

WHO WAS MAHA THEVI?

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There is no more mysterious figure in Lao history than the woman referred to in the Lao chronicles simply as Maha Thevi, the Great Queen. For almost a decade she is said to have ruled the Kingdom of Lan Xang as the power behind the throne (though never queen in her own right), making and murdering a succession of puppet kings. The image we have is of a malign crone, an evil and scheming woman who in the end deserved death at the hands of an enraged people who thereby exorcised her destructive influence and restored the kingdom to a stable and benign rule under a legitimate heir.

But who was Maha Thevi, and what was the source of her power? On this the authorities differ and the texts themselves are contradictory. Le Boulanger in his *Histoire du Laos Français* identified her as the eldest daughter of King Sam Sen Thai (1931, 59). The Lao historian Sila Viravong believed she was the king's younger sister (1964, 41). Michel Oger argued she was the principal wife of Sam Sen Thai, mother of his son and successor Lan Kham Deng (1972, 109). Each based his identification on different recensions of the Lao annals.¹ Most recently the question has been reopened by Amphay Doré in his massive and erudite thesis *Aux sources de la civilisation Lao*. Doré argues that Maha Thevi was the wife of Fa Ngum, founder of the Kingdom of Lan Xang, whom Sam Sen Thai subsequently also married in defiance of accepted custom (1987, 716).

The purpose of this article is to examine the evidence for these various theories as to the identity of Maha Thevi, to determine both the sources of her power and her motivation, and to suggest who she was, what she stood for, and why she is portrayed the way she is in the Lao annals.

The Chronology of Succession

Fa Ngum proclaimed the Kingdom of Lan Xang after capturing the town of Xieng Dong–Xieng Thong (Luang Prabang) in 1353.² He brought with him from Angkor his Cambodian queen, Keo Keng Nya, mother of his son and successor Sam Sen Thai.

Subsequently he took as his second wife Keo Lot Fa, the young daughter of the King of Ayudhya. The death of Keo Keng Nya in 1368 precipitated a struggle for power at court pitting the former companions-in-arms of Fa Ngum from the time of his conquest of Lan Xang, many of them Khmer, against the old aristocracy of Xieng Dong–Xieng Thong. The former had looked to Keo Keng Nya as their benefactrice and protector; the latter wished to restore their former privileges. With the death of her rival queen and the growing disinterest of her husband, Keo Lot Fa became a powerful figure in her own right, as patroness of what by then had become the dominant school of Theravada Buddhism. Resentment against both the arrogance of the former companions-in-arms and the king himself, as increasingly he neglected to practice Buddhist precepts, led in 1373 to what amounted to a *coup* at court. Fa Ngum was deposed and exiled, and his eldest son, Oun Huan, was invited to mount the throne.

Oun Huan took the throne name of Sam Sen Thai, and had four queens, four sons and four daughters. His first queen, known by her title as Bua Then, was his cousin Noy Nong Hieo, daughter of his uncle whom his father had defeated in the battle for Xieng Dong–Xieng Thong. She was thus a scion of the old nobility that had been responsible for placing Sam Sen Thai on the throne. Sam Sen Thai's three other queens in order of marriage were Noy On So, daughter of the King of Lān Nā; Keo Not Fa, daughter of the King of Ayudhya; and Mae Hieo Hong Thong, daughter of the King of Xieng Hung. Each of these four queens bore Sam Sen Thai a son whom, following Doré, we can identify as follows (1987, 707):³

1. Lan Kham Deng, son of Noy Nong Hieo, who inherited the throne from his father in 1417 and ruled until his premature death at the age of forty or forty-one in 1428.
2. Kon Ko Muang, son of Noy On So of Lān Nā, appointed governor of Xieng Sa.
3. Vang Buri, son of Keo Not Fa of Ayudhya, appointed governor of Vieng Kham–Vieng Cham.

4. Kon Kham (or Khamten), son of Mae Hieo Hong Thong of Xieng Hung, appointed governor of Pak Huei Luang.

We do not know how the four daughters were distributed, but the eldest was Keo Phimpha.

