lao ambassador to Thailand, Hiem Phommachanh, felt compelled publicly to question the motives behind the production. Casting doubt on whether the woman had even existed, he said the decision to make such a film was particularly insensitive toward the Lao people and would reopen old wounds.<sup>6</sup> The proposed Thai film brought to the surface unresolved tensions and the long simmering of Lao resentment. The ambassador leading the protest pointed out that:

*Anna and the King* was not allowed in Thailand because it was considered an affront to the reigning monarch, and Lao people likewise see this film as an affront. The Lao government will not infringe upon the right of the Thai producer but the film is different from *Pearl Harbor* and *Schindler's List* mentioned by the producers as they are based

on historical reality, but the Thai film is a matter of perspective and historical debate, as from the Lao perspective King Anouvong made the country strong and prosperous and struggled against Siam to rescue Lao people in Thai-held areas.<sup>7</sup>

Not content with making a single protest, the Ministry of Information and Culture decided to create an ongoing counter-history. Remarking that the Thai film 'insults the chastity of the king', Houmphanh Rattanavong, director of the Ministry's Cultural Research Institute, said it would respond by making dramas and paintings to show the bravery and sacrifice of King Anouvong.

In August 2001 the Ministry held a seminar to determine the proper historical reading of the event. Participants introduced new documents and wanted to establish a fund to support research on the King, further studying the information on palm leaf records in temples. They concluded that:

The fictional Yah Mo (Suranaree) character did not play any role in overcoming Anouvong. The Thai simply had more resources and bigger military to overcome the Lao king. . . . The Thai government tried to commit genocide, not only attempting to destroy the Lao people but also to eradicate the Lao name from the world map and make Lao people forget their citizenry or be turned into slaves. Even though King Anouvong died in war and his comrades were captured, Lao people refused to be servants of Siam.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the evident contentiousness of these issues, Grant Evans suggests that, while

international trade and intercourse traded in macro-conceptions of peoples, such as Lao and Siamese, among those at the Ayudhyan court and at the pinnacles of commerce, for most ordinary people, the differentiation between Siamese and Lao was irrelevant until the twentieth century. . . . The Lao court copied to some extent the style of the court in Ayudhya and later Bangkok just as the latter copied the style of the courts of Europe. The collapse of Lan Xang exaggerated the difference between the increasingly worldly and sophisticated Siamese and the increasingly parochial Lao courts.<sup>9</sup>

The Issan area of northeast Thailand remains an area where Thai and Lao cultures mingle and merge. Not only are the languages approximate, but the instrumental music,

singing, and storytelling of *molam* are shared. While hundreds of amateur performers in the border regions continue to develop aspects of their mutual heritage, those in Vientiane are firmly under the control of the socialist government. Craig Lockard here describes the growing discrepancy in the development of the Issan/Lao culture:

The local singing style (*molam*) draws from a wide repertoire including Lao historical epics, Buddhist stories, comic male-female interplay, courting songs, and wordplay. The *molam* form transcended mere entertainment; the musicians were expected to exercise spiritual power in local animism and utilize the strong tradition of improvisation to comment on current affairs . . . [while in Thailand] modern *molam* songs are adapted by rock bands and Isan (*sic*) youth became heavy-metal heroes after hooking up their instruments to amplifiers, in Laos, the *molam* has also been used for political purposes, to spread the messages desired by the government.<sup>10</sup>

Tension between Thailand and Laos, however, is more keenly felt in the capital, where the government is trying to create an identity that can withstand Thai cultural and economic dominance in the region.<sup>11</sup> The current sensitivities of Laos toward Thailand are not new, but a contemporary expression of a longstanding unequal relationship.

Since the court in Bangkok rose to unquestioned ascendancy in 1782 with the beginning of the current Chakri dynasty, Thai cultural influence has been overwhelmingly powerful in shaping the Lao performing arts:

Increasing Thai hegemony spread the Thai dance and drama tradition to Cambodia and Laos, and the rituals and entertainment of the tiny Lao courts were modelled along Thai lines. The repertoire of the Royal Lao Ballet mainly consisted of Thai-derived dances, often solo numbers or small-group compositions performed solely by female dancers.<sup>12</sup>

### Thai versus Vietnamese Paradigms

Historically, when the Lao kings felt threatened by Thai hegemony, they would turn for support to their powerful neighbour to the east, Vietnam.<sup>13</sup> In recent times, a similar practice has been adopted. The present-day socialist Lao People's Democratic Republic



During the Lao New Year in Luang Phrabang, the *Ramayana (Phralak Phraram)* is performed with masks for the demons and monkeys, and gold crowns for the heroes, Rama and Lakshama, Phraram and Phralak respectively. Photo: Melanie Micco.

not only owes its existence in part to Vietnamese assistance in the struggle against the American-backed Royal Lao Government (RLG), but also continues to share in warm political relations with Hanoi. Despite the dissolution of the Soviet Bloc that once offered sustenance and cultural direction to both countries, Laos continues to follow Vietnam's model of socialist realism to create its new theatrical works.

Lao culture, especially in the capital Vientiane, now contains the uneasy mix of both influences – an ancient Hindu culture of Theravada Buddhism, with its folk stories, legends and epics based on the *jatakas*,<sup>14</sup> the Buddhist rebirth stories, that it shares with Thailand on one hand,<sup>15</sup> and the French colonial experience and contemporary socialist realism it has adopted from Vietnam on the other. Lao musicians, directors, actors, dancers, and playwrights travel to both countries to receive further training although the resulting professional styles, ideological emphases, and aesthetic models reflect a certain schizophrenia. Today it is Thai television that claims large Lao audiences, not only through

Thai drama serials but also by serving as the main conduit for western programmes.<sup>16</sup>

Modernization has exacerbated the difference between the Thai centre and the Lao periphery. Thus the current paradigm of Thailand exemplifying Asian modernity – wealthy and dynamic, but racked by crime, disease, drugs, and moral decline – that the Lao envy but also view with horror has evolved from a much earlier inequity. The conservative society and suspicious socialist government of Laos accepts Thai economic investment, Thai musicians, Thai manufactured goods, and Thai television dramas, but is adamant in repulsing Thailand's mores and political model.

The split is between not only ancient and modern, but the more deep-seated Thai influence that inspires both hostile and envious feelings towards Thailand's clear alliance with the capitalist West, and the newer socialist brotherhood offered by Vietnam that, though existing mostly in official circles, has become increasingly interdependent as the socialist world shrank at the end of the twentieth century.<sup>17</sup>



The current state of the performing arts in Laos reflects its longstanding ambiguity towards its western neighbour, and its official friendliness with its eastern neighbour. Both Thailand and Vietnam have had an influence on how the arts have developed. The troupes in Vientiane are clearly under the aegis of the Ministry of Information and Culture, whose cultural policy includes:

preserving and revitalizing cultural heritage by integrating vernacular cultures – folk tales and folk songs, handicrafts and arts, museums and archaeological sites – into everyday life, as well as drawing upon innovation and eradicating inappropriate traditions.<sup>18</sup>

### Three Types of Lao Theatre

The overt socialist realism and agit-prop performances have contained and curtailed almost all creativity in the dramatic arts. In the first flush of revolutionary victory, such works might have aroused patriotic passions, but now audiences have had their fill, and artists themselves are fatigued with the same lacklustre material and approaches, but are unable to break away. As a result, the population watches Thai television dramas not only for entertainment but also for stories more relevant to their private lives.

