The political history and religious culture of Laos are exceedingly rich, a complex tapestry of interwoven strands. Culturally, bedrock “animistic” perceptions held by virtually all of its disparate peoples, including the majority Lao, have been layered over by Indic or Sinitic philosophical conceptions, social values, and political ideals. Other more specific and subtle religious, social, and cultural influences have come by way of the neighboring Khmer, Thai, Burmese, and Vietnamese, by the colonial French, and by the contemporary world of international tourism. Laos has never been easy to field conceptually. Thus, Goscha and Ivarsson introduced their superb collection of essays on how Lao political history has been constructed in this way:

Many have seen Laos making a delicate “balancing act,” an almost never-ending struggle between its two larger mainland Southeast Asian neighbors—Vietnam . . . and Thailand. . . . For some it is a Buddhist kingdom and a Marxist state. Others have analyzed it in terms of its position in Cold War Southeast Asian geopolitics and the seemingly endless wars occurring next door in Vietnam. It was the “next domino” to fall to communism, the “buffer” or the “linchpin” to holding the line for the “free world” against the “spread of communism” further into the region. Some writers continue to conceptualize Laos as a “special” part of larger French, Vietnamese, Indochinese or Thai worlds, with the Lao playing the role of “apprentices,” if not “younger brothers.” Others simply pass over Laos rapidly, a sideshow to seemingly more important histories. (2003: xi)

From considered comments like this, it seems as though Lao culture and society have not been often considered, especially by outsiders, as at the center of their own history. (Indeed, since some of what I say in this book about Lao religious culture arises out of comparison to what I know about Sri Lanka, I am not completely immune from this criticism either.)
That said, Goscha and Ivarsson also contend that although many Lao observers now regard the current political boundaries of Laos as unnatural, as a truncated by-product of French-Thai political machinations in the late nineteenth century, modern nationalist and Marxist historians have continued, nonetheless, to construct linear accounts of the “nation-state,” accounts that attempt to take “Laos” far back into a hoary past. Some of these accounts of Lao history begin with considerations of mythic origins relevant only to the proto-formation of what later became the Kingdom of Lan Xang, which was centered first in Luang Phrabang and later in Vientiane. In the process of writing history in this manner, myth and tradition have been conflated to telescope a projected teleology, one firmly rooted in perspectives highly conditioned by interests vested in modern political history. The history of Laos, Goscha and Ivarsson aver, remains intensely contested, especially when the political present functions as a keen driver for an anachronistic reading of the Lao past. I have consciously tried to resist this.

While the past of Laos may be complex and contested, one of my primary methods for understanding Lao Buddhism and religious culture has been to situate my discussions within the vicissitudes of political history. I have done so because Lao religious culture cannot simply be equated with philosophical or cosmological abstractions, nor can it be understood only as an individual Lao’s privately elected worldview or “belief system.” On the other hand, religious culture need not be regarded cynically as only a disguised political ideology to legitimate claims to power. In the West our conceptions of religion often either overly emphasize doctrine, soteriology, or personal meaning or are aimed at asserting religion’s functionality in relation to political process. Consequently, these conceptions of religion are frequently too restricted in scope to grasp the profundity of sociocultural dynamics in play, especially in a religious culture like the one that has unfolded in Laos.

Mandalas

Out of this concern for fielding sociocultural dynamics, central to the first chapter of this study is a consideration of the mandala, known to most Western students of Buddhism for its significance in meditation practice and artistic expression. In those contexts mandalas are elaborate symbols that represent various spiritual realities of the cosmos to be internalized through concentrated meditative pursuit. The earliest Indian constructions are essentially “cosmograms,” or spiritual maps of cosmic powers, for the mind to explore and penetrate. They function as didactic cues for processing phases of the enlightenment quest. The macrocosms of cosmic power that mandalas map, often portrayed as otherworldly “Buddha-fields” and their associated virtues, are meant to be realized microcosmically, or individually,
within an increasingly clarified mind. The subjective conscious apprehension of what the mandala symbolizes eventually gives way to a direct perception of “objective reality” or “reality-as-it-is.” The evolutionary development of mandalas as visual expressions of the Buddhist spiritual path can be observed in the increasing sophistication of Buddhist art in both northern and southern Indian traditions of material culture from the early centuries CE.²

