Globalization, nationalism and World Heritage

Interpreting Luang Prabang

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Abstract: This paper examines the interpretation of the World Heritage city Luang Prabang (the former royal capital of Laos), investigating the relationships between the goals and strategies of international organizations such as UNESCO and the priorities of the Lao state. Refuting the idea that the World Heritage system represents a form of cultural globalization, the authors instead suggest that there is a marked convergence of the interests of international heritage bodies managing World Heritage and the Lao authorities anxious to portray a particular vision of national identity through selective recognition of cultural heritage locations.

Keywords: nationalism; cultural heritage; globalization; Laos; Luang Prabang

One of the most interesting aspects of contemporary Laos is the burgeoning ferment around the nation’s past. The creation of an ideologically acceptable version of the past has always been important to communist regimes, concerned as they have been with the reconstruction of entire societies and with their own legitimation. In Laos, the imperative to fashion a national story has been driven by particular aspects of that past, particularly the need to come to terms with its colonial experience and its relationship to its neighbours. National stories seldom come ‘naturally’ to any nation, just as nations are in many ways artificial constructs. In Laos, a country of tremendous ethnic and cultural diversity positioned amongst larger neighbours whose actions and attitudes have frequently had significant ramifications for it, the national story is even less obviously ‘natural’ than most, and more in need of careful construction.

The debate over Lao history has been very fruitfully reflected upon

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by Martin Stuart-Fox and Grant Evans in a number of publications.\footnote{See, for example, Grant Evans (1998), *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance: Laos Since 1975*, Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai; Grant Evans, ed. (1999), *Laos: Culture and Society*, Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai; Martin Stuart-Fox (2002), 'On the writing of Lao history: continuities and discontinuities', in Mayoury Ngaosrivathana and Kennon Brezzeale, eds, *Breaking New Ground in Laos History: Essays on the Seventh to Twentieth Centuries*, Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai, pp 1–24. See also the contributions by Martin Stuart-Fox and Bruce Lockhart in this issue.} Much of their writing has focused on the way that the Lao themselves have engaged in the struggle over their history. We want to set this discussion in a somewhat broader context, analysing the way that national stories are inevitably shaped in broader international contexts. While it is true for formerly colonized nations that national identity during the colonial period – and perhaps even more so in the years since – could only be properly understood in terms of the colonial relationship and thus has never really been purely endogenously determined, it is difficult to deny that the world is today more closely integrated than ever, and few countries can remain immune to global economic, political and cultural networks and influences. In this paper, we examine how Lao national identity is influenced by one manifestation of this increasing global interaction, the international heritage system.

In much of the current debate about globalization and its effect on particular identities (individual, local, regional, national), there has been a tendency to establish a series of binaries, which often oversimplify or obscure particular realities. One of the most problematic oppositions, for a start, is that between globalization and the nation-state. The idea that these two concepts are in some way incompatible is often suggested but seldom justified; for many countries, indeed – and we can count Laos as one of them – the significance of national borders and what they designate has become even more important as technological advances provide us with the means to make them virtually redundant. In relation to cultural heritage, a number of oppositions are frequently mooted: global versus local, modern versus postmodern, core versus periphery, universalist versus cultural relativist. These oppositions do offer a means of highlighting struggle around useful central themes, but equally this polarization can be misleading and may fail to account adequately for the historical and political complexity of any given context. In the case of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) it is not at all clear, for instance, that these oppositions stand up to scrutiny, at least certainly not in the way one would intuitively expect.
Core and periphery

In the case of core and periphery, if we take the core to be the industrialized Western nations, few people are likely to contest the suggestion that Laos is a peripheral nation in terms of its level of development and its integration in global financial and trade systems. Yet in many ways, precisely because of its low level of development and modest capacities and its reliance on overseas aid, assistance and expertise, Laos is thoroughly entwined in global and regional relationships and thus subject to substantial international influence. It is not an exaggeration to suggest that in comparison with Japan – a highly industrialized, one might even say ‘Westernized’, Asian nation – Laos’s capacity for independent local policy development is meagre. This is the case in terms of economic policy as much as cultural heritage policy. It should be sufficient illustration of this to point out that the Nara Document on Authenticity, originating in Japan, represented a major challenge to the universalist impulses of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), while the Lao government relies on the latter and the French government for assistance in drafting national laws on cultural heritage. The design, development and maintenance of cultural heritage policy (and practice) in a range of partnerships seem therefore to make a clear and decisive dichotomy somewhat problematic, or at least suggest that the situation in Laos is much more complex.

Other oppositions

How do the other oppositions relate to an analysis of Laos? It is usually presumed that institutions such as UNESCO are ‘modernist’, in that they propagate ‘universalism, utopianism, and belief in humanity’s steady progress towards better things, usually defined in terms of the material conditions of life’. Resistance to the universalizing influence

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2 The Nara Document on Authenticity reflects the East Asian tradition of periodically renewing heritage buildings, as distinct from Western emphases (expressed in the Venice Charter) on the authenticity of original fabric, and asserts the need for each nation to develop conservation approaches appropriate to its own cultural context. The Nara Document tends to emphasize continuity of use rather than continuity of fabric when assessing authenticity.

of such organizations, then, when it emphasizes cultural diversity and relativity and local rather than global expressions of identity, is usually thought of as 'postmodern'. Is this particular binary frame upheld in relation to cultural heritage practice in Laos, though? Is the country a hotbed of postmodern dissent? We think not. The fact is that, if there is any Lao resistance to the modernist universalism of UNESCO and other international heritage agencies (and it is by no means clear that this is the case), it is, if anything, rooted in an earlier manifestation of modernity than 'universalism': that is, nationalism. It is evident that Lao cultural heritage policy and practice are to a significant extent driven not by a postmodern celebration of diversity and difference, but by the pursuit of one of the archetypal projects of modernity: the construction of the nation-state and national identity.