Performance practitioners are trapped in a dilemma both financial and artistic. First, they receive only insubstantial stipends from the government, and secondly much of their support comes from UNICEF and other international aid agencies that wish to use the arts for non-artistic purposes. Theatre in the capital has become the handmaiden of well-meaning foreign non-governmental organizations at the behest of the Lao PDR government and rarely performs except to address social issues.<sup>19</sup>

Without the artistry of a Bertolt Brecht, the humour of the San Francisco Mime Troupe, or the interactive imagination of the Thai troupe Maya or the Filipino PETA, Lao propaganda plays doubtfully achieve the social results they aim for, though they most certainly contribute to a disaffection with theatre as an art form. When the popular forms such as *lam leuang*, the Lao Opera in which musi-

cal virtuosity is the main draw, are employed to perform one more anti-drug play, spectators not only tire of the redundant message, but turn away from their traditional art in favour of Thai soap operas.<sup>20</sup>

While inadvertently damaging traditional forms, the government also does the modern arts no favour with its directives. Without popular roots, the modern spoken drama is particularly vulnerable to propagandistic abuse, and because it is not permitted to develop along its own creative course, but kept artificially alive by the government, it has come to be marked by the growing gap between what the government wants the troupes to present and what people want to watch.

By not allowing the modern performing arts to develop their own expression of social reality, the government is giving people only two choices—lacklustre propaganda that is Lao, or juicy melodrama that is Thai. Perhaps the grand spectacular depicting the reign of Fa Ngoum momentarily bridged the gap, but such large-scale productions are a rarity, especially for the rural majority.<sup>21</sup>

Three forms of theatrical performance exist on the Lao government's nationalist agenda: *lam leuang*, the Lao Opera; *lakhon tukata*, puppetry; and *lakhon vao*, spoken drama. None of these forms is taught at the National School of Music and Dance, where students select from courses in western classical music and ballet, or folk music, folk dance, and Lao classical music and dance.<sup>22</sup> Instead, in the case of spoken drama, current performers, directors, and playwrights were primarily trained in Vietnam and Russia; the puppet troupe in Bulgaria, and more recently by French collaborators; and only Lao Opera, the single indigenous form, continues to draw masters from within village communities.

### *Lam Leuang: the Lao Opera*

According to director Thongpad Lattikone, the current troupe of [*mo*]*lam leuang* (literally 'singing story'), was established as 'Lao Opera' and formed as a national group in 1972.<sup>23</sup> *Molam* is derived from *mo*, 'expert', and *lam*, 'to sing or chant'. Initially, a single



Lao Opera (*lam leuang*) Theatre in Vientiane. Photos in this feature by the author unless otherwise credited.

singer played a variety of characters, displaying virtuosity not only in singing but also in the multiplicity of roles with changes of costume and movement. It has evolved into a group performance, but the performers' singing talent remains their most important quality. *Leuang*

signifies myth, narrative, story, or legend. It is synonymous with the word *phiine*, but with one subtle distinction: *lam phiine* signifies to sing a myth, story, or legend, while *lam leuang* means to sing a myth, story, legend, narrative, epic, or drama. Compared with *lam phiine*, the *lam leuang* presents a more modern character, as realistic and lifelike. It is a recent creation and is the fruit of the development of *lam phiine*.<sup>24</sup>

The national troupe, however, likes to emphasize the antiquity of its art, saying that its material originated during Fa Ngoum's reign, along with the establishment of Buddhism.

*Lam leuang* began with a single monk chanting the story to people in temples and then was joined by others to tell the story. When the monks left the temple, they continued by using masks to paint pictures of various characters so that audiences knew who they were in the story. Later sound was added and, instead of masks, they started to paint their faces. The character's clothing accurately reflected the historic styles worn at the time in Luang Phrabang province.<sup>25</sup>

Current practice, however, stems from developments in southern Laos during the early twentieth century. Although *lam leuang* has developed along regional music lines that are unique to Laos, it shares several characteristics with *likay* in Thailand and *yike* in Cambodia. Brandon suggests that Thai *likay* was introduced into Laos via north-east Thailand, where many Lao live, but, as Miller points out, *likay* is a central Thai form, and it is not likely to have been easily adapted by the Lao on either side of the Mekong:

It is *ligeh's* (*likay*)<sup>26</sup> foreignness that makes it difficult to understand its introduction into the Lao-speaking northeast. Its language is not only Siamese but the musical instruments were also Siamese as was the singing style. What probably arrested the interest of the northeasterners were *ligeh's* visual aspects: the brilliantly painted backdrops, colourful costumes vaguely related to those of Siamese *lakon* and *khon* dance dramas, and glittering jewellery. While the northeastern people eventually realized they could not copy *ligeh's* Siamese musical characteristics, they slavishly imitated the visual aspects, with the result that casual observers could not tell the difference.<sup>27</sup>

One of Miller's informants, Tawin Boot-ta, said that *ligeh-lao* [*likay lao*] was never very popular and tended to disappear when the authentic *ligeh-tai* [*likay thai*] troupes began

coming to the area about 1944. He claimed that a more important factor in the development of *mawlum moo* (group *molam*) was *lum ruang* (*lam leuang*), a variation of *lum pun* (a well-established genre with professional singers), in which the singer acts out the story by changing costumes or hats and moving about as if to be several characters. He said *lam leuang* emerged in Laos about 1932, and used plots based on well-known stories: *Nang Daeng-awn* (*Nang Taeng Aun*), *Sang Sinsai* (*Sang Sinxay*), *Soorivong* (*Sourivong*), and *Prince Wetsundawn* (*Phra Vetsandone*).<sup>28</sup>

During the socialist struggle in the 1970s, *lam leuang* was brought within the nationalizing orbit and westernizing influences of Thailand. Miller comments that the rate of change brought about by outside influences was dramatically accelerated with the introduction of western popular music into rural northeast Thailand:

Troupes scrambled to keep up with each other in the latest fashion; a leading troupe discovers an innovation and all others must then follow suit or lose their fickle audiences. Things western and modern are good; things Lao are bad. The intrusion of popular songs into the actual story is the most disturbing change today, and this development which began only about 1973 is having a profound effect. A few troupes have already replaced the *kaen* (*khene*) with an electronic organ.<sup>29</sup>

### Ancient Tales and Modern Propaganda

While the performance style was taking its cue from gaudy Thai troupes, the Ministry, during the same period, contracted writers to write about the progress in agriculture, education, and news of the country, including the floods that destroyed the rice crop in the north.<sup>30</sup> Compton writes that although the development of radio broadcasting helped individual performers reach much wider audiences, even then 'some *mohlam* who were hired to sing over the radio stations during the 1960s and 1970s chose to remain anonymous because of the propagandistic nature of the topics about which they were asked to sing'.<sup>31</sup>

The national *lam leuang* troupe now performs two kinds of plays: traditional ones derived from legendary epics and folk tales

recited all over the country by monks, such as *Sithon and Manola* (the names of the male and female protagonists), *Four Brothers* (*Champa Si Ton*), and the especially popular *Sang Sinxay*. The troupe must also perform modern propaganda plays which have socialist-realist themes of national reconstruction or social issues deemed important by NGOs.