Lan Kham Deng had four (or five) sons and four daughters. The first two sons were Phommathat and Yukon, while another was named Khai Bua Ban. Phommathat succeeded his father as king of Lan Xang in 1428. At this point the succession becomes murky. One text, the *Nithan Khun Borom*, lists five kings reigning over the next eight years. Another, the *Phongsavadan Muang Lao*, lists seven kings over the same period. From these Doré has compiled a list of six kings reigning for seven years (1987, 709),⁴ while Sila Viravong has seven kings ruling for nine years (1964, 41–42). All agree that the last of the ephemeral monarchs was Khamket, and that after his death an interregnum occurred before the throne was offered to the last surviving son of Sam Sen Thai, Vang Buri, who took the throne name of Saya Chakkaphat Phen Pheo in 1438.⁵

The Ascendancy of Maha Thevi

It was during the period from the death of Lan Kham Deng to the accession of Vang Buri that Maha Thevi was active as the power behind the throne. We are told that she married a man much younger than herself who had been Sen Muang under Lan Kham Deng. At the time of his father's death, Phommathat may have still been a minor,⁶ in which case Maha Thevi may have acted as regent, a position allowing her to wield considerable power.

Phommathat is said to have reigned only ten months before being killed on Maha Thevi's orders. At this point either a brother of Lan Kham Deng or another of his sons was placed on the throne. If the successor was Lan Kham Deng's brother it was probably Phaya Xieng Sa, who is said to have survived for a year before falling prey to Maha Thevi. Alternatively, if the successor was a son of Lan Kham Deng, then it was in all likelihood Yukon. He is said to have lasted only eight months before fleeing in fear of his life—only to be pursued, captured and killed by Maha Thevi's soldiers.

Another brother of Lan Kham Deng who reigned briefly, Phaya Pak Huei Luang, is also said to have got wind of a plot to kill him. He thereupon returned to Pak Huei Luang, where he died a year later, of what causes we do not know. Khai Bua Ban probably also reigned briefly. Doré identifies him as a younger brother of Phommathat and Yukon (1987, 707), but Sila Viravong believes him to have been a nephew of Sam Sen Thai, and thus a cousin of Lan Kham Deng and his brothers (1964, 42). If Khai Bua Ban was a son of Lan Kham Deng, he may well have been too young to rule in his own right, thus allowing Maha Thevi again to exercise a regency. In any case, he too met the same fate as his predecessors.

There is general agreement that the last king to rule during this unhappy period was Kamket, an illegitimate son of Sam Sen Thai by a palace servant, who was placed on the throne after Vang Buri, the last surviving son of Sam Sen Thai, refused it. Khamket is supposed to have passed himself off as a reincarnation of Sam Sen Thai, and is said to have died of some intestinal disorder after a reign of two years (Doré 1987, 713). Since there was strong opposition to placing a bastard on the throne, he may well have been poisoned, though the texts do not in this case explicitly blame Maha Thevi for his death.

At this point "the Lao people" are said to have rid themselves of the tyranny of Maha Thevi and Sen Luang Xieng Lo by seizing them, tying them to rocks with their feet in water, and leaving them to die a slow death. Only after an interregnum of three years during which the kingdom was ruled by a Council of Elders presided over by two leading monks was the throne offered to Vang Buri, who this time accepted.

From the accession of Phommathat to the death of Khamket was the period of Maha Thevi's ascendancy. Throughout this period the Great Queen is portrayed as the dominant political figure in the kingdom. If, as one tradition records, she was ninety-five at the time of her execution, she was a very old lady during this time when she made and disposed of kings almost at will (Doré 1987, 714, citing *Nithan Khun Borom*, p. 87). It is unlikely, however, that she wielded such power simply through force of character, and she could hardly have been acting alone. We are given the impression that her young husband was but putty in her hands, but he must have had ambitions of his own, and he was younger and more vigorous than she was. As the Sen Luang Xieng Lo he must have had considerable influence at court. Who else supported him, and why? Against whom? And what outside powers were meddling in the affairs of Lan Xang during this confused period of instability? Both Ayudhya and Lān Nā had reason to be interested in the succession of Lan Xang. Answers to such questions may help to throw light on the identity of Maha Thevi.