In this sense, too, the universalist-versus-cultural relativist dichotomy is of limited value, for in Laos – a nation of enormous cultural and ethnic diversity – the emphasis of official policy is less on relativism than on unity in diversity. This is why the 47 different ethnic groups that make up the population of Laos are officially classified into three ethno-geomorphologic groups: the Lao Loum, or Lowland Lao; the Lao Theung, inhabiting the watersheds, slopes and valleys around the plains; and the Lao Soung, the Lao of the mountain summits. This reductive classification system is problematic, but suits the present government’s desire to build a sense of national unity while at the same time recognizing ethnic diversity. This compact construction of ethnic diversity can be seen clearly in recent government promotional material, such as the official catalogue of the International Horticultural Exposition held in Kunming, China in 1999, where ‘the people of Laos’ are represented by three portrait photographs, one for each of the three ethnic types dressed in distinctive costume. In this tripartite ethnic system, the Lao Loum dominate Lao political, economic and social life. One reason they continue to do so, despite the rhetorical commitment to ethnic inclusiveness, is precisely because the official desire for

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4 The most comprehensive analysis of Laos’s ethnic diversity can be found in Laurent Chazée (1999), The Peoples of Laos: Rural and Ethnic Diversities, White Lotus, Bangkok. For more detailed socio-political analyses of ethnicity in Laos, see Grant Evans (1999), 'Ethnic change in highland Laos', in Evans ed., supra note 1, at pp 125–147 and other chapters in Part 2 ('Diasporic Lao and ethnicity') in the same book.

national unity, in the end, prevents the introduction of policies that would encourage a more multicultural (and open) society. This suggests that the universalist/cultural relativist frame may also be of little value, especially in a country where there is little opportunity for the citizens to assert any concerns or identities that are not officially mandated.

The foregoing helps us to understand the nature of the opposition between the global and the local, which in its generalized form is largely unhelpful in an analysis of conflict in cultural heritage practice in Laos. Rather than applying a 'modern versus postmodern' texture, in fact, in this part of South East Asia one can more appropriately see the tension as between supra-nation-state organizations (eg UNESCO) and the nation-state – both of which are, in any case, manifestations of modernity. Can we see, then, the primary opposition as being between globalization and nationalism? Even this may be inadequate, because in Laos these two processes are not necessarily diametrically opposed. As we will demonstrate in this article, the government of Laos strategically uses the assistance of global organizations such as UNESCO to further its nationalist aim – that is, the development and maintenance of a distinctive version of Lao nationhood, which in turn underscores its legitimacy. Therefore, rather than emphasize binary oppositions, we would prefer to examine the domain in which Lao government interests in cultural heritage practice converge with those of international heritage agencies. Primarily, in our reckoning, it is in the interpretation of heritage sites that this convergence is most obviously and most fruitfully examined.

Before we examine in detail the interpretation of Luang Prabang as a World Heritage site, the role of UNESCO and its interactions with local heritage practitioners and policy makers need to be carefully understood. The World Heritage system that UNESCO's World Heritage Centre in Paris oversees is based on the 1972 UNESCO Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, colloquially known as the World Heritage Convention. Nations that ratify the Convention agree to follow its rules and principles, which are expanded upon in the Operational Guidelines. What we want to emphasize are several important aspects of the system that help to explain how UNESCO interacts with local heritage policy makers and that, ultimately, serve to shape the management of heritage sites such as Luang Prabang.

First of all, it needs to be recognized that UNESCO, as a part of the
United Nations system, operates at a national government level: state parties are signatories to the Convention, nominate sites for World Heritage listing, and are responsible for the implementation of the management plans that are integral components of the World Heritage management system. Thus there is a complex web of protocols – some formalized, others functioning more as unwritten conventions – in which UNESCO and national governments operate. UNESCO and its representatives must be careful not to infringe the sovereign rights of nations or to offend the national governments with which it works. These governments host National Commissions for UNESCO, are members of the UN more broadly and pay contributions for the upkeep of the system.

On the other side, state parties, especially in developing countries such as Laos, which lack many kinds of expertise, seek to obtain the benefits that engagement in the World Heritage system brings: technical assistance from UNESCO itself or from other international agencies and foreign governments that UNESCO can mobilize; the prestige associated with sites recognized as having World Heritage status; the economic benefits of these sites, especially through tourism; and, certainly not least important, financial and other resources necessary to preserve and manage the sites. In our fieldwork visits to Laos, we were made acutely aware of the seriousness of this latter consideration when government officials were very reluctant to engage in any critique of the activities of UNESCO or foreign governments assisting with heritage management for fear of jeopardizing the funding that is vital to the management of sites such as Luang Prabang.

UNESCO and the state parties that are signatory to the Convention engage in complex interactions that, from the former’s perspective, are intended to achieve uniform standards of protection and management for heritage considered to be of universal significance; and, from the latter’s perspective, assist in the management of national heritage, provide national prestige and help in economic development. As is commonly the case with many of the activities undertaken by the UN, there is a tension between the universalizing international vision of the world body and the national sovereignty interests of its constituent state parties. In terms of the management of World Heritage, one of the ways in which this tension has been most clearly manifested is in the treatment of sites at risk from various threats (notably development projects such as dams or mines). The World Heritage Committee may vote to place a site on its in-danger list, but usually UNESCO only undertakes such action with the consent of the state party involved. One way in which UNESCO has sought to
reduce these tensions is through the implementation of a Periodic Monitoring process, through which all state parties report on the condition of World Heritage sites on their territory. This process is intended to identify problems early on and to encourage cooperative solutions between state parties and the World Heritage Centre.