Although Compton contends that Laos, like other socialist countries, has generally viewed the performing arts as having an important role in the development of the socialist state, believing that they can move and inform people better than the written word where there is a high rate of illiteracy, much of their direction is influenced by outside groups. The directors contend that the public prefers the traditional stories, but they try to add two new plays to their repertoire each year, such as those being reviewed in 2003, *Crimes for Love* and *A Plan to Stop Drug Addiction*. These didactic scripts were written by *lam leuang* masters in other provinces who had been contracted to apply the government's political and social agendas to the traditional singing form. Preparing them is a lengthy process because they have both to pass the censors and be reworked to suit the actors.

The performers are aware of the many different demands placed on their art and the difficulty of maintaining their own standards. Thongpad Lattikone comments:

It is widely acknowledged that Lao opera is of higher quality than the Thai style because Laos has held on to its heritage and traditions through the stories that its opera groups perform, but we lack the appropriate dance schools to be able to keep the tradition alive, and if we are not careful we may see the disappearance of this fine form of cultural expression in the near future.<sup>32</sup>

The two forces shown influencing traditional performance in the 1970s almost define them in the twentieth-first century. The need to appeal to youth and the simplistic agit-prop texts are the Scylla and Charybdis of contemporary performers. While Thai-style pop music performances promulgating anti-drug messages play to thousands in Laos, *lam leuang* performances of contemporary texts

have to be preceded by popular song-and-dance 'concerts' in order to attract an audience that would not be drawn by the drama alone.

In the past, rural communities would save up to hire the troupe for a temple festival, a house-warming party, or a novice initiation ceremony. Some of the ticket money was also used to renovate temples. The *lam leuang* performers admit that young people are not so interested in the form; they prefer to roam about on motorcycles, dance to rock music, and watch Thai serials. Despite the shift of interest, the director believes,

This kind of opera has the capacity to work well with modern economic and cultural concerns but it will only be able to fit into the new world order if it is maintained and developed by a new generation of Lao literati.<sup>33</sup>

Thus he circumspectly acknowledges that not only do traditional stories no longer hold much appeal for the younger generation but the simplicity of the modern works have also failed to attract new younger audiences.

### Performance and Repertoire

The troupe now has a new theatre with air-conditioned offices in the centre of Vientiane built after the old wooden one burnt down in 2001; but it rarely performs there, as it is usually commissioned to perform outside the city. Lattikone contends, 'We enjoy travelling around the country and performing our traditional art. Because of the popularity of Lao opera we find it easy to raise funds to keep the group afloat.'<sup>34</sup> An average concert tour in the province of Vientiane costs about three hundred dollars, while tours in the distant provinces costs about five hundred because of the difficulty of travelling on poor roads.

When the troupe travels to the countryside it brings its own eight-by-ten-metre stage. Unlike most private troupes, it possesses a truck which allows it to move with all its props and costumes. The performances begin at eight in the evening and go on for five or six hours. The traditional performance begins with *wai khu*, a fifteen-minute prayer to past masters and teachers with offerings of incense,

an egg, flowers, and with a bowl of water to sprinkle on the performers.

Despite the new indoor theatre, performances are only given during the dry season from October to March. During the rainy season, the troupe remains at the theatre, training new members and rehearsing new plays. Masters of *lam leuang* do not come from any institution, but are brought in from rural communities. Teaching remains a process of an older master passing on technique to a younger pupil.

The current repertoire of the troupe comprises twenty plots, but the stories are not as important as the singing abilities of the performers. Sinouane Chanthasay, one of the main actors who plays the hero roles, was drawn from his folk-singing background, and auditions for the group still focus on the performer's singing abilities as well as stage presence and pleasant appearance. The troupe has twenty-seven performers, eleven of whom are women. Musicians from outside are often brought in to assist with the instrumental accompaniment.

The characters they play are role-types and each actor is trained for a particular type, in contrast to the *molam*, who would play all the roles himself. Three actors have been trained for the main role of the hero in case one is indisposed. Although the hero and heroine roles are the highest in the troupe's hierarchy, the clowns also remain popular favourites. Usually two clowns perform together, but, depending on the play or the desires of the sponsor, up to six clowns may appear.<sup>35</sup> They often wear the white patch on the nose that designates the clown (*chou*) role in Chinese opera and has now been adopted through much of southeast Asian theatre.<sup>36</sup>

When the troupe travels outside the capital, it depends upon private and community sponsorship and the sponsors determine the programme. The eponymous *Sang Sinxay* is a perennial favourite. Based on the Indian *Pan-nasa Jataka*, the Lao version is a seventeenth-century, twelve-thousand-line poem usually ascribed to a poet named Pangkam.<sup>37</sup> The story involves the adventures of three unusual brothers – Siho, (Great Elephant), Sangthong (Golden Snail), and Sinxay (Victorious



Merit), a boy born with a bow and arrow in his hands.

The central plot concerns a king whose beloved sister is abducted by an ogre (*nyak*) ruler who transforms himself into a hawk to carry her away. Later, the king marries seven sisters, and when two of his queens give birth to the strange children, he exiles them. When grown up, the three brothers are called upon to rescue their aunt, who has since become happily married to the ogre king and borne him a son. On their way, the brothers encounter many adventures, including Sinxay's repulsion of a demoness disguised as a voluptuous woman, though he does allow himself a dalliance with the *kinnari*, a flock of beautiful bird-women. Then a fierce battle ensues as they recapture the reluctant queen.

Among the most moving parts of the poem are those of the ogre king lamenting the capture of his queen, and her lament after his death.<sup>38</sup> Confrontation between good and evil characters provides a good deal of the stage action, but as *lam leuang* was originally performed by a single *molam* who would play all the roles himself, there are few actual fight sequences and little martial choreography. Instead combatants express anger and fear through gestures and facial expressions rather than engaging in combat.

*Lam leuang* is shown on television for four or five hours at the weekend. Chanthasay believes that television actually serves as a good advertisement, since potential sponsors see the shows and decide which they would like for a live performance.