Who Was Maha Thevi?

Some curious question marks hang over the story of Maha Thevi as we can piece it together from the various texts. Why did she murder one king after another? Was it to make way for a nominee of her own, or for her husband? If the former, who was that nominee? If the latter, wasn't she aware that he would be seen as a usurper and attract sustained hostility? Was Maha Thevi at the age of eighty-five really so enamoured of her younger husband that she was prepared to risk his life as well as her own in order to see him on the throne? And if this was what the Sen Luang Xieng Lo himself wanted, shouldn't he rather than Maha Thevi be seen as the evil genius responsible for the deaths of several kings? Yet he is portrayed in the chronicles as a rather colourless creature of Maha Thevi.

In the *Phongsavadan Muang Lao* and in the *Histoire Abrégée du Pays de Lan-Chhang*, *Hom Khao* translated for Auguste Pavie, Maha Thevi is identified as Nang Keo Phimpha, the eldest daughter of Sam Sen Thai (Mission Pavie 1898, 87; cf. Doré 1987, 715). If this were so, it is quite possible that she would want to obtain the throne for her husband, through eliminating all of her brothers and their offspring. What is less clear is who would have been likely to support her in this endeavour. In other words, what could have been the source of her power at court? Also, by what means could she have claimed the title Maha Thevi, normally reserved for the principal queen or queen mother of a powerful king? A further problem is Keo Phimpha's age. If Maha Thevi was indeed ninety-five in or about 1437/8 when she died, she could not possibly have been a daughter of Sam Sen Thai, who was himself born in 1357.

In other texts such as the *Nithan Khun Borom* and the *Histoire du Pays de Lan-Chhang*, *Hom Khao*, Maha Thevi is identified with Noy Hong Hieo, the first queen of Sam Sen Thai (Mission Pavie 1898, 42). If this identification is correct, then Maha Thevi was responsible for killing no fewer than three of her own grandsons without apparent compunction—and yet she built a pagoda to contain the remains of a bastard son of a palace servant. Also we are told that it was Noy Nong Hieo who put forward the candidacy of her son Lan Kham Deng to be king on the death of Sam Sen Thai—hardly the act of a mother intent on destroying her son's inheritance. And again there is the problem of age, unless we assume that Noy Nong Hieo was very much older than her husband.

Of those scholars who have studied this period, Hoshino records both textual identifications without choosing between them (1986, 188); Oger accepts the *Nithan* version (1972, 109), while Sila Viravong and Amphay Doré propose alternative identifications. Sila Viravong, accepting a variant text, believes that Maha Thevi was Nang Keo Ketkesi, the sister of Sam Sen Thai, and that she married her own grandnephew who held the post of Sen Muang under Lan Kham Deng (1964, 41n. 32). This could only have been the grandson of her only other brother, Khamhong. He could hardly have been twenty years old when her oldest nephew, Lan Kham Deng, died at the age of forty-one. Maha Thevi was then eighty-five. Presumably Sila Viravong believed Keo Ketkesi to have been Maha Thevi on the grounds that as the only daughter of Fa Ngum, founder of the kingdom and dynasty, she might have laid claim to the title of Great Queen. However, age still remains a problem.