Perhaps the most important component of the interaction between UNESCO and local heritage policy makers is the development of the Management Plan that is essential for every World Heritage site. The Management Plan must meet the requirements as set out in the Operational Guidelines to the World Heritage Convention, and its implementation and continuing effectiveness must be monitored and reported through the Periodic Reporting process. This process gives UNESCO and its associated international agencies considerable influence over local heritage practice. In the Lao case, there are currently two World Heritage sites: Luang Prabang and Vat Phou in the south of the country. In both cases, development of the Management Plan was achieved with substantial international assistance, in the former case from French experts and in the latter from experts from a range of countries and UNESCO’s Bangkok office.6

The point to be made here is that the World Heritage system functions in a way that encourages and almost forces state parties and international experts to accommodate each other, particularly in countries such as Laos that have considerable expertise deficits. Both UNESCO and the state party are presented with incentives to find ways to reach common ground on the management of heritage sites. We show in this article how this common ground involves the development of a particular interpretation of Luang Prabang that suits both UNESCO’s purposes and those of the Lao government.

Interpreting Lao heritage

In the first place, we need to be clear about what we mean by ‘interpretation’. The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance (the Burra Charter) is one protocol to which we can look for a definition. Sensibly, it recognizes that within cultural heritage practice the word has a number of different associations, but Article 1.17 nevertheless states succinctly, ‘Interpretation means all the ways of presenting the cultural significance of a place’. In tandem with this

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point, Article 25 asserts the value of interpretation, stating: "The cultural significance of many places is not readily apparent, and should be explained by interpretation. Interpretation should enhance understanding and enjoyment, and be culturally appropriate." Clearly the Burra Charter primarily addresses heritage sites, but a similar definition applies to movable cultural heritage and museum collections. Museums are partly in the business of presenting the cultural significance of their collections to the public. The useful text Museum Basics, for instance, says that while interpretation usually means translating from one language to another, in the museum world it also has a special meaning: 'explaining an object and its significance'.

In practice, heritage interpretation is a process that occurs in a number of ways. It occurs in the treatment of the fabric, the use of activities at the place or the use of introduced explanatory material. It may also be in the form of off-site programmes and publications – including, increasingly, multimedia. Interpretation is therefore a process that helps museums and heritage organizations fulfill their missions, including undertaking activities such as research or facilitating learning and recreation, which advance their core interests. Both these definitions – for sites and museums – stress the idea that communicating 'significance' is the central function of interpretation. The process of interpretation, therefore, begins by understanding and defining significance (the 'aesthetic, historic, scientific, social or spiritual value for past, present or future generations') and is followed by defining the most appropriate methods for helping the visitor to appreciate why the place is culturally significant (at the most basic level).

Interpreting Luang Prabang: the convergence of globalization and nationalism

Nowhere are the tensions over the interpretation of heritage in Laos more evident than in Luang Prabang, the small, charming World Heritage-listed city in the north of the country.

9 The quotation is from Australia ICOMOS, supra note 6 at p 2 (Art 1.2). Interpretation involves a lot more than this, however, if one embraces current learning theories that stress the need to facilitate very real engagement with visitors.
It is a living town with a population of around 35,000 people, stretching along an isthmus flanked by two rivers: the Mekong on one side and the (Nam) Khan on the other. Its verdant streets are lined with rows of two-storey shops in an amalgam of French provincial and indigenous architecture. The architectural fabric of the town also includes traditional-style Lao houses on stilts, although many have had their ground floors built in. Significantly, the town also boasts over 30 beautiful wat, or Buddhist temples, some of which have recently undergone extensive renovation.

Following its inscription as Laos’s first World Heritage site in 1995, Luang Prabang has become the jewel in the country’s heritage crown. The town is therefore subject to strict heritage controls drawn up with the assistance of UNESCO and French consultants funded by the French government. UNESCO and French experts still play important roles in managing the World Heritage values of the city. A combination of Management Plan and local planning regulations provide the frameworks for preservation in a vulnerable urban precinct with increasingly high levels of tourist visits and entrepreneurial interest. In the last decade, Luang Prabang has become the destination of an increasing number of tourists. This is wholly understandable, given the recent history of tourism in South East Asia: it is a wonderful place to visit and is relatively clean, tidy and for the most part unthreatening. For Western visitors, it is easy to be seduced by its relaxed tropical ambience, the enervating heat and humidity only confirming the natural tendency simply to lie back and enjoy the pleasant surroundings. However, for the aspirations of visitors interested in cultural history, the on-site interpretative materials are distinctly problematic. For instance, very little information on the origins of Luang Prabang and the role it has played in the history of Laos has been strategically incorporated into the cityscape. There are two primary reasons for this: first, the way in which the city is being envisioned as a World Heritage site (the defined ‘significance’, which is narrow and therefore does not provide the encouragement for more profound interpretation); and second, the attitude of the Lao government to the nation’s royal heritage.

World Heritage inscription and interpretation

World Heritage listing is a process of identifying the universal significance of a particular site, which in turn is the primary means of focusing interpretation. In 1995, Luang Prabang was accorded World Heritage
status for its 'successful fusion of the traditional architectural and urban structures and those of the European colonial rulers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Its unique townscape is remarkably well preserved, illustrating a key stage in the blending of two distinct cultural traditions.'