### *Lakhon Tukata*

The creation of puppetry in the Luang Phrabang court is said to date from Fa Ngoum's reign in 1353; but the court puppets, *ipok* (*epok*) – though preserved in the royal palace, and formerly brought out only at Pimay (New Year) or the end of Buddhist Lent – no longer perform. A new puppet troupe, *lakhon tukata*, was, however, developed from the special relationship between Laos and Bulgaria when, in 1978, twenty students were sent to Bulgaria to learn both puppet-making and its performing techniques.<sup>39</sup>

Ostensibly the *tukata* troupe performs both traditional and modern plays, but it is primarily committed to propagandistic productions focused on modern themes. It uses two kinds of puppets – rod and glove – many of which have a recognizable Eastern European design and style. In 2002, however, Michel Laubu, director of the French Turak Puppet Troupe, came to Vientiane to help create puppets made of found objects, such as pieces of bamboo, bark, coconuts, and discarded tins and cloth. The puppeteers of this new style called themselves *Kabong Lao*, or the Lao Torch. Although their puppets are quite distinct and more artistically compelling, they too, primarily perform didactic plays.

The troupe receives a small stipend from the government, but depends primarily on UNICEF sponsorship and bears the UNICEF logo on its curtain. UNICEF does not produce the scripts as such, but as anti-drug and HIV-AIDS prevention campaigns are its main concerns, the troupe creates the scripts for UNICEF'S approval. Thus not only does its existence depend on the international agency, but its repertoire is determined by its aims, and the troupe appears to have little artistic autonomy.

Although the other performing arts, such as *lam leuang* and *lakhon vao* (the spoken drama), have tried to tap into the UNICEF largesse, they have been largely unsuccessful, receiving only occasional funding for individual shows. The puppet theatre is less expensive and more streamlined. A large production, however, requires about eighteen puppeteers and uses taped music. Sometimes the puppeteers use their own voices and sometimes the whole performance – voices and music – is taped. With a 'cast' of twenty puppets, it takes up to three months to put together a new piece.

The troupe has its own small rehearsal space in downtown Vientiane and can give performances in that space, since the small puppet stage can be set up anywhere. As the *tukata* troupe rarely does traditional plays, it is not tied to the lunar calendar, yet because of the difficulty of travel most performances still occur during the dry season. The puppeteers bring their own lights, tape deck,



Above: UNICEF-sponsored *lakhon tukata* troupe presenting an HIV-AIDS prevention play. Below right: *lakhon tukata* puppeteers manipulating a large puppet about to burst into song.

sound equipment, and electric generator, all supplied by UNICEF. When they travel to the villages, they stay in people's homes, as arranged by the village headman.

### The Didactic Puppet Repertoire

In 2002, the troupe gave fourteen performances around the country, and the puppeteers claim their sense of achievement depends on whether they can maintain the audience's attention for the duration of the show. In 2003 they were preparing an anti-HIV-AIDS glove-puppet play to take to a puppet competition in France. The opening scene began with a simple message. A family is watching television as a character in the television frame pontificates about AIDS prevention, directing his words towards the son. (The technique comically reverses the common experience, as many people in Laos now receive information via television.) As a reward for understanding the message, the son receives money from his parents for English classes (which might not go down well in France, which has made strenuous efforts to preserve a Francophone tradition in its former Indochinese colonies).

Currently almost all puppet performances are circumscribed by three social topics: AIDS awareness and prevention; anti-drug campaigns aimed at young people; and education about UXO (unexploded ordinance) – the shells and landmines that still litter much of the country's northeast region that was penetrated by Viet Minh and bombed by the

United States. Ignorance alone is not responsible for people getting killed and wounded by UXO, but also poverty, as poor peasants retrieve the explosives to use for fishing or sell as scrap metal. Most fatalities, however, occur simply when a mine is set off by a farmer's plough.



A community-awareness programme tours the country, singing songs about the dangers of UXO, inviting children to sing along, and then testing the kids' recognition skills of the different kinds of bombs. One show, *Never Forget*, featured a little boy blinded by a landmine and no longer able to attend school, while others actually show villagers getting injured with the 'Bang!' of the bomb going off providing the eagerly expected climax to each scenario. A provincial coordinator for the programme, Khongsy Souda, does a comedy routine in drag to keep the tone light. He says that before the shows started, people would often try to defuse the bombs themselves, but now more are reporting them to the authorities.<sup>40</sup>

Despite monetary limitations and the imposition of a didactic repertoire, members of the troupe continue to develop their presentational skills for artistic purposes, such as creating life-sized puppets. Manipulated by three puppeteers, one for each hand and another controlling the feet, one such puppet was dressed in the Lao peasant costume of a simple cotton shirt, sarong, and sash around the waist, clutching a microphone. As a taped musician crooned a tune about love and the beauties of nature, the puppet swayed and gesticulated with realistic grace. The puppeteers kept their faces bowed and thus their own presence was de-animated, allowing the puppet to command one's focus. Although the song was newly written, it was not a call to social action, and along with the mimetic movements of the puppet, it provided a charming interlude.

### *Lakhon Vao*

The spoken drama is the least funded and the most constricted of the performing arts. While cute puppets mouthing the dangers of drug addiction can have a certain poignancy, live actors propounding the same message do not achieve the same appeal; nor does spoken drama have *lam leuang's* deep musical roots in the culture. And so the spoken drama struggles, receiving little international or local community funding, nor extra government money to compensate. At the same

time, it is the form most tied to the government agenda, presenting only contemporary propaganda.

Unlike Vietnam, Laos has not acquired a repertoire of French plays translated into Lao and, unlike in Cambodia, its spoken drama practitioners seem to have little tradition of previous French training – yet its genesis might owe some inspiration to Molière's social satires. Believing that the Lao spoken drama originated in stories broadcast on the radio in the 1940s,<sup>41</sup> Kham Mao, the current director of the spoken theatre troupe, contends that the first appeared in 1943: two satirical comedies that allowed the Lao to laugh at themselves. *Mr Self-Impressed (Ba Ngot)* satirized a man of high rank who forgot himself, reflecting the ways of the French-educated elite who were then attempting to control the country. The other play revolved around the karmatic belief that he who does evil receives evil, and satirized the exploits of a man whose excessive acts humorously contravened ethical norms.<sup>42</sup> These plays were performed only in Vientiane, where, during the intervening war years, it seems a complete hiatus of theatrical activity occurred.

Elsewhere in the country, the army used local *molam* troupes to propagandize the revolutionary cause and keep up morale; however, spoken drama was not used for this purpose as it was in Vietnam. Then:

Soon after liberation, the government of Lao PDR adopted the policy of promoting national culture and of preserving national and progressive aspects as well as the characteristics of local folklore of all ethnic groups.<sup>43</sup>

But we have little information about the contribution of spoken drama under this policy.