To get around the apparent contradictions in the above identifications, Doré has argued that Maha Thevi was actually Keo Lot Fa, the second wife of Fa Ngum (1987, 716). As we have seen, she could have claimed the title Maha Thevi after the death of Keo Keng Nya, even though she was not the mother of Sam Sen Thai. More importantly, to identify Keo Lot Fa as Maha Thevi overcomes two problems, those of age and motivation. If Keo Lot Fa was ninety-five (by Lao calculation; ninety-four by Western calculation) in 1437/8, then she was born in 1343/4. This would have made her just eleven at the time of Fa Ngum's challenge to Ayudhya, too young to be given in marriage, but old enough to be promised as his bride as part of a peace

settlement, just as we are told (Hoshino 1986, 120). In other words, of the queens of Lan Xang identified as Maha Thevi, only Keo Lot Fa is of the right age. Also, she would stand in no blood relationship to Lan Kham Deng and his sons, so would have far less compunction than Noy Nong Hieo in eliminating them to make way for an alternative successor.

This is a convincing argument, but to make it even stronger Doré identifies Keo Lot Fa with the third (Ayudhyan) wife of Sam Sen Thai, whom he maintains the king married in defiance of accepted custom that a son should not marry one of his father's wives. This enables Doré to claim that Maha Thevi was the mother of Vang Buri, and that in eliminating all other contenders for the throne she was preparing the way for the succession of her own son. Now Vang Buri, according to one account, was eighty-three when he died in 1480, which means that he must have been conceived in 1397/98. If Keo Lot Fa was his mother she must therefore have been fifty-four at the time. Doré has made an error in his calculations by claiming that Keo Lot Fa could have given birth to Vang Buri at the age of forty-three (1987, 718). To conceive and bear a son at this age is possible, but to do so at the age of fifty-four is very much less likely. If we accept the alternative accounts—which Hoshino also does (1986, 195)—that Vang Buri died at the age of sixty-five in 1479, then it is quite impossible for him to have been the son of Keo Lot Fa.

Furthermore, Doré accepts Hoshino's thesis that although Fa Ngum was deposed in 1371, he did not die until 1393, rather than 1373 (Hoshino 1986, 159). Although Oun Huan (Sam Sen Thai) ruled in place of his father, with the support of the old Lao nobility, from 1371 on, Hoshino and Doré believe he was not formally enthroned until 1393, after conducting the census ordered by the new Ming dynasty in China. That was in 1389 (Hoshino 1986, 159), and it was as a result of that census that Oun Huan took the throne name Sam Sen Thai. These crucial years from 1371 to 1393 had seen the collapse of Mongol power in Southeast Asia and its replacement by the Ming. They had also seen the rise of Ayudhya as the principal power in the central Menam plains in place of Sukhothai. For the Kingdom of Lan Xang, these years were a time of consolidation both of the state and of the position of Sam Sen Thai himself.

The significance of these events for our analysis is that Lan Kham Deng was born *before* his father's enthronement, whereas Sam Sen Thai's other three queens were wed *after* he was enthroned. If Oun Huan had married his father's young wife (still at least ten years his senior), it is much more likely to have been when they were both still young. This would have been possible if Fa Ngum had died in 1373, but less likely twenty years later when Keo Lot Fa was fifty years old. We must conclude, therefore, that the third queen of Sam Sen Thai was not the same person as Keo Lot Fa, though she did have a very similar name (Keo Not Fa, as noted above) (cf. Hoshino 1986, 120; 138). Incidentally, that Lam Kham Deng was not born until 1387 and that his brothers were younger still suggest that Sam Sen Thai did not marry until well after he was invited to occupy the throne in 1371, which goes to support the hypothesis that this

was a time of some turmoil, and that Sam Sen Thai needed to consolidate his position.

Let us summarize and draw out the implications of the above analysis for our understanding of the role and image of Maha Thevi. We have rejected the identification of Maha Thevi as either Keo Ketkesi, the sister of Sam Sen Thai, or Keo Phimpha, his daughter, on the basis both of age and the fact that neither had any claim to the title. Similarly we have rejected the identification of Maha Thevi as Noy Nong Hieo, first wife of Sam Sen Thai, on the basis of age and the unlikelihood that she would have plotted the deaths of her own grandsons. Oger got around this problem by postulating that Maha Thevi was not responsible, and that suspicion should fall on Vang Buri backed by Ayudhya (1972, 118). She was blamed in the *Nithan* to protect the true culprits. Doré's thesis that Maha Thevi was actually Keo Lot Fa is the most convincing, but she was not the mother of Vang Buri. That was another, younger Ayudhyan princess who, despite being the mother of Vang Buri, was not implicated in the bloody deeds that were perpetrated during the succession crisis of 1428–38.