There is also another dimension of the mandala’s significance, however, that is less well known to most people, especially Western observers or practitioners of Buddhism and Hinduism. In early historic India, mandalas were also used as architectural and spatial designs for the construction of great Buddhist monuments built by pious Indian kings, laity, and monks, especially for the evolving forms of the Buddhist reliquary stupa. They were also used as blueprints for the great Hindu temples that accompanied the rise of bhakti devotional religion dedicated to the emergent great gods of Hindu tradition, Siva or Visnu (or less frequently, one of the forms of the goddess) from the middle of the first millennium CE onward. Conceived in mandalic form, these great Hindu temples were regarded by devotees as vibrant this-worldly seats of power for Siva or Visnu, places where their magnanimous powers of divine compassion could be petitioned. Moreover, they were comprehended as local reproductions of their deities’ heavenly abodes (Mt. Kailasa and Mt. Vaikunta respectively). The central tower of the Hindu temple, containing in its base the garbha grha (sanctum sanctorum) of the deity, symbolized the center of the cosmos as well. Thus the power of the deity occupying this space was identified as the power within this world that sustains its vitality. The center of the cosmos, also symbolized by the central temple tower or the spire of the stupa, from both the Hindu but especially the Buddhist perspective, could also be regarded as a this-worldly Mt. Meru, the heavenly abode of Sakka (Sanskrit: Sakra; the Buddhist rendering of the Vedic deity Indra, the devaraja or “king of the gods”).

Most of these great monumental constructions, at first Buddhist but then predominantly Hindu after the fifth century CE, were constructed by ambitious kings who had mustered the capacity to marshal the labor and material resources necessary for such elaborate constructions. Many of these kings, in turn, fashioned themselves as either cakkavattins (dharma-wielding kings descending from a lineage of the Buddha and destined eventually to become buddhas in their own right) or in the Hindu context as devarajas (this-worldly royal incarnations of the deities they worshipped). The temples that these Indian rulers constructed, often the palaces that they inhabited, and/or the royal cities that they built, were regarded as the pivots of a political mandala, the very center of the known, inhabited world, where power from the ultimate center of the cosmos flowed into and then throughout their realms, ritually orchestrated by a cadre of priests at their service. The Hindu
king, then, was a this-worldly version of absolute cosmic power and the Buddhist king an embodiment of the dharma that the Buddha had perceived and then made known. Both represented themselves, through their regalia, temple projects, and ritual articulations, as consecrated vectors of supernatural force.

It is this last dimension of the mandala’s significance that seems to have become politically normative in many of the overtly Hindu and Buddhist kingdoms of Southeast Asia, especially at Angkor, where the ideology flourished from at least the ninth (and probably earlier) through the thirteenth century CE. Power was conceived and then realized through a dynamic process of vertical and horizontal, centripetal and centrifugal flows, from the parallel otherworldly reality to this world, and from the center of the mandala to its peripheries, and from its peripheries to the center, channeled and directed in a pulsating fashion. Kingdoms, as well as their subrealms, were understood as mandalas, as mandalas within mandalas, and in many cases as overlapping mandalas.

Discussions about mandala polity are a major focus of consideration in Chapter 1 when I discuss the religious elements of Lao political history from the fourteenth through the nineteenth centuries. But I will not argue that the political formations erected by the Lao were simply the result of imported notions of classical Indian statecraft. Indeed, the term mandala is not directly deployed in the Lao texts and inscriptions that refer to the political realms of Lao kingship. Rather, what I shall try to illustrate is that indigenous understandings of power incipient in the indigenous cults of “cadastral” deities, or “gods of the land” and ancestor veneration, provided the Lao with a conceptuality to field and then inflect Hindu and Buddhist principles of polity quite uniquely. That is, the perceived power attributed to Lao kingship was not simply a by-product of the mandala’s transposition from Indian to Lao cultural regions. To understand power and its relation to “mandalic” space, I also discuss the indigenous conception of *muang* (a tributary political mode operating largely at the village level) and the various spiritual powers that attend to it.