### *Fragrant Red Lotus*

The next record of a performance was in 1984 when a troupe was assembled to prepare a new drama to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the liberation victory in 1975. The result was the first major play and production of a spoken drama in the Lao Republic, *Fragrant Red Lotus (Hom Kin Bouadeng)* written by Dara Kanlaya, developed from one of

her short stories. This went through several versions until it was performed in 1985, and in 1987 was made into a film<sup>44</sup> that altered the plot further. Both versions were popular with the public and it remains Laos's best known modern play.

*Red Lotus*, a common Lao name for a girl, combines revolutionary fervour with a love story, but its various configurations reveal the negotiations between the writer and the government ministries. The four-act, two-hour play emerged from a special six-month workshop conducted by a Russian-trained writer from Hanoi who came to Vientiane to assist in the development of Lao theatre. Not only were all the writers involved novice playwrights, but the actors, too, were first-time performers.

Kanlaya had written a story in the 1960s about an incident she had heard as a child, of a girl who had been raped by her stepfather and could not tell her mother about it. When the girl finds herself pregnant, she kills herself. To this was added the girl's love for a boy who was not rich enough to satisfy her ambitious mother. The boy leaves to fight at the front, and another, richer young man falls in love with the girl and tries to help her out of her predicament. But knowing her stepfather to be a spy and fearing that if she accuses him he will create trouble for her boyfriend, she refuses to take this course. Then the boyfriend's death is reported and all hope is lost.

Needless to say, all this tragedy was not what the Ministry of Information and Culture wanted to propagate. Changes were recommended and followed – the boyfriend was not really killed and comes back; the girl was not really raped but had only suffered an attempted attack (as the heroine in a socialist drama must be pure); and the villainous stepfather is punished. This version received praise from both the army and government.

In order to write about the heroine realistically, Kanlaya researched the lives of the women in villages who supported the troops involved in the struggle for liberation. The main idea she wanted to communicate with her protagonist was that *Red Lotus* had to struggle every step of the way, that she con-

tinually had to fight to succeed. Over forty people were involved in the production, which played to audiences in the thousands.

However, this new style of theatre caused some bemusement among the spectators, who criticized anything that lacked complete realism. Thus, when *Red Lotus* washed her face from a basin, the spectators complained there was no water in it. Lao women are famous for their weaving, and the production not only required a real loom on stage, but the actress had to use it properly or receive criticism from the weavers in the audience. The Vietnamese teacher found this demand for realistic detail both frustrating and amusing, implying that his Vietnamese audiences were a little more sophisticated in regard to theatrical convention.

As a former deputy director of the literature department in the Ministry, Kanlaya says she has recommended adding a drama course to the National School of Music and Dance, but so far her suggestion has gone unheeded.<sup>45</sup> Noting that while the spoken drama troupe has no theatre of its own and cannot afford to use the grand National Cultural Hall,<sup>46</sup> and that the *lam leuang* theatre is empty a good part of the year, she has also suggested that the various groups pool their resources to cut down on expenses.

Kanlaya retired from public service in 1996 in order to return to her writing and run a family publishing business. She has never written another play, but is still interested in having a hand in the theatre; however, she wants to have nothing more to do with ministries and bureaucracies, but instead is contemplating forming an amateur troupe in which people do not use the excuse of the lack of money to prevent them from putting on a play. Moreover, such a group would not have to serve the government agenda and, although it might still be subject to censorship, it would not be restricted to producing anti-drug and anti-AIDS parables.<sup>47</sup>

### The Repertoire of Spoken Drama

By 1995, the spoken drama troupe had a standard repertoire of ten dramas, and since then it has introduced two new plays a year.



In 2000, the director Hongnakorn Thomphara was directing *Work in the Field Awaits* (*Naa-thong Ngaan Khoi*), a piece about stopping the cultivation of opium poppies, as is currently the practice of ethnic minorities, including the Hmong. Despite the appearance of its tough anti-drug stance, the Lao government has in the past depended heavily on the income from opium and it is likely that in some quarters continues to do so. Thus a play in which the parents are opium farmers and their children are trying to persuade them to give it up rings hollow when four-fifths of the populace live below the poverty line and no other crop brings in the same kind of revenue.

In 2002, one of the two new plays presented was originally called *Brother Viet* (*Ai Viet*), referring to the time when the Pathet Lao and Vietnamese soldiers fought in the field together against the Royalist troops. When the Lao soldiers could not remember the names of individual Vietnamese, they addressed them as 'Brother Viet'. But the censors saw a problem in the title, because Lao distinguishes between older and younger brothers, implying different levels of respect and obedience. So the name was changed to *Friends in the Field of War* (*Pheuan Houam Lop*). Another source of contention was that the main Vietnamese soldier dies in action. Someone in the Ministry thought this was unsuitable and might be misinterpreted by the Vietnamese, and that therefore the Lao soldier must also die. Others argued that since the Vietnamese was only coming to assist the Lao, his death was not symbolic of defeat or dishonour, as it would be if the Lao were shown dying on his native soil. Finally, it was decided that the Vietnamese soldier should *almost* die.

Later in the year, the company produced a comedy, *Money and Heart* (*Ngeun Lae Nam Chai*), whose storyline suggested that while money was desirable and could be used to improve life, it was not everything. A convoluted plot involves an old man who wins a lottery prize but does not know it until he reads about it in the newspaper. A gang of robbers plan to trick him out of his prize. The greedy old man is vulnerable to their machi-

nations but is rescued by a hero and heroine, while the robbers' plots fail due to their own in-fighting.

The double bind the troupe finds itself in, however, between fulfilling its government mandate and trying to appeal to the audiences' desire for entertainment, was exemplified in a recent performance at a special camp for several thousand children. The troupe received five hundred dollars from UNICEF to present a play, but when the organizers saw the planned show at the dress rehearsal they found it unsuitable for children. Creating a script based on a well-known folk tale, *Seven Daughters* (*Luk Saaw Thang Chet*), the troupe had modernized it, ostensibly to raise gender issues.

The father of a family is so distraught because he has only daughters that he falls ill. The organizers, however, considered the daughters' behaviour vulgar and wild; and that the actresses were influenced by Thai television in portraying girls with puerile mannerisms. That the doctor who attends the sick father is gay and comes on with his boy attendant caused further displeasure.

The director agreed to present an alternative – an anti-drugs play about a boy who leaves school, fights with his parents, runs off with a friend, and is caught with drugs by the police, who tell his parents to take better care of their child. The boy then promises to return to school. Although the organizers let it be presented, they found it disappointingly unimaginative and simplistic. Thomphara wistfully hoped the future would see a professional company emerge; but in 2003, as he departed for a three-month training course in Vietnam, the company was writing another anti-AIDS play to submit to the Ministry and then to UNICEF.<sup>48</sup>

The troupe consists of fourteen artists who perform mostly in Vientiane, both because they do not have money to tour and do not possess a truck like the *lam leuang* troupe. And, unlike *lam leuang*, which uses its television appearances to advertise itself to its prospective community sponsors, *lakhon vao* continues to debate whether or not to appear on television. Thomphara explains that they would have to pay for a television appear-



Rehearsal of *Work in the Field Awaits* by the spoken drama troupe (*lakhon vao*), 2000.

ance, which suggests a serious lack of collaboration between the government agencies.

