

Grant Evans, *The Last Century of Lao Royalty: A Documentary History*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009. 443 pp. 523 photos. Hardbound: ISBN 978-974-9511-66-4

This large, beautifully produced and lavishly illustrated book brings to life the all-but-forgotten Lao monarchy through more than 500 photographs and dozens of descriptions, reports, letters and interviews with surviving members of the former royal family. The photographs have been assiduously collected over several years, and many of the documents have been translated from French and Lao by their compiler. To set the context for the photographs and documents, Grant Evans provides a longish introduction. Apart from its value to historians and anyone interested in the history of Laos, the book should appeal immensely to the worldwide Lao diaspora, nostalgic for the kingdom they once knew.

An anthropologist turned historian, Evans is one of the finest scholars working on Laos today, with several books to his name. He is particularly interested in how cultural and religious symbols and rituals are constructed and used for political ends; on the face of it, this book reflects those interests. His presentation, however, invites a number of questions. This brief review concentrates on just two. The first is: what sort of message does this book have for a reader? The second is: how is a reader to understand the historical role of the monarchy in Laos?

So, first to the book. To begin with, there is an intriguing ambiguity in the title that is carried through into the content. The ‘last century’ of Lao royalty has at least three possible meanings. Since the Lao monarchy came to an end in 1975 when King Sisavang Vatthana abdicated, and this volume purports to be ‘a documentary history’, the most obvious reading would be that the ‘last century’ refers to the period from 1875 to 1975. Since the book begins with the return in 1888 of King Ounkham to Luang Phrabang after it had been sacked the previous year by Tai and Chinese bandits, the ‘last’ century would actually cover just a ‘short’ century from 1888 to 1975. Or the last century could refer to Lao royalty during the twentieth century, which is what it is mostly about. Or the last century could date from the book’s publication, extended to cover the ‘long’ century from 1888 to the present. This last alternative is not as unlikely as would at first appear, since Evans includes a recent interview with the pretender to the Lao throne, whom he describes as being ‘in waiting’, and ends with an account of how commemorative rituals are performed for the royal family to this day.

The book is divided into 16 sections, arranged in part chronologically and in part thematically. They begin with the transfer of sovereignty over Lao territories east of the Mekong from Siam to France, as seen through colonialist French eyes, followed by two sections covering the ‘Main Palace’ during the reign of King Sisavang Vong (1885–1959; reigned 1904–1959),

and the 'Front Palace' personified by Prince Phetsarath (1890–1959). These two institutions refer to the king and the *ouparat* or viceroy, a position that King Chulalongkorn abolished in Siam, but which lived on in Luang Phrabang in an hereditary form until 1920, when Phetsarath's father died. It then lapsed, only to be resuscitated in 1941 when Phetsarath was appointed to the position.

The political *pas de deux* of Sisavang Vong and Phetsarath was critical in shaping the future of Laos during the turbulent years from the Japanese *coup de force* of March 1945 until the country obtained full independence from France in October 1953. Evans devotes a section to this period when the monarchy was challenged by the nationalist Lao Issara, led by Phetsarath. The relationship between the two men is discussed later in this review. Suffice it here to note that while Phetsarath declared the unification of Laos as an independent state, the king favoured the return of the French.

The next section, subtitled 'The Making of a National Monarchy', is devoted to royal travels, both internally and internationally, which Evans interprets as having established the legitimacy of the king as head of state in the eyes of all Lao. The following section covers the rule of King Sisavang Vatthana (subtitled 'Ruling through Righteousness'). This subtitle, like that of the previous section, is indicative of the sympathetic treatment Evans accords the monarchy throughout the book. Subsequent sections are devoted to the royal families of Champasak (focusing

on Prince Boun Oum) and Xiang Khuang, and to the political activities of the princely half-brothers, Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong.

