

* A leader in anthropology at the Department of Sociology at the University of Hong Kong, Grant Evans, has assembled 12 papers divided into four sections to create 'Laos: Culture and Society'. The book covers geography and history, Lao ethnicity and the diaspora, religion and ritual, and language and literature. Most are by Western researchers, but two chapters are by Laotian contributors.

Evans’ wide-ranging opening chapter, ‘What is Laos Culture and Society’ provides the recurrent theme to many other papers: there seems to be a great debate about what it is to be Lao and how Lao-ness is defined. As minorities (mostly non-lowland Lao) make up about half the country’s population, do not natively speak Lao, and about half the population (it is guessed) is not Buddhist, the binding glue is sometimes spread rather thinly.

There are two other contributions by Evans here. 'Ethnic change in northern highland Laos’ again addresses the question of Lao-ness, studying the relationship between the Black Tai and the Song Moon in one particular village, Ban Na Wan. This is standard field research, dressed up with a good deal of academic verbiage like ‘ethnic essentialism’ and ‘the emics and etics of ethnicity’. His chapter ‘Apprentice Ethnographers’ studies the Vietnamese influence and training on would-be Lao anthropologists, who also have to toe a political line set out by one of the leading lights of Lao communism (a contradiction in terms, some would hold) Kaysonne Promvihane. Because Laos has so many ethnic minorities, the view that ‘it does not constitute a proper nation... (is seen) as imperialist propaganda undermining national solidarity’. It is perhaps comforting that the 820 ‘self-named ethnic groups’ found in the unpublished 1983-85 census could be reduced to 47 categories for the 1995 census, and that the government now attempts to ‘cloak itself in ‘tradition’ and nationalism instead of Marxism.’

By far the best chapter comes from Andrew Walker, who engrossingly studies the role of women in long-distance trading from Thailand into northwestern Laos. With a fine eye for relevant detail (‘vinyl handbags stuffed with thousand-baht notes’), he traces the Mekong route from Chiang Khong to Udomxai taken by these enterprising women whose tales, freedom and relative wealth are surprising in the usual masculine travels 'celebrated in Lao and Thai culture'.

The two Lao contributions, by Siambhaivan Sisombat Souvannavong and Khampheng Thipmuntali, are detailed studies. ‘Elites in Exile’ deals with two Lao families in France, one of which returns. Since nearly six times more people from Laos are in the United States than in France, it might have been relevant to study them; but they probably contain fewer of the old elite (and more non-lowland Lao).

‘The Tai Lue of Muang Sing’ deals with buffalo sacrifices and Buddhism (without seeing any apparent contradiction) and concludes by fearing that the Lue culture, on the Chinese border, will be artificially fostered for the needs of tourists.

Soren Ivarsson’s paper ‘Towards a New Laos’ deals with the influence of the first Lao newspaper, ‘Lao Nhay’, which was published from 1941-45. This centres round the question of how to write Lao, whether the forms should reflect (often dubious) Pali-Sanskrit origins, or modern spoken forms. This theme is taken up and expanded in N.J.Enfield’s paper, ‘Lao as a National Language’ and returns once more (to) the very considerable influence of Thai on the development (or even possible eclipse) of Lao. Enfield raises several important issues concerning national linguistics.

This is, then, a very mixed bag in terms of interest and clarity, but its variety probably accurately reflects not only the interests of the researchers involved, but also of modern Lao society as a whole. Anyone interested in the landlocked former kingdom will want to read and digest this, with its recurring themes of what it is to be Lao, and what constitutes Lao culture.'

*(with acknowledgement to 'The Nation' and to Mr Michael Smithies. The reviewer is a long-time resident of Bangkok, distinguished as a writer and as former Head of the British Council in Thailand).