In addition, whereas students of music and dance can find work in hotels and restaurants, actors have a difficult time supporting themselves. Kanlaya has suggested that money spent on lavish dance costumes could be used on the development of playwriting and upgrading the level of language in the current drama productions.

Somsack Duangpanya, a journalist who covers the cultural beat for the English-language newspaper, the *Vientiane Times*, contends that any new ideas for the theatre will have to come from foreign funding organizations, as the government does little but approve their programmes. So foreign money determines the topics and often decides the genre. As a result, all the groups copy each other, afraid to do anything new, because if they do not attract audiences the organization will not fund them again. Performances are frequently geared towards teenagers and are preceded by a pop music and dance show, or if it can be afforded, a television star is included.

Somsack Duangpanya believes *lam leuang* is dying because it will not or cannot introduce new material and has become stagnant. He remembers enjoying it as a child, although he admits that even then his classmates were not so interested.<sup>49</sup> As a final irony, after hav-

ing been required to follow a didactic line modelled on Vietnam's socialist theatre, the performing arts now find that even their content about AIDS and drugs is being more widely disseminated by the plots in the Thai serials, albeit in a more sensational and less educational fashion.

### Challenges of the Future

At the beginning of 2003, the Ministry of Information and Culture held a three-day conference to review its past performance and map a course for the future. Meeting in the National Cultural Hall, the participants worried about the downturn in the world economy and how it would affect their international sponsors. Noting that competition for aid would be more fierce, the dramatists prepared themselves for some difficult times. Closer to home, the week before, a bus on the main road between Vientiane and Luang Phrabang was attacked. Many Lao passengers were killed, as were two unlucky Swiss cyclists, whose deaths brought the news to the international press.

It was suspected that the 'bandits' were discontented Hmong who have made trouble for the socialist government since the 1970s, when hundreds of thousands were employed by the United States to combat Viet Minh and Pathet Lao forces. Though many

were subsequently evacuated to the US, those who remained are a constant irritant to the Vientiane government, and despite efforts to make the workers' state one of ethnic equality, this is still not the reality.<sup>50</sup> Thus the dramatists were enjoined to make greater efforts to include the forty-nine ethnic minorities in their scripts and productions.<sup>51</sup>

The problems in this small country are evident, but whether or not the performing arts can be made directly to improve social conditions remains open to question. The troupes have been successful in presenting information and educating the public, but remain unable to provide an entertainment that feeds the artistic needs of the people.<sup>52</sup>

The cultural workers in Vientiane have so far been unable to compete with the raunchy performances of the amateur *molam* groups in the smaller towns and villages. Statues and representations of distant kings are less compelling than the travails of the poor people presented in traditional stories that at least still attract middle-aged and older audiences. A character who captures the imagination and sympathy of the younger people does not seem to have emerged, with the exception of the popular Red Lotus, but as a revolutionary heroine she now needs updating, a newer context to revitalize her image in the contemporary society.

Not far from the Cultural Hall, at the Talaat Sao or Morning Market, is an overwhelming display of thousands of silk weavings by Lao village women. Aside from regional differences, an infinite variety is represented in these textiles from within what appears to be a single tradition. The recurring patterns of abstracted natural elements of birds, rivers, and *nagas*, the snakes with their diamond-shaped heads, are all presented in breath-taking combinations of colours, dimensions, and textures, each weaving unique, however similar to others, and all beautiful. Deservedly world famous, these products of Lao villagers not only express their cultural identity but also their individual artistic impulse and technical prowess. They keep alive their art and develop it, experimenting with the tradition, expanding its parameters without losing its distinctive qualities.

There has been a weaving renaissance in Laos, testimony to the incredible versatility of Lao weavers and their ability to adapt to changing times . . . Contemporary weavers no longer confine themselves to traditional techniques determined by ethnic group. Young weavers now draw upon a wide design repertoire to weave their fabrics. Commercialization and the blurring of group distinctions have diminished the significance of many designs. The result is beautifully woven songs without words.<sup>53</sup>

Although many Lao weavings are now sold in the tourist trade, and no doubt tourist tastes have impacted their production, Lao textiles might offer a more comprehensive and richer model for the Lao performing arts than the vapid commercial soap operas from Thailand and the dry socialist realism that is already being jettisoned in Vietnam.

Sponsoring language-based arts always poses difficulties for governments, especially socialist regimes that tend toward the view that if the arts are not actively supporting their agendas they are obstructing them. The visual abstractions in Lao textiles present no such dilemmas and are an obvious source of national pride, as evinced by the weaving heroine of *Fragrant Red Lotus*.

The female weaver is at the heart of the culture of Laos, and if the participants of the cultural conference down the street could see her as a muse for the performing arts rather than the foreign models and historical kings, not only the traditional *lam leuang* but the modern *lakhon vao* might be revitalized with a contemporary native relevance. The brave female weaver Hom Kin Bouadeng could well be Laos's answer to the Thai heroine Thao Suranaree.

#### Notes and References:

*A special note of thanks to the National Science Council of Taiwan for supporting this research, and to Douangchampany Vouthisouk for his assistance in translating.*

1. Somsack Pongkhao, 'A New National Symbol is Born', *Vientiane Times*, 24–26 December 2002.
2. Somsack Pongkhao, 'Fa Ngoum Performers Say They are Ready to Impress', *Vientiane Times*, 2 January 2003.
3. Grant Evans, *A Short History of Laos* (Chiangmai: Silkworm, 2002), p. 25.
4. Anouvong was initially well liked in the Thai court; however, he overestimated his position. When he



Restaurant performance in Luang Phrabang of court dances. Photo: Melanie Micco.

attended the royal cremation for Rama II, he requested that the new king, Rama III, return the Lao dancers and artisans residing in the Thai court but was given only one singer. See David K. Wyatt, *Studies in Thai History* (Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 1994), p. 24.

5. M.L. Manich Jumsai, *History of Laos* (Bangkok: Chalermnit, 2000), p. 184–8.

6. Hiem Phommachanh, 'Controversy over Thai Film', *Vientiane Times*, 27–30 July 2001.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Phonekeo Vorakhoun, 'A Look Back into the Past', *Vientiane Times*, 14–17 September 2001.

9. Evans, p. 37.

10. Craig Lockard, *Dance of Life* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998; Chiangmai: Silkworm), p. 166–85.

11. A long history of territorial disputes and pent-up resentment at Thailand's overwhelming economic and political dominance 'are things that Thailand must take into consideration, not only in its relations with Cambodia, but also other neighbouring countries such as Burma and Laos,' said former foreign minister Surin Pisuwan. See Songpol Kaopatuttip and Tunya Sukpanich, 'Making an Enemy out of Misunderstanding', *Bangkok Post*, 2 February 2003.