Four sections follow whose rationale seems to be that they reveal the personalities and activities of kings and princes in a positive light. One section is devoted entirely to the art of embroidery in gold thread, apparently singled out because it is traditionally performed by the ladies of the extended royal family. Other arts wholly or partly dependent on royal patronage are ignored, such as Lao classical dance, puppetry, sculpture, wood carving and the decorative arts as applied in the royal monasteries and the palace.

One section is devoted to the important ritual and religious role of the monarchy, the disappearance of which Evans, the anthropologist, clearly regrets. And the reader can sympathise, in comparing the New Year ceremonies of 1953 described by Henri Deydier with what remains of them today in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR). Next come royal portraits presented in the form of interviews by Evans of five members of the royal family, including Prince Soulivong, grandson of King Sisavang Vatthana and pretender to the Lao throne; and royal weddings, which Evans presents as nationally unifying public spectacles. While the interviews (some of which could have been edited) reveal the homely side of the Luang Phrabang monarchy, the weddings displayed both wealth and status—as most Lao weddings do.

The two brief concluding sections tell the story of the imprisonment and death of King Sisavang Vatthana, his only queen (his father had had 11) Khamphui, and Crown Prince Vong Savang at the hands of the new communist rulers, who refused for years to admit they were dead; and the revival of commemorative rituals for King Sisavang Vong in Luang Phrabang, and their performance by members of the royal family in France. The future of the Lao monarchy is thus permitted to remain open.

The reader certainly comes away from this book with a more rounded picture of the Lao royal families, from their personal lives (no whiff of scandal noted, except that some failed to marry ethnic Lao spouses) to their ritual obligations and their political roles, which they performed with dignity. In his introduction Evans absolves the Lao monarchy of virtually all criticism (though to be fair, not all of the documents he includes are entirely laudatory). No character flaws or political misjudgements are discussed. Criticism by the Lao Issara of the political role played by Sisavang Vatthana, when he was Crown Prince, is brushed aside with the help of political theory: it is difficult to be a crown prince (as Charles Windsor would probably agree). Corruption on the part of Prince Boun Oum is mentioned to be quickly passed over. Evans emphasises rather the significant ritual role monarchy played in Lao culture and religion. The reader may be forgiven for concluding that Evans would be happy to see Laos revert to a constitutional monarchy—even though

he admits this is unlikely.

There is, however, a downside to monarchy that Evans does not examine, which has to do with how the example of hereditary privilege reinforces social status and hierarchy and so limits (or even prevents) social mobility. This was certainly the case in Laos, where the heads powerful aristocratic families monopolised political power, mostly for their own benefit and at the expense of the nation. King Sisavang Vatthana might admonish them for corruption and be frugal in his own habits, but he also endorsed their activities by presenting them with noble titles. The very existence of monarchy underwrote their hereditary position in a firmly entrenched social hierarchy, which the unscrupulous and greedy were able to exploit. Furthermore, in a hierarchical society the relationship between monarchy and democracy is often problematic. Recall that to relegate monarchy to a purely constitutional role took centuries in England.

There is, by the way, a justification for having a king as head of state in a Theravada Buddhist country, which Evans does not make explicitly, but which is implied by his focus on ritual and religion. Through the concept of karma, Buddhism accepts that human beings are not born equal: some have more advantages than others because they are more advanced along the universal path towards Enlightenment. The social circumstances of rebirth reflect this, as does social status, which is accorded to monks and families wealthy enough to make considerable

merit through donations to the Sangha. Kings stand at the apex of this merit-making social hierarchy, revered, as is the King of Thailand, for the merit made in previous lifetimes in order to be reborn into the royal family and become king, as well as for the additional merit made this time around.

All five Theravada Buddhist countries were once monarchies. Only Thailand and Cambodia remain so, and the monarchy in Cambodia hardly inspires confidence in its longevity. Every reader, Lao or foreign, might have his or her own view on whether the Lao monarchy should be restored (as the Cambodian monarchy has been). While Evans's own views can only be guessed at, he presents such a favourable view of constitutional monarchy in Laos prior to formation of the Lao PDR that to the reader might reasonably detect a subtext favouring its restoration.