How then did Keo Lot Fa become involved in this crisis, and what were her motivations? Oger argues that the succession crisis was a replay of the factional dispute that led to the deposition of Fa Ngum, complicated by interference on the part of Ayudhya in supporting Vang Buri. He also argues that the crisis would not have been so prolonged had not the conspirators had the support of a powerful faction at court, and that that faction could only be the former companions-in-arms of Fa Ngum (Oger 1972, *passim*). This scenario is possible, providing factional groupings remained unchanged over more than half a century. It seems more likely, however, that new factions had developed, in particular one centred on the figure of Keo Lot Fa, the Great Queen.

By 1393, when Sam Sen Thai was enthroned, Keo Lot Fa would have been a very influential lady of fifty years old. Doré believes that she lived in the palace of Sieng Thong until the enthronement of Sam Sen Thai in 1393 (1987, 718), and so presumably had not gone into exile with Fa Ngum. Half her life at least had been lived in Xieng Dong–Xieng Thong. During this time she is likely to have gathered supporters around her, not least because of her patronage of what had become the predominant form of Buddhism in Lan Xang, the Mon/Sri Lankan school that had been introduced via Sukhothai and had eclipsed the Khmer school established by Fa Ngum (Hoshino 1986, 161).

It would have been only natural when a young princess from Ayudhya arrived to become Sam Sen Thai's third wife that Keo Lot Fa should have taken a motherly interest in the girl. In the years that followed Maha Thevi and the young queen would have formed what we can call the "Ayudhyan faction" at court. One member of this faction was apparently the young Sen Muang appointed by Lan Kham Deng, who was very probably a protégé of Maha Thevi. After the death of Sam Sen Thai in 1417, it is possible that his widow, the young Ayudhyan queen, became enamoured of the Sen Muang, that they became lovers, and even that marriage took place, brokered in all likelihood by

Keo Lot Fa. In other words, given the confusion in the texts between the Ayudhyan queens of Fa Ngum and Sam Sen Thai, it is likely that it was not Maha Thevi, in her late sixties or early seventies, who married the Sen Muang, but Sam Sen Thai's queen, who would have been no more than in her early forties.

The premature death of Lan Kham Deng plunged Lan Xang into a crisis of succession. Suddenly the opportunity presented itself of manipulating the succession in favour of the Ayudhyan faction. Lan Kham Deng's son, Phommathat, was a youth hardly of age. Vang Buri was governor of Vieng Chan, in close contact with his Ayudhyan relatives. We may surmise that in Xieng Dong–Xieng Thong the wily old queen Keo Lot Fa was working hand-in-hand with the Sen Luang Xieng Lo. Together they would have constituted a faction powerful enough to challenge the old nobility who had overthrown Fa Ngum, backed Sam Sen Thai and Lan Kham Deng, and placed the young King Phommathat on the throne.

When Phommathat was brutally assassinated by unknown assailants, his younger brother was next in line. When Yukon too was assassinated, again outside the city, the old nobility turned to the eldest remaining son of Sam Sen Thai, Kon Ko Muang, the governor of Xieng Sa. Here was a more mature candidate, but one with little knowledge of the Byzantine politics of the capital with its factional conspiracies. He too fell victim to assassination, ambushed by assailants outside the city.

It is significant that at this point Vang Buri, the third of Sam Sen Thai's sons, was apparently passed over for the succession. The antagonism against the Ayudhyan faction who must by then have become the principal suspects, no matter how well they had covered their tracks, must by then have become intense. Instead the throne was offered to Kon Kham, governor of Pak Huei Luang. It took him just a few months to learn of a plot against his life, and discretion being the better part of valour, he wisely returned to Pak Huei Luang. There he died within a year, due to what circumstances we do not know.