One of the theoretical maxims often operating in my mind while I was researching this study was this: fundamental transformations in the political economy of a society are inevitably reflected in the dynamics of its associated religious culture. Chapter 1 begins with a focus on the construction of a religious polity among the Lao and ends with an account of its unraveling due to the competing political and military aspirations of the Burmese, Vietnamese, and Thai. The second chapter focuses on the transformations of religion in Laos that occurred with the impact of French colonialism and then with America’s powerful military presence during the Vietnam War. These impacts may have been equally, if not more, traumatic than the disestablishment of the Lao Lan Xang kingdom. But what remains remarkable throughout all of these political changes is the persistence of the
Lao spirit cults, a fact that seems to challenge the verity of the maxim I have just articulated regarding how social, political, and economic change affects religious culture. Despite sweeping political paradigm shifts in Lao history, the spirits of the place have endured.

The arrival in Luang Phrabang of a new political regime in the fourteenth century is believed by many to have been accompanied by Sinhala (Sri Lankan) forms of Theravada Buddhism that eventually provided the ideological rationale for a consolidated and imperial Lao political mandala. But the consolidation of specifically Buddhist political power in Laos probably did not, in fact, occur before the sixteenth century, and only then as a consequence of heavy cultural influence emanating from the neighboring kingdom of Lan Na (the region surrounding contemporary Chiang Mai, Thailand). My basic point in this discussion, of course, is that political change in Laos was accompanied by challenges and transformations in religion as well. In Chapter 2 I shall also observe how the colonial presence of the French, replete with alternative ideological conceptions of “nation” and “religion,” impacted some Lao religious sensibilities, not only in how religion would be regarded in relation to the state, but also in relation to the very notion of “religion” itself. An account of the effect of these French notions on some of the Lao elite, and the consequences of French colonial policies for rural highland “tribal” peoples, provides background for one of the primary discussions in the third chapter of this study, which is concerned with how the Theravada Buddhist sangha has been impacted in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by the rather spectacular political sea changes of the era.

Having commented on the influence of the French colonial presence, I then briefly discuss the American military intervention in Laos between the mid-1950s and 1975, when American forces were finally withdrawn from Southeast Asia, thereby signaling the U.S. defeat in the Second Indochina War. Laos was severely devastated by this war—some have said “bombed back into the stone age”—and became an unwitting casualty of what was, in hindsight, a seriously misguided American foreign policy in Southeast Asia. America’s military intrusions into Laos, ostensibly in response to North Vietnamese incursions, contributed to a radical destabilization of the county that exacerbated deep political divisions within the Lao metropole, while at the same time further fostering a process of alienation within some of the highland “ethnic minority” communities of Laos, a process that had begun initially during the period of French colonialism. Both consequences, among the elites as well as among the people of the countryside, contributed significantly to the political chaos that ensued. The intensity of the American bombing of Laos, an effort intended to stymie the movements of North Vietnamese regiments into Laos and supplies into South Vietnam, was unprecedented in the history of warfare. American planes dropped more bombs on Laos
than the combined total tonnage dropped on Germany and Japan in World War II, about two-thirds of a ton for every inhabitant in the country. Moreover, the CIA’s “secret war” against the North Vietnamese, in which predominately upland ethnic Hmong fighters, among other minorities and Thai mercenaries, abetted conditions that ultimately led to social and political disintegration on a national scale, radicalized many monks in the Buddhist sangha.

Addressing the situation in Laos during the contemporary postwar period in the third chapter, I attempt to answer the following questions. Was there a place for Buddhism within the emergent Marxist revolutionary state? What was the state’s disposition toward indigenous religious culture?

In the fourth chapter I ask how the opening up of the country in the 1990s, signaled by Luang Phrabang’s newly acclaimed status as a tourist-attracting UNESCO World Heritage Site, altered or began to affect the Buddhist monastic vocation and Lao religious culture in general. Thus throughout Chapters 2–4 I trace the contours of Lao political history to determine its significance for religious change.

Nevertheless, there is yet another set of questions that has preoccupied my attention: how is Buddhism related to Lao conceptions of spirits (phi and khwan)? How and why have these cults persisted? These questions have been answered in various ways over the centuries. Some, including various royalty and monks, have periodically declared that these two aspects of the religious culture should have nothing to do with one another or that when the two have been related, the result leads to distortions in Buddhist understanding. Indeed, one of the most powerful sixteenth-century Luang Phrabang kings, Phothisarat, attempted to eliminate the worship of phi at the great shrines and to replace these shrines with Buddhist temples. Some leading monastic intellectuals during the late French colonial period articulated a wholly rational form of “purified” Buddhist thought that also excluded the veneration of spirits. Finally, the leaders of the communist revolutionary Pathet Lao, who took over the country in late 1975, in following a line of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy, also attempted to ban the veneration of phi by essentially criminalizing the practice and labeling it a matter of “superstition” that needed to be suppressed if the nation-state was to realize its destiny as a “scientifically based” socialist society. Some Western scholars, in addressing the question of how Buddhism has been related to spirit cults, have argued that they are two separate but coexisting religious systems. Others have averred that Buddhism historically encompassed, subordinated, and then accommodated the cults of the phi to form a unique “blend” of emergent religious culture.