In reviewing the performance of the Lao monarchy prior to 1975, *The Last Century of Lao Royalty* presents history in two forms. There are the documents, carefully selected, and there is Evans's 40-page introduction, which presents his own interpretation of the political and cultural/religious activities of the Lao monarchy. Of those two areas of activity, this review focuses on Evans's interpretation of the former, as it was the political decisions of Lao royalty (not just the king, but other royal players too) that shaped the independent Kingdom of Laos at key moments in its brief history.

Under the French, the kings of Luang Phrabang had limited jurisdiction and

were not constitutional monarchs. Evans dates the constitutional monarchy in Laos from 23 April 1946, when King Sisavang Vong was re-enthroned as king at the behest of the Lao Issara, which had deposed him the previous October. This event climaxed a tumultuous year during which Lao nationalism came of age. It was, of course, encouraged by the French as a riposte to the 'pan-Thai-ism' emanating from Bangkok. Nationalist activities took place mainly in Viang Chan, which by then had come to be included in the protectorate of Luang Phrabang. The court, however, was largely insulated from these developments—until the protectorate was brought to a sudden end by the Japanese *coup de force* of March 1945. The king was forced to declare independence, but he did so not for Laos as a whole—only for the Kingdom of Luang Phrabang. The rest was administered by the Japanese by right of conquest over the French administration.

From his coronation in 1904, Sisavang Vong had had minimal contact with central and southern Laos, whose inhabitants overwhelmingly did not recognise him as their king. Personally conservative, in 1945 he was already 60 years old and set in his ways. Prince Phetsarath, then *ouparat*, was only five years younger, but far more widely travelled within the country and much more forward-looking and abreast of events. It was Phetsarath who led the Lao Issara to seize power after the Japanese surrender, and who proclaimed the independence and unification of

Laos. The king, already in contact with the French in the form of Major (later Colonel) Hans Imfeld (not Emfeld), and clearly acting on French advice, thereupon dismissed Phetsarath as both prime minister of the government of Luang Phrabang and *ouparat*.

Evans explains this clash between the king, strongly supported by Crown Prince Sisavang Vatthana, and Prince Phetsarath as an ‘unintended outcome of the half-way house political structure put in place in 1941’ when the Luang Phrabang kingdom was extended to include the provinces of Haut Mékong, Xiang Khuang, and most notably Viang Chan in compensation for the loss (temporary, as it turned out) of Sayaboury to Thailand. He portrays the king as doing what he thought best for all Laos, given its weakness in the face of powerful expansionist neighbours. And he plays down differences between Sisavang Vong and Phetsarath on the grounds that the latter always wanted Laos to be a constitutional monarchy, and so was never really opposed to the king.

What this explanation glosses over is the failure of both the king and the equally conservative crown prince either to understand the forces of nationalism that the Second World War and its aftermath had unleashed, not only in Laos but across the colonial world, or to grasp the opportunities it offered to assume a leading role in the movement for Lao independence—as Sihanouk did in Cambodia. Phetsarath, on the other hand, as formerly the most senior Lao civil servant under the French,

not only viewed Laos as a whole, but also understood much better both the changes that were occurring and the opportunities they offered. These differences in understanding were what motivated the two men to take the actions they did, not any personal antagonism or competitiveness between them and their families. What ill-feeling there was later resulted from the king’s response to Phetsarath’s proclamation of Lao independence as a constitutional monarchy. The king did not have to dismiss Phetsarath. He could have played a more ambiguous role. Instead he aligned himself with the French.