Luang Prabang’s inscription on the World Heritage list has undoubtedly provided many benefits, such as the conservation of heritage structures and stimulus to the local (and national) economy. World Heritage listing is of course seldom without its problems, and Luang Prabang is now having to face difficulties caused by rapidly increasing tourist numbers, such as inadequate infrastructure, development pressure and the dislocation of other activities and land uses by tourist-focused development. UNESCO’s Bangkok office is well aware of these kinds of problems and is trying to deal with them by insisting on strict planning and heritage controls over the World Heritage site and by cooperating with other agencies and governments to develop projects aimed at protecting traditional cultural activities.

The justification for Luang Prabang’s inscription on the World Heritage list reveals a particular view of the town’s cultural value: it is almost entirely architecturally focused, emphasizing a harmonious blend of indigenous and colonial building styles. It therefore favours a passive aesthetic visitor experience based on seeing. On the face of it, in the focus on the built environment, this inscription seems anti-historical. It pays scant attention to the fact that Luang Prabang is a living, breathing town in the twenty-first century. Of greater concern is that, while interpretation based on the architectural history could provide a more profound and critical reading of the social and political—historical processes that drove the culture of the town over time, this particular aspect is either underdeveloped or misleading.

The roots of this situation are clear: in the justification for World Heritage inscription, ‘colonial’ is not considered problematic at all. It is almost seen as a positive contribution to Lao urbanism – resulting in a unique cultural blend of the Oriental and the Occidental; in some ways it may indeed be positive, but that does not mean that the whole

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11 For example, the Norwegian government funded a project conducted by UNESCO and the Lao government called ‘Cultural Survival in Luang Prabang: Documentation, Education and Training to Revitalize Traditional Temple Arts and Building Crafts within the Laotian Buddhist Sangha’. The project began in late 1999 and was funded for three years.
context and impact of colonialism should be ignored, as is presently the case. With the concentration on architecture, other aspects of colonialism tend to be ignored; the overwhelming thrust is nostalgic, a quest for an idealized, Orientalized ‘real Asia’. This echoes the dominant image used by Western tourist agencies and the Lao government itself: Luang Prabang is presented as an unspoilt, exotic destination, ‘a quiet and relaxed remnant of the old Asia’. As Francis Engelmann wrote for the UNESCO Courier in 1999,

‘The traditional way of life in Luang Prabang is one of the charms for the alert stroller. Noisy motor-boats on the Mekong have been banned and have to keep their distance from the city. The religious life of the monasteries, goldsmiths at work, women weaving among the stilts supporting houses and old ladies taking offerings to pagodas are scenes that captivate tourists.’

Rather disturbingly in this case, it appears that, perhaps due to the World Heritage listing process, ‘colonialism’ has been nostalgically re-packaged as a benign interlude in Lao history, which simply helped to produce some lovely architecture and which now frames some tasteful religious and craft practices.

The emphasis on architecture and on an Orientalized mystique also serves to historicize Luang Prabang’s importance in such a way that its significance as the royal capital until 1975 is rendered thoroughly historical and irrelevant to the present. The meaning of the town, like the town itself, becomes the core of a large-scale museum display. This reflects what Colin Long has argued occurs at a national scale: in Lao national urban and heritage policy, Luang Prabang is the focus of heritage preservation efforts geared towards celebrating ‘traditional culture’, while Vientiane will become the modern capital of a modern nation, although incorporating some elements of the symbolic structure of the

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historic city. Ing-Britt Trankell makes a similar point: 'Memories of the Lao "modern" recent history, especially photos and objects relevant to the independence movement are exhibited in Vientiane, an arrangement which is at the same time a statement of how the relation between Louang Prabang [sic], as power centre of l'ancien Régime [sic] and Vientiane as the capital of an independent nation, is supposed to be perceived'. In addition, Trankell sees the maintenance of the division of two important festivals between Vientiane and Luang Prabang – the That Luang festival and the New Year's celebration and asperision of the Prabang statue – as confirmation of an effort to 'mark the political balance and relations between the two main centres of post-revolutionary society'.

Events such as the New Year's festival in Luang Prabang fit rather awkwardly into the heritage significance of the city for both UNESCO and the Lao government. While UNESCO is moving rapidly towards a much greater recognition of the importance of intangible culture as heritage, the World Heritage system still lags behind. Thus, the focus on architectural expression (that is, buildings) in the World Heritage listing of Luang Prabang draws attention not only to the production of

17 Ibid, p 192.
18 The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage was adopted by the thirty-second session of the UNESCO General Conference on 17 October 2003. The Convention defines intangible cultural heritage as 'the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. For the purposes of this Convention, consideration will be given solely to such intangible cultural heritage as is compatible with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable development.' This intangible cultural heritage 'is manifested inter alia in the following domains: (a) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage; (b) performing arts; (c) social practices, rituals and festive events; (d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; (e) traditional craftsmanship.' UNESCO (2003), Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, UNESCO, Paris, p 3.
a unique built environment of indigenous and colonial styles, but also to the importance of Buddhism, because of the overwhelming presence of *wat* in the town and the consciousness of those who manage its heritage values. However, this obscures or ignores another very important aspect of Luang Prabang’s history: its importance as a place where the relationships were negotiated between the Lowland Lao, represented by the royal authority of the king, and the many ethnic minority groups in the area. This negotiation was – and still is to some degree (see Trankell) – performed in a ritualized way through the New Year ceremonies, which ‘were dedicated to the ritual confirmation of the political dominance by the Lao royalty over the aboriginal inhabitants of the surrounding areas’, but also extended recognition to these autochthonous peoples (collectively referred to by the Lowland Lao with the derogatory term *Kha*) of their original ownership of the land. One of the effects of World Heritage listing in its current form, then, is to make Luang Prabang a wholly Lowland Lao city, rendering the ethnic minority people who have always had complex trade, social and ceremonial relationships with it marginal to its identified significance, and confining them to roles as picturesque market traders literally and figuratively at the edge of the World Heritage zone.