This last view is similar to, though not exactly what I have advanced in two of my previous books on the topic of deity veneration and Buddhism in Sri Lanka’s religious culture. In those studies I illustrated not only how deities of Hindu ori-
gin and a bodhisattva of Mahayana Buddhist origin were assimilated and then transformed within the dominant purview of Theravada tradition, but I also illuminated the manner in which the Sinhalese have interpreted the significance of such supernatural figures from a Buddhist perspective. That is, I tried to show how Buddhists have “read” or construed the significance of important elements of popular or folkloric religious culture, and how they have done so rather inclusively at that. Certainly that kind of task could also be appropriate in the Lao cultural milieu. But my sense is that this approach would leave our understanding still wanting in an important way. During my time in Laos I came to realize that many Lao have understood the Buddha, dharma, and sangha in their own particular ways because of assumptions imbedded in their indigenous cultic worship of phi (spirits). Instead of concentrating on how Buddhists have “read” aspects of popular religious culture that they have assimilated, including the veneration of phi, khwan, and ancestors, I have explored the matter from the other way around: how have important aspects of Buddhism been construed or “read” in light of persisting forms of understanding rooted in traditional Lao conceptions of “spiritual power”? I became especially interested in the significance of conceptions that have to do with understandings of “the power of a place.” While this issue is addressed in a number of discussions throughout this study, I take it up directly in the concluding fifth chapter.

Laos: Some Basic Facts

Laos has the fewest number of people of any country in Southeast Asia. The 1995 census, the most recent reliable data available to me as I write, reported a population of 4,575,000. (In 2007 the population was approximately 6 million.) The 1995 population figure was less than half that of Cambodia, less than a tenth that of Burma, about 7 percent of Thailand’s, and 6 percent of Vietnam’s (Sisouphanthong and Taillard 2000: 12). When the total population of Laos’s Southeast Asian neighbors (excluding China) is compiled, the population of Laos forms only about 2.5 percent of the total for the Indochina peninsula, or only one in forty people. Population density is less than nine per square km, making the country three times less densely populated than Cambodia, Burma, and Malaysia (Sisouphanthong and Taillard 2000: 28). The most significant reason that Laos is less densely populated than its Southeast Asian neighbors lies in the fact it is mostly mountainous. Spectacular ranges of granite lace its topography from north to south.

The Lao Loum people—those Lao citizens who speak the Lao language, traditionally have grown wet rice along the Mekong River and its many tributary basins, whose religious culture is dominated by Theravada Buddhism and spirit cults, and whose settlement patterns followed the muang configuration—account
for little more than half the population. In popular parlance the Lao Loum are “the ethnic Lao.” But if other ethnic groups in the Tai–Kadai ethnolinguistic family are included along with the Lao Loum, peoples such as the Putai and Leu, two-thirds of the population of Laos can be accounted for. As Sisouphanthong and Taillard have noted in their *Atlas of Laos*: “This is far less, below the Tai–Kadai family in Thailand (estimated at 83%), the Mon–Khmer in Cambodia (87%), and the Vietnamese/Kinh in Vietnam (87%)” (12). Mon–Khmer peoples, of whom more than half are Khmu, make up 23 percent of the population while Tibeto–Burmans and Hmong (or Meo), who migrated into northern Laos from southern China in the nineteenth century, form between 7 and 8 percent. The population of contemporary Laos, therefore, is very heterogeneous. Indeed, forty-seven disparate ethnic groups are noted in the government’s census.