Evans takes to task my own argument, in my *History of Laos* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), that the king missed another opportunity to raise the leadership profile of the monarchy by making Viang Chan his principal place of residence, which would have better enabled him to serve as a symbol of national unity, reduce the regionalism of the south, and act as a restraining influence in case of political conflict. Evans rejects such criticism on the grounds of the king’s age, which made him reluctant to move, that Luang Phrabang had ‘as much claim as Vientiane to be the historical capital of the country’, and that the king had important ritual functions to perform in Luang Phrabang. But his arguments miss the point. Evans is forced to admit that maintaining Luang Phrabang as a separate royal capital did demonstrate ‘a certain failure of political imagination’, but even for this he blames the Royal Lao Government, not the monarchy. I

still maintain, however, that a significant opportunity was lost for which the monarchy was most to blame, and this was of a pattern with the failure of the king to play any leadership role in achieving Lao independence.

Evans maintains that royal travels and weddings, plus fulfilling the crown's constitutional and religious obligations, were enough to change the Luang Phrabang monarchy into widely loved kings of Laos. I am not so sure. Sisavang Vong suffered from arthritis and did not like to travel around the country. His son travelled more, both as crown prince and king, but like his father preferred to remain in Luang Phrabang. I remember watching him as king in the 1960s on some choreographed occasions. He clearly lacked the common touch, which Sihanouk and Phetsarath had, and always looked severe and unbending. He was received with respect, but not with warmth or enthusiasm. In fact most rural folk had little idea who he was or what he stood for, which worried the United States embassy. In 1970, in a document included in this book, US Ambassador G. McMurtrie Godley expressed his doubts that the king or crown prince could ever 'provide the kind of national identity that Asian monarchies such as the Thai or Japanese give' (p. 212). The king, he noted, was not outgoing and had proved 'inept' in winning support in southern Laos (where most people still regarded Boun Oum as their 'king').

Despite McMurtrie's criticism, Evans presents a very positive picture of the last (and only) two kings of

the modern Kingdom of Laos—both in his introduction and through the documents he has chosen. (I wonder, did the French embassy share the positive American views that Evans includes?) His purpose in writing the book is to restore the monarchy to its proper place in Lao history—a place that has been all but erased in the political propaganda that masquerades as history in the Lao PDR. It is unlikely that a documentary history in English would have much impact in Laos (the Lao translation of Evans's *Short History of Laos* has a better chance of doing that); but the photographs are now on record and speak louder than foreign words in a country whose proclaimed ideology is discredited and whose communist rulers have had no alternative but to revert to nationalism—and have already gone so far as to raise a statue to King Fa Ngum, founder of the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang!

Evans states that another purpose in compiling this book was to bring about the 'recovery of memory'. But just what does that mean? Memory can only be recovered in those who have all but forgotten past experiences; it cannot be recovered in those who have never experienced the events described. For the next generation, the past must be constructed anew, and that is the task of historians. *The Last Century of Lao Royalty* goes some way towards filling a significant gap in Lao history. However, a definitive history of the Lao monarchy still remains to be written—not least because the Lao government refused

Evans access to the royal archives, such is its continuing sensitivity to the monarchy.

Errors are few in this comprehensive study (though former foreign minister Quinim Pholsena was assassinated in 1963, not in the '1950s'). Attentive readers will find a few annoying typographical errors, mostly among French terms, where a couple of dozen additional accents need to be sprinkled around. Lao transliterations are not always consistent (Phoui and Phouy, for example, on page 11), but the book must have been a challenging one to edit. The index of photo credits does not list all photographs not taken by Evans himself, as it claims to. Who, for instance, took the wonderful series of photographs of the That Luang festival in Luang Phrabang in 1938? And it is not always clear when 'documents' have in

fact been written by Evans himself (as is the one on Souphanouvong). But such blemishes are few.

In conclusion, this impressive book presents a sympathetic (some might say overly sympathetic) portrait of the Lao monarchy. If the suspicion remains that there is a subtext to be read into it, Evans has every right to his interpretation—as others have to differ in theirs. Constitutional monarchy may or may not be a preferable form of government for Laos, though the current Lao ruling elite would certainly not think so. Nonetheless, whatever may be the reader's view, the future of the Lao monarchy is a matter for the Lao people alone to decide.

Martin Stuart-Fox

---