The awkwardness posed by the New Year’s festival for the Lao government is different from the problems created by World Heritage listing. The architectural focus of the listing creates a problem of absence: the ethnic minority groups are rendered invisible. For the Lao government, the New Year’s festival is potentially too pregnant with meaning of a kind that represents a threat to its political and cultural control. The New Year festival prior to the Revolution was a royal ceremony, involving the ritual enactment by the king of a cosmological journey,

‘to the various mythological sites connected with the arrival of the Buddha and the construction of the World Pillars. This was to be done after the New Year in order for the king to receive the aspersions, in local English translated as “the bath for the king” (*song nam cau sivit*), from the people, before bringing out the Prabang in procession.’

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20 Aijmer, *supra* note 19, at p 194.
The New Year festival as currently performed, Trankell writes, still contains the same important ritual elements of the king’s cosmic journey, although it is now sponsored by the communist state rather than the king. Important elements of the ceremony have been changed, such as the incorporation of ethnic minority groups in a way that transforms them from ‘ethnic vassals to national citizens’.21

Other aspects of the festival were already undergoing change during the Royal Lao government (RLG) period, as Grant Evans has shown.22 However, although Trankell sees the New Year festival as serving ‘to transport people out of time, into timeless and liminality, and achieving a collation of past and present’, we argue rather that in the context of Luang Prabang as a World Heritage site, the festival is firmly of the past, part of an ‘authentic’ experience of an ‘authentic’ ‘old Asia’, and thus harmless to the present.23 The changes that have been made are intended to make the festival more ideologically correct, and, according to Evans, have generally tended to simplify the whole ritual. Above all, though, the festival can be seen as a manifestation of a no longer relevant past, while at the same time, the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party can portray itself as the defender of traditional culture.

Heritage preservation, colonialism and national identity: origins

While the listing of Luang Prabang as a World Heritage site has brought the relationship between heritage preservation, colonialism and national identity into sharp focus, the truth is that this relationship has a long and problematic history. At this point, it is worth tracing this history in order to give our argument a historical context. Contemporary Lao national identity, indeed, is intimately bound up with colonialism. It is often presumed that in the colonized world national identity grew in opposition to the colonial presence, that nationalism was distinctly anticolonial. The case is far more complex in Laos, where a sense of national space was still fluid up to the arrival of the French. Some sort of sense of Lao space has existed for centuries, at least back to the Kingdom of Lan Xang established by King Fa Ngum in the fourteenth century. In the early eighteenth century, however, the kingdom had broken into three smaller principalities, Luang Prabang in the north,
Vientiane in the centre, and Champassak in the south, which were all under considerable expansionary pressure from Burma and Siam. By the time of French colonization in the late nineteenth century, Vientiane had been destroyed by the Siamese, who were also threatening the existence of Luang Prabang. Thus, while there was a remembered sense of a Lao kingdom by the time of the arrival of the French, it could not be characterized as a nation-state in the accepted sense and it no longer physically existed anyway. The Franco–Siamese Treaties of 1893 and 1904 delineated Laos’s western borders (as they remain today), thus formalizing a European sense of the national territory while at the same time handing over to Siam large areas populated by Lao which had once been part of the Kingdom of Lan Xang.

It was during the period of French colonization, lasting from the end of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth, that a sense of Lao heritage was actively fostered, predominantly by the French themselves. The École Française d’Extrême-Orient (EFEO) was the agency most vigorously engaged in this process, as it was throughout France’s Indo-Chinese colonies. 'From its inception at the turn of the century until 1951, when it remitted jurisdiction over the respective archaeological patrimonies of the constituent states of the [recently formed] French union, [the EFEO] had classified 1256 monuments, 780 in Cambodia, 401 in Vietnam and 75 in Laos.'24 The EFEO contributed enormously to the understanding of the history and cultures of the Indo-Chinese countries, with detailed studies, archaeological work and conservation efforts. Wat Sisaket, Wat Phra Keo, Wat Ong Tu, Wat Si Muang and That Luang in Vientiane were some of the important structures restored under its supervision. By the end of the colonial period, the EFEO had come to see its activities as contributing to the process of nation-building in Indo-China:

'Besides the vanished kingdoms whose reconstruction in memory has been the task of the École, the existing – and very much alive – states of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam have found in this research their most ancient nobility. They have rediscovered these treasures of ancestral glory which allow the new generation to regard the future with confidence and oblige it to face [that future] with greatness. So, in the rediscovered fullness of their past, the three countries have

been able to listen to the call for independence and the voices able to
guide them towards a new destiny.

For what these countries found in their heritage was the sense of
the State and the sense of the People. In the process of reviving this
heritage, by adding by its own example the sense of Truth, l’École
Française d’Extrême-Orient has been associated in advance with the
renaissance of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.25

As Geoffrey Gunn points out, though, the EFEO’s activities were not
conducted solely with disinterested learning in mind. Most of the struc-
tures chosen for restoration were associated with the institutions of the
Lao elite:

‘Thus by strengthening Buddhist social institutions, by restoring
religious and “political” edifices such as the king’s palace in Luang
Prabang, the French sought not only to legitimise and buttress the
system of royal power – where that was thought to be advantageous
– but to coopt traditional hierarchies in the interest of indirect rule
and the administrative expediency which flowed from that meas-
ure.’26

Members of the elite were encouraged to work in partnership with the
colonists to build a sense of Lao identity within the overarching iden-
tity of the French Empire. Thus, Prince Souvanna Phouma, trained as
an engineer by the French, managed the restoration of Wat Phra Keo.
Binding the Lao elite to the colonial project was one of the goals of
French preservation efforts, but just as important was the need to de-
fine Laos territorially as a cultural and political space distinct from
Siam. This process of cultural definition was just as important as –
indeed, it complemented – any treaties that mapped the physical bounda-
ries of Siamese and Lao territory.