The heterogeneity of the population makes the distribution and delivery of education and health services, let alone communication per se, extremely difficult for a country with such an undeveloped infrastructure. In areas where non-Lao Loum ethnic minorities dominate, the numbers of the school-age population in school is quite a bit less than in those regions where the “ethnic Lao” dominate. With a high rate of population growth (about 2 percent per year), the expansion of quality education throughout the country will continue to be a major challenge for the nation in the foreseeable future. In 1996 the opening of the National University of Laos signaled an important moment for a developing nation seeking to cultivate human resources necessary to provide the country with its long-term technical and educational requirements. Other regional universities offering limited curricula, chiefly in agriculture, information technology, and economics/business, have recently opened as well.

In 1995 the population of Vientiane, the capital, was 166,500 (Sisouphanthong and Taillard 2000: 32). It is now (in 2008) probably in the vicinity of 225,000–250,000. When Vientiane’s population is combined with other small cities, including Luang Phrabang, Xam Neua, Phonsavan, Pakse, Oudomxay, Savannakhet, and so forth, the total urban population still amounts to less than 10 percent of the total population. Eighty-five percent of the population is still engaged in agriculture. Laos, consequently, is the least industrialized country in Southeast Asia (29). The country is also 85 percent forested naturally, but swidden (“slash-and-burn”) cultivation, as well as the deforestation that has resulted from extensive (much of it illegal) logging (instigated by Chinese business concerns), has reduced the actual forest cover to 42 percent, down from 70 percent in 1940 (20).

In spite of economic reforms introduced in the 1990s and a breathtaking rise in the number of tourists now visiting the country, Laos remains among the world’s poorest and least developed countries. With an average annual per capita income of $320 according to 1995 data, Laos is economically more advanced than Camb-
bodia ($240) and Vietnam ($190), but Laos is three times poorer than the next richest countries, Indonesia and the Philippines. Nevertheless,

the Lao PDR is also the biggest recipient of official development assistance in Southeast Asia . . . 67% of this aid comes from international financial institutions and only 31% from bilateral aid with Japan and Sweden being the largest donors. (Sisouphansithong and Taillard 2000: 30–31).

According to statistics reported by the Lao Front for National Construction in 2005, there are currently about 22,000 Buddhist monks at 4,937 Buddhist temples in Laos. At the same time, there are 95 Roman Catholic churches serving 42,000 parishioners, chiefly in urban areas. The LFNC reports 221 evangelical Protestant Christian churches in no less than seventeen of the country’s eighteen provinces, 9 Bahai spiritual halls, 8 Mahayana temples serving predominantly Vietnamese Buddhists in Vientiane, Champasak, Pakse, and Savannakhet, and 400 Muslims, the great majority of whom reside in Vientiane. In January 2007 a representative from the Council for America’s First Freedom, an organization linked to Christian evangelicals seeking unfettered missionary access to Asian and other “third world” countries, hailed these figures as an encouraging sign of the Lao PDR government’s willingness to open up Laos to the rest of the world. If this is indeed the case, it would appear that the Department of Religious Affairs of the Lao PDR is now pursuing a contradictory policy (and perhaps unwittingly at that, since Christian missionary work remains officially banned): it makes continuous efforts to link Lao Theravada Buddhism to the national public culture on the one hand while simultaneously turning a blind eye to Christian missionary work among the country’s minority hill tribe peoples on the other. But what is actually happening is far from clear.

The foregoing figures provide a skeletal social profile of contemporary Laos. When writing about Lao culture, however, one also has to take into account that most of the “ethnic Lao” population, and therefore Lao Buddhism and religious culture, actually resides outside of the current political boundaries of Laos. Indeed, owing to the vicissitudes of political history, especially during the early nineteenth century but also due to the fallout of the Vietnam War, the “ethnic Lao” are actually nine times more numerous in northeast Thailand than they are within the contemporary political boundaries of Laos per se (Hayashi 2003: 9). This figure, however, can also be somewhat misleading if it is not properly contextualized. The Japanese anthropologist Yukio Hayashi notes:

[The government of] Thailand has a history of encouraging the Lao [in northeast Thailand] to discard their identity and assimilate by establishing regional
identities within its own borders; [but] Laos . . . has actively promoted the application of that name to all its citizens and, by using it to establish the nation’s international identity, is attempting to eliminate its use as an indicator for a specific ethnic group. (2003: 31; emphasis mine)

The strategy by the central Thai government to dilute Lao identity has been pursued chiefly through two means: one has been to reform Lao Buddhism in the image of a royally sponsored, Pali book-based, Bangkok-centered form of Buddhism, and the other has been to replace the Tai-Lao language of the northeast region with the Bangkok Thai dialect. It is noteworthy, as Hayashi points out, that the Lao of northeast Thailand call themselves “Isan” or “Thai” when speaking to Thai from other regions of Thailand, or to foreigners, or when dealing with the central government, while to their own non-Lao neighbors in the same region, they refer to themselves as “Lao.” “When Lao from Northeast Thailand and from Laos meet in public, it is usual to pat each other on the back and call each other brother, expressing a consciousness of their ‘genealogy’” (Hayashi 2003: 47).