12. Jukka O. Miettinen, *Classical Dance and Theatre in Southeast Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 147. In Luang Phrabang some of the court traditions for New Year's parades and tourist performances continue to be utilized. 'Luang Phrabang's classical dancing and traditional music have their own particular style that differs from that in Vientiane. These forms and the great traditional ceremonies have only survived in parts. The musical repertoire used in the religious ceremonies has fared better than its courtly counterpart.

Classical dancing and music have suffered a long period of decline and have consequently lost their vitality. Part of the repertoire began being revived in 1986.' See Douangchampany Vouthisouk, 'Luangphrabang', Unpublished essay, 5 November 2001.

In particular, the *ipok* puppet theatre and sections of *Phralak Phraram*, the Lao *Ramayana* dance-drama, have been resurrected. In accordance with the custom of the Lao court that favoured smaller and shorter portions of the epic rather than lengthy performances, the Lao government has produced the section portraying the golden deer and the abduction of Sita. During the Lao New Year in Luang Phrabang, *Phralak Phraram* is performed with masks for the demons and monkeys, and gold crowns for the heroes, Rama and Lakshama, Phraram and Phralak, respectively. See programme for *The Golden Deer and the Abduction of Sita*, National Culture Hall, Vientiane, 2002.

13. In 1893 Laos became one of the five regions of Indochina along with Cambodia, Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina. August Pavie, the French surveyor who wanted to annex Thailand to the Indochinese colony, managed to acquire Lao territory for France through historical precedent: 'The consequence of Anu's (Anouvong) fight against the Thai was far-reaching, because it gave the Vietnamese claims over Laos. Anu had gone to ask the help of the Emperor of Vietnam under terms of submission, promising the succession of the eastern provinces and the usual tribute of silver and gold trees every three years. As a result, Xieng Khouang was occupied by a Vietnamese garrison and the Vietnamese moved in at several points. . . . This also gave the French a pretext to eventually gain control over the whole of Laos when Vietnam became French.' See Jumsai, p. 195



14. Unlike Vietnam, where the socialist government eradicated the power of the Buddhist monks, the Lao socialist government has incorporated Buddhism into its nationalist agenda.

15. Lao literature is a branch of a larger literary tradition shared by several Tai-speaking groups: the Yuan of Lanna (north Thailand, around Chiangmai), the Kheun in north Burma, and the Leu of Yunnan in southern China. Their literatures also share several characteristics: the convention of writing stories as if they were *Jataka Tales* and the scripts in which they were recorded. The apocryphal *Jataka Tales*, which had a major influence on the literatures of all Tai groups, were composed by the Yuan or the Mon. See Peter Koret, 'Books of Search: Convention and Creativity in Traditional Lao Literature', in David Smyth, ed., *The Canon in Southeast Asian Literatures* (Richmond: Curzon, 2000), p. 210–33.

16. Thai television broadcasts ten channels to Laos's three. In addition, Laos has experienced a big boom in video rentals and cheap illegal copies. Some Lao collectively buy a VCR to watch comedies, love stories, music-dance videos, Chinese martial arts dramas, and European war films; but pornography keeps them in business. In villages many people have satellite television that helps them tune in to the rest of the world via Thai television, since Lao and Thai languages are similar enough for Lao to understand. Glen Lewis writes, 'In 1994, [the Thai] Shinawatra's IBC group was involved in developing television in Laos, until the Lao PDR government decreed the experiment undesirable as it was circulating content "detrimental to the Lao way of life".' See Glen Lewis, 'Thai Media Images of its Neighbours', 'Texts and Contexts in Southeast Asia' conference, Yangon, Myanmar, 2001.

17. Even though official relations in former Soviet Bloc countries have been broken off, the Lao troupes still keep in contact with other socialist and former socialist companies in Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

18. [www.wwed.org/policy/clink/Laos.html](http://www.wwed.org/policy/clink/Laos.html).

19. One of many such examples included the Central Art Ensemble, the National Acrobatic Troupe, the National Theatre Troupe, Young Lao Artists for Peace, the National Puppet Theatre, and the blind singers from the Thongpang Ophthalmology Hospital, all contributing their talents to an AIDS awareness campaign. Interestingly, the spoken drama troupe performed a piece that did not target the young people in the family but focused on the *father's* 'intensive night life'. See 'Art Against Aids', *Vientiane Times*, 8–11 June 2001.

20. Laos does not yet have the significant drug problem that Thailand has with methamphetamines and Vietnam has with heroin, but the government has launched a full-scale campaign against drugs, particularly amphetamine use. Almost three thousand young people crowded into the National Culture Hall to hear thirty-three Lao pop groups sing against drugs. See Somchit Phommixay, 'Le Concert contre la drogue fait salle comble', *Le Rénovateur*, 4 July 2002. Fifty-thousand people flocked to a rock concert in the southeastern city of Pakse, whose slogan was 'Music is for life, but drugs are a killer'. See Somsak Duangpanya, 'Music Revolution', *Vientiane Times*, 7–10 February 2003. Such concerts attract large audiences because some of the singers are well-known stars, unlike the singers and dancers of the *lam leuang* 'concert'.

21. French puppet director Michel Laubu went with the Kabong Lao to explore the Sepone district in the

mountains of Savannakhet, where he claimed that the villagers had never seen a performance. See Michel Laubu, *Ka Bong Lao, Théâtre d' Objets* (Montreuil: Éditions de l'Oeil, 2003), p. 9.

22. At the National School of Music and Dance, located just outside of Vientiane and next to the National School of Fine Arts, 208 students undertake a seven-year course in general education with specialties in folk music, classical Lao music, western classical music, folk dance, traditional court and minority dances, and ballet. The better students are sent abroad after graduation to Australia, Thailand, Vietnam, or China for further study.

23. Bouaphane Saengphachane, 'Operatic High Culture Graces Rural Laos', *Vientiane Times*, 6–9 April 2001.

24. Houmphanh Rattanavong, 'The Lam Lüang: a Popular Lao Entertainment', trans. Amy Catlin, *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology*, IX (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), p. 189.

25. Somsack Pongkhao, 'Lao Opera Still in the Hearts of the People', [www.vientianetimes.org.la/Contents/2003-70/Laohtm](http://www.vientianetimes.org.la/Contents/2003-70/Laohtm).

26. Lao words transliterated into English present a problem of standardization because these languages have their own alphabet with sounds alien or different in English. Local people are unfamiliar with any standardized spellings outside their own alphabet, and so each person creates the word phonetically, resulting in a wide variety of spellings, e.g., *leuang*, *luong*, *ruang*. I use the spelling that is on the front of the theatre itself. In addition, in the former Indochinese colonies, although Cambodia and Laos did not receive a French-constructed alphabet like Vietnam, their lexicographers learned French phonetic systems. Thus, in their current spelling they use French phonetics which when reproduced by an English speaker often convey the wrong sounds.