French efforts to encourage the development of a Lao national iden-
tity to counter the cultural and political influence of Siam included the
establishment of a Buddhist Institute in Vientiane in 1931.27 By the
outbreak of the Second World War, the Siamese had changed their

25 ‘Discours du Général d’Armée de Lattre de Tassigny’, in Louis Malleret (1953), Le
cinquantenaire de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient: compte rendu des fêtes et
cérémonies, EFEO, Hanoi, pp 20–21 (translation by the authors).
26 Gunn, supra note 24, at pp 7–8.
country's name to Thailand, aligned themselves with Japan and begun to test French resolve to defend the western edge of their Indo-Chinese empire with military pressure. These developments added extra impetus to French attempts to improve their administration of Laos and to foster a controlled sense of Lao nationalism. Measures were taken to stimulate the Lao economy and its linkages with the rest of Indo-China and to improve the standard of living. New roads linking different parts of Laos and linking it with other parts of Indo-China were built, and extra effort was put into agricultural and forestry development. An effort was made to improve education and health care. In the political sphere, the Lao elite was to be given a greater role in administration of the country.

A new Service de Propagande Lao was established to foster a national consciousness uniting the country from north to south, overriding local ethnic and cultural differences. Søren Ivarsson argues that this campaign had two goals as far as the French were concerned: to integrate Laos better into the Indo-Chinese Federation and make it a more viable member, and to counter pan-Tai nationalism originating from Bangkok and stressing 'the historical, racial and cultural similarities between the Lao and the Thai'. The efforts of the French to bind Laos more closely to Indo-China certainly seemed to have an effect on the Lao elite. Shortly after the collapse of the Japanese and the Vietnamese declaration of independence in 1945, Lao Premier and Viceroy, Prince Phetsarath, proclaimed:

'Nourished by French civilization, I have not the slightest desire at my age to return to school to learn Chinese or Russian...Our [Lao and Vietnamese] policies are not the same. Vietnamese policy seeks to rid itself entirely of the French, whereas ours seeks to obtain independence within the framework of the French Union...We still have need to lean on a strong power in order to protect ourselves against

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28 Hugh Toye (1971), *Laos: Buffer State or Battle Ground*, Oxford University Press, London, pp 57 ff. In 1940–41 the Thai recovered former Thai territories in western and northern Cambodia and Xaignabouri and Bassac in northern and southern Laos respectively in a brief war with the French regime in Indo-China, which was, by this stage, cut off from metropolitan France and subject to Japanese control; Grant Evans (2002), *A Short History of Laos, the Land in Between*, Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest, New South Wales, pp 74–78.

29 Søren Ivarsson (1999), "Towards a new Laos: Lao Nhay and the campaign for a national "reawakening" in Laos 1941–45", in Evans, ed, supra note 1, at p 64.

30 ibid.
the designs of our neighbours both in the east and in the west, in the north and in the northwest.\textsuperscript{31}

Grant Evans contends that 'all colonial states in one way or another made themselves obsolete. They virtually taught the indigenous nationalists their nationalism'.\textsuperscript{32} This was certainly the case in Laos. French efforts to develop Lao national identity, commenced by the EFEO and accelerated under the threat of Thai irredentism in the late 1930s and 1940s, ended up stimulating Lao demands for greater independence, which were expressed in the formation of the Lao Issara movement that sought to take control of the country in the aftermath of the Japanese collapse in 1945, and in the development of a Lao communist resistance. Yet French colonial policy was also contradictory in that, while it sought to develop a sense of Lao national identity, it also intended to bind the country into the broader Indo-Chinese entity. Emphasizing the distinction between Laos and Siam while allowing the former to be swallowed up in a potentially Vietnamese-dominated Indo-Chinese Federation was a significant source of discontent amongst the Lao elite.

Thus, the development of Lao nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s was also spurred by a sense among the Lao elite and even some French colonial officials – that Lao identity was under threat from the country's incorporation into French Indo-China itself. Not only was it subject to different forms of colonial control in different parts of the country (Luang Prabang was a protectorate, while Vientiane and the southern parts were directly administered as colonies), but there was a very real fear, especially among the elite, that Laos would be submerged in a greater Indo-China dominated by the Vietnamese.\textsuperscript{33} These fears have persisted to varying degrees and in different forms ever since, but must have had particular potency from the 1920s to the 1940s. In 1937, there were 10,200 Vietnamese living in Vientiane, but only 9,000 Lao, while by 1943 three-fifths of Laos's urban population were Vietnamese, who carried out much of the colony's economic and administrative activity.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{32} Evans, supra note 27, at p 22.
Such was the predominance of Vietnamese staff in the bureaucracies of Laos and Cambodia that the only languages spoken and written in them were French and Vietnamese.