As I noted above, the “ethnic Lao,” known only since the 1950s as “Lao Loum” because of an attempt first initiated by the then Royal Lao Government to generate an inclusive nomenclature for its heterogeneous population, make up about half of the population in Laos, but they cover only about 20 percent of the land space that comprises contemporary Laos, for they are confined to the lowland river basins of the Mekong and its tributaries. In Thailand, where the Lao make up only 20 percent of the population, they actually inhabit 30 percent of the nation’s landmass (Hayashi 2003: 35; also see Map 0.1).

The Lao Theung, the ethnic minorities who reside in the uplands or on the mountain slopes, and Lao Sung, the minorities who reside at or near the mountaintops, occupy the remaining 70 percent of the land. In the northern province of Luang Phrabang, the region where I conducted most of the research for this book, the Khmu people comprise the vast majority of Lao Theung, while the Hmong are the predominant Lao Sung.

This last discussion begs some comment about the historical use of the term “Lao.” Indeed, its history has been quite varied. Hayashi and others point out that the earliest written use of the term is found in an inscription authored by a king of the Sukhothai mandala (in what is now north central Thailand) in the thirteenth century, about a century before the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang was allegedly established by its popularly acclaimed progenitor, Fa Ngum. We also know that it was also used in the sixteenth century by the Portuguese to denote a specific area as well as the inhabitants of that area.

Hayashi also cites the well-known mythic motif that when Tai-speaking people migrated down the Mekong from southern China to displace the people speaking
the Mon-Khmer language, they gave the term *kha* (servant) to these people while referring to themselves as *thai* (free). As I shall show, this ancestral “theory” resides within a well-preserved “ethnic Lao” cosmogonic and migration myth. Regarding the specific social usage of the term “Lao,” Hayashi writes that

> it was originally used as a term denoting the highest social rank. But later when the region became a vassal to Siam [in the eighteenth century], the Siamese rulers, in order to distinguish between [themselves] and others, applied the term Lao to those who had previously called themselves Thai, giving it the more contemptuous meaning [or] connotation that remains to this day [from the Thai perspective]. In this way, the term Lao came to denote a middle rank between the Thai and the Mon-Khmer. (2003: 35)

Adding to this discussion, Charles Keyes points out that

> until the end of the nineteenth century, the term “Lao” was used by the rulers, and even the ordinary people in Bangkok, in a rather vague way to refer to
peoples living to the North and Northeast of what had constituted the core of old Siam (Ayudhya), who had followed cultural traditions and spoke languages related to but clearly different from those of Siam. Under this rubric came not only the peoples living in the principalities of Vientiane, Luang Prabang, and Champasak that would later be included within French-controlled Laos, but also those in the principalities of Chiang Mai, Nan, and others that would subsequently constitute Northern Thailand. In addition, most people living on the Khorat Plateau in what is today Northeastern Thailand were also considered Lao. (2002: 120)

What these comments by Hayashi and Keyes would seem to indicate, then, is that the term “Lao” used to designate the Lao people and Lao language was originally and consistently used by outsiders, rather than by the “ethnic Lao” themselves until quite recently. Indeed, before the nineteenth century, the terms “Thai” and “Lao” as ethnic terms were not in use at all, although “it is [now] common for national histories to project such titles into the distant past” (Evans 2002b: 2). Moreover, in the present Laotian nation-state, its meaning has been expanded quite beyond reference to the ethnic “Lao Loum” people per se to include all contemporary citizens of the Lao Peoples Democratic Republic. Finally, the term is also being used increasingly as an adjective (analogous to English “Laotian”) for its use in designating the language spoken and the culture practiced by the Lao Loum people. In the first part of this study, which focuses upon the Lan Xang kingdom, I have sometimes used the term Lao to refer to the interests of this kingdom, but it should be understood that I have done so provisionally, in the absence of any other better term I could consider.