27. Terry Miller, *Traditional Music of the Lao: Kaen Playing and Mawlum Singing in Northeast Thailand* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985), p. 74. However, Brandon recognized that the literary sources and the music were altered to suit Lao expression. See James Brandon, *Theatre in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 177–8.

28. Miller, p. 78.

29. Miller, p. 98. The *kaen* (*khaen*, *khene*), a traditional Lao wind instrument made of several bamboo pipes bound together, used to be found in most Lao households and many people could play it. Now it is popular among Lao communities abroad, although it is still studied as the basic instrument for all the male students at the National School of Music and Dance, while female students study the Lao flute.

30. Miller, p. 92.

31. Carol J. Compton, 'Traditional Verbal Arts in Laos: Functions, Forms, Continuities, and Changes in Texts, Contexts, and Performances', *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology*, IX (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), p. 151.

32. Bouaphane Saengphachane, 'Operatic High Culture Graces Rural Laos', *Vientiane Times*, 6–9 April 2001.

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.* Before the original theatre burned down, performances were given once a week; now aside from special holidays, they are given once or twice a month.

35. Sinouane Chanthasay, interview with author, 9 February 2003. One of the troupe's most experienced clowns left to perform in the circus troupe. Circus – primarily jugglers, acrobats, and contortionists – devel-

oped under French colonialism, but is currently suffering the same decline of interest affecting all live performance. Managers say they cannot give performances too frequently because audiences will not buy tickets to see the same show twice.

36. Chinese Opera sponsored by and for the Chinese community often holds an independent place in many Southeast Asian societies. Operas are usually performed for Chinese New Year or in conjunction with Lao festivals such as one held on the twelfth full moon (Oct/Nov) at That Luang: the Grand Stupa, the symbol of the Lao nation, that begins with a procession from Vat Simuang, built in the sixteenth century by King Seththathirath to house the city foundation pillar (Lak Muang). When the pillar was first planted in the ground, a pregnant woman (Nang Si) suddenly jumped into the hole and was crushed to death. Now she is revered as the protector of the city and people pray to her for favours. After Vat Simuang, the procession goes on to Patousay, the Victory Arch built to pre-Revolutionary war dead and supposedly constructed with American cement donated to build an airport runway. For the past ten years, during the festival, Chinese Opera has been performed for about two weeks in Vientiane. The opera is in memory of the deceased, deified as Hor Kang. These deities are invited to watch the opera. The actors, however, are Chinese from Thailand, who are not as expensive as the preferred ones from China. Although Lao audiences cannot understand what the actors are saying, they enjoy the fight scenes in particular. Brandon mentions these travelling Chinese troupes as well (see Brandon, p. 178–9).

37. In the seventeenth century, a Prince Pangkam from Nong Bua Lampoo came to Champasak. This reputed author of *Sang Sinxay*, a romantic novel in verse, had a dalliance with the Queen of Champasak and then returned to his home country. See Jumsai, p. 159. Sinxay is considered more of a cultural hero than Rama, perhaps revealing the difference between the Thai-influenced court that performed *Phralak Phraram* and the less court-influenced Lao populace. According to Kanlaya, whose father, Sila Vilavong, transcribed the poem into modern Lao language, and whose brother-in-law rendered it into prose to make it more accessible, authorship is uncertain. Koret suggests that questions of authorship in Lao literature are part of a cultural and religious attitude toward written texts. See Koret, p. 210–11.

38. Somsanouk Mixay, 'Sang Sinxay', *Treasures of Lao Literature* (Vientiane: Vientiane Times, 2000), p. 49–59. The epic, according to Kanlaya, presents the Buddhist world view by showing the calamity wrought by personal desire and the misalliance between human and ogre.

39. Deputy Director Somhak, interview with author. Vientiane, 12 February 2003.

40. Peter William Crawford, 'Zen and the Art of Community Awareness', *Vientiane Times*, 28–30 August 2001.

41. Bouangeun Xaphuvong, 'On Lao Theatre', unpublished conference paper, 'Asian Performing Arts' conference, Hanoi, Vietnam, 1997.

42. Kham Mao, interview with author, Vientiane, 10 February 2003.

43. Ibid.

44. The last functioning cinema in Vientiane somewhat reflects the current state of Lao film. The Odeon

Cinema in 1999 was serving as a stage theatre in which the Sinxay Cultural Club performed music and dance by its student members. While UNICEF sponsored the programme, the club was set up by the Ministry of Information and Culture specifically to target high school students and propel them away from possible amphetamine use. Each summer it organizes over two hundred people in a variety of activities. See Souknilundon, 'Sinxay Cultural Club Protects Teenagers from Delinquency', *Vientiane Times*, 6–9 April 1999. The cinema had been confiscated by the government when the socialists took over in 1975 and the owners went into exile. However, when they returned, the cinema was returned to them, but in 2002 it was defunct, used neither for film or stage performance.

45. Dara Kanlaya mentions another school that existed on the site of the *lam leuang* theatre. A Thai performer, Khu Ouan, trained a group to perform classical dance and popular drama in the pre-liberation days of the 1950s. At the time, Vientiane had little in the way of classical performance, the Lao court tradition being upheld in Luang Phrabang. Maintaining a successful troupe of ten performers, Khu Ouan became more famous when he married a Lao princess who defied social convention not only by marrying a foreign commoner, but also by participating in his theatrical activities. Recognizing their success at the time, the government extended the training centre into a more formal school, after which several students went to Thailand for further study.

46. The construction of the National Cultural Hall was financed by China. Its main auditorium holds 1,800 people and there are additional meeting rooms. The enormous structure dominates the centre of Vientiane. Built in 2001, there was some dissatisfaction about the colour and architecture, which critics called 'un-Lao'.

47. Dara Kanlaya, interview with author, Vientiane, 12 February 2003.

48. Hongnakorn Thomphara, interview with author, Vientiane, 11 February 2003.

49. Somsak Duangpanya, interview with author. Vientiane, 13 February 2003.

50. The story of the giant gourd is the creation myth of the Tai peoples that include the ethnic Lao. Long ago, life on earth was threatened by a gigantic vine that shadowed the sky and which had several giant gourds growing on it. When the vine was cut down, voices were heard inside the gourds. The gourds were pierced with a red-hot poker and dark-skinned people (Kha) came out. The gourds were then cut with a knife and the fairer-skinned people (Tai) came out. This distinction further distinguished 'plains people', who adopted Buddhism and developed states, from those in the mountains, who operated along tribal lines and remained animist.

51. Although nearly fifty minority groups live in the country, at the National School of Music and Dance the music and dance of only ten are represented, and minority students attending the school are few.

52. In May 2004, the Laos Ministry of Information and Culture put into force a ban on Thai television programmes being shown in public places such as bars and restaurants, in order to prevent Thailand's 'cultural domination'. The ban does not affect viewing Thai television shows in private homes.

53. Mary F. Connors, *Lao Textiles and Traditions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 68–71.