Although the communist takeover in 1975 can be seen as a radical departure in the trajectory of Lao history, leading as it ultimately did to the demise of the centuries-old monarchy, there is a sense in which the present government should be seen as the heir to a movement of Lao nationalism that has been developing since the beginning of the twentieth century. This is not to say that the Lao communists have the same motives for promoting Lao national identity as did the French or even the RLG prior to 1975. Nevertheless, there do appear to be recurring themes: the need to define Laos as a viable nation-state with a sense of itself as a historical (even if now somewhat truncated) entity; and the need to stimulate a sense of national identity amongst an otherwise ethnically and culturally diverse population. It is the realization of these two needs that drives current Lao government heritage policy, and UNESCO’s activities must be seen in this context. Indeed, in some sense, UNESCO can be seen as the heir to the activities of the EFEO, although the comparison here should not be laboured. The EFEO was a willing tool of French colonialism, whilst UNESCO is perhaps a more circumspect participant in the development of Lao nationalism.

The Royal Palace Museum

It appears that interpretation in Luang Prabang is limited by the approach taken towards the presentation of the role of the monarchy in Lao history. This too has implications for understanding the relationship between global agencies and the nationalist agenda of the Lao regime. It is best demonstrated by the approach to interpretation taken in the presentation of the Royal Palace Museum, a key feature of the cultural heritage landscape of Luang Prabang.

After the Revolution in 1975, the Royal Palace was quickly seen as a means of promoting national unity, and was officially opened to the public a year later as a museum for the benefit of the Lao people. Interpreting this event some years later, the Director General of the

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35 The museum is variously called the Royal Palace Museum, the Luang Prabang Museum, and the National Museum of Luang Prabang.
36 The Luang Prabang Museum was opened on 31 March 1976 (Anonymous [nd], Guide to Luang Prabang Museum, np, p 1).
Department of Museums and Archaeology, Thongsa Sayavongkhamdy, wrote that 'the main aims ... are to preserve the palace and the royal collection as well as to serve as the learning grounds for the public [for] the history of the former monarchy'. These aims reflect the fundamental tenets of international museum practice: preservation, public access and learning. Another official guidebook asserted that 'the museum has become the centre of historical and cultural research, as well as the main source of income, for residents of Luang Prabang' -- a recognition of the role of tourism in the cultural heritage matrix.

Thus the Luang Prabang Museum has become the central icon of a World Heritage site. This is reflected in journalistic pieces such as this one from the Asian Art Monthly: 'French architecture abounds in Southeast Asia and is especially notable in Luang Prabang, former royal capital of Laos. In the heart of this remote mountain town, filled with wooden Buddhist temples from the sixteenth century and French colonial buildings of the nineteenth and twentieth century is the National Museum.' On the surface, the Royal Palace (Luang Prabang Museum) is of course a fine example of an architectural blend: it was designed in a colonial process, according to the architectural principles of the École des Beaux Arts in Paris and reshaped with reference to local Buddhist temple vernacular. Thongsa writes that when it was designed and built between 1904 and 1909, 'the palace was meant to symbolize the new relationship between Laos and France, and mark the beginning of the promised modernisation of Laos'.

This interpretation of the meaning of the building is worthy of greater scrutiny: it seems that either the significance statement for World Heritage status has followed this interpretation of events very closely indeed, or else the interpretation was subsequently developed to fit perfectly with the main thrust of the inscription’s significance statement. Either way, French colonialism in Laos is cast in a very positive light – stressing the so-called ‘new relationship’. From another perspective, however, an alternative reading of events might see the Palace as a potent symbol of the declining geopolitical status to which Laos had slipped by

37 Thongsa Sayavongkhamdy (nd), Guide to the Royal Palace Luang Prabang, Chaiyong Limthongkul Foundation, Bangkok, p 2.
40 Thongsa, supra note 37, at p 1.
the early years of the twentieth century: the Palace was constructed by the French administration for the Lao King, who by 1904 was merely a puppet of his colonial masters, and by the standards of European and even other Asian monarchies, it was rather modest.

The present interpretation at the Luang Prabang Museum clearly contributes to the exotic and nostalgic image of Luang Prabang that has been fostered by World Heritage listing. Thus the Museum actively participates in preserving the royal mystique, which is closely associated with the place. Coupled with this royal mystique is that of Buddhism; indeed, more broadly, the two have always been inextricably entwined in Lao history, and continue to form the basis of Lao cultural heritage policy, as indicated by Thongsa at a recent UNESCO Sub-Regional Global Strategy meeting:

'At the present the Buddhist legacy continues to be the basis of our cultural development policy and Buddhist shrines and icons are still worshipped with due devotion. Such faith was an important factor and was taken into consideration while formulating the national policy of cultural heritage management but it did not predominate the rest of our heritage because the non-Buddhist heritage was also given the importance it deserves, such as prehistoric sites, Hinduist Temples [sic], vernacular houses, colonial mansions.'

The Palace Museum integrates royal relics and Buddhist cultural and spiritual material in a number of ways: literally, of course, in the architectural style, but also through the exhibits and the contents of some of its collections. There are semi-furnished period rooms and a display of royal gifts on the one hand, while there are cabinets housing Buddhist devotional statues collected from outlying temples on the other. One object, however, fuses these themes together absolutely, and also demonstrates the difficulties the museum faces in the interpretation of the role of the Lao monarchy. The great significance of this object was noted by a Nordic Institute of Asian Studies report on the museum published in 1991: 'In the extension of the king's reception room there is a small room where the most precious object of the Lao nation, the

Pra Bang [sic] is kept. The Pra Bang is a golden Buddha statue regarded as the palladium of the Lao nation.\textsuperscript{42} The Prabang, the sculpture from which the town takes its name, is the most significant object in the Museum, and as Thongs, wrote in his guide, it 'has been a chief source of spiritual protection for Laos since it was brought from Cambodia in the 14\textsuperscript{th} century'.\textsuperscript{43} It therefore has national as well as local cultural heritage significance. The display has not changed at least since 1991, when the Swedish consultants reported that the room could not be entered but that the objects could be viewed in a devotional manner through a glass-covered opening in the wall from the veranda. Hearsay cited by the Swedes suggested that the installation may indeed be older, because apparently 'the king is said to have come here every night to pray'.\textsuperscript{44}

Clearly, this special display within the museum is a very tangible representation of the fact that Buddhism has provided (and continues to provide) the religious justification for Lao political and social structures, including the former monarchy. Indeed, the Lao communist regime attempts to draw on Buddhism to provide itself with a sense of legitimacy, as evidenced by the parades to celebrate the 25\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the founding of the Lao PDR in 2000, which featured various aspects of 'traditional' culture, including a strong emphasis on Buddhism. In addition, Party leaders are now often seen publicly participating in Buddhist celebrations, an occurrence unheard of in the early years of the Revolution: the Party's most revered leader, Kaysone Phomvihane, was even accorded full Buddhist rites upon his death.\textsuperscript{45}

In contrast to privileging the Prabang as a tangible symbol of the relationship between royalty, Buddhism and Lao national identity, the Museum authorities seem entirely uncomfortable with other objects in their collection. In some respects, these objects fall outside this neat trichotomy and therefore also fail to concur with the romanticized World Heritage theme. For example, in a garage at the Palace is a collection of the last King's automobiles: a Citroën, two Lincoln Continentals and a Ford Edsel. During our visit in mid-2001, these cars were not on display or accessible to the general public, although we managed to


\textsuperscript{43} Thongs, supra note 37, at p 7.

\textsuperscript{44} Lind and Hagmuller, supra note 42, at p 73.

\textsuperscript{45} Evans, supra note 1, at p 64.
persuade Museum staff to show them to us. We were not allowed to photograph them, however.

While adequately preserved since 1975, these cars appear to have been a source of contention for quite some time. Perhaps one can detect the destabilizing influence of European values and correspondingly narrow perceptions of significance to which the Lao are currently unable to respond. In this case, the Swedish consultants from the Nordic Institute described both the garage and the cars (incorrectly identified as 'three Cadillacs') as 'eyesores' and recommended in their report that:

'Two of the cars could perhaps be auctioned off. One could be kept for its shame and tasteless extravagance and, again, for the historical irony, double-edged now when confronted with the Soviet monument on the same compound, of having inherited, from each of the two world powers which influenced Laos so strongly, a contemporary piece of high-esteem so prototypical for the official culture they represent.'

Putting irony and facetiousness aside, the royal cars are surely potent symbols of this period in Lao history and could provide excellent interpretative tools. These vehicles have the potential to speak volumes about the political status of Laos after 1954, the not-so-romantic period when the country became the focus of superpower rivalry and the RLG was the recipient of large amounts of American economic and military aid to support a bastion of anti-communism in the region. This fuelled corruption and decadence within the Lao elite, and was the source of much of the revolutionaries' propaganda success. Ultimately, as we know, this policy did not prevent the communist takeover. That the cars are not seen and this story remains untold demonstrates the narrow approach to interpretation by the Museum authorities, which continues to reinforce the central mystique of royalty and Buddhism at the expense of other elements of the city's and nation's history.

**Conclusion**

There is a growing body of literature on the relationship between national identity, political legitimacy and traditional cultural expressions in

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nations such as Laos. Grant Evans's excellent work in this field has emphasized the growing importance of traditional culture to the efforts of the Lao communists to legitimize a regime that can no longer rely on its revolutionary credentials for support. In this article, we have tried to extend this kind of analysis to show how this process is not merely an internal one involving 'negotiation' and interaction between Lao traditional cultural expressions and the government. Because of Laos's particular past and contemporary situation, it also involves recognizing the importance of international organizations as mediating influences.

We have shown that, rather than there necessarily being a tension or contradiction between the ideals and practices of international heritage agencies such as UNESCO and the needs of the Lao government, there is indeed a convergence of interests, expressed through their shared commitment to the preservation of certain aspects of the Lao past. We have also traced the historical origins of heritage preservation in Laos to demonstrate the long-term pattern of outside influence on Lao identity as manifested in heritage. Evans points out that museums 'are a product of a modern consciousness which is acutely aware of change – social, cultural and historical – and of ongoing change. It is this which explains the obsession around the world with the preservation of 'heritage'.' Museums, in other words, and other expressions of the heritage consciousness, are defensive manifestations, attempting to preserve against change.

It is in this sense of defensiveness that the interests of the Lao government and of the international heritage agencies converge most clearly. Lao nationalism, as expressed by the LPDR regime, is a defensive nationalism – Laos as distinct from Thailand, Laos as a meaningful


48 Evans, supra note 1, at p 123.
and historically justifiable nation, and Lao (‘socialist’) culture as opposed to Westernized mass culture. This sense of Lao nationalism intersects with a heritage ethic that is also defensive – the protection of a disappearing past in the face of change. This is, of course, a key cultural Zeitgeist of modernity, which involves at once the celebration of restless change and its opposite, the longing for stability and tradition. This dialectic is reflected in the reality that both the international heritage industry and the Lao regime are employing a particular image of Luang Prabang both to resist modernity through preservation of a pre-modern past, and at the same time to assert other key components of modernity, for the Lao government the validity of the nation-state; for UNESCO the importance of universality. In adopting the interpretation of Luang Prabang as a repository of particular Lao essences – Buddhism, royalty, exoticness and the success of cultural mixing – other ways of approaching and portraying the tension between the past and modernity have been foreclosed. Thus, the King’s cars remain locked away, symbols of a Lao modernity that does not fit this essentialized image.

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