

**Soren Ivarsson, *Creating Laos: The Making of a Lao Space between Indochina and Siam, 1860-1945*,
NIAS Press, Denmark, 2008.
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Visiting modern-day Laos, one can't help but notice its dual influence: patisseries, offerings of baguettes, and French architectural styles line the streets of the old city of Luang Prabang, yet the language – written and spoken – as well as the people themselves clearly resemble those of Thailand. The influences of these two countries are investigated during Laos' colonial period in Soren Ivarsson's *Creating Laos*. While Ivarsson's PhD dissertation from the University of Copenhagen was completed in 1999, he was only recently able to create a book out of his doctoral research. Most works that describe the colonial experience in Laos are framed to show the inevitability of Lao nationalism despite French sovereignty. He instead focuses on the link between French colonialism and Lao nationalism. Ivarsson emphasizes that the idea of Laos was not inevitable or natural but created by unearthing cultural elements of common history, language and religion. In his literature review Ivarsson demonstrates well his unique place in scholarship regarding the history of Laos and methodology concerning nationalism. This book also adds to existing literature as it aims to be a sequel to scholarship dealing with cultural nationalism and cultural identities under French rule in Indochina. More broadly, building on the ideas of Thongchai Winichakul and Benedict Anderson, he uses Laos as a case study to understand colonialism and nationalist responses.

Ivarsson proceeds chronologically as he discusses the idea of Laos from the sides of the French, Thai, and then finally Lao – thus tracing the beginnings of Lao cultural nationalism through to anti-colonial nationalism and subsequent independence. In the first chapters of the book he shows how Laos was brought into being as a territorial entity in the late nineteenth century. He paints a picture of Laos being pulled in two separate directions: the Thais positioning it culturally

and racially in the Tai realm, and the French shifting it into a distinct identity within French Indochina (which also included parts of modern-day Vietnam and Cambodia). Throughout, he successfully dissects French colonial discourse, which gave Laos this unique identity – on par with, and not encompassed by the Thais. The motivation for this discourse was also a justification for colonialism as the Lao identity and race was built up as something the French could help to maintain and survive. The French made sure to emphasize, in their creation of a Lao past, how the Thai had conquered the Lao city of Vientiane, and how the French were now there to protect them.

At the same time the French were creating difference Thai nationalist discourse was emphasizing the sameness between the Lao and the Tai. The Thais created a historical narrative in which most of modern Laos had always been a part of Siam but had recently been lost. They used notions of race and ‘Thainess’ in order to bring the Lao into their orbit. Ivarsson highlights how the category of race was used on both sides in order to produce each desired result. In this way Ivarsson outlines the historical contestation between France and Siam regarding the spatial layout of Laos. This is why he approaches Laos first from the outside – he wants to show how it is still seen as a disputed space by the Thai even after the French conquest in 1893. Through Siam continued pursuit of this land, Ivarsson demonstrates that there was no political entity recognized as ‘Laos’ at this time. No consultation of Lao royalty or elite Lao persons is mentioned in its colonial history. Thus this space was not recognized as having an individual political will as compared with Siam or Cambodia during the beginning of Western colonialism.

After these external elements are discussed, the reader is then presented with the nascent idea of Laos created by the Lao themselves. Ivarsson’s main argument in this later part of the book convincingly demonstrates how the Lao were crucially influenced by French discourse in their identity formation. Ivarsson shows how in the 1893-1940 period the beginnings of nationalism emerged from

French ideas of Lao distinctness and separateness from Siam. In the end Ivarsson concludes that the beginnings of Lao cultural identity were created during the time of French colonialism and transformed into anti-colonial nationalism during the World War II period. Throughout the book the reader is made to be aware that this nationalist identity is a result of a mixture between external and internal powers.

Ivarsson uses an array of sources to provide this cultural understanding of Lao nationalism. He includes a number of primary sources never before used in such a study, for example anti-Thai political cartoons and articles demonstrating nascent nationalist sentiments in Laos's first newspaper *Lao Nhay*. As well, he uses nationalist poems and songs to show how the Lao campaigned for a national renovation towards modernization. A large amount of French colonial manuscripts – journals and official documents – have been investigated for this project. Ivarsson's substantial knowledge of Thailand strengthens the book through use of Thai government archival sources, nineteenth century textbooks, cremation volumes of important figures, etc.

Overall this book is successful in its aims to present a history of the discourse of the idea of Laos and Lao cultural and national identity. Ivarsson is one of a few scholars of Lao history, and those interested in this part of Southeast Asia are fortunate to have this new work. Previously his work has been featured in chapters and articles focusing on Laos, but this full-length book is an excellent resource for anyone interested in this little-studied nation. Indeed, the literature review of historical studies of Laos and colonialism in Southeast Asia is worth the purchase of the book to anyone interested in this field. But this book will also be of interest more generally to those studying nationalism, colonialism, and the formation of cultural identities.

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