The last remaining son of Lan Kham Deng was then placed on the throne, only to be killed in his turn, perhaps in such a way as to appear like suicide. Of the fourth son of Lan Kham Deng we know nothing, and he probably died young. By this time only Vang Buri remained alive of the sons of either Sam Sen Thai or Lan Kham Deng. A move to offer him the throne was reportedly rebuffed, but may have been defeated by the old nobility, by then implacably opposed to the Ayudhyan faction. Instead a bastard son of Sam Sen Thai was placed on the throne. His death from some intestinal disorder two years later was very likely due to poisoning. Whoever was responsible, it seems to have been the catalyst that caused the old nobility to decide to rid themselves once and for all of Keo Lot Fa, at ninety-five perceived by many as an evil scheming old witch, and her co-conspirator, the Sen Luang Xieng Lo.

There followed an interregnum of three years, a cooling off period when the affairs of Lan Xang were in the hands of a state council presided over by the two most senior monks in the kingdom. This seems to have been a compromise body which included descendants of former companions-in-arms of Fa

Ngum, who had become professional court officials (cf. Viravong 1964, 42–43). We do not know what role these people played during the succession struggle, though they may well have tried to remain neutral. So too in all probability did members of the Sangha.⁷ However, close ties between the monastic orders in Lan Xang and Ayudhya may have predisposed powerful monks to favour Vang Buri, the Ayudhyan candidate, as the next king. Court officials would have argued for the need for a king, and Vang Buri as the only remaining son of Sam Sen Thai was the obvious and only choice.

That Vang Buri's ties with Ayudhya were particularly close is evident from the lavish gifts sent to celebrate his coronation as Phra Chao Saya Chakkaphat Phen Phao by King Intharacha of Ayudhya (Viravong 1964, 43). When Saya Chakkaphat died in 1479 following the Vietnamese invasion of Lan Xang, King Ramathibodi of Ayudhya despatched a high ranking delegation bearing coffins of sandal wood and gold and other gifts, a remarkable mark of respect for a fellow monarch (Viravong 1964, 46). But then Saya Chakkaphat had always been a particularly close friend of Ayudhya.

The Image of Maha Thevi in Lao History

The first recension of the *Nithan Khun Borom* dates from the reign of King Visun, third of the sons of Saya Chakkaphat to rule in Lan Xang (Vo Thu Tinh 1983, 49). Previously he had acted as regent for three years for his young nephew Somphou who subsequently died under somewhat mysterious circumstances. The Ayudhyan connection was still very strong. Visun, like Vang Buri before him, had been governor of Vieng Chan before he succeeded to the throne. The version of events during the succession struggle of 1428–38 had to be acceptable to the king. It could not therefore reflect badly on the Ayudhyan faction.

It seems likely, however, that the events of those years had already entered into popular folklore and mythology, particularly the figure of Maha Thevi, the evil crone responsible for the deaths of a succession of kings. As Oger has pointed out, the image of Maha Thevi has taken on the dimensions of the legendary demoness Phi Kong Koi (1972, 107), who drinks the blood of those she enthrals, discarding their drained and broken bodies on the banks of rivers (for an account of this demoness see Levy [1959, 417–418]). It is even possible that the bodies of some of the kings killed were left at the base of cliffs, or on river banks, deliberately to suggest that a Phi Kong Koi had been at work.

If by 1500 Maha Thevi had become so central a figure in the oral history of the succession crisis that she could not be ignored, the authors of the *Nithan* would have been faced with the problem of ensuring that this witch-like figure should not be in any

way identified with the Ayudhyan faction, that is with Keo Lot Fa. Someone else had to be blamed, and who better than the queen, representative of the defeated faction of the old nobility, who had tried so desperately to thwart the Ayudhyan faction and ensure that the succession went to her own grandsons; that is, Noy Nong Hieo. Authors of later texts, probably recognizing the inherent unlikelihood of this identification, sought an alternative candidate, and blamed Keo Phimpha. In either case, Keo Lot Fa was protected, as too was the younger Ayudhyan queen of Sam Sen Thai, the grandmother of Visun, on whom no shadow of suspicion fell for the elimination of all other sons and grandsons of Sam Sen Thai except the Ayudhyan line.

There is another aspect to the image of Maha Thevi in Lao history, however, for she looms as the scheming female intruding in the male domain of politics and statecraft. She is the female as demoness who destroys a succession of kings. There is a clear lesson to be drawn from the "Maha Thevi story," and that is that women should be excluded from power: the affairs of state and succession should be decided, as was eventually the succession of Vang Buri, by men in council. Of course it is always possible that Keo Lot Fa at the age of eighty-five *was* a scheming old crone, that she *was* the evil manipulator behind the events of 1428–38. However, it is just as likely that whatever her sins, Maha Thevi was not the demoness of popular mythology, and that echoes of the legend of the Phi Kong Koi were deliberately incorporated into the written account as part of the deception to hide the true identity of Maha Thevi, and concurrently to serve as a warning to future generations.

After all, it was not really the elderly Keo Lot Fa who had the position and power to arrange the assassination of a succession of kings. The Sen Luang Xieng Lo was in a much better position to do that, and had a much better reason for doing so—to ensure that the succession went to his wife's son, an outcome that would immeasurably strengthen his own position. Did he claim, when retribution eventually caught up with him, that he had been bewitched by the old queen? Many of the old Lao nobility who had seen her as their principal enemy, standing for more than half a century as the detested symbol of Ayudhyan influence in Lan Xang, would not have needed much convincing that she was in reality an evil witch. So they executed her along with the Sen Luang Xieng Lo and the story grew up that they had been man and wife. Thus was born the legend of Maha Thevi, the great and evil queen, the demoness incarnate, who almost destroyed the kingdom when she interfered in the affairs of men.

It has been one of the libels of Lao history to identify the wife, or sister, or daughter of Sam Sen Thai as Maha Thevi, the evil queen. None were. Evidence suggests that Keo Lot Fa, the venerable queen of Fa Ngum, was Maha Thevi. She may have been a scheming old crone, but she is just as likely to have been a querulous old lady who in the rancorous atmosphere of the succession crisis of 1428–38 became the unwitting focus of factional hatred and fear, and in popular imagination became the villain of the story.

NOTES

1. Sunet Phothisane has identified sixteen different texts dating from 1512 to 1926 of what he calls the *Pheune Khoun Bolom* (The Story of Khun Borom). Although the earliest texts identify Maha Thevi as the sister or wife of Sam Sen Thai, Sunet prefers the third, dating from around 1600, which identifies her as Sam Sen Thai's daughter (1990, transcript p. 6). Cf. Vo Thu Tinh (1983, 49–51) who, following Sila Viravong (1964), lists five principal versions of these chronicles.
2. In addition to the four sources noted in the previous section, this summary draws upon Hoshino (1986) and Phinith (1983). Interestingly, the latter text makes no mention at all of Maha Thevi.
3. Both Sila Viravong (1964) and Sunet Phothisane (1990) list five sons, including Lu Sai (mother unknown) who was sent to rule over Muang Kabong. In any case, he appears to have played no part in the subsequent succession dispute.
4. The *Phongsavadan Muang Lao* has Khai ruling for three years, however, not three months.
5. Sila Viravong (1964, 43) gives the date of Vang Buri's enthronement as 1456, a date Oger (1972) accepts. Hoshino (1986, 195) prefers 1438, as does Doré (1987).
6. Much depends on whether we accept with Sila Viravong that Lan Kham Deng was 41 when he died (1964, 41), or that he was 41 when he succeeded to the throne, as Hoshino records (1986, 185).
7. Hoshino (1986, 188) quotes the *Phongsavadan Muang Lao* as saying that the Sangharaja warned Maha Thevi not to interfere in politics, but that she refused to listen.

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