Indeed, not only is the term “Lao” multifarious in its past and present designations, but the term “Laos” requires a deconstruction in its own right in order to be properly contextualized. It is now quite clear that the introduction of the term “Laos” designating a segment of French Indochina was meant by the French to emphasize a cultural and political difference in relation to the Thai. The French were quite conscious of the religious, cultural, and linguistic affinities that obtained between the Tai peoples under their own control and the Siamese, especially after demarcation of the new territorial boundaries that they forced upon Siam in 1893 through “gunboat” diplomacy. They continuously worried about Siamese pretensions to lay claim over their former vassal states (Vientiane, Luang Phrabang, and Champasak) or the possibility that the Tai people under French control would seek the patronage of the Siamese king. The French encouraged, directly or inadvertently, the types of histories that would emphasized a narrow, vertical genealogy of Laotian identity, one that articulated a trajectory of its nationhood from the present back to the fourteenth-century figure of Fa Ngum. As will be
noted in later discussions, French policy was aimed at sharpening the distinction between “Thai” and “Lao” in whatever ways possible, while simultaneously building bridges to the Cambodian Khmer. Their efforts to engender an incipient Lao nationalism among the Lao elite, however, eventually undermined their own abilities to sustain their colonial interests.

Theravada Buddhism: A Brief Overview

Finally, a few words of introduction about Theravada Buddhism are needed. “Theravada” refers to the “way of the elders” and the manner in which this lineage of Buddhist monastic tradition chose to distinguish itself as a conservative and preserving force in maintaining the teachings of Gotama the Buddha, regarded as the latest in a series of twenty-four enlightened beings who, over many eons of time, have made known the truth of dharma to assuage the suffering condition of humanity, a suffering caused by ignorance and desire that can be overcome through the pursuit of wisdom, the practice of morality, and the cultivation of concentrated meditation. In its “canonical” scriptures (Tipitaka) written in the Pali language, a form of Prakrit derived from Sanskrit during the middle centuries of the first millennium BCE in Northern India, the subtle teachings of the Buddha about non-self (anatta), impermanence (anicca or paticcasamuppada), action (karma), and the disciplined life (vinaya) of the monk (bhikkhu) are presented in both sermonic and legalistic genres of literature. These texts were not committed to writing until the first century BCE in Sri Lanka, some four centuries or so after the life of the Buddha. Other Pali texts, such as the monastic noncanonical Mahavamsa written in Sri Lanka about 500 years later, trace the Theravada lineage of male and female monasticism back through the son (Mahinda) and daughter (Sanghamitta) of the great Indian Emperor Asoka. Asoka’s children are thereby thought to have introduced the bhikkhu and bhikkhunni sanghas (monasticism) to Sri Lanka in the third century BCE. Through Asoka’s children, Theravada is then traced back to the very time of the Buddha himself.

Within the monastic Mahavihara fraternity in Sri Lanka, the Theravada lineage thrived while the royal capital city Anuradhapura became a great cosmopolitan center of learning, thanks to the abilities of pious Buddhist kings who generously lavished their surplus wealth, a by-product of a sophisticatedly engineered, hydraulic-based agricultural system, upon the sangha. Here a Buddhist civilization took root and expressed itself through literary and artistic modes of culture for more than 1,300 years before it was sacked in the tenth century CE by an invading army of the imperial South Indian Cola empire, resulting in the destruction of the extensive infrastructure that had supported a “monastic landlord” social and political economy. But within a few generations, the Theravada male monastic lin-
Eage was revived and reestablished in a new capital city, Polonnaruva, and it is from Polonnaruva that the monastic and Pali literary traditions were exported first to Burma in the eleventh century, and subsequently over the following two centuries into Sukhothai and Lan Na in what is now northern Thailand, and finally to Angkor in the early fourteenth century. From Lan Na especially, though Lao tradition avers Angkor, Theravada made its way definitively into the cultural regions of the Lao. Thus the Lao were probably the last “ethnic people” of Southeast Asia who adopted Theravada on a wholesale basis. Theravada now remains a vital religion in contemporary Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. There are also pockets of Theravada in eastern Bangladesh and established Theravada communities in urban Malaysia and Singapore, not to mention in the major cities of the United States, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom.