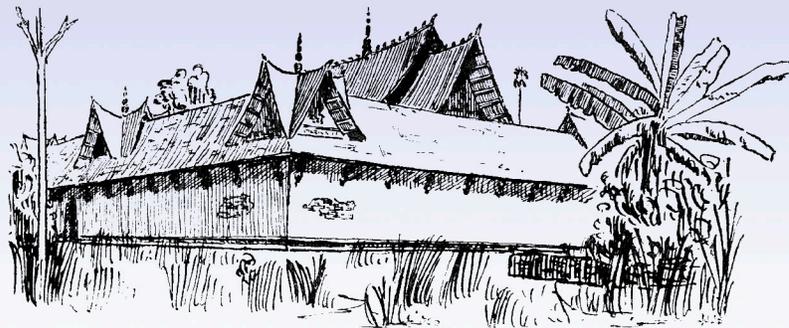




JOURNAL OF LAO STUDIES

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Volume 1, Issue 1, January 2010



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Books for review should be sent to:

Justin McDaniel, JLS Editor
223 Claudia Cohen Hall
249 S. 36th Street
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, PA 19104

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Smyth, H. Warrington. Notes of a Journey on the Upper Mekong, Siam. London: Published for the Royal Geographical Society by J. Murray, 1895. pp. 75.

From the Board of Directors of the Center for Lao Studies:

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I am pleased to see the end result of years of dreaming and work represented in this first issue of the Journal of Lao Studies. I am grateful to all of those whose efforts resulted in a quality academic journal specifically for the field of Lao Studies. I appreciate the time taken by the authors, editors, reviewers and others who worked behind the scenes to produce this publication. It is an honor to now send this scholarship out to the world as an open access journal with hopes that it will spark a greater interest in Lao Studies by being as freely available as possible. Our mission at the Center for Lao Studies is to advance knowledge and engagement in the field of Lao Studies through research, education and information sharing. The JLS moves us a giant step forward towards fulfilling that mission. Please take time to enjoy the journal. Your thoughts, comments and submissions for future issues are always welcome.

Gregory Green, Chair, CLS Board of Directors

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From the Executive Director of the Center for Lao Studies:

On behalf of the Center for Lao Studies, I am pleased to introduce the first issue of the Journal of Lao Studies. CLS is proud to establish what is currently the only peer-reviewed academic journal solely devoted to Lao Studies. The journal not only covers articles on all ethnic groups from Laos, but also includes the Lao diaspora, the Lao Isan and other ethnic Lao groups residing in neighboring countries. CLS also provides other opportunities for Lao Studies specialists to promote their work, such as through our triennial International Conference on Lao Studies and through CLS sponsored panels at various conferences. Much gratitude goes out to our dedicated editors, board members, volunteers, and the contributors who have spent many hours to make JLS a reality. We hope you will enjoy reading many of the wonderful articles in this issue and many more issues to come.

ຂອບໃຈ,

Vinya Sysamouth, CLS Executive Director

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Editor's Introduction

Dr. Nick Enfield concludes his article on language and culture in Laos writing: "The ethnolinguistic diversity characteristic of Laos makes the country a treasure trove for research in human traditions of language, culture, and cognition." This could as well be the conclusion of every article in this first volume of the *Journal of Lao Studies*. This is also what makes the field of Lao Studies so exciting and so frustrating. There is a "treasure trove" of linguistic, cultural, artistic, biological, and ethnic diversity in Laos, but the scholars actively engaged in Lao Studies research are scattered all over the world and rarely have time and funding to share their findings. Moreover, scholars based in Laos do not have easy access to the international scholarly community. The *Journal of Lao Studies* (JLS) looks to remove some of these obstacles. We aim to bring together Lao and international scholars through the publication and dissemination of peer-reviewed scholarly articles on a vast range of subjects, which simultaneously highlight the diversity of Laos and create a vigorous Lao Studies community.

The time is right. The study of Laos has grown significantly over the past ten years. With the opening up of historical and manuscript archives, the improvement of communication and transportation, and the launching of joint foreign-Lao research projects, Laos has attracted a number of new scholars in diverse fields of expertise. The *Journal of Lao Studies* (JLS) is an exciting new scholarly project which hopes to become the first and most rigorous venue for researchers who work on Laos. Moreover, the JLS is sorely needed in the field. Presently, there are no academic journals devoted to Lao Studies. No major university press has a series dedicated to Lao Studies books either. Articles on Lao Studies are now published in disparate journals in France, Australia, Thailand, and North America. However, since most academic journals which have an Asian focus are either primarily venues for Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Thai, or Vietnam Studies, research based in or on smaller countries are often ignored. Therefore, scholars in the field have a difficult time every year attempting to gather together all the various publications spread across the globe in several languages. In this first volume we have begun this process and

the editors and advisory board are very pleased with the outcome. Even though these articles are all in English, we hope to publish articles in Lao, French, and Thai in the future.

We start with a complex article on an extremely pressing subject – the environmental degradation of Laos. Political ecologist and historian, Dr. Ian Baird (executive director of Global Association for People and the Environment and author of numerous studies on Southern Laos and Northern Cambodia) writes on the seemingly innocuous fact that there has been an allocation of large-scale economic land concessions for rubber production in Southern Laos over the last few years. However, he shows that these land allocations have frequently overlapped with agricultural and forest lands of importance to local people, replacing them and thus dramatically affecting agrarian livelihoods. His article considers the particular circumstances surrounding large Vietnamese-owned rubber plantation concessions granted in southern Laos, and their impacts on the largely ethnic minority highland population in Bachiengchaleunsouk District, Champasak Province. He describes how a non-government organisation (NGO) has attempted to support these communities through partnering with the local government to study the impacts of the land concessions and associated agriculture transformation, and raise awareness in communities regarding relevant Lao laws. While the NGO's efforts have not always gone smoothly, the end results have been surprisingly encouraging, even if many problems remain unresolved. He writes “Foreign investors have been acquiring land with rich soils for low state rents, often without having to appropriately compensate local people, let alone ensure that they significantly benefit from the investments. These plantations are stripping local resources away, leaving local people—most of who are upland ethnic minorities—poorer and with fewer livelihood options than they had before.” However, his article does not simply offer a litany of destruction. Instead, it “focuses on responses.” Baird's is indeed a direct and timely response. The editors found this article one of the most in depth and sophisticated studies of the most understudied regions in Laos – the South. It combines historical, ecological, political, and anthropological research and is essential reading for students of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia Studies, and scholars of political ecology in general.

Highlighting the diversity of Lao Studies, we follow this article with Nick Enfield's provocative piece on the state of Lao linguistics. Although, Enfield has long been recognized

as one of the world's premier scholars of Lao linguistics, he steps back from his usually highly specialized articles on socio-linguistics, to offer the wider Lao Studies community an overview of the field and a call for more resources (human, financial, archival, technical) into the amazing diversity of languages spoken in Laos. He notes in the introduction that "there is at present a vigorous public debate in Laos on the issue of language, with the participation of scholars, researchers, educators, and politicians. This debate goes to the highest level, and has been on the agenda for decades. The issue? Whether the letter 'r' should or should not be included in the Lao alphabet. Meanwhile, dozens of distinct human languages spoken in Laos are in danger of extinction in the immediate or near future. We know little or nothing about the structure, history, or social setting of these languages or the people who speak them. There is no public debate about this issue in Laos, and little research activity to document the country's dozens of minority languages, whether for scientific, practical, or social purposes. The problem is identical in research on culture. This paper offers a number of reasons why this must change." He does no less and in this short piece he not only documents the problems facing Lao Studies (not just Lao linguistics, but the studies in the humanities and social sciences in general), but he also provides an agenda for change.

Our third article is by Dr. James Coughlan, a sociologist and criminologist who has been a scholar of Laos for over 30 years and has published extensively on Asian communities in Australia. This article shows us that Lao Studies goes beyond the borders of the nation of Laos. Coughlan looks at the Hmong and Lao communities of Australia. He closely analyzes census data and ambitiously develops an ethnic profile of Laos-born communities in Australia. He shows the extent to which the communities in Australia have changed over the past twenty years. The JLS hopes to include an article on the Lao diaspora and/or a study of ethnic diversity within Laos in every issue. Coughlan's article is a model first example.

Our fourth piece is an interview with Dr. James Chamberlain conducted by Dr. Grant Evans. This is a rare interchange between two of the leading voices of Lao Studies. Chamberlain moved to Laos in 1965 and has largely lived there for the past 44 years. Recently, he has been working as a private consultant focusing on social research for development projects. Lifelong interests include translation of the Lao epic poem of *Thao Houng Thao Cheuang*, comparative and historical Tai linguistics, and ethnohistory of the

Vietic speaking hunter-gatherers of Nakai and Khamkeut in Central Laos. The exchange between Chamberlain and Evans provides rare access into the life of a scholar who was instrumental in building the field. They cover a wide range of subjects including pre-1975 Lao education, Lao literature, Lao pre-war magazines, the Hmong intelligentsia of the 1960s and early 70s, USAID history, and personal stories about Lao scholars and politicians in Vientiane during the American war in Vietnam. The second issue of the JLS will feature an interview with Grant Evans, one of the most prolific and respected scholars in Lao Studies.

After this interview and these articles, the editors have solicited three critical book reviews of major publications in the field. The first is a lengthy review essay of the new *Recherches nouvelles sur le Laos* edited by Yves Goudineau et M. Lorrillard (Etudes thématiques n°18, EFEO: Paris, Vientiane, 2008). This massive tome of 29 articles demanded a reviewer with extensive experience. We were thrilled that Dr. Martin Stuart-Fox, the voice of Lao history for the past 40 years decided to write this review. The second is an article on the recently released (University of Hawaii Press, 2009) *Spirits of the Place* by Dr. John Holt. Holt's is the first major study of Lao Buddhism in English. Finally, Oliver Tappe offers a thought-provoking review of Boike Rehbein's *Globalization, Culture and Society in Laos* (Routledge, 2007), a major study by one of Europe's leading scholars of contemporary Lao politics and economics.

The editors, Vatthana Pholsena and Justin McDaniel, are honored to present this first volume of the Journal of Lao Studies and trust that it will expose the treasure trove of research possibilities in and about Laos and build new communities of scholars and students.

Thank you.

Author Biographies

Ian G. Baird

Dr Baird is a Canadian who has resided in southern Laos for most of the last 15 years. He has a PhD in Human Geography from the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada, and is presently the executive director of the Non-Government Organisation (NGO) the Global Association for People and the Environment (GAPE). He is also an affiliate at the POLIS Project on Ecological Governance at the University of Victoria, Canada. In 2007 he co-edited *Fishers' Knowledge in Fisheries Science and Management* (UNESCO), and in 2008 he co-authored *People, Livelihoods, and Development in the Xekong River Basin, Laos* (White Lotus). His most recent book, published in 2009, is titled *Dipterocarpus Wood Resin Tenure, Management and Trade: Practices of the Brao in Northeast Cambodia* (Verlag Dr. Müller). His research is presently focused on political ecology, history, colonialism, identities, and the social and spatial organisation of the ethnic Lao and Brao people of southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia.

James Coughlan

Dr Coughlan lectures in sociology and criminology at a small Australian regional university. He first visited Laos in January 1975, and during the 1970s and 1980s spent some time in refugee camps in Thailand. Between 1973 and 1993 he was closely involved with the Hmong, Lao, and Vietnamese communities in several Australian cities. Since the late 1980s he has published extensively on Asian communities in, and Asian migration to, Australia. His current research interest is examination the spatial concentration and distribution of various Asian communities in Australia, as well as the meanings attached to the lyrics and music of Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band. Unfortunately, Dr Coughlan has no knowledge of the Hmong or Lao languages.

James R. Chamberlain

Dr. Chamberlain came to Laos for the first time in 1965 and lived and worked there, and in Thailand, especially Northeast Thailand, until the present time except for time spent in the US in graduate school. Born in Lansing, Michigan, he received his undergraduate degree in comparative literature from Michigan State University in 1965, an M.A. in Linguistics there in 1969, and a Doctorate from the University of Michigan in 1977, specializing in Comparative and Historical Tai Linguistics and Ethnobiology. He moved back to Laos in 1995 where he has been working as a private consultant focusing on social research for development projects. Lifelong interests include translation of the Lao epic poem of *Thao Houng Thao Cheuang*, comparative and historical Tai linguistics, and ethnohistory of the Vietic speaking hunter-gatherers of Nakai and Khamkeut in Central Laos.

N.J. Enfield

Dr. Enfield is a senior staff scientist at the Max Planck Institute, Nijmegen, and is Professor of Ethnolinguistics at Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands. He also holds a Certificate in Lao Language and Literature from Dong Dok University (1990-91). He is the author of *A Grammar of Lao* (Mouton, 2007). His other books, edited and authored, include

Ethnosyntax (OUP, 2002), Linguistic Epidemiology (Routledge, 2003), Roots of Human Sociality (Berg, 2006, with SC Levinson), Person Reference in Interaction (CUP, 2007, with Tanya Stivers), and The Anatomy of Meaning (CUP, 2009).

Announcements:

Journal of Lao Studies

Call for Article Submissions

The study of Laos and the Lao has grown significantly over the past decade. With the opening up of some historical and manuscript archives, the improvement of communication and transportation, and the launching of joint Lao-foreign research projects, Laos has attracted a number of new scholars in diverse fields of expertise. The *Journal of Lao Studies* (JLS) is an exciting new scholarly project which is expected to become the first and most prestigious venue for researchers who work on Laos.

We are now accepting submissions of articles, book review suggestions, review articles (extended reviews of major publications, trends in the field, or of political, social, or economic events). These submissions can cover studies on Laos, the Lao diaspora (Northeast Thailand, Europe, the Americas, Australia, and so on), or studies in regards to ethnic groups found in Laos (Hmong, Akha, Khmu, among others).

Language: Lao and English are the main languages, other languages are welcomed. Please check with the editors first before submitting articles in other languages not listed here.

Summer

Study Abroad in Laos

June 15 – August 10, 2010



ຮຽນພາສາລາວທີ່ເມືອງລາວໃນລະດູຮ້ອນນີ້

(SAIL)

SAIL

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What better way to learn Lao than to spend your summer fully immersed in Lao society?

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- A Lao and Lao American history and culture course (or an elective) course
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- Cultural excursions throughout the city and provinces
- Home stay opportunities
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- Highly qualified program leader, San Francisco State University faculty, and Lao teachers



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Program Eligibility:

Open to both undergraduate and graduate students, educators, and education administrators as well as those interested in Lao, Lao American, Southeast Asian, and Asian cultures and society. Must be 18 years or older. Please contact the Center for Lao Studies to determine your qualification.

Application Deadline: February 15, 2010

For more details please contact:

Center for Lao Studies
65 Ninth Street
San Francisco, CA 94103
Tel: 1.415.874.5578

San Francisco State University
Dr. Jonathan H. X. Lee, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Asian American Studies
jlee@sfsu.edu

Email: studylao@laostudies.org
Web: www.laostudies.org/SAIL
Blog: www.laostudies.org/sailersblog

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CALL FOR PAPERS

The Third International Conference on Lao Studies

July 14-16, 2010

Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen, THAILAND

<http://www.laostudies.org/conferences>

The Center for Research on Plurality in the Mekong Region, <http://www.plurality.net> Khon Kaen University <http://www.kku.ac.th> and the Center for Lao Studies in San Francisco <http://www.laostudies.org> are pleased to announce the Third International Conference on Lao Studies (ICLS) to be held on July 14-16, 2010 in Khon Kaen, Thailand. The main objective of this conference is to promote Lao studies by providing an international forum for scholars to present and discuss various aspects of Lao studies.

RATIONALE

The Lao PDR and areas of neighboring countries where the Lao people reside are situated in the center of the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS), encompassing parts of Cambodia, the People's Republic of China, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. The Lao people play a pivotal role in regional cooperation among the GMS nations. With the rapid changes due to the regional economic cooperation of the GMS and emerging globalization, the Lao people face diverse challenges in social, cultural, economic, and environmental aspects. This conference will provide a forum for scholars who are interested in Lao studies to explore, share, and synthesize experiences and knowledge on Lao culture and society.

THEMES

In the age of globalization and GMS regional cooperation, the Lao people are in transition to a new phase of modernity and are facing an array of new economic possibilities, cultures, and ways of life. These changes can be opportunities as well as challenges for the country.

The Third International Conference on Lao Studies intends to explore diverse impacts of regionalism and globalization on Lao society: how they affect identities, cultures, and social patterns; how the society and people cope with current and emerging challenges; and how the Lao people living in the Lao PDR and other GSM countries contribute to the global and GMS development.

The conference will include invited Lao Studies scholars and researchers from all disciplines and intellectual perspectives to share paper presentations, panel presentations, exhibits, performances, and cultural activities. The following groups are classified as a part of the Third International Conference on Lao Studies:

- All ethnolinguistic groups of Laos (e.g. Mon-Khmer groups, Hmong-Mien groups, Lao-Tai groups);
- Lao Isan and other ethnic Lao groups in Thailand (e.g. Lao Song, Phuan, Phu Tai);
- Ethnic Lao living in Cambodia;
- Cross-border ethnic groups in Thailand, Vietnam, China, Burma, and Cambodia (e.g. Akha, Hmong/Miao, Khmu, Iu Mien, Lao Phuan, Tai Lue, Tai Dam, Tai Daeng, Shan);
- Overseas Lao (e.g. Lao American, Lao French).

The following topics related to the aforementioned groups will be included:

Art, Literature and Music; Buddhism; Lao Legacy and Heritage; Ethnic Groups in Modern Economy; Gender and Family Transformation; Lao People in the GMS Regional Cooperation; Lao People in the Regional/Global Economy; Sustainability and Quality of Life; Border Trade and Culture; Isan Regionalism; Modernity and Traditional Architecture; Modern Education; Changing Livelihood; Environment and Health; Research Methodology for Lao Studies; Language and Linguistics; Rural Development; Other topics welcome.

PROCEDURES and TIMELINES

1. Please submit abstracts in English before 31 January, 2010
2. To submit abstracts electronically, send preferably a Microsoft word file (document) in an e-mail attachment to 2010laostudies@gmail.com
3. To submit abstracts by mail, send preferably a Microsoft word file (document) on a CD along with printed copy to:

The Third International Conference on Lao Studies
Center for Research on Plurality in the Mekong Region
Building HS 03, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Khon Kaen University
Khon Kaen 40002 THAILAND

Tel/Fax: +66.43.203.215
<http://www.laostudies.org/conferences>

4. The program committee will review abstracts and send an acceptance letter with scheduling information and other instructions for submitting final abstract statements and full versions of papers.
5. Abstracts of panels, and individual papers and full versions of conference papers will be collected for distribution at the conference. The final versions of abstracts should be submitted not later than March 31, 2010. Full papers are requested by April 30, 2010.

ORGANIZED PANELS

Organized panels, composed of 3-4 scholars presenting formal papers and 1 or 2 discussants that can be scheduled into one-and-a-half-hour time slots are also invited. Panel organizers are requested to supply the following information:

- Title of the panel
- Conference theme(s) related to the panel
- Name, institution, address and email of the panel organizer
- Name, institution, address and email of each paper presenter
- Names, institutions, addresses and email of the panel discussants
- Abstract (250 words or less) describing the panel as a whole
- Title of each paper and abstract (250 words or less) for each paper

INDIVIDUAL PAPERS

Individual papers will be grouped into coherent panels. The papers must include the following:

- Title of the paper
- Name, institution, address and email of paper presenter
- Abstracts (250 words or less) with identified keywords.
- Related conference theme(s)

REGISTRATION

All participants are requested to register online before June 15, 2010. Registration after this date must be made on-site. The registration fee includes the conference program, an abstract publication, a CD of the conference proceedings, daily lunches and breaks, and one reception dinner. Early registration deadline is April 30, 2010. Please note that there will be no refund for cancellation or absence.

Registration Fees: 15% discount applies to CLS members. Membership information available at: <http://laostudies.org/content/view/30/46/>

Early registration fee (on or before April 30, 2010)

- Lao, Thai Nationals 2,400 Baht /US\$70
- Foreign Participants US\$100
- Students* (Lao, Thai) 1,200 Baht/US\$35
- Foreign Students US\$70

Late/on-site registration fee (after April 30, 2010)

- Lao, Thai Nationals 3,400 Baht/US\$100
- Foreign Participants US\$150
- Lao, Thai Students 2,400 Baht/US\$70
- Foreign Students* US\$100

* Students must present valid student identification at the time of registration

Payment can be done online by credit card, international bank transfer, or domestic payment. For on-line credit card payment, please visit:

<https://co.clickandpledge.com/advanced/default.aspx?wid=29989>

An optional Lao Study Tour is being arranged; details will be coming soon.

Ian G. Baird¹

Land, Rubber and People: Rapid Agrarian Changes and Responses in Southern Laos

Introduction

Largely fuelled by increased demand for raw rubber (*Hevea brasiliensis*) latex in India and especially China (Alton *et al.* 2005), mainland Southeast Asia has recently experienced a ‘rubber boom’. While there was a huge expansion of rubber in southern Thailand and Peninsular Malaysia in the 1970s and 1980s (Barlow 1997), most recently rubber planting has mainly targeted previously peripheral and remote parts of the region, such as rural and upland areas in China, Cambodia, Burma, Thailand, Vietnam and Laos (Ziegler *et al.* 2009; Cheang 2008; Luangaramsi *et al.* 2008; Shi 2008; *Thanh Nien News* 2007; 2008; Manivong and Cramb 2008; Dwyer 2007; *Myanmar Times* 2006). Foreign capital infusion for rubber tree plantation development has dramatically increased in recent years (*Vientiane Times* 2008a), and Ziegler *et al.* (2009) have estimated that more than 500,000 ha of land in these countries has already been planted with rubber, and that the amount of land dedicated to rubber could expand two or three fold by 2050.

There are now monoculture rubber plantations in most of Laos’ provinces, with the earliest dating back to the 1990s (Diana 2007). Multi-cropping agro-forestry systems like those in other parts of Southeast Asia have apparently not yet been introduced to Laos. Chinese, Vietnamese and Thai companies have so far been the most important investors in monoculture rubber estates. The Government of Laos’ Committee for Planning and Investment (CPI) estimated in February 2008 that 17 large companies had already obtained 200,000 hectares of land concessions in Laos specifically for rubber (*Vientiane Times* 2007a). Vongkham (2006) reported that Laos’ Forestry Research Centre, a

¹ POLIS Project on Ecological Governance (University of Victoria, Victoria, B.C., Canada)



government institution, estimated that 181,840 hectares of land would be planted with rubber just in northern Laos by 2010.

Large-scale investments in rubber have mainly come through joint ventures between private foreign investors and private Lao investors, or as investments with 100% foreign ownership. However, the development of rubber in Laos—when considered at the scale of nation-state—is complex, with many different small farmer initiatives, aid agency-supported development projects, and especially Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) arrangements being initiated (see Dwyer 2007 for a review). The example of Hat Nyao Village in Luang Nam Tha Province indicates that small holder farming families have the potential to benefit economically from the development of small-scale rubber plantations (Manivong and Cramb 2008; Alton *et al.* 2005).¹

The promotion of rubber by the Government of Laos (GoL) is justified in various ways. It is seen as a tool for eradicating opium production in northern Laos,² and more generally for decreasing swidden agriculture throughout hilly and mountainous parts of the country (Shi 2008).³ It is also viewed as a tool for introducing neoliberal economic practices, including capitalising land resources and using them to generate state revenue, and more generally supporting Laos' production and long-standing promotion of foreign exports (cf. Harvey 2005). For most plantation investors, the main attractions of Laos are the low cost of land access, the perceived availability of large pieces of land, and to a lesser extent, the availability of cheap labour⁴ and the close proximity of Laos to major markets. Even though the vast majority of land in Laos is used regularly by villagers to meet their livelihood needs, Lao development discourses frequently promote the myth that there is plenty of 'empty space', 'unused land' and 'untapped resources' available for foreign investors to exploit in Laos (see Barney 2009 for a more detailed discussion).

In this paper I do not argue against farmer livelihood strategies that include either rubber-based or off-farm opportunities. However, the large-scale rubber plantations in Laos are clearly having a massive and rapid impact on landscapes and livelihoods. Schipani (2007) has written about some of the conflicts that have emerged between rubber plantation development and biodiversity protection inside Lao National Protected Areas, and Chamberlain (2007) has reported that large rubber concessions have contributed to increasing poverty amongst poor groups, especially ethnic minorities living in upland

areas. He has also emphasised problems related to sharing revenue from rubber plantations in northern Laos with villagers and labour issues. I, however, am dealing with a case of complete land disenfranchisement, something more common in southern Laos than elsewhere in the country. I want to draw attention specifically to the socio-cultural and economic impacts of the types of rubber development occurring in Bachiengchaleunsouk (Bachieng) District, Champasak Province, southern Laos, which I argue are largely benefiting foreign investors and local elites at the expense of most villagers. Foreign investors have been acquiring land with rich soils for low state rents, often without having to appropriately compensate local people, let alone ensure that they significantly benefit from the investments. These plantations are stripping local resources away, leaving local people—most of who are upland ethnic minorities—poorer and with fewer livelihood options than they had before.

Since the number and seriousness of land-related conflicts in Laos has increased dramatically in recent years (Mahaphone *et al.* 2007), many questions are being asked about the pros and cons of issuing large land concessions for agriculture, and more generally regarding contract farming in Laos (see, for example, Fullbrook 2007; Hanssen 2007; Dwyer 2007). However, this paper does not specifically deal with all aspects of contract farming. Instead, I am concerned with the political ecology of large-scale rubber plantation development in southern Laos.

Yet, even though rubber plantations are seriously impacting local people and the environment, it would be of limited interest to merely describe how the imposition of large rubber plantations has negatively impacted the livelihoods of rural people in southern Laos. Past decades of research regarding rural development have provided adequate evidence on how resource-intensive FDI, when injected into rural landscapes of less industrialised countries such as Laos, has a tendency to transform land and other resources important for local livelihoods into capital that can be acquired, traded and withdrawn in various ways by foreign investors and their local business and government cohorts and supporters.

Instead, this paper focuses on responses: that of villagers and GoL officials at various levels to large rubber concession expansion, and above all, the pro-active work of an international Non-Government Organisation (NGO) working in Laos, which has been

able to partner with farmers affected by these plantations, local government officials, and Lao Non-Profit Associations (NPAs) (the Lao equivalent to a 'local NGO') to effect change within what most consider to be a restrictive political environment.⁵ While the land-use and livelihood research in Bachieng described below did not progress particularly smoothly, the changes that finally materialised were surprisingly promising, even if they emerged in ways not originally expected and in tandem with events apparently unrelated to the research. In addition, many problems remain unresolved. Some important lessons are worth presenting, to indicate some possible approaches that international and local organisations can take to support people who are threatened by large land concessions implemented under a poor governance system (see Stuart-Fox 2005), and some potential pitfalls that should be avoided.

Systems for Developing Rubber in Laos

The partnership system that has emerged as the favourite of the central GoL for foreign investment in rubber production is often referred to as '2+3' in Laos. This generally means that farmers contribute two components: labour and land; and investors provide three: capital inputs (seedlings, fertilisers, etc.), technical support, and markets. This form of contract farming is seen as optimal by many, as it is supposed to ensure the transformation from subsistence to market-oriented agriculture focussed on cash crops and exports, while at the same time keeping land under the nominal control of farmers, and thus providing them with secure agricultural employment as labourers (*Vientiane Times* 2007c; 2008g; Phouthonesy 2007b; Pongkhao 2007a). In practice, this frequently means that latex is divided up between the investors and villagers. However, the devil is in the detail, as there are various other conditions associated with these agreements, such as requirements for farmers to sell their rubber to the investing company at an undefined 'market price', at least until farmers' debt to the company is repaid. Thus, detailed analysis of individual contracts and conditions is required.

There are also variations of what has come to be known as '1+4' systems, with the '1' referring to either land or labour. It can sometimes mean that rubber trees are divided up between villages and investors, rather than the latex (Shi 2008; Dwyer 2007). However,

as with 2+3, there are potentially many possible arrangements that might be classified as 1+4. Therefore, one should be wary about judging tenure arrangements based on 2+3 or 1+4, as these numbered classification systems tend to overly simplify the appearance of concession arrangements, since the numbers only refer to the inputs of different parties, without indicating the ways that concession benefits are divided between investors, the State and farmers. It has also been reported that many schemes slated for 2+3 systems are in fact being managed more like 1+4 projects (*Vientiane Times* 2009a).

Although the GoL and Dak Lak Company (one of the Vietnamese rubber plantation concessionaries in Bachieng) classify the plantations in Bachieng District as 1+4 arrangements—since some villagers are being employed on the plantations, and others are being given management rights over certain areas of rubber—in reality the plantations are better described as land grabs, as there are no guarantees that farmers will receive temporary or permanent employment. Their employers can choose to replace them with outside labour, including Vietnamese workers, thus putting the villagers in potentially precarious situations.⁶ Furthermore, people's land has frequently been confiscated for the rubber companies, leaving locals with no rights over the land, or revenue from the sale of latex.

These concessions are not the only plantation model. In northern Laos, for example, there are many more varieties of 2+3 and 1+4 systems for developing rubber. However, rubber development based on land grabbing appears to be the norm in southern Laos. There may be less large rubber concessions in northern Laos because local governments there have been generally less willing to give out large rubber concessions to investors as compared to local governments in southern Laos. Chinese investors are more prominent in the north, while Vietnamese investors dominate the south. While it is unclear whether the nationality of investors has been a significant factor in the geographical location of companies in different parts of the country, it certainly makes sense for Chinese companies to locate near China. One senior GoL official, who asked to remain anonymous, commented in early 2009 that Lao officials often feel obliged to approve Vietnamese projects. The Vietnamese often make them feel that they need to agree with their requests in order to repay the Vietnamese for their sacrifices in helping the Pathet Lao liberate Laos over 30

years ago. Discursive pressure is clearly an important factor, with the Second Indochina War still being used as justification for special favours to the Vietnamese.

Government revenues for the concessions are low, amounting to about US\$6-9 a hectare per year for good quality land (Phouthonesy 2007b; *Vientiane Times* 2008d),⁷ which is over 10 times less than the US\$100/hectare/year rate that the GoL's present draft land concession decree stipulates for land concession fees in areas with little infrastructure⁸ (*Vientiane Times* 2008f), even if the actual concession fee may end up being considerably less.⁹ Furthermore, this revenue goes to the central GoL, without guarantees that any share will be provided to the villages being impacted by rubber development.

Bachieng District

Bachieng District has been the centre of Vietnamese rubber developments in southern Laos, although new large Vietnamese rubber plantations are being developed in other parts of southern Laos, including a 10,000 hectare concession inside Dong Ampham National Protected Area,¹⁰ another 10,000 hectare in Phou Vong District, Attapeu (*VN Business News* 2008), and a 30,000 hectare concession in Somboun Sub-district, Phou Vong District (*Vientiane Times* 2008i). Bachieng is attractive for rubber developers because much of the district is located on the edge of the Boloven Plateau, considered to have some of the best conditions for rubber cultivation in Laos (Vongkham 2006).

Bachieng District has a human population of approximately 46,500, of which over 31,000 can be defined as being members of ethnic minority groups. These include large numbers of Mon-Khmer language speakers from the ethnic Jrou (Laven), Souay, Ta-oy, Katang, Brao (Lave) and Harak (Alak) groups. While Bachieng's population was, until a few years ago, spread out in 90 villages, recent GoL efforts to administratively consolidate villages¹¹ has resulted in there presently being only 47 official villages in the district. Until the arrival of the large rubber developments, the vast majority of local people were primarily small-scale semi-subsistence farmers.

There are many other districts in Laos that have a higher proportion of poor people than Bachieng, but Bachieng's population of poor is significant nonetheless, and the district is considered one of the poorest in Champasak Province. It is classified as one of the GoL's

priority 47 districts for reducing poverty, of which there are only two in Champasak (Chamberlain 2007).

The history of the peoples of Bachieng is complex and varied, with some, such as many from the Jrou and Souay ethnic groups, having lived in the area for a long time. Others are more recent migrants, and during the 1960s and early 1970s many ethnic minorities who sided with the Royal Lao Government either fled to Bachieng to escape the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese, or escaped from areas to the east that had become unsafe because of US bombing along the Ho Chi Minh Trail (see Van Staaveren 1993 for a US military account of where bombing occurred). The result is that the human population of Bachieng includes both those who supported the Communists and others who did not.

Even before the arrival of 'big rubber' to Bachieng, the complex human geography and history of the district had already left some villages with relatively little agricultural land and forests. Land and Forest Allocation (LFA), which is explained below, was conducted in almost all the villages in the district in the 1990s in an attempt to improve natural resource management practices and promote agricultural investment and production.

Background of Rubber Development in Laos

Rubber was first introduced into Laos by French investors in 1930, with the first 0.5 hectare rubber plantation being established in present-day Bachieng District (Vongkham 2006). However, there was little rubber development in Laos under the French, especially compared to the large-scale expansion in Cambodia and Vietnam (see Hardy 2003; Salemink 2003; Slocomb 2007; Tran 1985). The relative lack of rubber development in Laos was probably a direct consequence of the country's remoteness, the abundance of land in Vietnam and Cambodia, and the relative lack of abundant, reliable and cheap sources of labour in Laos.

The First and Second Indochina wars were not conducive to rubber estate expansion, and it was not until 1990 that rubber planting began again, this time in central Laos. Then, in 1994 rubber planting began in northern Laos at Hat Nyao Village. In southern Laos, it was not until 1995 that the state logging company, Development of

Agriculture, Forestry and Industry (DAFI), funded the establishment of a 74 hectare rubber plantation in Houay Tong Village, Bachieng District (Alton *et al.* 2005; Vongkham 2006). There was little more expansion of rubber in southern Laos in the 1990s.

In 2003, people in northern Laos became increasingly interested in cultivating rubber, especially after it was found that Hat Nyao villagers, which were by that time producing latex for sale to China, were able to generate income equivalent to between US\$1,825 and US\$3,389/hectare/year (Alton *et al.* 2005). This comparatively high income acted as a catalyst for encouraging the State and farmers to develop more rubber (Alton *et al.* 2005; Vongkham 2006). The Hat Nyao experience also demonstrated that villagers are not opposed to rubber cultivation *per se*, and can be quite successful cultivating it provided that they are able to privately manage their own small plantations.

In June 2004, a business delegation from the Vietnam Rubber Plantation Company visited Laos. During the visit, GoL representatives apparently proposed that between 50,000 and 100,000 hectares of land be made available for rubber development. The GoL announced that it would be happy to accommodate foreign investors, particularly those from Vietnam (Lang 2006). In fact, on May 10, 2004, before the delegation arrived in Laos, the central GoL had already signed a bilateral agreement with the government of Vietnam in support of Vietnamese investment in rubber development in Laos (Obein 2007). This would become the basis for future investment arrangements between Vietnamese rubber companies and the GoL.¹²

On June 21, 2004 the Vietnam-Laos Rubber Joint Stock Company (commonly referred to as the Viet-Lao Rubber Company¹³) was granted a 50-year concession from the central GoL to cultivate 10,000 hectares of rubber in Bachieng District, at a cost of either US\$22 million (Obein 2007) or US\$34.7 million.¹⁴ The local government of Bachieng announced the allocation of land to the Viet-Lao Rubber Company on October 27, 2004,¹⁵ and the company entered into an Authorisation and Licence Agreement with the GoL to develop rubber on January 18, 2005. The specific social and environmental impacts of this company's rubber plantations in 33 villages in Bachieng have been investigated by Obein (2007).

On July 20, 2004, the provincial governments of Champasak and Salavan approved another 50-year rubber concession, this time for the Dak Lak Rubber Company¹⁶ to invest

US\$32 million in developing 10,000 hectares of rubber, as well as thousands of hectares of coffee, cocoa and cashew trees (*Thanh Nien News* 2007). Final provincial approval for implementation was obtained in January 2005.¹⁷

Finally, in 2006 the Kaosouyaotiang Viet-Lao Company (commonly referred to as the Yao Tiang Company), a partnership of three Vietnamese companies, signed a 40-year agreement with the GoL to develop another 10,000 hectares of rubber plantations in Bachieng District, at the cost of over US\$35 million. However, according to the local news media, the company did not start operations in Champasak Province until June 14, 2007 (*Champamay* 2008).

Together the three Vietnamese companies have a concession area for rubber of 23,653 hectares in only Bachieng District.¹⁸ It should be noted that for all three concessions the amount of land was determined on paper without identifying the land on the ground. Therefore, once the concessions were approved, there was pressure on lower level officials, especially those in the district, to find “available” land, even when there was not actually much available. This, in turn, has led to government officials pressuring village headmen to agree to sign away their land.

By October 2006, the Viet-Lao Rubber Company had planted 8,000 hectares of its plantation, with the remaining 2,000 hectares slated to be planted in 2007, even though 3,000 hectares of land had been cleared (Obein 2007).

At around the same time, Dak Lak Rubber Company reported that it had planted 3,200 hectares (*Thanh Nien News* 2007), and two years later the company announced that it was cultivating 8,000 hectares of rubber in Champasak, Salavan and Attapeu Provinces,¹⁹ as well as 1,000 hectares of other perennial crops, including cashews, coffee, and eucalyptus. The company’s management expects that it will have planted its 10,000 hectares of rubber in 2010 (*Vietnam News Agency* 2008b). It expected to expand its growing area in southern Laos by 1,500 hectares in 2009. The company is also planning to build a rubber processing factory, which is expected to be operational by 2011 (*Nhan Dan* 2008).

In March 2008, the *Champamay* newspaper in Pakse reported that the Kaosouyaotiang Viet-Lao Company had surveyed 2,318 hectares of land, and planted 1,305 hectares with rubber. This was considerably less than expected, and the Vietnamese

blamed delays on the high costs of equipment, materials and fuel in Laos, as compared to Vietnam. The newspaper also stated that, "Some groups of villagers have not yet cooperated." (*Champamay* 2008).

The Research Process

The Global Association for People and the Environment (GAPE) is a small Canadian-registered international NGO that has had a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the GoL to support non-formal education in Champasak Province since 2001. I am a co-founder of the NGO, and its current executive director. GAPE began working in Bachieng District in February 2006, well after the first two Vietnamese rubber companies mentioned above began operating there. However, it was not until an ethnic Brao cultural exchange trip was organised in the villages of Km 19 (Houay Ten) and Km 20 (Phya Keo) in April 2006 that the extent of the impacts of large-scale rubber development in Bachieng became evident to those working for GAPE, including the author of this paper.

From then, GAPE began considering ways to address this important land issue, and in August 2006, the Rural Research and Development Training Centre (RRDTC), a private Lao Non-Profit Association (NPA) based in Vientiane, received funding from a close ally of GAPE's, the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives in Laos,²⁰ to begin disseminating legal information to five villages affected by rubber development in Bachieng. This groundbreaking work began in October 2006, and was implemented in cooperation with GAPE.

In December 2006, the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), based in Copenhagen, funded GAPE to implement a one-year project specifically related to land issues in Bachieng. However, it took some time to obtain approval from the provincial government, and in the end they would only authorise a study of land-use and livelihoods in Bachieng that did not specifically mention 'rubber'. The project was approved on April 19, 2007, and dealt with the same issues outlined in the first draft of the project proposal, but the word 'rubber' was removed. Village questionnaires were developed and field-level research commenced. The project was specifically focussed on documenting the changes taking place as a result of rubber concessions, as well as building on the legal dissemination

work that RRDTTC had initiated. However, GAPE hoped that its work would directly benefit those at risk of losing their lands to rubber expansion.

The plan was to cooperate with the district government in Bachieng in order to jointly conduct rural assessments in a large number of villages being affected by rubber development, with the goal of determining the extent of the impacts facing communities, and working with the government to address any problems identified. The underlying objective was to raise awareness within the Bachieng government, in the hope that if exposed more intimately to the problems faced by villagers, government officials and policy makers might become more sympathetic to villagers' circumstances, and alter their policies and practices accordingly. Still, the officials in Bachieng remained suspicious.

In June and July 2007, GAPE commissioned the Champasak Province Science Technology and Environment Agency (STEA)²¹ to conduct a study on the environmental impacts of rubber development on five villages in Bachieng District and four others in neighbouring Pathoumphone District. Although the Lao authors of the report clearly recognised the serious negative impacts of rubber development, they dared not strongly implicate the Vietnamese plantation developers. In line with the agreement between GAPE and the province, they also refrained from making it explicit at the beginning of their report that they were specifically researching the negative impacts of rubber development. Instead, their research was framed as a general study of development-induced environmental impacts in Bachieng. For example, the title of the report, translated into English, was "Research and environmental data collection in five villages in Bachieng District and four villages in Pathoumphone District", and the two stated objectives of the study, equally vague, were "to study the environmental impacts from development projects in two districts" and "to create a report about the present status of environmental change" (STEA Champasak 2007: 1-2). However, if one digs deeper into the report, it becomes evident that it is actually focussed on investigating the impacts of rubber development. The authors wrote that, in contravention of the GoL's regulations for implementing Decree 192/PM on compensation and resettlement of people affected by development projects (GoL 2005b), required social and environmental assessments had not prepared prior to the development of the rubber plantations (STEA Champasak 2007). Obein (2007) was more direct in declaring that Lao environmental, compensation and resettlement legislation had

not been complied with in the case of the Viet-Lao Rubber Company, and that mitigation measures had not been developed to deal with the negative environmental and social impacts of rubber development.

A few months later, GAPE contracted RRDTTC to conduct legal dissemination work using drama in Bachieng, to complement its previous efforts, and as part of its continuing work in partnership with the Bachieng government. However, efforts to formally disseminate information about the labour law were blocked by provincial authorities who were apparently concerned that the implementation of the law would reduce company profits. They summoned GAPE staff to the provincial education office and the issue was referred to the Non-Formal Education Department in Vientiane. GAPE officers were able to convince the Department that there was nothing inappropriate about GAPE's activities, and the provincial government was informed that GAPE should be allowed to continue its work.

While not all parts of the Lao laws are beneficial to local people, some are. For example, Article 67 of the Land law states that foreign land concession holders are obliged: "to not violate the rights and interest of other persons" (GoL 2003). In addition, Article 14 states,

"The change of [the use of] land from one category to another category can be made only if it is considered to be necessary to use the land for another purpose without having negative impact on the natural or social environment and must have the prior approval of the concerned management authorities" (GoL 2003).

Article 22, which relates to the allocation of forest land use rights, also states:

"The district or municipal administration, in coordination with the village administration, is charged with considering and approving the allocation of forest land use rights in respect of forest land" (GoL 2003).

Even though article 22 does not deal specifically with large land concession issues, it implies that village administration permission is required to give forest land away for concessions.

In November 2007 GAPE hired the Gender Development Group (GDG), a Vientiane-based NPA, to study five Bachieng villages. Their goal was to investigate the impacts of rubber development on women (GDG 2007). While this study was more open about its objectives than the STEA study, the authors acknowledged in their final report that district government officials had prevented them from asking direct questions about the impacts of rubber development, in line with the revised agreement between GAPE and Champasak Province. The officials insisted that GDG frame their questions more generally. This probably affected the answers that the researchers received, but in any case, the issue of rubber, because it is so paramount in relation to peoples' lives, came out in most responses (GDG 2007).

Meanwhile, GAPE's research project with the Bachieng District government proceeded, with focal group and individual men and women interviews being the main tools used for collecting data. Interviews were generally done at night after villagers had returned from work with 2-3 days allocated for each community. Data collection focussed on livelihood issues, changes in farm-based income, and compensation for losses. Since many of the GAPE and government researchers were ethnic minorities from the area, local languages apart from Lao were often used, thus making it easier for women and older people to participate. However, the presence of some government officials, especially those from the district governor's office, sometimes had the effect of stifling villager participation, or at least reducing their criticism of rubber investors or government official involvement in the concessions. However, these officials were not always present, and when they were absent villagers tended to be much more critical. Twenty-five copies of the Labour Law were made and handed out to a few of the worst impacted villages, even though some Lao GAPE fieldworkers were too afraid to do this, fearful that government officials might disapprove. This indicates that the law can represent a powerful tool.

By August 23, 2007, when the IWGIA-funded work in Bachieng ended, 37 villages had been studied by GAPE and its government counterparts, of which 29 were already being directly affected by rubber concessions.

The Impacts of Large-Scale Rubber Development in Bachieng

Through the course of the research, GAPE researchers and their government counterparts became familiar with the impacts and challenges that people in rubber development areas in Bachieng are facing. The following is a summary of the main issues identified.

Losses of Common Property Lands

Villagers have lost access to important communal lands, including forests and pastures. In the past, these lands were crucial for local livelihoods. Pastures were grazing areas for cattle and water buffaloes. Forests provided important resources like fire wood and wood for making houses, etc., and also non-timber forest products (NTFPs), including wild mushrooms, forest fruits, wild rattan, malva nuts, wild cardamom, wild honey, imperata grass for roof making, reeds for making brooms, various kinds of bamboo, medicinal plants, game and fish, and other items. Some villagers previously made NTFP gardens in the forest, using the mosaic of upland fields and regenerating trees of various sizes to cultivate crops like cardamom in the understory, relying on limited weeding and pruning to improve cultivation conditions. Obein (2007) also reported that rubber plantations were having serious negative impacts on wildlife habitat.

Nowadays few NTFPs are collected or cultivated, and women in almost all of the villages visited complained about having to spend much more time collecting fire wood. Others have been forced to buy charcoal for cooking, and while this could have some health benefits for cooks, it also increases family expenses, and this is especially problematic for poorer families.

Some villages that engage in commercial blacksmithing, such as Km 19 and Km 20, have also found it difficult to find wood for firing their tools. They too must buy charcoal, thus reducing their profit margins. This is an example of indirect livelihood impacts caused by the loss of forest access.

The loss of grazing lands has been a major problem for communities. Prior to the arrival of the concessions livestock were mainly allowed to 'free range'. However, once the

companies gained control of the land, cleared it, and planted rubber tree seedlings, they no longer allowed villagers' livestock to enter the plantations for fear that they would damage the seedlings. Since villagers often had nowhere else to release their livestock, many had no choice but to ignore the companies' attempts to control concession land spaces. When some seedlings were damaged, the companies stepped up their efforts to control access by demanding payment of 300,000 kip (about US\$30)²² fines for every damaged seedling. Most farmers were either too poor to pay these fines, or refused to pay. The companies took additional steps to protect their seedlings, including digging 1 m wide and 1.5 m deep trenches around the plantations. Villagers have reported that Vietnamese company employees have taken and eaten livestock that have fallen into these trenches.

In one village it was reported that 17 animals died after consuming grasses in plantations that had been sprayed with herbicides.²³ No compensation was provided to the owners of the animals, which violates Laos' resettlement and compensation legislation (GoL 2005a). Obein (2007) also reported that agriculture chemicals were negatively affecting livestock in the Viet-Lao Rubber Company's plantation area. Many farmers in Bachieng have dramatically reduced the number of livestock they have, thus diminishing village savings and safety nets, since people often relied on selling livestock for emergencies. Furthermore, when large amounts of money are required, such as to pay wedding dowries or other marriage expenses, livestock are frequently sold. Livestock are also important for many upland minority peoples who sacrifice livestock when conducting rituals. According to Chamberlain (2007), livestock are the most important source of wealth identified by villagers in Laos. The reduction of livestock as a result of land concessions pressures has, thus, significantly contributed to increasing poverty amongst villagers in Bachieng.

Crucially, villagers have not been given free and prior informed consent, or the option to retain their communal lands, and they have not received any compensation for the loss of communal forests and pastures, which the State claims to own.²⁴ This is despite the Lao resettlement law, which specifies that those who lose income due to land loss should be compensated (GoL 2005a).

Overall, biodiversity losses have been heavy, and while this has affected almost all community members, it has been especially serious for the poor, since they are frequently

more dependent on communal lands than others. It is unclear who benefited from selling the logs acquired when converting primary forests to plantations, but it certainly was not the villagers.

Finally, important natural aquatic habitats have been decimated. Many water bodies have been poisoned by herbicides (used against ‘weeds’) and pesticides (used against termites) applied to plantations. Vegetation directly adjacent to water bodies has also been cleared and planted with rubber, with no buffer zones being established as required by the Lao Environmental law. Spraying equipment has frequently been washed in the streams, and the STEA Champasak (2007) found that the companies had not properly trained workers in the use and disposal of agricultural chemicals. Obein (2007: 20) also criticised the storage of agricultural chemicals by the Viet-Lao Rubber Company, claiming that “spillage cannot be contained, putting at risk ground water and surface water.” There have also been serious problems with soil erosion, especially in steeper areas that have been cleared for planting rubber. According to Obein (2007), environmental impacts associated with large-scale plantation development, including serious erosion, were already evident in areas affected by the Viet-Lao Rubber Company in late 2006. Overall, habitat and stream hydrology have been badly affected, resulting in dramatic declines in fish, crabs, shrimp, shellfish and turtles, and edible stream bank vegetation, thus negatively affecting local livelihoods and food security. Obein (2007) also expected that erosion was damaging aquatic habitats and reducing villager fish catches. Villagers are also afraid to consume water from the streams, believing that doing so might negatively impact their health. Those who have stood in the water for long periods while fishing have experienced burning and severe peeling on their lower legs.

Losses of Agricultural Lands

Bachiang District is known for its relatively rich soils (many being volcanic), and prior to the arrival of the large rubber plantations, locals cultivated a wide variety of annual and perennial crops, including upland rice, various kinds of vegetables, pineapples, coffee, different types of fruit (especially durian, cashew, banana and *bong* trees), legumes

(mainly peanuts, mung and black beans), and small-scale hardwood plantations (mainly teak). These agricultural activities were the primary basis for most villager livelihoods.

According to Obein (2007), the 33 villages, populated by 12,644 people, affected by the Viet-Lao Rubber Company plantations had lost 83% of their agricultural land to rubber by the end of 2006. Of those, 18 villages were left with 10% or less of their agricultural lands, and of these villages, four had no agriculture land at all. The situation was deemed so serious that Obein (2007: 33) made the following recommendation:

“For each village which has lost all or almost all of its agricultural land, this represents at least 18 villages, and for which the various households have lost their source of income, the opinion of the Consultant is that resettlement to a new location might be a solution, albeit such relocation is usually a very delicate, expensive and risky process. The option of returning plantations to the villagers is highly preferred.”

Essentially, it would appear that rubber plantation development in Bachieng could lead to large-scale internal resettlement, and indeed, in 2009 when a village was resettled in Bachieng due to having inadequate agricultural land to continue occupying their former village site.²⁵

As with communal lands, villagers have often not been given options for keeping their agriculture lands. Furthermore, even though all those who lost agricultural land were, according to Laos' resettlement legislation (GoL 2005a), supposed to receive cash compensation for lost land, many farmers had trouble obtaining it. None were paid in the first couple of years, and cash compensation for losses only began being dispensed in 2006, and in some cases it did not commence until February 2007. But even after compensation was forthcoming, many farmers have been unhappy with the amount provided, and the treatment of different farmers and villages has varied. Obein (2007) reported that villagers have been very dissatisfied with the compensation process for a number of different reasons. However, villagers have not been allowed to renegotiate the amount or appeal for higher rates, and farmers have often been told that they must accept whatever the company determines is appropriate. Similarly, Luangaramsi *et al.* (2008) found that some companies paid compensation to villagers for the foregone harvest only, while others

assessed the land and crops together. Still others paid for the land only. Some received low compensation for lost swidden land; others received nothing for the loss of swiddens. Much depended on the status of individual villagers.

Some farmers have not received any compensation, even though their village area was subject to LFA, thus establishing a basis for issuing land titles to farmers. This is because some individual lands were not officially registered with the GoL prior to the arrival of the rubber companies (neither permanent nor temporary titles had been issued), and farmers had thus not established tenure in the eyes of the State, through paying land taxes.²⁶ In particular, swidden lands had often been inappropriately classified as 'empty' or 'unused' state-public land. In accordance with government rules, villages are supposed to rotate upland fields annually and following a 3-year cycle. But even in places where it has not been strictly enforced, the discourse itself restricts people to officially owning only three fields, one per year, even though three year fallow systems are generally not sustainable (Chamberlain 2001; Baird and Shoemaker 2007; Fujita and Phanvilay 2008). This resulted in a dilemma for many villagers; few dared to admit that they actually had more land than allowed by GoL policy.

Even though compensation has frequently been provided, it has almost always been at a rate well below market value, a rate deemed insufficient by most farmers. Although compensation levels have varied, farmers have typically received 1,000,000 kip (US\$100) for a hectare of swidden land, and 500 kip (US\$0.05) for each lost coffee tree or pineapple plant. This is not even enough to compensate for lost income for a single year of harvests. Similarly, Obein (2007) reported that villagers sometimes received just 500,000 kip per hectare of compensation for coffee plantations that produced over two million kip a year of revenue. This contradicts the GoL's legislation regarding resettlement compensation (GoL 2005a).

The conditions in various villages in Bachieng have differed, with some communities such as Km 19 and Km 20 having lost the vast majority of their agricultural and communal lands. There, most families now have little more land than what their houses are located on. However, some communities have managed to retain part or even most of their land. A few were even able to keep rubber out of their village territories altogether. But in almost all cases when lands were lost, losses have been significant. It has left the vast majority of

farmers with insufficient land for agriculture. Many have had to abandon swidden agriculture and use what small pieces of land remain for more intensive agricultural activities, such as cultivating small vegetable gardens. Most do not have enough land to make their livings primarily from their own agriculture.

Farmers have sometimes been allowed to intercrop annuals between the rubber seedlings (Obein 2007). This is sometimes allowed for three years, or until the canopies of rubber trees close up, but the concession owners do not always allow intercropping, and in any case, many farmers feel that they are being taken advantage of, since they end up providing the companies with free weeding around their rubber trees. This is also only a temporary solution to the people's land alienation problems.

Chamberlain (2007) considered poverty issues in the ethnic Ngkriang village of Ban Don in Bachieng District, and determined that the village had become very poor as a result of losing almost all of their agricultural land to Vietnamese rubber plantations, apparently with no compensation being provided, at least at the time of the study, in 2006. One villager was quoted as saying,

“Now we have no land for crops at all because all of our land has been taken by the Vietnamese rubber project. ... We can't think of what to do, when we have no land we cannot think. ... We brought this problem to the District Chief but he refused to listen and just let the Vietnamese continue to plow up our land, now they have plowed almost to the edge of the village” (Chamberlain 2007: 43).

Labour Problems

Villagers have faced various labour problems, and a number of labour issues have emerged that have made villagers unhappy. For one, only those between 18 and 35 years of age are eligible for employment as day-wage labourers with the Dak Lak Rubber Company, while those working on the Viet-Lao Rubber Company plantations are required to be between 18 and 45 years old. Thus, older farmers are being excluded, and many are bitter.²⁷ In addition, women are not allowed to bring young children to work, as is common practice in Laos. This makes employment difficult for women with small children (older

children are, however, sometimes allowed to accompany their parents). The weak, sick or disabled are also prohibited from working on the plantations. Overall, in February 2008, 64% of the working aged population in Km 19 and Km 20 Villages were not being employed by the companies as full-time labourers.

Still, sometimes under-aged teenagers are allowed to work, and many have quit school to labour in the plantations to support their families, especially when their parents are unable to work due to their ages or for other reasons. Children as young as 15 have been hired, even though the companies claim to only be hiring labourers 18 years or older. This has encouraged younger people to abandon plans to achieve higher education.

Labourers claim that they are not receiving full payment for their work. For example, people are sometimes paid less for holes they dig for planting rubber trees compared to originally agreed rates. Villagers claim that they are expected to work long hours, which violates the Lao Labour Law (GoL 1994). Another problem is that few labourers have been given permanent contracts. This is because the labour demands of the plantations vary from season to season, and labour demand depends on the stage of plantation development. Labourers are often hired on a piece work basis, with some obtaining 300,000 to 500,000 kip (US\$30-50)/month for weeding in the dry season. However, much of the weeding work is done in the rainy season, with labourers receiving about 3,700,000 kip (US\$370) for weeding 25-hectare plots. In addition, contracted labour cannot look for other work during the slow season. This is a serious concern, because during the slow season villagers cannot generate enough income to survive. In addition, according to the Labour Law, temporary workers are supposed to make a minimum of 25,000 kip (US\$2.50)/day, but in reality many only obtain 18,000 kip (US\$1.80)/day. The companies often fail to pay labourers on time, or they only give them part of what they are owed. This is a common method for ensuring that labourers do not quit without notice, as they would not want to lose the money still outstanding.

Luangaramsi *et al.* (2008) also found various labour problems associated with rubber plantation development in Bachieng. Apart from receiving low wages, they found that amongst the non-permanent villager labourers that they interviewed in Bachieng, the average number of working days per year was less than a quarter of the working year, thus making it very difficult for people to make a living through working on the plantations.

Permanent workers also receive uncertain wages, and in some villages all permanent workers have been fired and replaced by outsiders.

Some observers are concerned that the rubber plantations demand for labour may decline in the future, as less labour is required to tap rubber trees (150-200 days/hectare/year) compared to preparing land and planting rubber seedlings (400-500 days/hectare/year) (NAFRI 2007; Vongkham 2006). Labour requirements may have already peaked in most of the plantations in Bachiang. However, some expect that labour demand may increase substantially once tapping begins (Luangaramsi *et al.* 2008).

Finally, labourers are frequently exposed to dangerous herbicides or other chemicals applied to the rubber plantations, causing various health problems. Protective materials (gloves and masks) have, for the most part, not been provided, and sometimes labourers have been asked to apply chemicals without receiving adequate safety training. In some cases labourers are forced to work in areas where chemicals have recently been applied. Spraying has also been done next to villages on windy days, irritating and likely harming people. However, those who work on the rubber plantations do not receive any health benefits, and those not working for the companies but who have been negatively affected by spraying have not received any company assistance.

Overall, villagers are unhappy about being forced to become reliant on unsecure and poorly paid employment on plantations. However, there are those who favour rubber development, especially poorer people who had little or no land before rubber development began. Many of these labourers are relatively recent migrants with less attachment to the places that are being transformed, and more of a need for paid employment as labourers due to lacking land-bases to make a living. This has, for example, led to some differences of opinion in villages like Houa Khoua.

Rapid Transformation Pressures

Because land clearing is often done using bulldozers, changes in landscapes and associated livelihoods have taken place over very short periods of time, with most villager-land being converted within a year, and often within a week or two, a few days, or even just one night. In some cases peoples' lands have been clandestinely cleared at night during

village festivals (*boun ban*), when villagers let their guard down. They awake the next morning to find the landscape completely transformed. Peoples' lives have changed from being more or less self-sufficient to becoming heavily dependent on rubber company labour, or when that has not been possible, many have become idle due to a lack of farming and foraging opportunities. Villagers reported that whereas in the past they bought very little food, now they have to buy 90% of what they consume, thus dramatically increasing their need for cash. This coincides with changes reported by Luangaramsi *et al.* (2008). Based on a survey of 189 families in six villages affected by rubber plantations in Bachieng, they found that the number of families who were able to grow enough rice to eat for 11-12 months a year fell from 4 in 5 in 2003 to just 1 in 5 in 2007.

Of course, switching from on-farm to off-farm employment is not inherently problematic, and can even lead to improved livelihoods and more options for farmers (see, for example, Rigg 2005). But, there is a big difference between farmers making these changes on their own and over many years, and people being forced into rapid change, with little consideration of whether those being transformed are in a position to successfully adapt or not (see Polanyi 1944). In the past, everyone had particular roles in society, but now it is becoming difficult for some to adapt to finding new roles. For example, older women used to help weed the fields, but now there are no fields to weed.

Most people previously worked their own hours, but now that they are forced to work for the companies to survive, they have to follow the work schedules dictated by the companies. In addition, it has been reported that labourers are punished by not being allowed to work for 15 days if deemed to have missed a day of work without justification. If workers miss three consecutive days, they are usually fired. Therefore, villagers can no longer rest when they feel like it, choose to take an afternoon nap, or take days off at will. Essentially, the companies are doing their part to transform local people through introducing new forms of discipline to their labour force. Some government officials see this as positive, as a way to force 'lazy' or 'backwards' villagers into modern subjects.

However, idleness, especially among those too old to work on the plantations, has led to other social problems, such as excessive alcohol consumption. Petty theft has also increased and more poor people in Bachieng are travelling to Pakse to beg. In addition, those labouring now have less access to food produced by themselves, but regular access to

cash wages. Learning to manage this change has not been easy, and some women in Bachieng complained that unlike before, their husbands now drink whiskey everyday because they have the cash to buy it. This is a new burden for women, and family conflicts have often increased.

Apart from livelihood adjustment problems, villagers are experiencing other socio-cultural challenges, such as losing Animist connections to agriculture and the land, and becoming displaced from special places with spiritual importance. For example, agriculture rituals linked to rice harvesting have been abandoned in some villages because most people are no longer able to grow rice. As a result, social cohesion in these villages has deteriorated. Douglas Porteous and Sandra Smith (2001) called such developments “domicide: global destruction of home”, which is an important concept for understanding what is happening in Bachieng. People are grounded in particular places, often with close relations to the land. As landscapes are transformed abruptly, and lands are taken, this ‘destruction of place’ can leave people with a sense of groundlessness or emptiness. There are various psychological impacts that can emerge as a result of loss of ‘places’. However, these are rarely adequately considered. Certainly, the transformation is not just about material changes and losses, although those are certainly important and can exacerbate other socio-cultural and psychological problems.

Elderly people feel especially anxious that they will have no land to pass onto their children, and that as a result the younger generation will not remain in the villages to look after them. Without land or opportunities to work on the rubber plantations, middle to older people are having a particularly hard time adjusting to changes. It is also this group that tends to be the most attached to the landscapes that are being transformed.

However, younger people are not immune to impacts. Chamberlain (2006), for example, has pointed out that in parts of northern Laos upland ethnic minorities have become increasingly involved in human trafficking and other forms of exploitation as a result of rapid changes in landscapes and livelihoods linked to the development of rubber plantations. Certainly, those being affected by rubber development in southern Laos are equally vulnerable to these sorts of problems.

Problems with the Research

GAPE's research on rubber development began to run into serious problems in September 2007, after all the data had been collected in the villages. A few things transpired that created considerable tensions. Most seriously, once all the villager questionnaires began to be examined by GAPE officers and their government counterparts, a senior Bachieng District official became alarmed. When he read the completed interview forms, he realised that a large proportion of the villagers interviewed had expressed serious criticisms of large-scale rubber development. Tremendously frustrated with the situation, some villagers had directed their criticisms at the government, accusing senior officials of personally benefiting from becoming aligned with the companies. Strong criticism against government policies and practices is relatively rare in Laos, and the official was shocked, choosing to confiscate all the interview forms that included comments that he considered too critical. According to one of GAPE's Lao officers, the official was particularly concerned that the district might get into trouble with the Ministry of Justice, as the Deputy Minister had visited the district the previous day.

It is unclear exactly how many interview forms were seized, but it was in the hundreds, about half of the total from the 37 villages. Those documents were never returned, and all that remained were the forms of interviewees less critical of the rubber plantations. This was a huge blow to the research, as the backbone of the study was supposed to be the quantitative data collected through interviews. With so many questionnaires gone, and the ones remaining tending to be more positive than those lost, it eventually became clear that it would only be possible to make limited use of the data.

This was, however, not the only problem that the project experienced. In September 2007 GAPE contracted RRDTTC to organise a "Drama for Legal Advocacy", with the goal of using theatre as a tool for raising awareness of legal issues linked to land and rubber in Bachieng villages. The drama was, in fact, developed in cooperation with government officials, including district officials and those from the provincial Department of Justice. However, when it was tested at Km 11 Village, and viewed by the same senior Bachieng District official who had confiscated the field data just days earlier, he reacted harshly, and reported his dissatisfaction to the Education Division of Champasak Province. The official

thought that the performance was too provocative, and too implicitly critical of the rubber plantation developers. The provincial Education Division ordered that the drama not be shown to villagers again. Thus, another part of the project quickly came to an end.

In the same month, at a regularly quarterly (every three months) meeting between GAPE staff and Bachieng District officials, the deputy district chief asked GAPE to change its Lao language quarterly activity report. Referring to the research that had been conducted on land issues in Bachieng, GAPE's report briefly stated that one of the serious problems facing villagers was that they did not have enough agricultural land. The deputy district chief said that he wanted all references to villager land shortages removed. He claimed that there was plenty of land but that the villagers were too lazy to utilise it.

The morale of the 5-6 members of the GAPE team working on Bachieng land issues hit a low-point. Everything seemed to have gone wrong. With so much of the quantitative data gone, even writing the final project report had become problematic. Many within GAPE considered the project a failure. The district government had seemingly been successful in stifling the voices of villagers, and GAPE was powerless to do much. Furthermore, GAPE's overall relationship with the Bachieng District government had taken a turn for the worse. This was not only affecting GAPE's research activities, but also its standard primary education and non-formal education activities in Bachieng.

Taking a Second Look

However, the results of this initiative inevitably turned out to be more complicated than originally recognised.²⁸ It took some months to realise that the project had actually achieved more than initially thought. For one, despite the negative response of senior district officials to the research results, over time some officials came to realise that people in the villages were really suffering due to rubber plantation development, although the issue of rubber remains a contested one, with various positions being argued by different actors. Whereas district officials were previously often the ones intimidating villagers to give up their land to the companies, they are now more likely to urge village headmen not to sign away village land. For example, in one case when the village headman of Thong Phao Village signed away most of the community's land, local officials actually berated the

village chief and sent him back to the company to renegotiate the return of at least some of the village's land. He managed to get half back.

In October 2008 the young brother of the district chief, who previously facilitated many land deals on behalf of the rubber companies, but is now a headman in Kengkia Village, was overheard telling the deputy director of the district Education Office that the Bachieng government should stop supporting the expansion of rubber, as there is not enough land left, and it would be economically and socially more advantageous to promote other crops on the remaining lands, including corn, black beans and peanuts. He also warned that the unstable global economy could cause the price of rubber to crash, along with the entire local economy. He commented, "There is a new theory called '*sethakit pho phiang*' (sufficiency economy, probably an idea borrowed from Thailand) which says that it is safer for villagers to remain independent and to produce many different things in order to be more resilient." In fact, it is clear that the global economic crisis is already causing dramatic declines in rubber markets, with global prices plummeting from US\$3,200 per tonne in April 2008 to just US\$1,800 per tonne in October 2008 (Chun and Nguon 2008).

Money remains an important factor. Some village headmen have been bribed by rubber companies to sign off on land deals that are not in the best interests of their communities. The opportunities for corruption are high because the Agricultural and Forestry Division officials and Provincial Land Management Authority (PLMA) officials frequently inform only the village headman about the plans to develop land in a village, rather than informing the whole village administration. However, in some cases community pressure has helped to ensure that village headmen have acted in support of villagers.

Villagers have also become less compliant with company plans, and are now more willing to argue with rubber developers, and even refuse to give up their land. For example, the headman from Houa Khoua Village told me in mid-2008 that he had decided not to give up any village land to the rubber developers. Or if people are willing to sell land, they tend to negotiate with more confidence, since they now feel that they can refuse to sell their land if the terms are not favourable. For example, an ethnic Ta-oy woman from Bachieng explained how important the legal information provided to poor villagers has been, citing the example of her sister, who was brave to negotiate the price a company gave her for half

a hectare of marginal land that she was not using. They offered her 500,000 kip (US\$50), but she eventually negotiated for over 3,000,000 kip (US\$300). According to her, the limited amount of legal information provided by RRDTTC via GAPE has been spread by villagers ad hoc, and has played an important role in increasing village legal knowledge and confidence. Although such victories may seem small, they are significant for previously disempowered people. The overall result is that the rubber companies are now finding it more difficult to acquire land, and they must pay much more for it.

There are a number of interlinked factors that have contributed to these changes. Not all are a direct result of GAPE's work. What is clear is that the research has helped 'soften-up' local government officials to the concerns of villagers. Practical day-to-day problems that they have observed have also affected officials, and have contributed to them becoming more sympathetic to villagers. For example, some have lost land themselves or have relatives or friends who have been victimised. In addition, GAPE's work has helped villagers better organise their thoughts and articulate the problems that the plantations are causing.

There has so far not been any violence associated with villager protests, but in at least two cases farmers have used guns to stop Vietnamese bulldozer drivers threatening their lands. One of these farmers was an ethnic Ta-oy Education official who, with GAPE sponsorship, attended a regional land rights workshop in Cambodia in mid-2007, where he vigorously presented the problems of rubber plantation development. Other villagers have protested in groups, while still others have taken safer routes, such as criticising the investors behind their backs.

Rumours spread that villagers in Km 14 Village shot and killed a Vietnamese bulldozer operator working for a company. However, upon investigation I learned that no shots were actually fired. It appears that the exaggerated version of the story is a classic example of James Scott's (1985) 'Weapons of the Weak', in which stories are created to discursively support what many villagers might hope would happen, even if nobody dares to take the risk associated with actually shooting someone.

One villager who is too old to work on the plantations said that there are now many illegal Vietnamese labourers working for the companies. He told me that one way to get a laugh in these hard times is to dress up in a Lao police uniform and walk towards the

Vietnamese labourers when they are working in the plantations. He said it was fun to watch the labourers run away in fear of being asked to present work permits, which many do not possess. People know that the effect is only temporary and that their actions do not really pose a serious threat to the companies, operations, or the Vietnamese employees, but these forms of resistance are relatively safe, and the resister can still gain some temporary satisfaction in getting some digs in. This is even true if people claim that something has happened, when in fact it actually did not.

In addition, RRDTC and the Ministry of Justice provided legal training on the Environment Law to many villagers, and the additional advice about the Labour and Land laws that the RRDTC team offered to villagers informally has had an impact on local government officials and villagers. Both had previously very little understanding of Lao law as applied to large land concessions granted to foreign companies. The main lesson that government officials learned was that village headmen are not obliged to sign away village land for concessions if they choose not to. This replaced the previous view that government approved projects must be vigorously implemented without any questioning or negotiation. In fact, the laws allow more room for negotiation and even resistance than anyone expected.

However, the power of officials still worries many villagers, with some continuing to feel that the police and the courts do not operate within the law, and have the power to do whatever they want regardless of what the laws stipulate. This cannot be denied, but at least the law provides villages with new ways of justifying their positions, and this can certainly help in some cases.

There have also been other changes that were neither planned nor anticipated by GAPE. A journalist who works for the English language division of *Khao San Pathet Lao* newspaper became aware of the rubber plantation problems in Bachieng and investigated. He learnt about many different problems from villagers, and as a result wrote a critical article that he originally hoped to publish in *Khao San Pathet Lao*. However, the editor did not allow the article to be published there, as he was afraid it could damage Laos-Vietnam relations. However, the journalist was determined, believing that it was important to report on this issue. After discussing the article with the editors of the *Vientiane Times*, they

finally agreed to publish it on April 23, 2007. The first few sentences of the article indicate its tone,

“Villagers in Bachieng district of Champassak province envisage a dark future now that their lands have been taken over by investors for a rubber plantation.

Local authorities have allowed the investors a concession on the land and encourage villagers to work as labourers for the investors.

The resulting shortage of land for agriculture will force some families to leave their homes in search of alternative land to earn a living.” (*Vientiane Times* 2007b).

The article went on to quote the village headman of Don Village, who explained that the community had lost 100 hectares of land to rubber, leading two families to move to another district. Three other families were expected to relocate. GAPE field workers have heard that other farmers have moved to various other districts in Champasak and Attapeu Provinces. However, poorer families frequently claim that they do not have the resources to start a new life elsewhere.

The village headman complained about the low compensation that villagers had received for lost land planted with cardamom and teak. The article reported that other villages in Bachieng were facing similar problems, including having their perennial agricultural crops bulldozed by the rubber developers. The article quoted the Director of the Agriculture and Forestry Division of Champasak Province as stating that, “We accept that there will be some problems with villagers initially, but if we don't change today from local production to industrial production, when will we do it?” This indicates that the scheme was partially justified through the deployment of particular development discourses. The GoL wants these ‘ethnic minorities’ to rapidly transform their livelihoods and become modernised.

However, the head of the Champasak Governor’s office was also quoted as saying, “We know only about the investment possibilities in Bachieng district, but we know nothing about the actual implementation of the project.” He promised to launch an investigation to determine whether payments to labourers by the rubber developers were appropriate. He also commented that rubber developers should not be allowed to take

control of land already being cultivated by villagers. The senior official's comments indicated that the provincial government was already distancing itself from rubber development, in order to avoid conflicts with the central government, even though some of the most senior officials in both the district and province had used their positions to become involved in rubber production through being given private rubber plantations by the companies in return for support in obtaining land.

Once the article appeared, one of the rubber company officials read it and became angry. He brought the article to the Prime Minister's Office to complain that the article was written too strongly. The complaint ended up backfiring against the investor, as it caused the Prime Minister, Bouasone Bouphavanh, to set up a committee made up of senior officials from different ministries to investigate the situation in Bachieng. In addition, the Prime Minister personally visited Bachieng and Lao Ngam Districts to investigate the rubber developments shortly thereafter. This trip was instrumental in leading the Prime Minister to declare—at a national land meeting on May 8, 2007—that the government “would stop approving land concessions for investors on an indefinite basis, or until a more comprehensive strategy could be devised” (*Vientiane Times* 2007b). His announcement fit with a proposal by the National Land Management Authority (NLMA) a month earlier to temporarily halt all new land concessions to private companies nationwide, in order to prevent serious environmental impacts (Phouthonesy 2007a). Specifically citing land conservation disputes in Bachieng and Lao Ngam, and problems with planting rubber on high quality lands that would better be allocated to growing other crops, Bouasone stated,

“We can generate a lot of money from the [Bolovent] plateau, if only we diversify from rubber tree plantations, for which we only get five or six dollars per hectare in land tax. This doesn't add up to much over a year ... We also need to start calculating in detail how much villagers will actually earn from rubber plantations.”

He also commented that,

“We are calling a halt to these projects to improve our strategy and address the shortcomings of our previous strategy ... We don't yet know when we will

resume approval of these projects, as this will depend on whether we can improve our strategy.”²⁹

On the following day, the Governor of Champasak announced that there would be continued discussions to resolve land concession disputes in Bachieng, and that he would encourage the rubber developers to implement the 2+3 system.³⁰ The Governor also indicated that the Vietnamese had already consented to implement this on a pilot project basis. In addition, the Governor commented that 50 years was too long for concessions, and that he wanted to cut them down to 35 years.³¹ He acknowledged that parts of the plantations in Bachieng overlapped with land already used by villagers for agriculture. However, he partially defended the development, claiming that the livelihoods of many villagers had improved because they now had opportunities for employment with the rubber companies (*Vientiane Times* 2007d).

In addition, in July 2007 Nong Sim Village, one of the communities in Bachieng District that received RRDTC Environment Law training and other informal legal advice from RRDTC, prepared a complaint about land that they lost to rubber, and sent it through a relative in Vientiane to the Ministry of Justice. This apparently increased the pressure on the GoL to make changes in favour of the villagers.

However, it appears that the companies are continuing to push ahead, and on July 30, 2007 the *Vientiane Times* reported that the Deputy Prime Minister of Vietnam, Truong Van Doan, stated at a meeting regarding Laos-Vietnam cooperation a week earlier, that Vietnam planned to increase the number of rubber plantations in Laos, and that 60,000 hectares would be planted by the Vietnamese “in the near future” (Pongkhao 2007b).³² Furthermore, on September 25, 2007 the *Vietnam News Agency* (2007) reported that Dak Lak Rubber Company was planning to expand its rubber holdings in southern Laos by 2,000 to 2,500 hectares in the coming year. No mention of the conflict or subsequent moratorium on new land concessions was mentioned, but it was reported that, “The company [Dak Lak Rubber Company] has also helped improve its workers’ living conditions through education, healthcare and road upgrading projects,” indicating the increased sensitivity of the issue. In addition, in September 2008 Vietnamese rubber plantation developers received assurances from the highest level of the GoL that there was

still official support for Vietnamese rubber development in Champasak (*Vietnam News Agency* 2008a). Seemingly oblivious to concerns about rubber expansion in Laos, in March 2009, the Vietnam Rubber Group, the largest producer and exporter of rubber in Vietnam, announced that it planned to expand its rubber plantations in Laos from about 10,000 ha to 100,000 ha (*Thanh Nien News* 2009).

However, other senior GoL politicians have continued to express their objections over large land concessions. For example, on June 5, 2008 Kham-ouane Boupha, Minister of the Prime Minister's Office and President of the NLMA, made some interesting comments about the need to strengthen Laos' LFA system.³³ He said that there were chronic problems with land and natural resource management in the country associated with large land concessions for industrial crops, and that local authorities had incorrectly allowed foreign investors to proceed with poorly assessed projects that had led to serious social and environmental impacts in rural areas (*Khaosan Pathet Lao* 2008). A few months later, he was also quoted as stating, "I think that we need to study three things about rubber: one is the economic return, second is the environmental impact and the third relates to social issues...If the rubber project (sic) is not suitable based on these three things then we will not approve land for investment" (*Vientiane Times* 2008h: 1).³⁴

The statements by the Prime Minister, the Minister responsible for the NLMA and other senior officials and politicians have helped create political space for lower level government officials to question and criticise rubber development, and they have also been crucial in changing the positions of some local government officials in Bachieng. These comments have signalled that public discourses related to rubber development no longer have to be blindly supportive.

However, while conditions have somewhat improved in Bachieng, the moratorium on new land concessions was only partially effective. Indicative of this, on July 18, 2008 the *Vientiane Times* quoted a member of the National Assembly for Savannakhet Province, Colonel Lamngeun Khampaseuthxaiya, as stating that, "[L]and concessions that covered farming land were still being granted" (*Vientiane Times* 2008b). However, the ways that various provincial governments are dealing with these problems vary.³⁵

New problems with rubber plantation concessions have started to emerge in other parts of Laos, such as in Xekong Province where provincial authorities have complained

about villagers selling their land to rubber companies without the knowledge or approval of the government, and have also suggested that some rubber plantations should not be allowed in order to ensure that there is land available for other potentially more valuable crops (*Vientiane Times* 2008c, e & h; Pongkhao 2009a). In addition, in November 2008, it was reported that Luang Nam Tha Province, in northern Laos, had decided to stop approving new rubber plantations until the socio-economic impacts and profitability of rubber were assessed by the government. Officials expressed the need to retain land for planting other crops for food security purposes, and they also believe that other crops may be more profitable than rubber. “Now nobody knows whether the rubber is good for our economy and poverty reduction so we will stop it to study the impact,” said provincial administration office Deputy Head, Mr Bounma Phandavong (*Vientiane Times* 2008h: 1).

Indicating that official opposition to rubber plantations is growing, the *Vientiane Times* (2008j) reported in November 2008 that rubber plantation concessions that cause damage to forests would no longer be approved. Past expansion of rubber plantations was reported to have resulted in the encroachment on environmentally-sensitive protected areas, apparently due to a lack of adequate surveys in advance of project development. According to the Deputy General of the Forestry Department, land with more than 30 cubic metres of standing trees per hectare would not be approved for rubber cultivation. In the same article, the deputy director of the Agriculture and Forestry Division of Champasak Province reported that the government did not want anymore rubber development on the Boloven Plateau, as coffee is believed to be a more profitable crop.

The *Vientiane Times* (2008j) also reported that the rapid expansion of rubber had prompted the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry to limit rubber expansion to 300,000 hectares. However, the same article stated that many agriculture experts believed that the amount of rubber plantations should be capped at the present level of 200,000 hectares. Most recently, the Lao Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry announced that it is “assessing the efficiency and effectiveness of rubber plantations in Laos to ensure balance and cohesion with the country's prevailing social and environmental conditions.” It was also suggested that the amount of rubber allowed to be planted in Laos might be capped at 150,000 hectares (Pongkhao 2009b: 1). This study appears to be in response to serious

concerns voiced by members of the National Assembly as well as government officials working at various levels.

Discussion

There are a number of points that can be drawn from experiences associated with large-scale rubber development and agriculture and livelihood transformation in Bachieng District. The first and most obvious is that rapid landscape and livelihood transition caused by large-scale rubber plantation development can lead to serious problems that deserve careful consideration. So far there has been insufficient effort in surveying land prior to granting concessions. The government also has not had access to good land zoning maps for determining where land might be available, and how much. There was, in fact, no land surveys done in Bachieng prior to the signing of concession agreements, and one of the biggest problems was that the government felt obliged to find land for concession holders even when suitable unoccupied land was not available. More importantly, the surveying that occurred did not allow locals to participate in meaningful ways.

Colin Barlow (1997) provides an overview of the history of agricultural transformation based primarily on rubber development, but his biases against village subsistence agriculture systems are clear from the outset, as indicated by the way he frames agricultural transformation. For example, he includes pre-plantation agricultural within what he calls “a backward economy” (1997: 1589), thus showing that this form is not ‘modern’, and is thus inferior to more ‘developed’ forms of agricultural economies. More importantly, Barlow appears unaware of the hardships frequently caused by large plantation development. He does not indicate much sympathy for those whose livelihoods are being forcibly and rapidly transformed by large plantations. This same lack of consideration for farmers who are impacted by land concessions is evident in other economic studies, such as Schumman *et al.* (2006), who, while not explicitly focussed on rubber, still failed to acknowledge the importance of considering the impacts of land concessions on local livelihoods. Instead, Schumman *et al.* (2006) focuses on maximising benefits to the central GoL and ensuring easy access to land by foreign investors. While the funder of the study, the German aid agency GTZ, has dealt with this issue elsewhere, and

has generally tried to support villager interests in relation to land concession issues, the particular approach adopted by Schumman *et al.* (2006) is dangerous, in that it legitimises a modernist discourse that considers the interests of investors and the State, without giving nearly enough emphasis to the concerns of rural people.

Another problem with Barlow's typology of agricultural transformation is that he assumes that the development of plantation agriculture is appropriate and necessary, as does Schumman *et al.* (2006). They remain silent regarding issues that are at the core of rights-based approaches to development, including general equity and gender issues, and issues related to the hardships associated with large-scale plantations development. They do not refer to the negative impacts plantation development usually has on biodiversity. As the *Vientiane Times* (2008g) has reported, "Rubber can also degrade the soil if it is grown in unsuitable areas," and, "Much more needs to be done if long-term repercussions are to be avoided."

It is crucial to carefully consider who makes the decisions to transform; what are the power relations associated with these developments, including who has control over the land, human resources and markets; and how much time, capital and other resources people have to make adjustments. As this case study indicates, large-scale rubber plantation development has many potential pitfalls.

A more appropriate framework for considering the type of plantation development described in this paper was famously laid out in 1944 by Karl Polanyi in *The Great Transformation*. Polanyi argued that the development of the modern state went hand in hand with the development of modern market economies and that these two changes are inexorably linked. Certainly, one can see, in the case of Bachieng, how State power has been used to support market-oriented developers, and vice versa. In addition, Polanyi certainly understood the magnitude of the types of industrial change that come with large-scale rubber plantation development. Opposed to typical liberal accounts of the rise of capitalism, he recognised that capitalist led agricultural change ultimately means the total transformation of previous social orders, and that its sustainability is doubtful due to the destructive impacts on humans and nature. We can see the same in Bachieng today. However, it is also worth mentioning that Polanyi also discussed 'countermovements', including various measures by governments designed to protect the dispossessed. This can

also be seen in relation to recent attempts by the GoL to restrict land concessions due to concerns about land alienation.

Another important point that has arisen in this study is that even though LFA was conducted in the 1990s in most of the villages in Bachieng, land tenure systems introduced by the State are likely to be ineffective if participatory processes are not used to empower local people (see Fujita and Phanvilay 2008 for another example from Laos). Legal backing is also necessary in the long-term. Of equal importance, follow-up is required to ensure that processes like LFA remain relevant, and are structured in ways that allow for adjustments in responses to previously unanticipated problems. If these systems are not flexible, they are likely to become irrelevant and be abandoned or ignored when contradictions arise. Our research in Bachieng found that many villagers often could not even remember when LFA was conducted in their communities, or they were unable to recall the original agreed-upon land-use plan. The burial or spirit forests of the villages were best known, which is not surprising since these forests have an important cultural value.

This study also shows that developing cooperative research projects to investigate problematic land tenure issues in politically restricted countries such as Laos can—despite various potential obstacles—either directly or indirectly contribute to changes in government policies and practices, even if there are other important factors that have little or nothing to do with advocacy work.

This study also indicates that extending legal training to villagers can bring various positive results, including sensitising local government officials to legal frameworks that provide villagers with substantial rights. Legal training can provide important knowledge for empowering local people to stand up for their rights and feel more confident to negotiate with government and private companies that may or may not be working in the interests of villagers. As one observer noted, “The laws in Laos may not be perfect, but they are at least better than what people have had to face when they don’t know anything about the laws and are at the mercy of others to interpret them.” However, the fact that GAPE workers were sometimes afraid to disseminate legal material, fearing the government might see this as overly provocative, indicates that much work remains to be done.

This case study also indicates that by working closely with governments and villagers, it is possible for positive results to be achieved, even through sometimes

unexpected links and connections bring about these changes. Certainly, GAPE could not have predicted that RRDTC's informal legal dissemination work would have been so effective, or that the family ties of villagers at Nong Sim with people in Vientiane would have facilitated the application of a formal complaint to the Ministry of Justice. In turn, this indicates possibilities for villagers to partially alleviate some serious problems in a political environment that is closed to strong criticism of government approved projects.

Conclusions

Many of the most serious challenges of the rapid transformation in landscapes and livelihoods in Bachieng have still not been rectified, and none of the land taken from locals has so far been returned to the previous owners. Even though the prospects for improved local governance seem somewhat brighter, the results achieved are more likely to benefit villages that have not yet lost their land, compared to those who were early victims of large-scale rubber development. While Jesse Ribot's (1998) point about not overlooking other factors unrelated to land when assessing opportunities and obstacles for accessing resources is fundamentally useful, especially considering that some common property studies have underestimated the importance of some non-land resources, this case study confirms that for most of the people of Bachieng, land tenure is the key issue. This is particularly the case for so-called 'indigenous peoples', since they tend to have more holistic and multidimensional relationships to land, as well as non-land resources that are linked with land, a point emphasised in the recently approved United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations 2007).

Ducourtieux *et al.* (2005) point out that one of the GoL's most important objectives is to reduce rural poverty, and that land reform measures, including increasing land security for farmers, is seen as an important means for achieving this objective. However, large rubber plantations like those being established in Bachieng are dramatically contradicting stated GoL policy, by actually reducing land security for rural farmers, and causing increased food security problems and associated poverty. The Prime Minister of Laos would appear to be justified in stating that granting large land concessions without appropriate research and safe guards, and considerations for the environment and the

poor, is not likely to benefit either the rural poor nor the GoL. Similarly, a forestry official quoted by the *Vientiane Times* (2008g), stated, “[I]t is debatable whether rubber plantations can help to alleviate poverty and boost economic growth.” Indeed, it is important to consider whether plantations can alleviate poverty *and* boost economic growth *at the same time* [emphasis in original]. We cannot assume that the two necessarily go hand in hand, and some might even argue that the two concepts are prone to conflict with each other.

This paper has presented a case study of NGO engagement in important land and resource issues in southern Laos, in an attempt to provide some insights into the kinds of problems that can arise, and the ways that different parties respond to changes. Although there have been many studies conducted in Laos about natural resource management issues, and most recently about rubber, few have attempted to present detailed information about engagements associated with such studies. This is what I have tried to do here. While it is difficult to know how much GAPE’s work in Bachieng has ultimately contributed to the overall changes in government discourses and practices, it would appear that significant changes have occurred. Certainly, other factors have also been important. Although we tend to think of NGO initiated projects as being independent and self-contained entities—or at least that is the way they are frequently presented in project reports—this paper shows how the work of civil society organisations like GAPE tend to be intertwined with other processes. Thus, the results are often unexpected, with big picture changes emerging out of multiple processes, of which the roles of NGOs are only part of, even if they can sometimes be important for triggering or otherwise promoting processes that can take on lives of their own, and eventually lead to positive but incomplete results, as has been the case in Bachieng.

The future of economic land concessions and large rubber plantations in Laos remains uncertain. Indicative of this, the May 2007 moratorium on new large land concessions was rescinded in May 2009 by a Prime Minister’s decree on state land leases and concessions. Addressing one serious concern, the new decree emphasised that there needed to be land surveys conducted to identify land categories and suitability before approving new land concessions (*Vientiane Times* 2009b). However, many concerns remain, especially at the community level, and therefore, at the end of June 2009, less than

two months after concessions were permitted, the GoL again suspended large-area land concessions after deciding that it is not ready to continue with the policy. The GoL's latest backtracking may have been in response to concerns raised by several members of the National Assembly in late June. They urged the government to address land concession problems, saying that "people in their constituencies had complained that the policy had had a negative impact on their livelihoods and on national protected areas" (*Vientiane Times* 2009c). However, the government is still allowing land concessions up to 1,000 ha, and concessions larger than that can be approved under special circumstances. Clearly, the debate regarding economic land concessions and rubber in Laos is far from over.

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Abstract

In recent years Laos has experienced rapid changes in land and resource use and tenure. Of those, the allocation of large-scale economic land concessions for rubber production has been amongst the most significant. While rubber is being developed in various ways in Laos, large rubber concessions in southern Laos have frequently overlapped with agricultural and forest lands of importance to local people, replacing them and thus dramatically affecting agrarian livelihoods.

This article considers the particular circumstances surrounding large Vietnamese-owned rubber plantation concessions granted in southern Laos, and their impacts on the largely ethnic minority highland population in Bachiengchaleunsouk District, Champasak Province. In particular, I describe how a non-government organisation (NGO) has attempted to support these communities through partnering with local government to study the impacts of the land rubber concessions and associated agriculture transformation, and raise awareness in communities regarding relevant Lao laws. While

the NGO's efforts have not always gone smoothly—and have combined with other circumstances not connected to its work—the end results have been surprisingly encouraging, even if many problems remain unresolved. The circumstances indicate possible ways in which local people affected by large land concessions can be supported in the restrictive context of Laos.

Notes

¹ However, it is important to realise that the people from Hat Nyao are not 'typical', in the sense that they were apparently better 'connected with government' and more financially secure than most other villages at the time the community first started cultivating rubber. That made it possible for them to fund their own plantation development rather than rely on contract farming agreements with the Chinese, as is presently the case for other villages in northern Laos. There ethnic Hmong people of Hat Nyao also benefited from informally learning about rubber development from Hmong in southern China (Alton *et al.* 2005).

² For example, the Chinese government encourages rubber investments abroad, including in Laos, by offering favourable policy incentives and generous subsidies through the Opium Replacement Special Fund, which is promoted within the context of China's Going Out Strategy (Shi 2008; Rutherford *et al.* 2008; Cohen 2009). Of the US\$26 million China has recently invested in northwestern Laos, US\$20 million has been used to develop rubber plantations. (Haberecht 2009).

³ In China, rubber has also been promoted as a means for reducing swidden agriculture (Ziegler *et al.* 2009).

⁴ Whether cheap labour is in fact available in Laos to support the massive expansion of rubber has been a topic of debate. At least in northern Laos, there is not expected to be enough local labour to tap latex once the trees are mature, and it is likely that outside labour (probably from Vietnam) will be required (*Vientiane Times* 2008g). However, the *Vientiane Times* (2008g) quoted the deputy governor of Luang Phrabang Province as saying, "[I]f foreign workers were brought in [for working on rubber plantations], there is the risk of potential social problems, because they may decide not to return to their country of origin." There are many Vietnamese working on Lao rubber plantations in Bachiengchaleunsouk (Bachieng) District, Champasak Province, which is the focus area of this paper.

⁵ Laos is politically organised as a one-party state.

⁶ There is a clause in Article 7 of the Lao labour law that states that "Any labour unit in economic sectors may employ foreign workers when necessary, if no appropriately qualified workers are available in the Lao People's Democratic Republic" (GoL 1994). Therefore, by claiming that certain jobs require foreign labour, even if Lao people could actually do the work, it would be possible to justify hiring more foreign labourers at the expense of local labour.

⁷ Some people have reported that land concession taxes range between US\$2-6 per hectare per year, with each deal being negotiated separately, without there being any across the board rules. However, legislation is being debated that will standardise rates and fees throughout the country (Florian Rock, *pers. comm.* October 12, 2008). The *Vientiane Times* (2008d) has reported that average rates are US\$6-9.

⁸ Land located in areas with considerable infrastructure nearby is potentially worth US\$900/hectare/year (*Vientiane Times* 2008f).

⁹ The final rate for land concessions fees is still being considered, and in August 2008 the *Vientiane Times* (2008d) reported that a rate of between US\$30-80 was being considered, but that the government had asked that the rate be reduced. A senior National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI) researcher was reported to have recommended that the rate be set at between US\$20-30/hectare/year, which he believed would be in line with rates in neighbouring countries.

¹⁰ Deputy Governor of Attapeu Province, *pers. comm.*, April 2008.

¹¹ This means that two or more villages are administratively reorganised so that there is only one new village administration compared to the two or more that previously existed. However, unlike village consolidation, villages are not physically moved (Baird and Shoemaker 2007).

¹² Provincial Land Management Authority, Champasak Province, *pers. comm.* 2008.

¹³ This company was created by the Vietnam General Rubber Corporation (GERUCO), a large state enterprise managing 220,000 ha of rubber plantations in Vietnam. The Viet-Lao Rubber Company was created especially to implement this project (Obein 2007).

¹⁴ Provincial Land Management Authority, Champasak Province, *pers. comm.* 2008.

¹⁵ Provincial Land Management Authority, Champasak Province, *pers. comm.* 2008.

¹⁶ Provincial Land Management Authority, Champasak Province, *pers. comm.* 2008.

¹⁷ TERRA, *pers. comm.* 2008.

¹⁸ Provincial Land Management Authority, Champasak Province, *pers. comm.* 2008.

¹⁹ According to Vongkham, in 2006 a total of 6,719 hectares of rubber had been planted by Dak Lak Company in Champasak, as well as an additional 1,419 hectares in Salavan, 500 ha in Attapeu and 100 ha in Xekong Province, resulting in southern Laos having a total of 8,738 ha planted with rubber.

²⁰ The Lao PDR/Canada Fund was managed by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the Canadian Embassy to Laos in Bangkok, Thailand.

²¹ The name of the organisation has now changed to the Water Resources and Environment Agency (WREA).

²² US\$ 1 = approx. 10,000 kip

²³ Glyphosate weed killer is apparently used in some areas, especially to combat imperata grass.

²⁴ In fact, all land in Laos is officially owned by the state, including land with registered private land titles. That is essentially 'state-private' land. However, forests and pastures are less ambiguously claimed by the state ('state-public' land).

²⁵ Anonymous government official, Champasak Province, *pers. comm.* 2009.

²⁶ However, the Lao legislation on resettlement and compensation suggests that even those without land titles should be eligible for compensation (GoL 2005a).

²⁷ It should, however, be noted that occasionally workers over the age limit have been hired to work on the plantations.

²⁸ Even this paper could have unpredicted results.

²⁹ Two months later, in July 2007, Ekaphone Phouthonesy of the *Vientiane Times* (2007c) reported that the GoL was still unsure as to when they might lift the moratorium on granting new land concessions.

³⁰ However, there is no evidence to suggest this has actually happened.

³¹ However, since making that announcement there is no indication that the Vietnamese have agreed to reduce the time of the concession agreement or that the Lao have strongly pressed for changes.

³² Vongkham (2006) reported that the GoL planned to have a total of 52,840 hectares of rubber planted in the four southern-most provinces of Laos (Champasak, Salavan, Attapeu and Xekong) by 2010.

³³ Fujita and Phanvilay (2008: 121) wrote that the, “Development of LFA was supported by various international organizations throughout the 1990s as a means of supporting sustainable community resource management and preventing open-access problems by defining clear resource boundaries and constructing resource management institutions based on local participation and customary practices. An underlying assumption is that clear and secure property rights brought about through LFA will help improve productive use of land in rural areas.” However, as Baird and Shoemaker (2007: 876-7) have written, “The original goals of this initiative were to develop a system of land classification according to use, improve natural resource management by demarcating forests for specific purposes, and prevent illegal logging by provincial and district entrepreneurs by providing villagers with new management and use rights. The programme was to be based on a process of participatory land-use planning and at least partially on a Vietnamese model, which had worked well for lowland communities.” LFA was introduced to Laos in 1990 on a pilot basis, and was expanded to become a nation-wide programme in 1994. It was, in practice, a top-down tool for reducing swidden agriculture in upland areas by declaring large tracts of land off-limits to swidden agriculture (Baird and Shoemaker 2007).

³⁴ It is unclear whether Kham-ouan Boupha’s opinions were influenced by GAPE’s work, but on April 7, 2008 Khampanh Keovilaysak, who works for GAPE and was involved in the research regarding rubber in Bachieng, made a presentation about the Bachieng rubber situation at a national workshop about land concessions organised in Vientiane by the NLMA and International NGOs working on land issues in Laos. Kham-ouan Boupha listened intently during the presentation but made no comments at the time. Overall, the GAPE presentation about the rubber situation in Bachieng was well received.

³⁵ Mike Dwyer, *pers. comm.* 2008.

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N. J. Enfield¹

Language and Culture in Laos: An Agenda for Research

On the publication of the first issue of the *Journal of Lao Studies*, it is worth asking how the study of all things Lao might be of interest to the greater scientific community. For anthropology, a key attraction of Laos is its unusually high degree of human diversity. The problem is that we know little of what defines this diversity. Worse, one of the few things we do know is that this diversity is under threat. This makes the task of anthropologists more urgent than ever. The study of human diversity directly addresses a fundamental question for human science: What are the limits of possibility for human life?

The striking differences between humans and other species are most clearly manifest in the properties of our linguistic and cultural systems. We maintain massively complex symbolic systems that each individual has to learn over a long period of socialization, and that differ almost entirely in form and content across thousands of different human groups. The average villager in Laos will know tens of thousands of words and expressions in his or her own language, each of which may differ entirely from the tens of thousands of words and expressions known to the people in the community next door, which will be different again from the next community, different further from the next, and so on. The same is true for the thousands of local practices, cultural values, and conceptual systems also known to be unique from human group to human group. Each language and culture is in this sense a natural experiment in historical collaborative creation of cultural tradition (Enfield 2005:192-7). Members of each sociocultural group will conform in following a collectively created pattern of ways of thinking, ways of speaking, ways of doing things, and ways of interacting with the environment (Boyd and Richerson 2005). Each linguistic and cultural system can therefore be viewed as a living document of human tradition (Enfield 2006a).

The ethnolinguistic diversity known to exist in Laos makes the country a rich archive for anthropologists of all types. With the current state of the art, the immediate agenda is

¹ Senior staff scientist, Language and Cognition Group, Max Planck Institute, Nijmegen and Professor of Ethnolinguistics, Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

clear: We need to describe the country's human diversity. Until the empirical data are available, any general discussion of language(s) and culture(s) in Laos is going to be incomplete, or, worse, ill-informed. For now, there is a lack of balance in scholarly attention. The situation in linguistics is indicative: scholars of language in Laos are preoccupied with orthographic prescription for the national language, arguing for example about whether written Lao requires a letter 'r' (ICR 1995, Enfield 1999). Despite the political issues of interest, and attendant curiosities of the sociology of intellectual life, orthography of the Lao language is just one leaf on a single branch of a single tree in a giant forest of problems for research. We are meanwhile learning next to nothing of the endangered mysteries of language and culture in the country.

Just consider what we don't know about language and culture in Laos.¹ We don't know how many languages are spoken in the country. Existing proposals vary from around 60 to over 100 (see LNFC 2005, Enfield 2005, 2006b), none offering empirical support for the cited figure, or any appreciation of the problems of answering this question at all (cf. Hudson 1996:36). But even if we could state how many languages there are in Laos, this wouldn't be much. What are the properties of these languages? What are the words and expressions (numbering in tens of thousands!) that each speaker of each language has to know? What are the grammatical structures? What do the kinship systems look like? How do they differ structurally? How are the languages related to each other, historically and socially? What ethnic importance do the languages have? What sorts of social settings do they inhabit? What are the patterns of language contact and multilingualism? How do children acquire these languages? What degree of cultural knowledge is encoded in the languages' vocabularies and grammatical structures? What kinds of poetry, verse, or song can speakers of these languages produce? What might the languages tell us about the social organization of the societies in which they are spoken? Or of their mechanisms of face-to-face interaction? Or of the livelihoods of the people (e.g. in the vocabulary of biological classification)? Or of their cognitive analysis of the world in general? Lists of ethnolinguistic distinctions such as the one produced in 2005 by the Lao government (LNFC 2005) are welcome and fascinating (shortcomings, errors, and infelicities aside). But they are of little use as reference sources for this list of questions. The reality is that we know little of substance about what defines this country's great human diversity. Hence the pressing need for primary field research.

None of the above questions are answered quickly or cheaply. Most researchers who visit remote communities don't have the time to collect long-term or in-depth data. From the colonial expeditions of Pavie's time to the helicopter drops by consultants of the last decade or so, short-term research visitors to the uplands of Laos have by necessity employed rapid methods of data collection. The relatively superficial results are of great use when nothing else is available. Linguists and ethnographers are grateful for even the sketchiest references to linguistic and ethnographic facts documented by officials of the Pavie mission and similar colonial projects. These are sometimes our only source of word lists and other empirical data on otherwise entirely undocumented languages and cultures. However, for lack of any alternative, there's a risk that such sources will be employed for purposes beyond those for which they were designed.

With appropriate time and resources, research can acquire a host of virtues which rapid research can't deliver. It can be broadly systematic, thorough, comprehensive, and thus a significant resource for future researchers and field workers. It can enlist and involve the ongoing participation of the communities involved, not only in their provision of data, but in their analysis of it, supplying findings which are both significant and comprehensible to the communities themselves. It can feed into the building up of information and analysis, contributing to longer-term cumulative research. With these three properties – comprehensive, participatory, cumulative – research can be responsible, sustainable, and of high quality.

The agenda being sketched here entails a number of requirements. One is funding. Researchers need to find and mobilize research funds. Funding bodies need to recognize the importance of field research, and channel research funding there. As it happens, funding and other kinds of support are available for documentation of linguistic and cultural systems, particularly those most endangered and most implicated in the country's biocultural diversity (Nettle and Romaine 2000, Crystal 2000, Maffi 2005).

A second requirement is people. Willing researchers don't grow on trees, but they do spring from university graduate programs. One of the best kinds of researcher for field work is the humble graduate student. There are great opportunities in Laos for students who would be field workers, not only those based in universities abroad, but also for students and other researchers originating in Laos.

A third requirement is state of the art research methods. There are well developed tools and techniques for documentation of linguistic and ethnographic material. (A) Methodological tools: The dramatic growth of research and other activity being done around the world on endangered biocultural diversity has concentrated on the development of methods that are maximally sensitive to the community's wants and needs (Nettle and Romaine 2000, Grenoble and Whaley 1998). Findings of these projects are ready to be applied to similar activities in Laos. (B) Technical tools: Ethnographic and linguistic research is becoming increasingly sophisticated in its employment of technical resources such as video and sound recording, GPS, and computer programs for data organization and analysis (e.g. video processing, dictionary/text building, mapping, data processing). (C) Theoretical tools: Concerning the relationship between linguistic/cultural diversity and cognitive diversity, much recent progress has been made in the analysis and understanding of relationships such as those between culture and language (Gumperz and Levinson 1996, Enfield 2002, Gentner and Goldin-Meadow 2003). In addition, there is much recent progress in understanding how linguistic and cultural diversity relates to diversity of livelihoods and lifestyles, particularly as it concerns human interaction with the natural environment (Berlin 1992, Maffi 2005).

Lao people stand to gain from the proposed research agenda. Researchers must strive to impart these tools and techniques to the Lao scholars and field workers who have the chance to be involved in these projects, such that they may carry the work through beyond the confines of limited research programs. This is part of the desideratum of sustainability in research. But all the resources and expertise in the world will amount to nothing if the relevant authorities lack the political will to approve sustained primary field research in remote communities of Laos. The last two decades have seen willing fieldworkers encounter resistance to their research plans, often when they are offering a good deal of financial, technical, and training resources. These researchers have come from fields as diverse as literature, ethnomusicology, historical and comparative linguistics, ethnobiology, grammatical description, and ethnography. Without these projects going ahead, valuable training and resources have been lost to the Lao research community. More generally, research both interesting and important has just not been done.²

I have tried to define an agenda for research on language and culture in Laos. The ethnolinguistic diversity characteristic of Laos makes the country a treasure trove for

research in human traditions of language, culture, and cognition. The key requirement for research to really count is that descriptive and analytical work be conducted in sustained field residence. Now is the time to promote a broad agenda of primary field research in Laos which prioritizes the systematic collection of quality empirical data bearing directly on the significant yet ill-understood human diversity that this complex country harbors. This will first be a contribution to human science, to documenting the naturally occurring limits on human variation, to figuring out where human groups around the world are alike, and where we may (even radically) differ. Second, it will be a sorely needed corrective to the current balance of linguistic and other anthropological research in Laos.

Abstract

There is at present a vigorous public debate in Laos on the issue of language, with the participation of scholars, researchers, educators, and politicians. This debate goes to the highest level, and has been on the agenda for decades. The issue? Whether the letter 'r' should or should not be included in the Lao alphabet. Meanwhile, dozens of distinct human languages spoken in Laos are in danger of extinction in the immediate or near future. We know little or nothing about the structure, history, or social setting of these languages or the people who speak them. There is no public debate about this issue in Laos, and little research activity to document the country's dozens of minority languages, whether for scientific, practical, or social purposes. The problem is identical in research on culture. This paper offers a number of reasons why this must change.

Notes

¹ Notwithstanding exceptional contributions such as Costello and IRLCS (1993), Evans (1999), Jacq (2002), Sidwell and Jacq (2004), Suksavang and Preisig (1999), Svantesson et al (1994), Thipmuntali (1999), Kingsada and Shintani (1999), Wright (2003), Pholsena (2006), Rehbein (2007), among others.

² Fortunately, there are recent signs of emerging opportunity for academic research in Laos, for example through the fast-developing National University of Laos, and the recently established National Academy of Social Sciences.

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James E. Coughlan¹

The Countries of Birth and Ethnicities of Australia's Hmong and Lao Communities: An Analysis of Recent Australian Census Data

Introduction

From early 1975 until mid-2008, Australia settled approximately 11,200 Hmong and Lao immigrants and refugees, from a diversity of countries across the globe, although most of these immigrants were born in Laos and Thailand.¹ These Hmong and Lao immigrants have come from a diversity of socio-economic backgrounds, and have entered Australia under an assortment of immigration programmes. At present, there is a paucity of reliable knowledge concerning the ethnicity and ethnicity-related characteristics of the Hmong and Lao communities in Australia, which in turn has led to some misconceptions within Australia about the size and characteristics of these communities. The principal objective of this article is to provide a clear description of the ethnicity and ethnicity-related characteristics of Australia's Laos-born communities, as well as an indication of the number of ethnic Hmong and Lao born in other countries, but resident in Australia, by conducting a time-series analysis of data from the 1986 and 2006 Australian Censuses of Population and Housing. Through this exercise it is hoped that a greater understanding of the magnitude and ethnic diversity of the Hmong and Lao communities in Australia will be achieved, which in turn will furnish community service providers, policy makers and researchers with basic information required to plan for the effective integration of Australia's Hmong and Lao communities into the mainstream of multicultural Australia.²

For the first time in Australia, the 2006 Australian Census has provided a wealth of data relating to the Hmong and Lao communities in Australia. This article presents a

¹ Senior Lecturer, Department of Anthropology, Archaeology and Sociology, School of Arts and Social Sciences, Faculty of Arts, Education, and Social Sciences, James Cook University, Cairns, Queensland, 4878, Australia

preliminary analysis of some of these data in order to provide community service providers and policy makers with fundamental data, and to encourage researchers to conduct more detailed analyses of the data.

The Conceptualisation of Ethnicity

This article does not seek to contribute to the ongoing extensive philosophical and theoretical debates on what constitutes 'ancestry' and 'ethnicity'³, but rather merely to discuss some of the ethnicity-related factors as they pertain to the Hmong and Lao communities in Australia. Nevertheless, due to the contested debates associated with the conceptualizations of 'ancestry' and 'ethnicity', it is necessary to provide some explanations of these two concepts. There are two essential suppositions associated with ethnicity - the objective-scientific ethnic origin concept based upon notions of historical ethnic or ancestral roots, and the subjective ethnic identity concept derived from the notion of personal identification with an ethnic group. These two conceptual perspectives are not mutually exclusive, as several ethnicity-related factors, such as language spoken or religion/spirituality, may be common to both. The nebulous distinction between the concepts of ethnic identity and ethnic origin may be illustrated by Anderson and Frideres's (1981: 39) note that '... language is the most important component of ethnic identity.'

In the academic literature, there is the general proposition that ethnic origin is essentially an historical allegiance to a specific group based upon a common culture, history, language, nationality, and religion. On the other hand, ethnic identity is based upon the ethnic group(s) with which an individual identifies, and this identity is derived not necessarily from the individual's historical ethnicity, but more so from the ethno-cultural traits with which an individual chooses to identify. For example, a Laos-born immigrant living in Australia may be a fifth generation ethnic Chinese. This person's ancestry, or ethnic origin, is Chinese, as this is the cultural and ethnic origin of their ancestors; however, this individual's ethnic identity may be Lao, as she speaks little or no Chinese, but rather Lao, and she is more readily able to identify with Lao culture, history, language, and traditional spiritualities, rather than with the equivalent facets of Chinese ethno-culture.

This article utilises *ancestry* data as an indication of ethnic origin, and *language spoken*

at home data as a manifestation of ethnic identity, although recognising that both associations are not perfect, and thus prone to error.

Ethnicity in Recent Australian Censuses

The Australian population census has never sought to directly ascertain the ethnic identity of the Australian population, but has rather sought to obtain data on a diversity of ethnicity-related factors.⁴ Despite the Federal Australian government adopting a multiculturalism policy since 1973, the concept of ethnic identity continues to be generally uninterpretable or misinterpreted by the majority of the Australian population (Borrie 1984: 62). However, an indication of the ethnic identity of the Australian population has been derived from census questions on *language(s) spoken (at home)* and *religious denomination*⁵. A question on *languages regularly used* was included for the first and only time in the 1976 Census, and a question on *language(s) spoken at home* has appeared in each Census commencing with the 1986 Census; a *religious denomination* question has been included in every Australian quinquennial Census since Federation in 1901.

Prior to the release of the 1986 Census results, insufficient reliable data existed concerning the ethnicity of the Australian population. Australian population Censuses from 1971 up until 1981 made recourse to gathering data on various attributes, such as country of birth, country of birth of parents, citizenship, and religion which, when manipulated together, were used to formulate a somewhat unreliable surrogate of ethnicity. The 1976 Census also contained questions on *racial origin* and *languages spoken*, while in the 1986 Census the former question was replaced by an *ancestry* question, and the latter question was reintroduced, after being omitted in the 1981 Census, in a modified form as *language(s) spoken at home*. The *ancestry* question first appeared in the 1986 Census, and after internal Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) evaluation (ABS 1990),⁶ reappeared in the 2001 and 2006 Censuses.

Since the early 1980s, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) allocated considerable resources in its effort to develop an ethnicity question for the 1986 Census, and, following the recommendations of the 1986 Population Census Ethnicity Committee, a question on ancestry was included on the 1986 Census form, despite doubts concerning its reliability (Borrie 1984:

69-72, 82-84).⁷ For the Indochinese communities in Australia, the reliability of their ancestry response(s) on the 1986 and 2006 Census forms was certainly influenced not only by their interpretation of the *ancestry* concept, but also, possibly, by how this concept was interpreted and translated for the respondent, if the respondent was not competent enough in English to complete the census form themselves.

The author is aware of only one published study that has been conducted to assess the reliability of responses to the *ancestry* and *language(s) spoken at home* questions on the 1986 Census form (Khoo 1988), and two evaluations of the 2001 Census questions (Khoo and Lucas 2004; Khoo 2006), which find that the quality of the data from these questions is of a good standard. Currently the ABS is engaged in an evaluation of the 2006 Census ethnicity-related data, the results of which should be published in 2010. In order to assist in the interpretation of data from the *ancestry* and *language(s) spoken at home* questions, a discussion of the perceived limitations of these data, as it relates to the Indochinese communities in Australia will be briefly addressed.

During the author's participation in the development of the *ancestry* question for the 1986 Census, he conducted several hundred interviews with respondents from Cambodia, Laos and Viet Nam during the testing and refining of this question. From these interviews, and subsequent discussions, the author perceives that the responses to the 1986 Census ancestry question are generally of a high reliability for the Indochinese communities in Australia, due to the accuracy of the reasons given by those respondents who completed test-census forms as to their interpretation of the information this question sought to elicit.⁸

This perceived level of reliability with respect to the *ancestry* question cannot, however, be extended to the *language(s) spoken at home* question, especially for minority ethnic groups from Cambodia, Laos and Viet Nam; for example, the ethnic Chinese. Although Chinese has only one modern written form, there are about six principal spoken Chinese languages (each with a multitude of dialects), of which about five languages are widely used within the ethnic Chinese communities in Indochina. It is not uncommon for ethnic Chinese from different dialect groups to inter-marry in Indochina, and if the spouses do not speak a common Chinese dialect then the language spoken at home is more than often the principal language of the host society, *viz.* Khmer, Lao or Vietnamese. Their children may acquire one or both parental Chinese language(s), attend a local Chinese school (where generally

Mandarin was taught), or fail to learn any Chinese languages. From observations in Laos and Viet Nam since early 1975, the two most salient factors which influence the propensity of these children to acquire a knowledge of a spoken Chinese language are the number of generations the children's parents have been in Indochina, and whether the parental home is in an area of high ethnic Chinese concentration, for example the suburb of Cho Lon in Sai Gon, Viet Nam. The longer a family's ancestors have been away from China, for example five or more generations, the less likely it is that subsequent generations will speak Chinese, *ceteris paribus*. On the other hand, children raised in a neighbourhood where the majority of the population, especially those with whom the children socialise, speak a Chinese language, then the children are more likely to acquire at least some spoken proficiency in the language(s) spoken by the other neighborhood children. Therefore, individual ethnic Chinese born in the countries of Indochina may not necessarily speak Chinese at home, but may still have the ability to converse in several Chinese dialects or languages, which may or may not be the dialect(s) or language(s) spoken by their parents. In addition, from observations in Laos and Viet Nam, second generation ethnic Chinese, born in Laos or Viet Nam of parents of different Chinese language groups and brought up in neighbourhoods with few, if any, other ethnic Chinese, do not speak Chinese at home, but may, and this is more probable for males than females, have had the opportunity to learn a Chinese language at a local Chinese school.

Also partially related to the above discussion is the issue of inter-ethnic marriage. Western research has shown that the offspring of an inter-ethnic marriage generally acquires the language of the dominant society, rather than the minority parent's language (Stevens 1985; Stevens and Swicegood 1987: 77). Thus, the language spoken at home from the offspring of such a union is more than likely the language of the host society, rather than the minority ethnic parent's spoken language. Children born in Laos of a marriage between an ethnic Chinese and an ethnic Lao will probably speak Lao at home, rather than Chinese, and this is clearly evident in the 2006 Australian Census data presented below.

For the 1986 and 2006 Australian Census *language(s) spoken at home* question, only one non-English language response was coded, unlike the similar questions in recent Canadian Censuses where up to two responses were coded. As only one response to this question was coded, this reduces the reliability of the data of individuals who speak more than one non-English language at home. For example, consider the case of an ethnic Lao-

Vietnamese family, who were all born in Laos, and though only the parents speak Vietnamese, all family members speak Lao. The parents speak Lao all of the time with their children, while between themselves and with Vietnamese friends they speak Vietnamese. The parents' response to the *language(s) spoken at home* question was Lao and Vietnamese, though only the former was coded. In this situation, the language(s) spoken at home data do not accurately reflect the ethnic reality of the parents, and thus any inference made from such data will be distorted.⁹

The 2006 Census questions of concern to this article are provided in Figure 1. The 2006 Census non-response rate to the *ancestry* question was 8.1 per cent, as well as 6.9 per cent for the *country of birth question* and 5.7 per cent for the *language spoken at home* question (ABS 2007).

12 In which country was the person born?
 • Remember to mark box like this:

- Australia ► Go to 14
- England
- New Zealand
- Italy
- Viet Nam
- Scotland
- Greece
- Other – please specify

16 Does the person speak a language other than English at home?
 • Mark one box only.
 • If more than one language other than English, write the one that is spoken most often.
 • Remember to mark box like this:

- No, English only ► Go to 18
- Yes, Italian
- Yes, Greek
- Yes, Cantonese
- Yes, Arabic
- Yes, Vietnamese
- Yes, Mandarin
- Yes, other – please specify

18 What is the person's ancestry?
 • Provide up to two ancestries only.
 • Examples of 'Other – please specify' are: GREEK, VIETNAMESE, HMONG, DUTCH, KURDISH, MAORI, LEBANESE, AUSTRALIAN SOUTH SEA ISLANDER.
 • See page 7 of the Census Guide for more information.
 • Remember to mark boxes like this:

- English
- Irish
- Italian
- German
- Chinese
- Scottish
- Australian
- Other – please specify

Figure 1: Ancestry, Country of Birth and Language Spoken at Home Questions - 2006 Census

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics *Census Dictionary: Australia 2006 (Reissue)*, ABS Catalogue Number 2901.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra, 2006.

The Ethnic Diversity of Laos

Laos has a very diverse ethnic population, with the 2005 Lao Census identifying '49 different ethnic groups' (National Statistics Centre of the Lao People's Democratic Republic 2009). Other sources claim that at least 82 Laotian languages are spoken in contemporary Laos, excluding Chinese, Khmer and Vietnamese languages (Ethnologue 2009; Central Intelligence Agency 2009). In early March 1985, Laos conducted its first national population census, which recorded a population of 3,584,803 people; the third Lao Census of 2005 enumerated a population of 5,609,997 people (Cultural Profiles 2009), although the National Statistics Centre of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (National Statistics Centre of the Lao People's Democratic Republic 2009) gives a figure of 5.62 million.

Although all three recent Lao Censuses have collected data on the ethnicity of the population, these data are not readily available from Lao sources. The data below are projections of the size of the various ethnic groups in Laos as of early 1975, based on 1970 estimates (Whitaker *et al.* 1985: 41-60):

Table 1:
Number and Percentage Distribution of Ethnic Groups in Laos - 1975 Estimates

Ethnic Group	Number	Percentage
Lao Loum	1,524,000	48.0
Lao Theung	762,000	24.0
Lao Suong	318,000	10.0
Lao Tai	222,000	7.0
Vietnamese	222,000	7.0
Chinese	63,500	2.0
Thai	63,500	2.0
Total	3,175,000	100.0

Source: Donald P. Whitaker, Helen A. Barth, Sylvan M. Berman, Judith M. Heinmann, John E. MacDonald, Kenneth W. Martindale and Rinn-Sup Shinn *Laos: A Country Study*, The American University, Washington, DC, 1985, pp. 41-60.

The Lao Loum (Lao Lum), or ethnic Lao, are also referred to as the lowland Lao as they inhabit the plains of Laos. The Lao Theung consist of about 50 different ethnic/tribal groups that reside on mountain slopes, while the Lao Suong (Lao Sung) are the ethnic/tribal groups which inhabit the mountain tops, of which the Hmong are the largest group. The Lao Tai is comprised of seven T'ai language speaking ethnic groups. As of early 1975, the majority of the ethnic Vietnamese and Chinese lived in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, and were mainly involved in various commercial activities. Finally, the Thai group are the descendants of those ethnic Thais who remained in Laos after the end of the Thai domination of Laos. There was also a small expatriate European population in Laos up to early-mid 1975.

In the decade immediately following the removal of the royalist ministers in the Lao government in May 1975, in the order of 370,000 people fled Laos into Thailand. About 40 per cent of this number were from the hill tribes, predominantly the Hmong, with the rest being Lao Loum, in addition to large numbers of ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese.

The ethnicity data from the recent Lao Censuses are based on ethnic-linguistic groupings, rather than ethnicity *per se*, with data from the 2005 Census provided below. Due to changes in classifying and naming ethnic, or ethno-linguistic, groups in Laos over the past three decades or so, the article will not enter into a discussion of the changing ethno-linguistic distribution of Laos over this period of time. Rather the above data are presented as background information, to the discussion which follows.

Table 2:
Percentage Distribution of Ethno-Linguistic Groups in Laos - 2005 Lao Census

Ethno-Linguistic Group	Names of Specific Ethnic Groups	Percentage
Tai-Kadai	Lao, Tai, Lue, Thai Neua, etc.	66.2
Mon-Khmer	Kammou, Lamet, Khmer, etc.	22.8
Hmong-Mien	Hmong and Iu Mien	7.4
Sino-Tibetan	Akha, Lahu, Sila, etc.	2.7
Others	Chinese, Vietnamese, etc.	0.9
Total		100.0

Source: Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs (United States Department of State), *Background Note: Laos* (<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2770.htm>, accessed 2 January, 2009), and Satoshi Yokoyama 'The Situation of Ethnic Minorities in Laos', pp. A6-1 to A6-8 in *Lao Health Master Planning Study: Progress Report 1* (<http://www.nsc.gov.la/>, accessed 2 January, 2009), Table 3.10.1, p. A6-2.

Ancestry of the Laos-Born Communities in Australia

The 2006 Australian Census enumerated 9,372 Laos-born people resident in Australia (out of a population of 19.855 million residents), compared to 7,422 at the time of the 1986 Census.¹⁰ Only 446 (4.8 per cent) of the Laos-born did not answer the ancestry question in the 2006 Census, and when we pro-rate the responses provided, we arrive at the following distribution of ancestry responses for the Laos-born in 2006:

- 64.81 per cent Lao,
- 17.51 per cent Chinese,
- 6.83 per cent Hmong,
- 4.94 per cent Vietnamese,
- 1.85 per cent English,
- 1.76 per cent Thai,
- 1.16 per cent Australian,
- 0.25 per cent French,
- 0.12 per cent Khmer, and
- 0.67 per cent other.

The above distribution is substantially different from those presented in Tables 1 and 2, especially with respect to the over-representation of the Chinese and Vietnamese in the Australian Laos-born population. This over-representation is not unexpected, considering the emigration of many ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese from Laos after mid-1975. In addition, we must note that while the Australian data are based on ancestry, the Lao data are based on ethno-linguistic group, thus some minor variations would be expected. While the French and Vietnamese populations are a reflection of 19th and 20th Century French colonisation of Laos (Stuart-Fox 1982, 1986, 1997), and the Thai and Khmer groups a representation of Cambodia and Thailand sharing national border with Laos, the small Australian and English figures are indicative of some Laos-born individuals considering themselves Australia-Lao, as well as some Australians having given birth to children in Laos.

In an effort to understand more clearly the ancestry of the Laos-born community in Australia, Table 3 presents 2006 Census data on the first ancestry response cross-tabulated by the second ancestry response (where applicable) for this community. Table 3 reveals that 91.4 per cent of the Laos-born provided only one response to the *ancestry* question, or did not answer the question. Of those who provided multiple responses, the main multiple responses

were:

- 287 Chinese-Lao, but only 46 Lao-Chinese,
- 105 English-Lao, but no Lao-English,
- 71 Lao-Thai, but only 26 Thai-Lao,
- 45 Lao-Vietnamese, with 37 Vietnamese-Lao, and
- 42 Australian-Lao, and 5 Lao-Australian.

Considering the historical ethnic diversity of Laos, most of the responses in Table 3 are not unexpected. At the same time, considering the number of Anglo-Celtic Australians who have worked and lived in Laos over recent decades, and a number of these Anglo-Celtic Australians have 'Lao' spouses, the number of Australian/English-Lao counted in the 2006 Census is not unexpected. However, an issue which does require some further investigation, and will be discussed later in this article, is the ordering of responses, *viz.* why there were 287 Chinese-Lao, but only 46 Lao-Chinese, or why the 2006 Census enumerated 71 Lao-Thai, but only 26 Thai-Lao, and what role parental ancestry played in the ordering of responses. An issue of interest is comparing the above results with those of the 1986 Census.

Table 3:
First Ancestry Response by Second Ancestry Response of Laos-born - 2006 Australian Census

	Second Ancestry Response										Total
	Australian	French	Chinese	Hmong	Khmer	Lao	Thai	Vietnamese	Other	Not Applicable	
First Ancestry Response											
Australian				4		42				41	87
English	6		7	4		105				58	180
French						3		5		4	12
Asian, so described						3				18	21
Chinese	12				6	287	16	17	3	1,298	1,639
Hmong						8				644	652
Khmer	3					3				0	6
Lao	5	12	46	5			71	45	6	5,603	5,793
Thai						26				58	84
Vietnamese			7			37				370	414
Other			5						4	15	24
Inadequately Described										16	16
Not Stated										446	446
Total	26	12	65	13	6	514	87	67	13	8,571	9,374

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *CData Online* (<http://www.abs.gov.au/CDataOnline>, accessed 20 December, 2008).

Coughlan (1988, 1989b, 1990a) conducted a comprehensive analysis of the 1986 Australian Census ethnicity data on the Indochinese communities in Australia. His analysis of responses to the 1986 Census *ancestry* question revealed the following ancestry distribution for the Laos-born, with the proportion changes between the 1986 and 2006 Censuses in brackets:

- 73.59 per cent Lao (-8.78 percentage points),
- 18.31 per cent Chinese (-0.80 percentage points),
- 4.95 per cent Vietnamese (-0.01 percentage points),
- 1.31 per cent Hmong (+5.52 percentage points),
- 0.68 per cent English (+1.17 percentage points),
- 0.25 per cent Thai (+1.51 percentage points),
- 0.09 per cent French (+0.16 percentage points),
- 0.07 per cent Khmer (+0.05 percentage points),
- 0.00 per cent Australian (+1.16 percentage points), and
- 0.75 per cent other.

The ancestry distributions between the two Australian Censuses are very similar, except for the Hmong and the Lao. Unfortunately, in the 1986 Census there were clerical coding errors with respect to coding the county of birth of individuals who provided Hmong as their ancestry, resulting in many individuals who had recorded 'Hmong' as their ancestry being coded to the country of birth category 'Uruguay'.¹¹ This error was not detected until after the 1986 Census forms were destroyed, and thus remedial action could not be taken to rectify the errors, and therefore the above 1.3 per cent figure, representing 97 Laos-born Hmong in 1986, is a severe under-representation, compared to the 665 Laos-born Hmong counted in the 2006 Census. Conducting further analysis of the 2006 Census data, taking into account data from the *period of residence in Australia* question could aid in verifying the changes between the two Censuses. The next task is to attempt to verify, or at least clarify, the data presented in this section by examining data from the *language(s) spoken at home* question.

Language Spoken at Home of the Laos-Born Communities

Language spoken data provide an indication of ethnic identity, rather than ethnic origin which is more generally associated with the notion of ancestry. The weaknesses of the Australian Census *language(s) spoken at home* question are, firstly, the question refers only to

languages other than English spoken *at home*, and secondly, as noted previously, only one non-English language response is captured during data processing. Despite these deficiencies, historically the question has delivered reliable and useful data (Borrie 1984; Coughlan 1990a: 6-7).

Only 97 (1.0 per cent) of the Laos-born did not answer the *language(s) spoken at home* question in the 2006 Census, and when responses are pro-rated the following distribution of languages spoken at home for the Laos-born are produced, with the ancestry proportions in brackets:

- 65.93 (64.81) per cent Lao,
- 7.62 (1.85) per cent English,
- 7.05 (17.51) per cent Mandarin,
- 6.82 (6.83) per cent Hmong,
- 5.29 (4.94) per cent Vietnamese,
- 3.05 (see Mandarin) per cent Cantonese,
- 1.97 (1.76) per cent Thai,
- 0.50 (see Mandarin) per cent Teochew,
- 0.38 (0.03) per cent Croatian,
- 0.27 (0.25) per cent French,
- 0.12 (see Mandarin) per cent Hakka, and
- 1.12 per cent other languages.

These data indicate a high degree of consistency between the ancestry and language profiles, except for the higher proportion of English language speakers, and lower proportion of Chinese speakers (10.8 per cent for language and 17.5 per cent for ancestry). The high number and proportion of *only* English speakers at home, 707 or 7.6 per cent of Laos-born individuals, is primarily among younger Laos-born individuals who received most of their education in Australian schools, as well as the growing number of Laos-born individuals who are marrying mainstream Australians.¹² The lower proportion of Chinese language speakers was expected in light of the earlier discussion of Chinese migration and intermarriage in Laos. On the other hand, the presence of 34 Croatian speakers, and only three people of Croatian ancestry born in Laos, requires explanation, and is likely to be an automated computer coding error.¹³ Overall, the ancestry and language spoken at home profiles support each other.

In order to gain a greater understanding of ethnicity of the Laos-born communities in Australia, cross-tabulated data in response to the *ancestry* and *language(s) spoken at home* questions are presented in Table 4,¹⁴ revealing some interesting information. For example,

while 90.4 per cent of people of Hmong ancestry spoke Hmong at home, the figure was a slightly lower at 85.8 per cent of the people of Lao ancestry speaking Lao at home, 73.7 per cent for the Vietnamese and 55.0 per cent for the Chinese. These percentages, and the data in Table 4, would indicate that there is little inter-ethnic marriage involving the Hmong, while there is a higher proportion of such marriages, or language loss, for the Vietnamese and Chinese communities born in Laos, which confirms earlier research (Coughlan 1990a).

Table 4:
Language Spoken at Home by First Ancestry Response of Laos-born - 2006 Australian Census

Language Spoken at Home	First Ancestry Response										
	Australian	English	French	Chinese	Hmong	Lao	Thai	Vietnamese	Other	Not Stated	Total
English	11	20	0	131	17	464	5	33	7	19	707
French	0	0	3	0	0	12	0	6	4	0	25
Croatian	0	0	0	0	0	31	0	0	0	3	34
Hmong	3	3	0	3	584	20	0	0	6	14	633
Lao	67	134	7	515	25	4,948	44	54	32	290	6,116
Thai	0	8	0	41	4	88	31	7	0	4	183
Vietnamese	0	6	0	34	0	97	4	306	8	37	492
Chinese, not further defined	0	0	0	12	0	0	0	0	0	0	12
Cantonese	0	3	0	258	3	12	0	3	0	5	284
Hakka	0	0	0	6	0	5	0	0	0	0	11
Mandarin	0	6	0	578	3	49	0	3	0	15	654
Teochew	0	0	0	46	0	0	0	0	0	0	46
Other	3	0	0	12	10	40	0	3	9	3	80
Not Stated	4	0	0	3	6	27	0	0	0	57	97
Total	88	180	10	1,639	652	5,793	84	415	66	447	9,374

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *CData Online* (<http://www.abs.gov.au/CDataOnline>, accessed 20 December, 2008).

The other interesting feature of Table 4 is with respect to the 'Not Stated' ancestry response, and here we note that 64.9 per cent of the Laos-born who did not answer the ancestry question indicated that they spoke Lao at home, and 8.3 per cent spoke Vietnamese, thus indicating that most of those who did not respond to the ancestry question were

probably ethnic Lao. In addition, of the individuals born in Laos who indicated that they were of Australian or English ancestry, 79.8 per cent of the former and 74.4 per cent of the latter group spoke Lao at home, and only 13.1 per cent of the former and 11.1 per cent of the latter group spoke only English at home, thus supporting the conjectures in the previous section. An examination of the second ancestry responses, where applicable, cross-tabulated by language spoken at home largely support the above findings, and thus these data will not be discussed further here.

The language profile of the Laos-born communities from the 1986 Census has been reported by Coughlan (1988, 1989b, 1990a), whose analysis of the language spoken at home data revealed the following language distribution for the Laos-born, with the proportion changes between the 1986 and 2006 Censuses in brackets:

- 77.72 per cent Lao (-11.79 percentage points),
- 12.78 per cent Chinese (-1.92 percentage points),
- 3.80 per cent Vietnamese (+1.49 percentage points),
- 2.14 per cent English (+5.48 percentage points),
- 0.60 per cent Thai (+1.37 percentage points),
- 0.60 per cent French (-0.33 percentage points),
- 0.06 per cent Khmer (-0.06 percentage points), and
- 2.30 per cent other.

Once again, the above figures suggest that the language distributions for the Laos-born from the two Australian Censuses are very similar, except for the English and Lao speakers. Unfortunately, in the 1986 Census all Chinese dialects and languages were coded to the category 'Chinese', and there was no coding of the Hmong language, and thus 'Hmong' responses were coded to the category 'Other Asian Languages', and thus the Hmong are missing from the above figures. The percentage changes in the language profile of the Laos-born between the 1986 and 2006 Censuses largely mirror those changes presented earlier with respect to the ancestry profile, thereby supporting the earlier discussion.

While the previous sections have provided an ethnic profile of the Laos-born communities in Australia, an equally important exercise is to attempt to determine the numerical size of the Hmong and Lao communities in Australia. To accomplish this exercise, 2006 Australian Census data for the ethnic Hmong and Lao in Australia, irrespective of country of birth, need to be examined.

Countries of Birth of People with Hmong or Lao Ethnicity in Australia

Information obtained from the previous sections has been used to construct an ethnic profile of the Laos-born communities in Australia, which in turn may be used to inform the construction of a profile of the ethnic Hmong and Lao in Australia. Table 5 presents data on the main countries of birth of Australian residents of Hmong and Lao ancestry, as well as those who spoke Hmong or Lao at home, and indicates that there were 2,011 Hmong speakers in Australia at the time of the 2006 Census, as well as 9,374 Lao speakers. In addition, there were 2,188 people of full or part Hmong ancestry, as well as 10,765 individuals of full or part Lao ancestry. As expected, the main countries of birth of the Hmong and Lao are Australia, Laos and Thailand; 32.4 (67.7) per cent of the Hmong (Lao) speakers were born in Laos, 43.4 (25.6) per cent in Australia, and 23.3 (4.0) per cent in Thailand; in addition, 31.2 (60.3) per cent of the individuals of Hmong (Lao) ancestry were born in Laos, 45.4 (33.9) per cent in Australia, and 21.7 (4.5) per cent in Thailand. The high proportions for Thailand reflect the longer period of time that many Hmong immigrants to Australia spent in Thai refugee camps, compared to the Lao and other Indochinese refugees, as well as the high fertility levels of the Hmong compared to the Lao as reported by Coughlan (1990b).

The data in Table 5 also confirm what is known from anecdotal evidence, that there has been a small migration of ethnic Hmong and Lao from countries such as France, New Zealand, and the United States of America to Australia.¹⁵ However, the small, but not insignificant, number of ethnic Lao born in Croatia - 90 Lao speakers and 22 individuals of Lao ancestry - is a computer scanning error in the processing of the 2006 Census schedules, as noted in Endnote 13.

Table 5:
Country of Birth by Hmong/Lao Language Spoken at Home, Hmong/Lao First Ancestry Response and Hmong/Lao Second Ancestry Response - 2006 Australian Census

	Language Spoken At Home		First Ancestry Response		Second Ancestry Response	
	Hmong	Lao	Hmong	Lao	Hmong	Lao
Country of Birth of Person						
Australia	849	2,313	914	2,412	52	1,032
New Zealand	9	50	8	50		23
Bosnia and Herzegovina		10				
Croatia		90		22		
England		5		3	3	3
France		15		20		6
Greece		6	3	4		
Germany		3				3
Other Europe		5	6	6		
Cambodia		13		3		12
China (Excludes SARs and Taiwan Province)		7	3	4		3
Japan		4		3		5
Laos	635	6,117	651	5,792	13	512
Nepal		3				3
Philippines		4		3		4
Thailand	456	357	456	305	6	167
Viet Nam		12	3	3		7
Other Asia	9		7	13		
United States of America		14	3	14		3
Other				4		5
Inadequately Described		3		3		3
Not Stated	53	343	60	268		42
Total	2,011	9,374	2,114	8,932	74	1,833

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *CData Online* (<http://www.abs.gov.au/CDataOnline>, accessed 20 December, 2008).

Other than the 'Croatian' anomaly, the data in Table 5 support the preceding Laos-born data, and confirm what has been ascertained from earlier research and communications with Hmong and Lao community members in Australia, and thus furnishes no surprises. The actual numbers in Table 5 for the Hmong and Lao for the language spoken at home and first ancestry responses are also fairly close, in light of our previous discussions. The next task is to look a little more closely at the ancestry profiles of Hmong and Lao Australians.

Hmong and Lao Ancestries in Australia

The previous section clearly indicated that the Hmong and Lao communities in Australia were born in numerous countries, and with the prospect of inter-ethnic marriages, both within Laos as well as other countries, such as multicultural Australia, we may expect the expansion of small multi-ethnic Hmong and Lao communities in Australia. Certainly this is nothing new, as we know from the modern socio-ethnic history of Laos, and from observations in Laos since early 1975, that there has been a small degree of inter-ethnic marriage involving the ethnic Lao, Chinese and Vietnamese communities in Laos from at least the late 19th Century. In an attempt to quantify the degree of this inter-ethnic mixing of the Hmong and Lao communities in Australia, Table 6 presents 2006 Census data on the total Australian population, involving people with Hmong or Lao ancestries, which indicates that there is not a high degree of multiple ancestries involving the Hmong or Lao in Australia. Overall, of the 2,190 Australian residents who indicated that they were of Hmong ancestry, only 4.9 per cent were of mixed Hmong ancestry, while 21.2 per cent of the 10,764 Lao were of mixed ancestry. The most common ancestry responses associated with the Hmong and Lao were Chinese, Thai, Australian, English, Vietnamese and Khmer, which is not substantially different to the data presented in Table 3. Overall, the data suggest that the poly-ancestries of the Hmong and Lao communities in Australia are not that different to the ancestry profiles of Laos-born communities in Australia.

Table 6:
First Ancestry Response by Second Ancestry Response for Individuals With Hmong or Lao Ancestries - 2006 Australian Census

Ancestry	First Ancestry Response Hmong/Lao and Second Ancestry Response Left Hand Column		Second Ancestry Response Hmong/Lao and First Ancestry Response Left Hand Column	
	Hmong	Lao	Hmong	Lao
Australian		15	19	338
Maori		5		4
New Zealander		6		4
Assyrian/Chaldean		5		3
Dutch		9		3
English		7	21	281
French		18		6
German		3	3	9
Greek				9
Irish		5	3	3
Italian				19
Maltese				8
Portuguese		3		7
Serbian		6	3	3
Scottish				9
Spanish				10
Chinese	7	98	13	610
Filipino		25		16
Hmong		12		14
Khmer	3	31		48
Lao	13		9	
Sinhalese		5		
Thai		152		243
Vietnamese	3	101		124
Chilean		6		10
Mauritian		5		
Other	7	35	3	47
Inadequately Described		4		5
Not Applicable	2,083	8,375		
Total	2,116	8,931	74	1,833

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *CData Online* (<http://www.abs.gov.au/CDataOnline>, accessed 20 December, 2008).

As with the data in Table 3, the data in Table 6 reveal some interesting differences in the response orderings of the ancestries of the Hmong and Lao with multiple ancestries. For example, from the first line of Table 6, 15 people indicated that they were Lao-Australians, but 338 recorded themselves as Australian-Lao; in addition, 98 individuals indicated that they were Lao-Chinese, while 610 recorded that they were Chinese-Lao. Why the marked differences in the two sets of groupings of the same ancestries, and what reasons do individuals of mixed ancestry choose for selecting the order of their responses? What are the roles of country of birth, mother language, sense of ancestral/ethnic identity, etc. in this selection process? And is this issue of ancestry ordering important? The responses to these questions are beyond the scope of this article, however previous field experience in Laos and with the Hmong and Lao communities in Australia can provide some preliminary answers.

If we can use the ancestry responses Lao-Chinese and Chinese-Lao as examples. Individuals who consider themselves Chinese-Lao, are more than likely to have not been born in Laos, or if born in Laos are more likely to speak Chinese than Lao; thus their sense of Chineseness is stronger than their feeling of being Lao. On the other hand, Lao-Chinese individuals are more than likely to have been born in Laos of parents of full or part Chinese ancestry, and or are more likely to speak Lao rather than Chinese; thus, they feel more Lao than Chinese, but acknowledge both ethnicities are important to their identity. Of course, there are numerous other explanations, and this issue requires further research.

Ancestries of Hmong and Lao Speakers in Australia

In order to provide some clearer understanding of the previous ancestry data, the final exercise is to examine the ancestries of Hmong and Lao speakers in Australia. The data in Table 7 reveal that 93.6 per cent of individuals who spoke Hmong at home were of Hmong ancestry, with an additional 2.5 per cent speaking Lao at home. This high degree of correlation between the two ethnicity factors is expected, as we recall from Table 6 that 95.1 per cent of individuals who indicated that they were of Hmong ancestry only provided one ancestry response. The other important ancestry of the Hmong speakers was English, with a figure of 1.0 per cent. The picture is slightly different for those who speak Lao at home, as would be expected from Table 6, as only 77.8 per cent of individuals of Lao ancestry provided

only one ancestry response. For those who indicated that they spoke Lao in Table 7, only 77.9 were of Lao ancestry, with an additional 8.1 per cent of Chinese ancestry, 3.3 per cent of English ancestry, 3.1 per cent of Thai ancestry, and 2.4 per cent of Australian ancestry. The lower correlation between these two ethnicity factors is expected in light of the earlier data analysis.

Table 7
First and Second Ancestry Responses of Individuals Who Gave Hmong or Lao as Their Language Spoken At Home - 2006 Australian Census

Ancestry	Language Spoken at Home Hmong/Lao and First Ancestry Response Left Hand Column		Language Spoken at Home Hmong/Lao and Second Ancestry Response Left Hand Column	
	Hmong	Lao	Hmong	Lao
Australian	17	206		32
English	20	320		3
Irish		6		
French		5		12
Bosnian		6		
Croatian		140		7
Other European		24		9
Hmong	1,850	42	23	6
Khmer		11		11
Lao	41	7,006	9	682
Thai		175		127
Vietnamese		90		61
Chinese	8	739	0	65
Other Asian		19		22
Other	11	12	3	22
Inadequately Described	19	10		6
Not Applicable			1,978	8,309
Not Stated	47	563		
Total	2,013	9,374	2,013	9,374

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *CData Online* (<http://www.abs.gov.au/CDataOnline>, accessed 20 December, 2008).

Finally, Table 8 uses the same variables as Table 7, but expresses the data in a different format, by examining the languages spoken at home of individuals of Hmong and Lao ancestry, and reveals that 86.7 per cent of individuals of Hmong ancestry spoke Hmong at home, with an additional 6.9 per cent speaking only English at home. Once again, this high degree of correlation between the two ethnicity factors is expected, as we recall from Table 6, that 95.1 per cent of individuals who indicated that they were of Hmong ancestry only provided one ancestry response. The other main languages spoken by those of Hmong ancestry were Lao 2.2 per cent, Chinese languages 0.9 per cent and Thai 0.6 per cent. In addition, once again, the situation is slightly different for those of Lao ancestry, as would be expected from Table 6, as only 77.8 per cent of individuals of Lao ancestry provided only one ancestry response. For those of Lao ancestry in Table 8, only 72.5 per cent spoke Lao at home, with an additional 17.5 per cent speaking only English at home. Once again, the lower correlation between these two ethnicity factors is expected in light of the earlier data analysis. The other main languages spoken by those of Lao ancestry were Thai 3.1 per cent, Vietnamese 2.1 per cent, Chinese languages 2.0 per cent, and Hmong 0.5 per cent.

Overall, the above data would tend to suggest that there is a high level of language maintenance for the Hmong communities in Australia, as well as degree of language loss for the Lao communities in Australia.

Table 8
Language Spoken at Home of Individuals Who Gave Hmong or Lao as Their First and Second Ancestry Response - 2006 Australian Census

Language Spoken at Home	First Ancestry Response Hmong/Lao and Language Spoken at Home Left Hand Column		Second Ancestry Response Hmong/Lao and Language Spoken at Home Left Hand Column	
	Hmong	Lao	Hmong	Lao
English	108	1,220	41	637
French		13		9
Croatian		70		
Other European	3	10		11
Arabic or Persian		3		6
Hmong	1,849	41	23	9
Khmer	3	3		32
Lao	42	7,008	5	682
Mon-Khmer, not elsewhere classified	16			
Thai	13	150		176
Vietnamese	6	137		87
Chinese, not further defined				5
Cantonese	3	14	4	41
Hakka		3		
Mandarin	10	66	3	74
Teochew		3		7
Other Asian Language		18		3
Other	22	45		17
Inadequately Described	8	11		
Not Stated	31	117		38
Total	2,114	8,932	76	1,834

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *CData Online* (<http://www.abs.gov.au/CDataOnline>, accessed 20 December, 2008).

Discussion and Conclusion

The number of people in Australia who were born in Laos and who indicated that they were of Chinese ancestry is probably marginally under-represented in the ancestry data, and substantially under-represented in the language spoken at home data presented above. The major immigration of ethnic Chinese into the countries of Indochina began in the last quarter of the 19th Century (Stuart-Fox 1982, 1986, 1997), and was particularly intense during the first and early second quarters of the 20th Century in the case of Laos and Viet Nam. It is now likely that some of the young descendants of the ethnic Chinese who settled in Indochina during the late 19th and early 20th Centuries were absorbed, both culturally and linguistically, into the Cambodian, Lao and Vietnamese societies through inter-ethnic marriage. The present day descendants of these early Chinese immigrants into Indochina may have, for example, one eighth or one sixteenth Chinese ancestry, while the predominant component of their ancestry is the ancestry of the indigenous population of the host Indochinese society, viz. Khmer, Lao or Vietnamese ancestry. From observation, such individuals would more than likely indicate that their ancestry is the ancestry of the indigenous population of the host society, for example Lao ancestry, rather than their correct ancestry, Lao-Chinese.

The above basic analysis of the 2006 Australian Census data revealed that at the time of the 2006 Census, August 2006, about 9,372 Laos-born people resided in Australia; there were 2,190 individuals of Hmong ancestry and 10,769 of Lao ancestry in Australia; as well as 2,012 Hmong speakers and 9,376 Lao speakers. The 2006 Census data also revealed that 86.7 per cent of those of Hmong ancestry spoke Hmong at home, while only 72.5 per cent of those of Lao ancestry spoke Lao at home, with a significant 17.5 per cent speaking only English at home.

Unfortunately, this article could not reproduce with the 2006 Census data the earlier more detailed analysis of the 1986 Census data (Coughlan 1988, 1989b, 1990a), due to changes in the categories for the *birthplace of parents* questions in the 2006 Census compared to the 1986 Census.¹⁶ However, to compensate this, the greater detail provided by an enhanced coding of the *ancestry* and *language spoken at home* questions, which allowed for *Hmong*, *Hmong-Mien* and *Lao* ancestries, as well as *Hmong* and *Lao* languages, allowed for a

more comprehensive discussion than was previously possible for these aspects of ethnicity.

Certainly more detailed analysis of the 2006 Census data, supplemented with ethnographic field research, is required to provide greater explanatory power to the data presented above. For example, in situations where parents and children are residing in the same dwelling, a family-based analysis of the 2006 Census data could take into consideration the ancestries of, and languages spoken at home by, both parents, and compare these with the ancestry and languages spoken at home responses of their children living at home, as well as the ages of these children. Such an analysis could provide an indication of language loss and maintenance within the Hmong and Lao communities in Australia, especially if the period of residence in Australia and age of the parents and children were taken into account. In addition, ethnographic research could enhance the just proposed research by also investigating the ethnic identities of individuals concerned, as well as specifically investigating the ethnic identity of those who are part of inter-ethnic marriages/relationships. For example, we are aware of families with children in Australia where both parents were born and raised in Laos, and while one parent is ethnic Lao, the other parent is ethnic Vietnamese; in some of these inter-ethnic Lao-Vietnamese families only Lao is spoken, in other families only Vietnamese is spoken, and in some families both languages are spoken, by all family members. In this type of situation, how does one's ancestry and language usage influence their ethnic identity?

As noted earlier, the Australian census collects and codes data on only one non-English language spoken at home, which means in the case of multi-ethnic and multi-lingual individuals and families, which many Hmong and Lao families are, the census language spoken at home data do not provide an accurate and reliable indication of language usage, let alone ethnic identity and ethnic origin. However, it is our belief that the preceding data and analysis provide a reasonably good indication of the ethnicity of the Laos-born communities in Australia, as well as an understanding of the ethnic characteristics of the Hmong and Lao communities in Australia.

In conclusion, this article has been able to construct a basic ethnic profile of the Laos-born communities in Australia, and gained some idea of the size of the ethnic Hmong and Lao communities in Australia, but more research needs to be conducted if we are to gain a greater understanding of the ethnic diversity and dynamics of these communities. It is hoped,

members of the Hmong-Australian and Lao-Australian communities will take on this research in the near future.

Abstract

From the beginning of 1975 until mid-2008, approximately 11,200 Hmong and Lao immigrants and refugees have settled in Australia. Although these immigrants are well aware of their ancestral origins and ethnicity identity, within the broader Australian community there is a general ignorance of the ethnic diversity of Laos, as well as some misunderstanding about the number of Hmong and Lao immigrants and their descendants in Australia.

This article presents a brief preliminary analysis of *ancestry*, *country of birth*, and *language spoken at home* data from the 2006 Australian Census of Population and Housing relating to the Hmong and Lao communities in Australia, with the main emphasis on the responses to the *ancestry* and *language spoken at home* questions. The analysis and data presented here seeks to (i) develop an ethnic profile of the Laos-born communities in Australia, and to discuss how this profile has changed since 1986, and (ii) produce an estimate of the size of the ethnic Hmong and Lao communities in Australia as of mid-2006.

The 2006 Census data show that of those persons born in Laos, approximately 65 per cent indicated that they were of Lao ethnicity, 15 per cent of Chinese ethnicity, seven per cent of Hmong ethnicity and five per cent Vietnamese ancestry; while at the same time there were 2,190 people of Hmong ancestry and 10,769 of Lao ancestry resident in Australia.

Notes

1. At the beginning of 1975 there were about 150 Lao people in Australia, including students and diplomatic representatives (Coughlan 1990a: 101).

2. This paper is merely a starting point, as more detailed analysis of the 2006 Census data is required to construct comprehensive cultural-social, economic, and demographic profiles of these communities, along the lines of earlier analyses of Australian census data conducted by Coughlan (various years), Thatcher and Coughlan (1996), and Coughlan and Thatcher (1997).

3. See Coughlan (1990a: 4-6) for a brief discussion on this issue.

4. For a brief discussion of the history of developing and measuring ethnicity-related variables in modern Australian population censuses see Borrie (1984) and Coughlan (1990a: 6-7).

5. The *religious denomination* question is the only optional question in Australian population censuses.

6. Coughlan's (1989b) detailed analysis of the 1986 Census data for Asian-Australians - which incorporated an analysis of cross-tabulated responses to the ancestry (two responses if given), country of birth of person, country of birth of mother, country of birth of father and main non-English language spoken at home questions - concluded that overall Asia-born individuals' responses to the ancestry question delivered additional and valid data.

7. The author was employed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in the Population Census and Demography

Branch, during 1980-1986, and participated in the development of the ancestry question for the 1986 Census, as well as being a member of the Secretariat to the 1986 Population Census Ethnicity Committee. This Committee was chaired by Professor 'Mick' Wilfred David Borrie.

8. This confidence in the 1986 Census ancestry data does not automatically transfer to the 2006 Census data.
9. A 1982 Australian study of 156 Viet Nam-born immigrants revealed that 54 per cent spoke two languages other than English, and a further five per cent spoke three or more languages (Chipley *et al.* 1985: 29).
10. The 2006 Census count is close to what was expected considering inter-census demographic events. Between the times of the 1986 and 2006 Censuses, approximately 3,450 Laos-born individuals arrived in Australia (Department of Immigration and Citizenship *Settler Arrivals*, various years), while about 530 Laos-born individuals permanently emigrated from Australia (Department of Immigration and Citizenship *Emigration*, various years), giving a net gain of around 2,920 residents. Over the same period, roughly 430 Laos-born individuals died in Australia, producing an inter-census gain of about 2,490 Laos-born residents.

Thus, the 1986 Census count of 7,422 plus the overall inter-census gain of about 2,490, produces an expected count of approximately 9,910, slightly more than the actual count of 9,372 by 5.7 per cent, which is overall a very close result, assuming that both census counts are reliable.

11. In the 1986 Census, 881 individuals who provided Hmong as their ancestry (826 with Hmong as their first ancestry response, and 55 with Hmong as their second ancestry response) were coded as being born in Uruguay. While it is plausible that a few of these Hmong could have been born in Uruguay, it is probable that the vast majority were born in Australia, Laos or Thailand. The probable explanation as to how this error occurred is discussed in more detail in Coughlan (1988: 6-7).

12. Between 1984 and 2002, the only years for which data have been published, 725 Laos-born bridegrooms and 778 Laos-born brides had legal/registered marriages in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics *Marriages and Divorces*, various years). Of these 725 bridegrooms, 51.2 per cent married brides born in Laos and 7.6 married brides born in Australia; in addition, of the 778 brides, 47.7 per cent married bridegrooms born in Laos and 17.2 married bridegrooms born in Australia.

However, between 2001 and 2002, 171 Laos-born bridegrooms and 203 Laos-born brides had legal/registered marriages in Australia, and of the 171 bridegrooms, 44.4 per cent married brides born in Laos and 14.0 married brides born in Australia; in addition, of the 203 brides, 37.4 per cent married bridegrooms born in Laos and 20.7 married bridegrooms born in Australia, thereby indicating an increasing rate of inter-country of birth marriages involving the Laos-born communities.

In addition, Khoo and Lucas' (2004: 46) analysis of 2001 Australian Census ancestry data indicated that 21.3 per cent of married males of Lao ancestry had a spouse of a different ancestry, and 28.0 per cent of married females of Lao ancestry had a spouse of a different ancestry.

13. According to Michael Collins of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (personal communication, January 23, 2009): 'The processing of information from Census forms is now mostly automated, using scanning, Intelligent Character Recognition and other automated processes. Quality assurance procedures are used during Census processing to ensure processing errors are kept at an acceptable level.' Clearly 'an acceptable level' of errors is not high for the ABS.

As character recognition is used to capture the *ancestry*, *country of birth*, and *language spoken at home* data from the 2006 Census, it is probably that the responses 'Croatian' and 'Laotian', which do appear a little similar when written, have been confused by the computers reading the 2006 Census forms.

14. At times there will be slight variations in the totals for various categories between some of the tables presented here. This slight difference in the totals between tables is due to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)

introducing random error in cross-tabulated tables to protect individual confidentiality. Thus, cells in cross-tabulations with low numerical values are to be interpreted with care, as the ABS warns: 'No reliance should be placed on small cells as they are impacted by random adjustment, respondent and processing error' (ABS, 2006: 201).

^{15.} The magnitude of immigration and emigration of Laos-born people into and out of Australia could be ascertained by examining the arrivals and departures data of the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, based on country of birth by country of last residence for immigration movements, and country of proposed residence for emigration movements. Although such detailed data have been collected for many years, they are only available for purchase from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, and the author does not have these data at this time.

^{16.} In the 1986 Census, responses to the *country of birth of individual*, *country of birth of mother* and *country of birth of father* questions were coded to one of 89 specific countries and 9 general regional groupings. In addition, responses to the *ancestry* question were coded to one of 93 specific categories and three general categories, and data for the *language spoken at home* question were coded to 59 specific languages and five general categories.

However, for the 2006 Census, responses for country of birth of individual was coded to one of 284 categories, while responses for country of birth of mother and country of birth of father were coded to one of two categories (*Australia* or *Overseas*), while ancestry was coded to one of 274 categories and language spoken at home was coded to one of 430 categories.

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Interview with James Chamberlain¹ conducted by Grant Evans² on May 7th, 2001 in Vientiane, Lao PDR

A: So, can I ask, when you first came to Laos and why you first came; you came as a linguist, didn't you?

B: Actually that's not quite the way it happened. . . I came to avoid the draft actually.
[Laughter]

A: Ah.

B: Yes. . . In 1965 my name was at the top of the draft list, I had just finished my undergraduate work and at that point there were no options. Everyone was going to Vietnam. And so, I applied to an organization called IVS, International Voluntary Services, and at that point they had . . .

A: That was counted as a kind of military service, or substitute?

B: It could be, yes. It was draft deferrable. If you stayed with them long enough you could, practically speaking, probably go beyond the age at which you would be number one on the draft list. So then after I was here for a year, I got married and that helped even more [laughter] in terms of my status. I still had a draft status up until, you know, I was 27 or something. But it was funny because originally I was planning to go to Africa, and I had studied the Hausa language.

A: Oh really.

B: I was ready to go to Nigeria, and then the Biafran War broke out, so that wasn't really possible or feasible. And, so I applied to IVS to go to Algeria thinking it was just across the desert, but that didn't pan out because they were closing their program in Algeria, and they asked would I like to go to Cambodia, Laos or Vietnam? I knew I didn't want to go to Vietnam, but between Laos and Cambodia, the only country I knew anything about was Cambodia from an art history class. So, I applied to go to Cambodia. That was in 1964

¹ James R. Chamberlain, Ph.D. has spent most of the past 44 years in Laos. Recently, he has been working as a private consultant focusing on social research for development projects and undertaking numerous scholarly research projects.

² Grant Evans, Ph.D. is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology, University of Hong Kong, and Senior Research Fellow at l'Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient (EFEO), Vientiane, Laos.

(when the application process began). And Sihanouk shortly thereafter kicked all the Americans out of Cambodia. So, that left Laos by default. [laughter]. And, that's how I ended up in Laos. But in retrospect it was a very nice thing to have happened.

A: So when you arrived here in '65, what was it like?

B: Actually it wasn't a great deal different than it is right now, you know physically . . . maybe less paint, on the buildings. It was a bit run down, a bit shabby looking, at least to eyes coming from the states, and on our way we had stopped in Japan, in Hong Kong, in Saigon and in Phnom Penh before we finally got to Laos. So, of all those countries Laos was definitely the least attractive physically. But once you got to know it, there were a lot of nooks and crannies to the city that were interesting. It was a very small city. I'm not sure what the population was at that time. It must have been around a hundred thousand or a little over a hundred thousand. I think it was a hundred and fifty thousand in '75 when we left.

A: Right.

B: But it was very diverse as you can imagine. There were lots of countries represented. It was very cosmopolitan and you bumped into everybody because both the Eastern bloc and the Western bloc countries were here. I think every country in the world must have had an embassy in Laos at that time [laughing]. And all these strange political forces, let alone the fact that the Pathet Lao had their embassy right next to the morning market, at the same time there was war going on.

A; Theoretically, that was part of the coalition.

B: Yes, yes. And, then you had the French still very much in evidence with their Mission Militaire. The French influence in the education system was going strong. Both in the Lycée and in the Ministry of Education itself. The French were pretty much in control I would say, of the educational system and also through, of course, the Lao who had studied in France. And then you had this ICC group, you know the International Control Commission, which was Poland, and . . .

A: Poland, India and Canada.

B: Yes [laughing] Poland, India and Canada. And then of course the Americans who were very much in evidence with the big USAID compound, and the Kilometer 6 housing compound, and projects all over the country.

A: Joel Halpern described it as a 'Little America.'

B: Actually it was little America inside that compound and not a lot of Americans really spent a lot of time downtown. I mean, some people did, but it wasn't like the place was crawling with them. I think some people have a wrong opinion about that. In fact, my criticism of the Americans was that they didn't get out.

A: Right. That was Halpern's criticism.

B: They kind of tended to stay near the commissary or near the American school or in their compound, in their house, that sort of thing. But when you got out in the countryside they were more in evidence there because they stuck out [laughs], and you had more Americans working on the ground, for USAID and for various construction projects or education projects and what have you. There was a lot of American influence in the provinces that may have gone unnoticed by people in Vientiane.

A: We really need a good study on American civilian aid at the time, because it seems to me that the one book that's been done by Timothy Castle, *At war in the shadow of Vietnam: US military aid to the Royal Lao government, 1955-1975* (1993) focuses exclusively on military aid.

B: Absolutely. I think that could be done quite nicely right now, because there are still a lot of Americans that have just retired from USAID or the embassy and they're around, their minds are still good, you could really do a nice oral history just from their experiences.

A: So, in a sense, you had a classic split in the expatriate community between those people who'd get into the society and those who were here for the ride.

B: Interestingly, the number of people working with USAID who stayed on was the highest of any country in the world. People stayed on for second, third, or fourth tours, so you had USAID people who'd been here for 13 or 14 years. And their normal tour is only 3 or 4 years.

A: So it provided continuity.

B: A lot. That's why I say these people are quite knowledgeable. And there was a large core like that. Not a small core, a large core of people who had come out. A lot of them, like

myself, from IVS and then joined USAID. I didn't join USAID, but a lot of people did and then went out and just continued to live here because they felt so at home and one of the attractive things for those people (speaking of the cross-over) is in fact, their appreciation of the Lao goodwill and the Lao hospitality that they received. Working with people in Laos was a very nice experience for most people. I don't think anybody in USAID spoke no Lao. I think that everybody that I knew that had been here for more than one term could speak Lao, or at least to some degree. Maybe not perfectly, but a large number of people with Lao language ability. And, so that counted for a lot too, out in the field especially.

A: This has really been underestimated.

B: One of the greatest things that they did was the University of Hawaii project, you know the Fa Ngoum Comprehensive schools. For the first time you had very high level, very well researched and tested textbooks in Lao language, and a huge variety of subjects, and, I don't even know if a complete set survived because a lot of them were burned.

A: The project kicked off in 1967, is that right?

B: They started the project perhaps in that year, but I don't know if there was a school until maybe 1970 or something. But, they had a huge group of people. And all of them experienced educators and they went through the same methodology and textbook development they went through in the states, to make sure it was readable for students at that age level. Which was quite sophisticated and I don't think anybody has done anything like that since.

A: These are particularly aimed at developing secondary Lao education using the Lao language.

B: That's right...

A: What was happening in the past, people were getting to secondary school and having to switch to French.

B: The other aspect of it was it was more a school for the people as opposed to the Lycée system where as you got higher and higher became very elitist in the sense that there were so few seats left at the top that you really had to be at the pinnacle of your group in order to hang in there. But the Fa Ngoum schools opened up the door to more open education for more people. And yet, at the same time maintaining a quality of education, and that has never been duplicated, unfortunately. People talk a lot about, you know, what were the

good things about the old regime and, education you have to say was one of them in terms of what's happened.

A: And if you have an elitist education system and it turns out a good elite that's better than having an elitist education system that turns out a bad elite.

B: [Laughing] That's right . . .

A: Which is roughly what we have at present, I guess. . .

B: Yes, yes. I recall, when was it, 1970 or 71, I spent some time at Khon Kaen University and there were 12 Lao students there, all of whom had a baccalaureate from the Lycée in Vientiane, and they were far and away better educated than the Thai university students. They were students who had been on USAID scholarships, and they were told they were going to the US, but then at the last minute, for budgetary reasons, there was a big cutback about that time, and they were sent to Thailand. And so it was a big blow to their egos for that to have happened. But, they were the best, I would say, in just about every subject area. They came from an environment where they would question the teacher and challenge the professor in the class room and that sort of thing, which of course in Thailand was out of the question.

A: So, actually, the old Lao elite had much more intellectual confidence because they had mastered French intellectualism to a degree and consequently were more confident then vis-a-vis the Thai.

B: Yes I would say at that time there was no feeling of intimidation. It was more or less a symmetrical relationship when one or the other country visited each other. And of course the royal family was part of that, both having a royal family, of archaic lineage was considered to be very uplifting.

A: There were many magazines around at the time too, *Sao Khong*, which was bi-lingual Thai and Lao, *Mithason*, *Pai Nam*, *Nang*... It was all part an intellectual maturity which was . . .

B: There were several others too. I can't remember their names now, that were in a large format. *Phim Lao* was one. Those were very influential and you could pick them up on every street corner. I remember reading a very nice history of the Tai Dam figure *Chau Ngou Hau* in one of them. Did you know there was a Tai Dam association here at that time, that was very active as well, and they had the story of Thao Cheuang in one of the funeral

texts which was the first time I'd ever actually seen it. It doesn't appear in writing for the most part, but does appear in oral history. It was quite nice, things like that. Maha Sila's children of course accounted for a lot of that effort, but they were going in all directions and there was a lot of writing being done. A lot of novels being published, not to mention poetry. It was quite incredible. It obviously had quite a real future ahead of it. The national library was extremely influential in leading some of this. They were publishing things. I mean both the National library and the Lao Academy were publishing. Taking Lao literature, manuscripts, and putting them into printed form. The director general of the national library, Prachit Sourisak, was very active. He had done his undergraduate work in France, and then he had gone to the States for graduate work, and as part of his masters degree he did an internship at the public library, in Flint, Michigan, children's library and he came back loaded with ideas about how to disseminate Lao literature. Among other things there was a group of us that formed in 1974, unfortunately too late.

A: The journal, *Sangkhomkhadi*?

B: Yes that... That was Martin Barber and Amphai Doré, the two of them, but then that was expanded into a group that sought to publish and make available in both languages, dissertations and theses that had been written abroad. There was Yang Dao and myself, and Amphai, Prachit, and who else . . . I think Martin had gone back by that time... maybe 10 people that were interested in this...

A: And, Jacques Lemoine?

B: I don't recall that he was on that particular committee. But, what Jacques did was something else. He and Vo Thu Tinh started, or restarted I should say, the *Bulletin des Amis du Royaume Lao*, and that was very successful. He was also publishing under the name *Vittagnya* many books, such as those of Charles Archaimbault...

A: And, Stephan Feuchtwang on Feng Shui.

B: That's right.

A: Yes, when I first went back and started looking at that period, I became aware that it had just reached a threshold, and it was just going 'boom.'

B: That's right. It all of a sudden exploded...

A: What about the Literature Committee?

B: When I first got there in '65, they were in an old building which is by the Monument [Anousavary], on the opposite side from the old national assembly, where the Ministry of Agriculture is today and the Ministry of Justice. Both the National Library and the Literature Committee, which later became the Royal Academy, were in that building together. The National library was on the 2nd floor, but it was mainly in locked rooms, and to actually view the books you had to go and get permission from Prachit. That's how I first met Prachit. I said I'd like to get copies of some Lao literature, and he said, oh you do that downstairs. And downstairs, of course, was the Committee. The man in charge, the Director General, was Soulang Dejvongsa. Maha Sila Viravong had left by then as he had had a falling out with them. Whenever they got into an argument, they (the Lao scholars) would accuse him of being Thai. He had done this dictionary, I guess around 1962. It was published by the Ministry of Education, in the name of the Ministry of Education. But, in fact, everybody acknowledged that it was his personal work.

But, back to the story of acquiring literary things. Practically all of them had been edited by Maha Sila. And of course he also edited this journal called *Vanakadisane*. I got copies of everything they had. Their publication had in fact been supported by The Asia Foundation. They were 300 Kip or 200 Kip, or something. Even in those days it was not expensive. And they had the four volume set of *Sang Sin Xai*, and *Nang Teng One*, and so on. His editorial work has been questioned since by people who have shown that he was rather censorial in his editing. And he would, if there were passages that he thought were too risqué, he would rewrite them himself in the style of whoever it was that was writing.

A: What do you think Peter Koret's argument that someone like Maha Sila sits on a cusp between tradition and modernity?

B: In a way he was still more of a scribe than he was anything else, and then later on he evolved into someone who wished to fix tradition.

A: Perhaps an early version of a nationalistic intellectual?

B: He really was, there's no other word for it. I mean, he did the same thing with historical manuscripts. And of course he also had the advantage of having had access to a lot of the Lao manuscripts in the National Library in Bangkok. That's how he found the *Thao Hung Thao Cheung* manuscript. Because he had already been a monk in Thailand he had access to

those things, which later on were closed off for many years. I remember Prachit telling me he tried to get access to those manuscripts and was told they didn't exist. And, as he was leaving the National Library, a janitor who was from the Northeast of Thailand and who had overheard the conversation with these Thai officials, took him aside and said, 'Let me show you something.' And, he took him into a room to which he had the key for janitorial purposes. And here was a huge room. He said it was more than he could even fathom, all the manuscripts that were taken by the Thai army over the years.

A: You first encountered Maha Sila in the mid-60's?

B: Yes. He was very gracious and very happy that anybody could speak Lao...

A: He didn't speak French or English or anything like that did he? Amongst that group as far as I know...

B: I don't think he spoke French (of course his children did). . .for sure, he didn't speak English or didn't speak very much of it...

A: And you met Pierre Nginn at that time?

B: Yes, Pierre Nginn was already very old at that time. And, and he was very French in his outlook and everything he did he compared to France [laughs]. If it was something about Lao literature, it was just like Chason de Roland or, just like this or just like that. He had his whole basis for locating Laos in the world vis-a-vis France.

A: He's a rather interesting figure in his own right, however.

B: Yes, well he was really responsible for getting a lot off the ground. The Literature Committee, and I think he was the first president or chairman at the time.

A: Yeah, that's right. And then, did you meet Phouvong Phimmasone?

B: Oh yes. Later on he became quite influential.

A: He became the head of it in 1973, didn't he?

B: Yes. He was very influential. He was the reaction to Maha Sila in many respects. He was the Lao answer to Maha Sila, in their eyes. But I don't think he had quite the depth of Maha Sila in many ways.

A: Because he wrote one of the first major studies in French of Lao literature.

B: Yes, yes.

A: Which was in 1948.

B: Yes.

A: He was a lawyer too.

B: In '71, or '72 they started doing a large dictionary but it actually didn't get off the ground until '73. Soulang had masterminded the whole thing. There were 25 members of that committee, and they were all over 50 and most of them over 60, and so they started off trying to do this, using Maha Sila's dictionary as the basis and then adding to it, and unfortunately, because there were 25 of them and they were all patient Lao characters, they didn't even finish through *Ko* — you know the first letter of the alphabet after one year, and meeting once a week.

A: Enjoying themselves.

B: It was such a pleasure, the aesthetic experience of it I'm sure, and so finally at that point, Soulang came to us at the Asia Foundation and asked for funding to continue this project. They'd run out of funding. And, he explained to me what had happened. And I said, well how are you going to get around this. He said well I'm going to have a stopwatch. And they set up a rule, because they had to agree that the objective was actually to finish the dictionary, and he was there with his stopwatch. Actually, I think that started in late '72. Nobody was allowed to talk for more than 3 minutes at a time. And Soulang's duty was to time everyone when they spoke and to be very firm about it. And he had that capability. He could do that. And so, they finished it. Just about the time things were falling apart in 1975, this dictionary was finished.

A: They did finish it!

B: Yes, that's why I say it was such a loss. And it was in a manuscript form. It took about two and a half years. But that was before the days of Xerox. You couldn't very readily get a Xerox copy of anything. And, so there was one copy. One typescript and it was in Soulang's desk. And he even told me that he stopped by there when he was about ready to escape and go to Thailand and to France. He stopped by the office to pick up that dictionary and it was locked. His drawer was locked and he didn't have the key. So he had to leave it.

A: You've got no idea what happened to it?

B: I later asked people about it. I remember asking Dara about it, she's Maha Sila's daughter, and she hadn't even known about it. I asked Soulang about this new Lao to Lao dictionary that came out in 1992.

A: Sponsored by the Toyota foundation.

B: Was that who it was? I don't remember. Yes. It wasn't a great printing job or anything, but it was quite a nice dictionary in many respects and I asked Soulang if this maybe wasn't that dictionary either slightly reworked or not reworked at all. Lots of other people's names are on it now. And he said he thought it was. From what he could remember, he thought that it was. So, somebody may have kept it...you know given the state of things today. It's too bad. I mean, there's a lot lexical work that could be done using that dictionary and using other dictionaries that have been published over the years, both French and English. It's one of the better, for strange reasons, it's one of the better lexicalized languages in Southeast Asia, because you've got the Reinhorn dictionary, you've got the old Guingard dictionary, you've got the dictionary that Kerr, an American, did, and other things like that. You know, put those all together, plus these two Lao dictionaries, the Maha Sila one and this one, and then if you took Maha Preecha's dictionary of Isan, you could have quite a nice dictionary. Prior to 1975 there was an enabling environment as they say. There were lexicons that were being developed simultaneously with the dictionary. They had committees for all different subject matter, geography, biology, etc. The problem, interestingly enough, speaking of the intellectual state of things, the problem was the proliferation, because of all the different foreign influences in the education system. You know, in the last 5 years of the old regime you had the German Technical School, you had the American Comprehensive School, the Fa Ngoum School, the French technical schools, in addition to the university and the Law school and so on. And they were all developing, coining, technical vocabulary [laughs] but separately. So the idea of this . . . of this committee was not to develop new words, but to decide about which one from the many would be the standard one for Lao, in order for physics teachers, for example, in these various schools to talk to each other about physics. I sat in on some of the first ones that were done. . .

A: This was the Royal Academy, wasn't it?

B: Yes, that was it. Which had a more national language development side to it that hadn't been there before. This was also supported by The Asia Foundation.

A: But also, they also started to produce, like in Thailand, a little bulletin on natural sciences.

The idea of the Royal Academy was to sort of bring all these things together.

B: They had a galley of people there, just copying manuscripts. You could go into the Royal Academy and you'd see peoples sitting at desks just doing nothing but working on *bai laan* manuscripts, just transcribing them.

A: That was a high priority.

B: Oh yes. And, Prachit was doing it also. In fact, it was a very interesting situation, and I don't know if I mentioned to you before the case of the Tai Lue history. During our work in the Northwestern part of Laos, what is now Bokeo, it used to be Houa Khong, we discovered that there were 4 extant manuscripts of the Lue people themselves. They were big *bai laan* manuscripts, and they were written in the Lue language, which is very similar to Tham, and one in Laos was at Muang Moeng, just North of what is now Huay Sai, a couple of districts up, right on the river. But it's in from the river, the city itself is in from the river. And, there was a USAID man there in the early '60's, his name was Ernie Kuhn. Anyway, Ernie Kuhn was the area coordinator for USAID there, and he had an interest, just a personal interest in these kind of things, and when he was in Muang Moeng he found this manuscript, and he paid somebody there to make a copy for him, and after they had made the copy. He was about ready to take it and they said, can we have the new copy and you take the old one. You know, typical [laughing]. 'Cause the new is better than the old, right? [laughs] So, he said, well, if you insist. But he was very good about it. But before he left, he had them read the entire manuscripts into a reel to reel tape recorder. And so, he was able to preserve this manuscript. He gave it to the National library. It was there for a while, but then all of a sudden the Minister of the Interior at that time, his name was Pheng Phongsavanh came and took it. Just unilaterally took it back and then gave it to his son, who was at the time the Chao Muang of Houay Sai. After which it disappeared. And that was before Prachit Sourisak ever had a chance to get it copied.

A. Maybe it ended up in Thailand?

B: In some cases this happens. There are unscrupulous academics nosing around and paying people to go across the river and get a manuscript from that temple or this temple. And with a little donation to the temple they're very happy, because the monks rarely read these manuscripts anymore. These academics later keep them hidden away in their own private collections and won't reveal their existence to the outside world. That seems to be what happens a lot. Which is kind of sad.

A: Back to the cultural situation before '75, what about popular music?

B: Popular music. Wow. You know you didn't hear Thai songs all that much. You heard them along with everything else, but I remember at the Settha Palace Hotel back in about 1973-74 you could go at noontime and sit around this big dining room there, what is now I guess the lobby. And they had singers for 2 hours every noon. It was great place for everybody to go, all the yuppies of Vientiane at the time would go there. But, what amazed me, I recall sitting there one time and a girl sang songs in eight languages. You know, she'd sing a song in Chinese, the next one would be in Vietnamese, and the next one would be in Lao. And there'd be one in Thai, then one in French, one in English. It just kept going on and on. A single performer was expected to have that kind of repertoire.

A: In the early 60's it's still a fairly sleepy place?

B: Yes.

A: As you move towards the war things start to spin out of control, in the late sixties.

B: Uh-huh.

A: In a sense the Lao, lose complete control of what's happening, because it's a Vietnamese and American war by that stage.

B: Yes, but you know, you didn't notice that in Vientiane. You could be in Laos and never know that there was a war going on, especially if you stayed just in Vientiane.

A: Except for the refugee movements that started in the late 60's, early 70's.

B: Yes, but there weren't many refugees in Vientiane. I mean, not noticeably.

A: On the outskirts of Vientiane?

B: I suppose if you were living on the outskirts of town you'd notice it, but living in Vientiane you didn't notice it. I mean I knew it was going on because I was working at the Ministry of Social Welfare where they had a resettlement office. But you know most of them were not right on the edge of Vientiane. Most of them were 30 kilometers out, so you didn't see a huge influx of people coming into town. You knew there was a war. . .there were lots of reporters staying at the Constellation, you know, things like that. The night spots were . . .when I first got here in '65 Dong Palane was the big night strip with brothels and bars and one dancing place, the El Morocco [laughs] and everybody went there to dance at the El Morocco. And later on it shifted over to the Settha Palace, a place called Le Spot, 'The Spot,'

run by a Corsican. And then, after that, that was going on for a couple years, then it moved back to the old El Morocco, but it had another name, I can't remember. And. . .Up until the end it was there.

A: I read a report done by 2 Canadian anthropologists, who did a study of prostitution in Vientiane in the early '70's. They came up with a figure of about 1000 prostitutes, and my impression from reading that report was that it was actually a small number of people.

B: Take the White Rose, right. Those girls were mainly from Northeastern Thailand. But down in Dong Palane they were mainly Vietnamese and Chinese girls. And very beautiful, very nice girls. There was only one place, that was right on the river, I can't remember the name of it. It was run by an Italian that actually had anything that you would call go-go. And that wasn't established until about '73 or '74. Other than that, there was no such thing. It didn't exist in Vientiane. You'd go in and you would sit down and you would have a drink. And you'd chat with the girls as long as you felt comfortable, and you either left or took the girl upstairs afterwards. There was an upstairs in every place. That was the main set up every place you went. The only exception was another dancing place further down on the river, and that place was really wild. That was a big dancing place, with girls and also an upstairs. Every dancing place had to have an upstairs except for the El Moraco, which was where most of the foreigners went. But this was much more of a Lao place. And you found that same plan also in Luang Prabang. I remember going up there in late '60's and there was a strange place...sort of barn like with a band not right in tune and . . .playing little bits of everything. It's so dark you can hardly see you hand in front of your face. So, there was...that was a style that was emerging I would say. But the old style was simply, the girls and the bar and the drinks and the upstairs room.

A: So, the upstairs room has sort of disappeared today?

B: Yes. Exactly. It's not quite so overt. You don't have these kinds of blue collar brothels that you have in Thailand. I don't think you really have that I don't think you've ever had it. It may emerge now with the new transportation routes.

A: What's happening now is that Lao girls are going to Pattaya, etc.

B: That's a new thing. That whole thing is brand new. There's both migration and trafficking actually at this point. I've been helping the people at Social Welfare design a new trafficking department. And, I helped them design some research. The initial findings are

quite interesting. The girls that are going from the villages that they visited in Xaygnaboury were doing quite well. They were bringing back lots of money and building new houses in their village and it was very well handled. And I think the secret is that they had people on the Thai side that were looking after them after they crossed the border. But the other set of villages were in Saravanh, from further inland, they didn't have the connections in Thailand. They were lured. Once they got in Thailand it was just like trading buffalo. And so, they had not had good experiences, and most of them came back with no money at all, nothing to show for all their efforts, and had been virtually slaves in Bangkok and other places. No, in the old days you'd never. . . nobody ever heard of something like that.

A: Back to pre-75 things again. That era . . .that intelligentsia, there was in fact a small Hmong intelligentsia, wasn't there?

B: Absolutely, yes.

A: You mentioned Yang Dao. But if you go back earlier than that you had Touby Lyfoung and his brothers.

B: Touby and Tou Jeu, the man who was the head of the Lao supreme court. There was a big outcry when he became head of the Supreme Court in Laos. Because he was Hmong and that was very hard for the Lao to swallow. But he had the education, and was actually a very good person. And very practical, I remember he and Bill McDougal from The Asia Foundation were always trying to perfect the bamboo technology for a water-wheel driven rice pounder, and such things.

A: Tou Jeu was on the King's Council at one point, around 1949.

B: I wouldn't be surprised. Yes.

A: Then Touby followed later.

B: That's right. And, I think it happened pretty much independent of the war. The French missionaries had educated them well, sent them to France in many cases, and they came back to become representatives in the National Assembly. This was apart from the military side where you had generals and Hmong who had gone through the officers' training school. They weren't just SGU, American hired people who'd been given a rank, they actually had worked from the bottom up. Like you say, there was a real Hmong intelligentsia. One of the first things I did with IVS actually was to give English entrance exams to Hmong in Sam Thong, you know, with Pop Buell cheering along. [laughs] And boy,

did I ever get earfuls from him. He really wanted his boys to get into school. And a lot of them did. I think there were about 40 Hmong in the teacher training college at Dong Dok, and there were also a fair number in the law school. And they were quite vocal, especially about the language issue. This became a very hot issue, you know. They'd write letters and things to the editor. And, they really . . . it was interesting, because what had happened, . . . there had always been, since the forties, a Romanized alphabet, the so-called Barney-Smalley alphabet that Father Bertrais had used, and this was already very well known among the Catholic Hmong. They wanted to publish some new primers and they had them already to go in the Romanized alphabet. And then they made the mistake, this was in 1967, I think, they made the mistake of asking permission from the Ministry of Education. If they hadn't asked permission this never would have been an issue. And the ministry said 'No, we can only do it in Lao' because there'd been the National education reform act in 1962 which specifically said that there shall be education for all people of Laos, all the minority people of Laos, in their own language, so long as they used the Lao script. And they were, of course, interpreting language to mean writing system. That was actually the work of a French advisor, Jacques Bousquet was his name. . . he was a real nice guy. . . He had returned later with UNESCO...at any rate...they interpreted that quite literally, when they asked for permission. The Ministry said, you can only do it if you use the Lao alphabet, so they had to go back to the drawing board and design a Lao alphabet. Smalley and other people were brought in to do this, and they designed the Lao-Hmong alphabet, which was really just a symbol-for-symbol transliteration of the English one, or the Roman one. But anyway, they did that and published a 2 volume set of primers, and it was immediately used. The Bible was translated. There was a big Protestant movement. It turned out, interestingly enough, most of the Protestants were Green Hmong and most of the Catholics were White Hmong, not exclusively, but as a generalization. And, of course, the ones who had come to Vientiane, for education and were in the educational system, or were in the government system were all white Hmong. And so, these students at the law school were quite outraged when the government then said, 'Well, from now on, all minority languages must be written in the Lao script.' They wanted an exception, 'except for Hmong language.' They wanted that sentence added into the decree, because they argued, I think quite reasonably, that this Romanization had been around since the 1940's and lots of people

knew it, and it was already functional. As far as I know, nobody ever had a strong reaction to it on the government side. But Hmong students kept writing about it in the newspapers, time after time. The interesting thing is, there was never any problem with using the spoken minority language in the classroom. As long as you used the Lao writing system, that was the only thing that they were concerned about. When Yang Dao came back that was a big boost to all the Hmong, and they put him in the Ministry of Plan. So at all of the high society get-togethers of Vientiane at that time you always had Touby and Yang Dao and Tou Jeu and couple of other prominent Hmong there.

A: You were saying that there was also an active Black Tai group.

B: Yes. Very active. There was a man here who's name was Kam Ouynh who was the Black Tai leader. And, his father in-law, Baccam Quy was very old in those days, I mean he was already in his 80s. Kam Ouynh actually did all of the political work on behalf of the Tai Dam most of whom had come to Laos after the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu. They were a very unified group and they lived together in large communities, such as Nong Boua Thong in Vientiane.

A: And these people cleared out after '75?

B: They were the first ones across the river. They said, we've seen this before, and they just left everything. They had very nice houses. Most of the aristocracy, as you know, were from Muang Mouay and they were all the Baccam lineage. The women always dressed in Black Tai clothing wherever they went. They would preserve that tradition very, very strongly. And, they always spoke Tai Dam and they had the rituals and the funerals and everything carried out according to tradition. I think it's because you had the aristocracy here that knew what the tradition should be, so they preserved it.

A: And they had a French speaking elite.

B: Very much so. And Baccam Ouynh was one of those of course. They also had a military presence. You know they had an SGU unit that was, I think at Phon Hong. None of them had Lao citizenship, even up until, into the early 70's. So Cam Ouynh finally, I think it was in '73 or '74, finally got citizenship for all those members of the Black Tai community that had come after the fall of Dien Bien Phu. And one of the things he used to argue his case with the Prime Minister Souvannaphouma was the fact that they'd been fighting as a Black Tai guerilla force with the RLG. But you also had Black Tai people in various positions. In high

ranking or fairly high ranking positions around town. Quite often in the private sector as well, interestingly enough.

A: If you look at 70-75 and the Coalition Government what was your reading of how people understood what was happening?

B: Everybody was so happy that peace was coming. I mean they didn't look at in terms of anything else, except that the fighting was going to stop. They didn't understand the ins and outs of the 18 point agreement and all that. But they understood the idea that now the war is going stop. And when Souphanouvong came I happened to be standing in front of the Apollo Hotel when he first arrived and, ahh the throngs of people lining the streets, and he had the window down and he was waving. He was the symbol that peace was now here. He had arrived.

A: Souphanouvong in retrospect, it's absolutely clear that he was vital to the PL success. People believed him when he said nothing would change, except the foreigners would go home. So the RLG side put down their guns and went off to the camps. Souphanouvong said they'd only be away for 2 months.

B: They believed him. Yes, everybody.

A: You were talking about regional accents . . .

B: Accents...

A: Because I was talking to a Lao friend, the other day as we were listening to Lao radio, and the announcer was a person from Savannakhet.

B: Oh yes.

A: Speaking with a southern accent... and she was saying 'ahhh, listen to these accents. Why aren't they speaking the standard accent.'

B: Oh really?

A: But I was just wondering, what's your assessment of things...how do people relate to accent? B: Oh right.

A: I mean you talk to Lao overseas, particularly from Luang Phrabang, and given that the royal family spoke with a Luang Phrabang accent, they're very conscious of maintaining that particular accent.

B: Essentially, I would say that people in Laos don't change their style of speaking to conform to any standard. There's a very beginning of this starting now in Vientiane. But, it's not going to come easily because there's not a lot of . . . I mean somebody speaks with a Savannakhet accent, they say, oh right, he's from Savannakhet. But, it's not like they're holding it against him or anything like that.

A: Right.

B: And the same with the people from Pakse. You know, their strange tone where you can't pick up the final consonants. Or, certainly not Luang Phrabang. Luang Phrabang is not going to change. And if anything, Luang Prabang is considered to be, by many people, the flowery kind of language. But I don't think you ever find anybody in Vientiane trying to imitate for social purposes, the Luang Prabang accent. For the longest time there was no stigma attached to anybody's accent. They just accepted it as, ..that's the way it is. And it wasn't until after '75 when all these 'hicks' from Xam Neua started coming into Vientiane that there was any kind of feeling that there were lower classes of people coming to town.

A: Perhaps they are learning this idea of a standard from Thai TV?

B: Everything is standard Thai, right.

A: Back before 75 there wasn't television.

B: No, that's right.

A: The media wasn't very highly developed at all. What you're getting now in the 1990's is this proliferation of mass media.

B: It may be happening unconsciously, but it's not happening consciously as far as I know. I mean I haven't picked up any inklings that it has. And you'd think. . .there's an amazing resilience still. And the fact that I enjoy and watch Thai TV all day long doesn't mean that I'm going to be Thai. The Isan people, however, are really between a rock and a hard place, because they're not Thai and they're not Lao. They used to be, before all of this took place, they used to be more Lao. In fact, I think the Lao sometimes look down on the Isan people because the way they speak Lao is still what the Lao consider to be very folksy.

A: You went to University of Michigan, didn't you.

B: I was very fortunate, I went to Michigan. Michigan had a lot of good people for Southeast Asia. It had Gedney, and it had Robins Bruling, and it had Pete Becker, it had Carl Hutterer,

it had Pete Gosling and John Whitmore, and so on. It had a lot of really top notch Southeast Asian specialists, and so I was very fortunate. But, there wasn't much after that. I couldn't envision going into academia. There's so much to do here. I mean, there's so much to do when you're out here, even doing it in your spare time, which is what I do. I'm sure I can publish and . . . certainly research and study as much this way as I ever could have done in a university, where you have to go to faculty meetings and . . .[laughs] get involved . . . Gedney was quite angry at me, as you probably saw from some of the Ram Khamhaeng writings.³ But we made our peace in the end. And then sadly he passed away.

³ See James R. Chamberlain, ed., *The Ram Khamhaeng Controversy: Collected Papers*, (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1991).

BOOK REVIEWS

Martin Stuart-Fox¹

Yves Goudineau and Michel Lorrillard, eds: *Recherches nouvelles sur le Laos/New Research on Laos*. Études thématiques 18. Vientiane, Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 2008. pp. 678.

History and politics conspired over half a century to make social scientific research in Laos all but impossible. From the brief Japanese occupation and the end of the Second World War in 1945 until the early 1990s, war, hot and cold, revolution and political sensitivity curtailed research in archaeology and prehistory, anthropology and ethnography, sociology and cultural studies. Economics, linguistics and history fared a little better.

Following the collapse of communism in the former Soviet Union and introduction of the 'new economic mechanism' that opened Laos up to the world, research again became possible. But it has never been easy. Rural areas have been difficult to access, and the danger of unexploded ordnance (UXO) left over from the war has been ever present. Bureaucratic delays and political intransigence have been even more constricting. And yet scholars, to their great credit, have persevered.

By my count, the volume under review is the sixth collection of research papers to appear over the past decade.¹ It is also the largest, at more than double the length of any previous publication, and the most ambitious in its coverage. The 27 articles range from archaeology and history to religion, linguistics and anthropology. They are divided into three sections covering the making of history, heritage issues, and social dynamics, to each of which there is an introduction by the editors in addition to their general introduction to the volume as a whole. Sixteen contributions are in English and eleven in French, including the three longest. The four introductions are also in French, so the division between languages is roughly half and half. Abstracts of all papers in both languages are provided.

The first five papers cover the areas of prehistory and archaeology, whose rich research opportunities are at last being exploited. For prehistorians, Laos is situated enticingly between the Hoabinhian sites of northwest Vietnam and the northern Khorat

¹ Professor of History (Retired), University of Queensland, Australia

Plateau in northeast Thailand, both of which have contributed immensely to our knowledge of mainland Southeast Asian prehistory. Laos could well throw light on what Joyce C. White and Bounheuang Bouasisiengpaseuth call the “missing millennia” in regional prehistory, from 6,000 to 2,000 BCE. The two authors report on the Middle Mekong Archaeological project, which aims to survey the whole Middle Mekong region. Their own work focused on Luang Prabang province, specifically the valleys of the Ou, Seuang and Pa rivers where they located dozens of prospective sites during their 2005 survey.

It is one thing to identify likely sites, however, and quite another to mount expensive excavations. In a brief addendum, White and Bounheuang note that test excavations at two sites yielded Hoabinhian remains; but full-scale excavations are called for. The Middle Mekong project is backed by the American National Science Foundation and the National Geographic Society, so it is possible that funds for a major excavation will be forthcoming.

Thongsa Sayavongkhamdy and Viengkeo Souksavatdy report on a 2004 excavation of cave sites in an area now flooded by the Nam Theun II dam. This turned up a rare Neolithic burial site in which the flexed skeleton was almost intact. Radio carbon dating gave an age of 6190 ± 40 BP, or around 4,200 BCE, right at the beginning of the ‘missing millennia’. This excavation was funded by the Nam Theun II Power Company as a matter of urgency, but one wonders whether funds will be made available to excavate other sites that will be inundated when other dams are built.

Julie Van Den Burgh reports on another survey of archaeological sites on the Plain of Jars, which is part of a joint UNESCO-Lao government project designed to protect and manage the plain prior to application for listing as a World Heritage Archaeological Landscape. The plain was heavily bombed during the Second Indochina War, and all UXO have not yet been removed, but most of the area has been surveyed. The project began in 1998, and will culminate in World Heritage listing in 2010.

The two other archaeological papers report excavations undertaken in the 1990s, but provide their authors with the opportunity to reflect on the significance of their work. Anna Källén excavated Lao Pako, a low hill on the banks of the Nam Ngum. She found it to be an iron-age iron working site in use between 350 and 600 CE, which contained not only large numbers of ceramics, ornaments and utensils, but also infant burials. There was also evidence of pits dug into the hill in which offerings had been

placed. Källén believes these had to do with rituals that metaphorically associated metallurgy with childbirth, the metal being 'born' from the furnace like a child from the womb.

The last of the archaeological papers is by Marielle Santoni, who led the French mission to investigate ancient Khmer sites at and in the vicinity of Vat Phu. Like the Plain of Jars project, this was to provide the basis for World Heritage listing, which took place in 2001. Santoni's paper summarises the results of the earlier excavations, which have not been easily available to scholars. She discusses the means by which water from the sacred spring was channelled to the temple; the layout of the important nearby pre-Angkorean town of Shrestapura; and some minor sites downstream and along the royal way that ran between Vat Phu and Angkor in the eleventh century.

The next five chapters cover history and historiography. In the longest article in the collection, Michel Lorrillard reveals some of the fruits of his years of study of the history of Lan Xang. He begins his survey of the historical geography of Buddhism within the frontiers of modern Laos with the Mon period from the seventh to eleventh centuries CE. The earliest Mon principality on Lao territory centred on Thakhaek, which by the tenth century extended its influence to the plain of Viang Chan. But by then the Mon were already in retreat. The Theravada Buddhism of the Mon gave way to the Śaivism and Mahayana Buddhism of the Khmer, and there is no indication that the Mon of the Middle Mekong had any religious influence on the Lao.

Lorrillard argues strongly that Sayfong, downstream from Viang Chan, was never a Khmer garrison town, and that the famous stele marking the establishment of a hospital by Jayavarman VII was transported there from further south, probably from the Thai province of Sakon Nakhon. This seems very likely, for there are no archaeological remains at Sayfong. On the other hand the That Luang may have originally been a Khmer site (Pierre Gagneux certainly thought so), and the use of laterite blocks in the construction of some early stupas (for instance at Vat Si Meuang) does suggest Khmer influence on the Viang Chan plain. Even so, Lorrillard maintains, there is no evidence of Khmer political control north of Savannakhet.

Nor is there any evidence that the Theravada Buddhism eventually adopted by the Lao was introduced from the south. Rather, Lorrillard argues, the earliest indications of Buddhism in northern Laos point west to the Mon kingdom of Haripunjaya with its capital at Lamphun. With the establishment of the kingdom of Lan

Na in the thirteenth century, this became the source for the spread of Theravada Buddhism to Laos. Lorrillard thus discounts Lao chronicles like the *Nithan Khun Borom*, preferring the hard evidence of archaeology and epigraphy.

Lan Na certainly exerted the greatest cultural influence throughout northern Laos, but the diffusion of Buddhism seems to have been slow. Lorrillard points out that the first Lao king who was certainly Buddhist (since he took a Pali throne name) was Xainyachakkaphat Phaen Phaeo, who ruled a century after Fa Ngum had founded Lan Xang. And for the next century, until the capital was removed to Viang Chan, the cultural influence of Lan Na was overwhelming. In fact Lorrillard has argued elsewhere that the *That Luang* was probably designed by an architect brought from Chiang Mai by King Xetthathirat, who at the time ruled both kingdoms.

Only from the mid-sixteenth century, when Viang Chan became the capital of Lan Xang and Lan Na fell under the control of the Burmese, Lorrillard argues, did Viang Chan become the cultural centre of the Lao world. Its influence, marked by architectural style and large bronze statues of the Buddha, spread south and north, reaching its limits upstream from Huayxai and northeast as far as Hua Phan; and continuing well into the eighteenth century. These are major reinterpretations, which we must hope Lorrillard elaborates in book form in what will undoubtedly be the most scholarly history to date of the Kingdom of Lan Xang.

From Lan Xang we jump to the 1890s, that crucial time when France was establishing control over Lao territories east of the Mekong through the imposition of well defined frontiers. In a revealing study Andrew Walker shows how local French officials on the upper Mekong, who understood traditional overlapping jurisdictions much better than did their remote superiors, attempted to exploit them for commercial and political advantage. This was made easier because of the 25 km military exclusion zone on the Siamese side, a disadvantage Siamese authorities, who were quick learners, were desperately trying to overcome by reinforcing their administration in the zone and insisting on the significance of the Mekong as the frontier. This ironic reversal of roles – Siamese adopting the European conception of the state; French pursuing their interests by ignoring it - was only possible because local Siamese chiefs still understood their world in traditional terms. The conclusion Walker draws is that a frontier may be imposed through negotiations of power, but its meaning locally is the product of dialogue. But there was another assumption at play that Walker does not mention,

which is that many local French officials at the time saw the Mekong as a temporary frontier that they intended to push west. The Siamese well understood this, which is why they played the European game. In the end power trumped dialogue, even on the upper Mekong.

Volker Grabowsky continues his study of Meuang Sing, from the establishment of French rule in the form of an autonomous French-protected principality (along the lines of the princely states in British India) to the rebellion that broke out in 1914 following the decision to administer Meuang Sing directly as part of the province of Haut Mékong. Grabowsky shows that the rebellion was not inevitable, but resentment ran deep in the prickly *chao fa*, who blamed the French for surrendering his territories west of the Mekong to British Burma, leaving him with a truncated *meuang* – an example in microcosm of the fate of the Lao west bank territories on the Middle Mekong.

It was precisely because the frontiers of French Laos that were finally agreed upon in 1907 left 80% of ethnic Lao in northeast Thailand (then Siam) that it was so difficult to create any sense of Lao national identity. What was essential was to differentiate ‘Lao’ from ‘Siamese’, and this, as Søren Ivarsson shows, had to be on the dual basis of history and culture. The new history portrayed Laos as the direct heir of the *Lao* kingdom of Lan Xang, and condemned Siam for its destruction of Viang Chan following the gallant ‘freedom struggle’ of Chao Anou, its last king. In the cultural domain, difference rested on religion (in the form of a separate *Lao* Sangha) and the written form of Lao as a language distinct from Central Thai. The irony is that this construction of a national Lao cultural identity took place within the context of, and indeed with the support of, the colonial regime.

The significance of history is again evident in Bruce Lockhart’s model historiographical study of how Lao historians in the LPDR have constructed the historical relationship between Laos and Vietnam. Lao historians have traced these relations since before the founding of Lan Xang, when the two kingdoms were similar in power (with Lan Xang enjoying an edge over Dai Viet). The really politically sensitive event was the Vietnamese invasion of northern Laos in 1479, which the Vietnamese authors of a history of Laos published in 1982 left out entirely.² Lockhart shows how Lao historians, though they deal with the invasion in some detail, portray it as a conflict between the ‘feudal’ ruling classes of the two kingdoms, the implication being that no such antagonism existed, then or later, between the two peoples – a usual Marxist

distinction. Similar ambivalence marks later Lao-Vietnamese relations to the end of the nineteenth century when the French imposed a fixed frontier between Laos and Vietnam. Lockhart ends his fine analysis not with the ‘lips and teeth’ ‘everlasting friendship’ of the revolutionary period, but by providing a brief overview of the politics of the historiography of Lao-Vietnamese relations from the perspective of Hanoi.

The section on heritage issues is the smallest, and would be smaller still if the first and last chapters had been included under history and social dynamics respectively, which is where they really belong. Sophie Clément-Charpentier has delved into the colonial archives to reveal both the circumstances surrounding the decision to establish Viang Chan as the administrative capital of French Laos, and the early development of the town. She rightly stresses the political dimension of the highly symbolic decision not just to resuscitate the former capital of Lan Xang (destroyed by the Siamese, rebuilt by the French), but also to construct the governor’s residence on the actual site of the former royal palace (carrying a much more ambiguous message.) Clément-Charpentier delves into colonial motivation in greater detail than the recent history of Viang Chan by Askew, Logan and Long,³ with extensive quotes from documents. She also shows how the regulatory framework encouraged the division of the town into ethnic ‘quarters’ (French, Chinese, Vietnamese, with the Lao pushed further out). Yet the urban plan of the colonial capital remained Lao, marked out by monuments (the site of the palace, the royal vats, the That Luang) and the ancient walls along whose foundations ran the *route circulaire*. Clément-Charpentier includes nine early plans of the city, and I wish this study had been published before I wrote my own overview in *Naga Cities*.⁴

Good use is made of maps in Christian Taillard’s study of the ancient system of water management on the Viang Chan plain, which was so important not just for irrigation, but also for draining away flood waters from both the Mekong and Nam Ngum rivers. This was possible because floods in the two rivers occurred at different times – in the Mekong from melting snows in Tibet, and in the Nam Ngum from rainfall in Xiang Khuang. Taillard first studied the ancient drainage system in the 1970s and regrets that more attention has not been paid to it as the modern city has rapidly grown. Not only does the current city plan largely ignore such natural features, but building regulations are all too frequently overruled for developers with the right political connections.

The next two chapters deal with Buddhist manuscripts. Harald Hundius outlines the importance and success of the Preservation of Lao Manuscripts Program, in which he was centrally involved. In ten years, from 1992 to the end of 2002, the Program inventoried and preserved (*in situ*) some 86,000 mostly palm-leaf (some mulberry paper) manuscripts in 830 monasteries across all 17 provinces. Of these, the most important 10,000 manuscripts have been microfilmed (over three million palm-leaf pages) to provide an invaluable resource for scholars into the future.

Since to copy a Buddhist text is a meritorious act, many texts exist in multiple copies. These are nevertheless important for what they can tell us about different recensions and lines of transmission. Justin McDaniel takes one of these texts (on ordination) as an example of a didactic and pedagogical resource monks may draw upon to organize rituals and provide material for instructive sermons. He argues that the frequent repetition of key words and phrases throughout the text assisted readers, and particularly listeners, to memorize the unfamiliar, but religiously significant, Pali terms, which senior monks would also explain.

In the only chapter devoted to the Lao diaspora abroad, Catherine Choron-Baix focuses on dance as the key defining element of Lao culture preserved by expatriate communities. For these communities, providing they are large enough and resident monks can be found, their cultural core is a Vat Lao, where people can congregate on important occasions and maintain social contacts. But in presenting themselves as Lao to the broader community (in France, where Choron-Baix conducted her study; or in Australia, or Canada, or the United States, where there are also substantial expatriate Lao communities), graceful court dances best symbolize Lao culture and identity.

But the preservation of the court dance tradition outside Laos presents problems. Dance is not something that can be learned from books, of which there are none. It is passed from teacher to student through years of instruction, and teachers who studied at the famed Natasinh School of Dance are few and aging. Children have little time to learn, and those who do must attempt to interiorize, as Choron-Baix explains in a beautifully written passage, a set of values at variance with those of the societies in which they now live.

Choron-Baix believes that after 30 years of economic struggle to establish themselves in new countries, older expatriate Lao are returning to their cultural roots. So are some of the next generation, partly I think because they see their own children

becoming increasingly French or Australian or American, as intermarriage becomes more frequent and even language is lost. But as dance becomes emblematic of Lao identity, it becomes transformed. Court dance was accompanied by a traditional orchestra and singers, resources unavailable to most expatriate communities. Ironically traditional dance is being revived in the LPDR, not as an expression of elite court culture, but as entertainment in response to tourist demand. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as the experience of Bali has shown, for it does preserve elements of traditional culture. But it will be a bitter pill for those forced to flee abroad to recognize that authentic Lao culture must still be sought in Laos, and not in Paris, or Los Angeles, or Sydney.

Christian Culas and Francis Englemann's fine socioeconomic study of the 'ethnic market' in Luang Phrabang has little to do with heritage, except for the assistance given by the Maison de Patrimoine (Heritage House) in ensuring that the market became one of the city's principal tourist attractions. The authors set the market in its historical geographical and economic context (Luang Phrabang as a trading centre for networks that link lowland Lao with Khamu and Hmong), examine its ethnic composition and its economic links to the tourist industry, and compare it favourably with the similar 'hilltribe' market at Sapa in northern Vietnam.

Culas and Englmann note that what they call the 'new Hmong market' (now better known as the night market) is 80% Hmong, almost all of whom are women who sell cotton embroidery and appliqué work. Many Hmong have moved to Luang Phrabang in response to government pressure to end opium production and curtail slash-and-burn agriculture – and to take advantage of educational opportunities for their children. Khamu too have moved into nearby villages, but comprise only around five percent of traders; while the Iu Mien are not represented at all. One reason for Hmong dominance, the authors suggest, is that they are sensitive to what tourists want: none of the Hmong clothing and bedspreads sold in the market are worn or used by the Hmong themselves.

Two articles on linguistics begin the section on social dynamics. Nick Enfield provides a typically thorough overview of the history and current state of research into Lao linguistics, which as he points out is overwhelmingly the linguistics of Lao. What is needed is for the same level of interest to be shown in the hundred or so other languages spoken in Laos, several of which are under threat of extinction. This is not

true of Lao, despite fevered warnings that it is about to be absorbed into Thai. A similar point is made by Boike Rehbein, who argues that what is rather happening is not ‘Thai-ization’, but rather a process of modernization, due on the one hand to political support for a public, national language, and on the other to the forces of globalization, which demand specialized vocabularies for use by professional groups. Rehbein draws on Bourdieu and Wittgenstein to argue that language can only be properly understood by taking into account its sociocultural context; and that context for Lao is constituted by modernization.

Modernization is also a theme in Patrice Ladwig’s study of the current state of the Lao Buddhist Sangha. Ladwig places the changing role of the Sangha in historical context, from the activism of the 1960s through to the revolutionary Buddhism of the early years of the Lao PDR to its current role as the preserver of key elements of Lao culture (as nationalism replaces Marxism as the dominant ideology.) Ladwig examines the social role of Buddhism through the prism of three projects involving the Sangha: care of HIV/Aids sufferers, drug prevention, and environmental protection. All three employ traditional Buddhist morality and forms of intervention, though monks are constrained politically, and are careful not to provoke the ire of the LPRP.

Richard Pottier summarises one small portion of his work on traditional therapies in Laos, the ritual *baci sukhuān* held to ensure the health of a new-born child. His analysis reveals the syncretic nature of the ritual, which combines Buddhist, ‘Indo-Khmer’, and indigenous Tai-Lao elements – the latter evident not just in the conception of the 32 *khuān*, but also in the shamanic role of the *mo mon* conducting the *baci* in calling upon the aid of ‘auxiliary’ spirits. The inclusion of Pali phrases in the accompanying chants, which in Buddhist ritual makes merit, in this therapeutic *baci* provides power to drive out any ‘foreign bodies’ (*kho*) that might have taken up residence in the child.

Grant Evans takes a critical look at the state of Lao peasant studies, focusing on the concept of the peasantry in the light of its apparent disappearance as a sociological category throughout much of Asia. Evans argues that in Laos, however, peasants have not yet disappeared, and that the decline in peasant studies has had an adverse effect – not just in terms of research focus, but on how the Lao peasant economy is understood (particularly by international consultants investigating how to reduce poverty, about whom Evans is scathing.) What is required, Evans argues, is renewed study by economic

anthropologists to investigate how contact with the wider world is impacting on peasant life, in order to understand the transition that is occurring.

Five of the last six contributions are on the anthropology of ethnic minorities in both the north and south of Laos. The exception is a study of opposition to French colonialism in southern Laos from 1945 to 1949 by Vatthana Pholsena, which, like Sophie Clément-Charpentier's chapter, really belongs in the history section – especially in view of its historiographical component. Pholsena pursues a dual approach to the history of this period, juxtaposing an account by an elderly Vietnamese sent to Laos as a young communist cadre to win over the Katu in the mountains of southeast Laos, on the one hand, against a recent publication in Lao glorifying the role of General Khamtay Siphandone as leader of the revolution in southern Laos, on the other. While the Vietnamese account reveals careful planning and infinite patience in winning the confidence of the Katu, the Lao history minimises Vietnamese involvement (and ignores the Lao Issara). Pholsena does not adjudicate between the two versions: the point she wants to make is that what the Vietnamese were doing is part of the history of this time and place, but that we must expect the Lao to construct their own account. For the historian, however, there is a third source, the archives of the French military and intelligence organization that Geoffrey Gunn made good use of in his *Political Struggles in Laos (1930-1954)*.

Of the five anthropological chapters, one has a relatively narrow focus: Guido Sprenger asks whether the Lamet (Rmeet) have totemic clans. Izikowitz in his classic study of the Lamet (1951) reported that they were divided into exogamous clans, defined by descent from a single ancestor. Grant Evans in two recent papers took issue with this interpretation, maintaining that Lamet do not have clans, but rather patronymics (derived, Sprenger says, from origin myths involving particular animals). Sprenger concludes that whether or not the Lamet have clans depends on one's definitions, but on the whole he favours Izikowitz over Evans.

Ian Baird is interested in the Brao concept of spatial organization, and how this might influence the way we understand the vexed question of borders in mainland Southeast Asia. His foil is Thongchai Winichakul, who in his influential *Siam Mapped*, argues that the concept of a defined border as introduced by Europeans never previously informed Siamese thinking about the spatial exercise of power. Yet the Brao, with no social organization above the village level, nevertheless recognise precisely

defined borders between adjacent communities. This is a good point to make. The extent of kingdoms was fluid because frontier *meuang* could shift allegiance; but at the local level people always had a clear idea of the borders of their own social space.

The three remaining articles all have to do with the relationship between upland minorities and the politically dominant lowland Lao. Vanina Bouté reveals how Buddhism and spirit worship continue to coexist in significant religious rituals of the Phounoy of Phong Saly. This chapter should be read in conjunction with Pichard Pottier's study of the *baci sukhuang*, for this is the principal ritual Bouté examines. Of note is that the Phounoy believe people have not 32 *khuan*, but nine for men and ten for women representing different parts of the body (women have an extra *khuan* for their breasts). These are 'called back' in the Phounoy therapeutic *baci* to concentrate strength, as in the Lao ritual. But the ritual comprises two parts: one conducted by monks in the temple; the other by an *atjan* (*acharn*), who expels and bad spirits at the edge of the forest. While the monks gain their power from their knowledge of Buddhist texts, the *atjan* depends on his experience and must have a reputation for being able to command the spirits.

Oliver Évrard examines the process of 'tai-ization' among the Khmu in northern Laos, based on fieldwork he conducted in the Nam Tha valley. There is no doubt that Khmu have been deeply influenced by their contact with politically dominant Tai groups – from language (some Khmu dialects have adopted tones) to wet-rice production to religion (some Khmu in close contact with Tai groups have become Buddhists). That said, Évrard maintains that we should not see what is happening as unproblematic cultural assimilation, but rather as a more dynamic and interactive process that creates a new sense of what it is to be Khmu in 'Tai social space'. Though the state seeks to integrate minorities into an inclusive 'national culture', Khmu have responded in innovative ways that preserve their sense of identity, if with new social and cultural markers.

The last article in the book is an illuminating study by Yves Goudineau on how the ethnology of southern Laos has been constructed over time in a simplistic binary way, contrasting lowland Lao against upland ethnic minorities, differentiated only by the degree to which they have become 'laoicized'. Goudineau begins by examining how 'the south' has been conceived in Lao discourse (as remote and uncultured), and how Lao power was articulated (as *meuang* that consisted, on the Bolovens Plateau and in

the mountains, of little more than a thin Lao net cast across a shifting patchwork of minority villages). To this French colonialism added the tropes of racial purity (in relation to ethnic intermarriage), submission (or refusal, marked by flight from French control and rebellion), and civilisation (determined by the extent to which ethnic groups had entered into a dependent economic and social relationship with the Lao.) The result was construction of an ethnic hierarchy, which relegated the Katu on the upper Sekong River to the status of dangerous and unruly savages. Fantasy took the place of knowledge, symbolised by the very name – for Katu means something like ‘high up there’, and was not used by the people to refer to themselves.

Goudineau ends with the present. The villages of the Katu (who now accept their designation, *faute de mieux*) were obliterated by US bombing during the Vietnam War. Reconstruction and cultural revival were encouraged by the declaration of Sekong as a separate ‘Lao Theung province’ in 1984. Villages took the traditional form of circles of houses around a central communal building, whose construction was marked by an equally traditional ritual buffalo sacrifice – all of which was at variance with government policy aimed at curbing swidden agriculture and primitive practices. So the state has stepped in; villages have been relocated, no longer built in circular form; and the Katu have been deprived of their autonomy, forced into a context that satisfies a Lao conception of what they should be.

This brief summary does not do justice to the richness of Goudineau’s account, which deftly weaves together anthropology and history, politics and cultural analysis. His insights cry out for book-length treatment, which we can only hope will eventually appear. That said, let me make one comment as a non-anthropologist. Sometimes in reading anthropology one has a sense, especially in those studies that are historically informed (as the best anthropology should be), of regretted loss, whether in the past or projected into the future. The anthropology of social groups removed from the wider world is particularly prone to be infused with a form of nostalgia that has buried within it a conception of culture as something uncontaminated by external influences, pure and unvarying in its transmission over time. But all cultures evolve and adapt, and always have. The tragedy in Laos today is that the pace of change is being forced, driven by a combination of greed (for resources) and ideology (of modernization). Évrard’s Khamu, though many have been displaced, retain some freedom to adopt what they will of Lao culture: but Goudineau’s Katu are at the mercy of power they cannot resist, for in the

Laos of today there are no mountains remote enough to retreat to. The power structure of the authoritarian state deprives the minorities of freedom of choice – along with most other freedoms.

This brings me to my final observation. This is a wide-ranging collection, but there remain some notable gaps in its coverage, even by comparison with its predecessor of fifty years ago – René de Berval's *Kingdom Of Laos* (English translation 1959). The arts are under-represented, and there is nothing on education (an egregious failure of the current regime), or the economy (except for the Hmong market), or foreign affairs, all of which were given some mention in *Kingdom Of Laos*. Conspicuously absent from both books, however, is any discussion of politics or administration. These are delicate matters, yet most of the topics covered in this collection are inseparable from politics, which in an authoritarian single-party state like Laos permeate every aspect of life. In fact politics, corruption and the abuse of power is a hidden sub-text in many of the articles in this collection.

One might hope that the next collection of articles on Laos would include research on the politics of the LPRP, center-province relations (including decentralization), administration, justice, human rights, the economics of peasants, and (displaced) minorities, and industries (forestry, plantation agriculture, casinos), land policy, education, health, the impact of transportation corridors, tourism, and the corruption that now pervades the Party and society. Of course this is a hope unlikely to be fulfilled: research into most of these topics would be impossible, and there are no Lao NGOs or organizations independent of the Party with which to work. Yet Foucault's injunction remains a stark challenge: to speak truth to power.

So to conclude, *New Research on Laos* makes a substantial contribution to Lao studies. If some articles stand out (Lorrillard, Lockhardt, Goudineau, to name but three), the overall standard is remarkably high. Several excellent younger scholars showpiece their research, and we can expect to hear more from them. The quality of production is first rate, as one would expect of the EFEO. Putting such a volume together and editing it is a burdensome task, and the editors are to be congratulated.

¹ The five others, in order of publication, are: Jacqueline Butler-Diaz, ed., *New Laos, New Challenges*. Tempe: Arizona State University Program for Southeast Asian Studies, 1998; Grant Evans, ed., *Laos: Culture and Society*. Chiang Mai, Silkorm Books, 1999; Mayoury Ngaosrivathana and Kennon Breazeale, eds., *Breaking New Ground in Lao History: Essays on the seventh to twentieth centuries*. Chiang Mai: Silkorm Books, 2002; Christopher Goscha and Søren Ivarsson, eds., *Contending Visions of the Lao Past: Lao historiography at the*

crossroads. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2003; and the special issue of *Southeast Asian Research* devoted to the politics of history and national identity in contemporary Laos, volume 14, number 3, November 2006.

² No author, *Laos: An outline of ancient and contemporary history*. Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1982.

³ Mark Askew, William S. Logan and Colin Long, *Vientiane: Transformations of a Lao landscape*. London and New York: Routledge, 2007.

⁴ Martin Stuart-Fox, *Naga Cities of the Mekong*. Singapore: Media Masters, 2006.

Justin McDaniel¹

Spirits of the Place: Buddhism and Lao Religious Culture by JOHN CLIFFORD HOLT.
Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009. pp. 329+xiii.

Even though John Holt has been publishing major contributions in Theravada Buddhist Studies for over twenty years, he still manages to surprise the field. In his latest endeavor, Holt makes us reconsider not only what we think about the place of Buddhism in Laos, but the place of Buddhism throughout Southeast Asia. After this book, no longer will scholars be able to separate the study of spirits, local deities, and village and court ritual from the study of translocal "Theravada Buddhism." Besides offering a solid overview of the history of Buddhism in Laos, he makes us think hard about the legacy of Paul Mus and the place of politics, colonialism, and Marxism in the study of Southeast Asian religions.

I did not come to this opinion easily. Originally, I must admit I was skeptical about this book. I was dead wrong. Like Holt's several previous books, this book is clearly written, well-structured, accessible to a wide audience of undergraduates, educated travelers, and scholars new to the field. While it is not meant for experts, it actually does provide experts in the field with much theoretical meat to chew on. It is quite impressive how a non-expert in Lao Studies has been able to provide such a solid overview of Lao Buddhism. I suppose it is his fresh eyes, years of experience in Theravada Buddhist Studies in Sri Lanka and South Asia more broadly, and scholarly diligence and integrity, that has turned what I thought would be an "outsider's" introduction into a provocative and comprehensive study. He discusses his lack of background in Lao Studies well and the limitations of the study in the introduction. However, there are more advantages in this book than limitations.

First come the advantages: This is the first comprehensive book on Lao Buddhism available in English. And the reader does not simply learn about Lao Buddhism specifically, but about ways of approaching religion and culture and Southeast Asia more generally. This would be a good textbook for Religions in Southeast Asia (since it reflects on major assumptions and approaches to the field of Southeast Asian religions in general) and

¹ Associate Professor, Department of Religious Studies, University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, PA USA)

introductions to Asian Religions and Buddhism. In fact, the author's critical reflections on Mus, Tambiah, Weber, and other major theoretical voices in the study of Religion and Culture, makes this book essential for students of religion. Holt shows us that we have much to learn from the ways the Lao people have interpreted and expressed Buddhism. His books makes us question some fundamental assumptions in the field regarding "canon," "colonialism," "animism," "ecclesia," "State religion," "Marxism and religion," "monsoon culture," and the very idea of "syncreticism." His thesis regarding the need to "read" Lao Buddhism "through" the ethics and practices of land-based spirit religions is provocative and timely for a field still struggling to make sense of the role of "local cults" in the intellectual and social history of Buddhism, both diachronically and synchronically. Moreover, his nuanced understanding of the relation of political history and religion is refreshing. Holt does not see Lao religion and culture as merely derivative of Indic or Thai civilizations. He writes "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."(4) For this and many other reasons, the introduction (followed by a short introduction to "Laos") should be required reading for students of Buddhist Studies and Southeast Asian religions.

For the field of Lao Studies, this book also has advantages. Not only is it the best literature review of scholarship on Lao religion to date, but it also contributes new perspectives to both historical and contemporary problems in the field. For example, in the first chapter, dedicated to pre-20th century history, Holt provides a nuanced reading of Mus and emphasizes that "context" in historical studies of Buddhism is not merely the study of political or economic context (the influences of war, famine, taxes, royal decree, foreign guests, etc.). Inspired by Mus, Holt argues that context can also be seen as an "energy" or an "ethos" of a specific place that "is later personalized through the social and psychological experience of *events*; that is, through its existential realization, it is given a conscious social recognition through embodiment."(24; italics in the original) While this statement may seem vague to historians, Holt grounds Mus by showing how Lao understandings of local spirits and the "power of the place is not, therefore, transcendently endowed, but rather is brought to fruition by its subjective social apprehension by [a specific] group."(25) In

this way, Holt sees Lao religion not as a “top down” phenomenon in which the people merely follow royally sanctioned rituals and elite ecclesia, but must be seen from the “ground up.” I particularly like the way Holt starts off this chapter by talking about *phi* (ghosts/spirits) before Theravada Buddhism. Usually, *phi* are put at the end of chapters or books like an afterthought, even though they are the most ubiquitous part of Lao religious life. Here is where I find this study particularly refreshing – Holt is writing a history of Buddhism in Laos, but is starting with religious activities (rituals and beliefs) that existed long before Buddhism existed there. Moreover, these local practices were not displaced or marginalized, he emphasizes, but remain the vehicle in which Buddhism is practiced and understood locally. He does the same thing when writing about religion and politics in Lao history. He argues that we need to look at the “ban” and the “muang” before the Indic conception of the “mandala.”

For the sake of space, let me jump ahead in Holt’s book. After leading the reader through an engaging, albeit brief, history of the development of Lao Buddhism in life under the royal, colonial, and Marxist periods, he provides the most compelling chapter -- “Commodities of the Place: Ritual Expressions and the Marketing of Religious Culture.” Holt uses his “fresh eyes” to try to understand the ways in which Lao Buddhism is flourishing in the modern period under a strict one party Marxist government that was initially (in the late 1970s and early 1980s) quite hostile to the practice of religion in general. Holt doesn’t write off modern Lao Buddhist “revival” as simply a product of marketing to tourists or internet or Thai influence (although more about Thai and even Christian missionary influence especially on modern Lao Buddhist education might have been helpful). Although he does write about the influence of tourist marketing and UNESCO in the official “branding” of Lao Buddhism and Lao culture in general, he shows through his interviews with novices in Luang Phrabang that their lay lives before becoming ordained novices certainly influenced the ways in which they saw their “career.” Moreover, despite some novices who “perform” for tourist cameras and provide stock answers to tourist questions, many novices are extremely dedicated to their practice, but that most of the practice takes place in temples in the early dawn hours long before many tourist wake up and shake off hangovers or late night card games. I thought that this chapter relied a little too heavily on novices from Luang Phrabang and would have been helped by comparative studies in

other, especially far Southern and far Northern areas (for example, I have found the attitudes and daily lives of monks and novices in parts of Attapeu, Savannakhet, and Phongsaly very different from those of novices in Luang Phrabang and central Vientiane). Holt centered his ethnographical work on Luang Phrabang because he wanted to see where the “power of the place” was being most tested by the forces of globalization. In this way, he turned what may have been an overly broad study of modern Lao Buddhism in general into a very useful study of a very particular place and time.

Holt’s study is therefore useful for both students of the history of religions (in its reflections on Mus, Weber, Durkheim, Tambiah, and others) and modern social scientists working in the region. There are a few limitations though. The one problem that many readers may have with this book is that it includes too many lengthy quotations from secondary sources. It relies too heavily on Hayashi Yukio and S.J. Tambiah. While these are excellent sources, there are very good smaller studies (in English and French as well as Lao and Thai) which remain unexamined. For a broad introductory overview (which is how this book is envisioned) it is fine, but the author could be accused for consulting far too few sources, especially Lao language sources, for this book. However, he states from the outset that one of his aims is to ground his study in the historiography of Laos. This book is not simply a literature review though. He is not simply summarizing what other scholars say. Holt identifies major gaps in the field and draws these gaps to the attention of scholars in Lao, Buddhist, and Southeast Asian Studies attention. Second, I would like to have seen more interviews with women and laity. While *mae xin*, *mae khao*, or *mae xi* (white-robed “nuns”) are not as prevalent in Laos as in Thailand or Cambodia, it would have been interesting to hear their opinions on the changes in modern Lao Buddhism. This is a problem Holt acknowledges, and in the text (especially his many descriptions of rituals) and in his notes (esp. #35, pg. 313) he remarks on the importance of women in Lao Buddhist life. While lay practitioners were consulted and many rituals observed, another chapter of ethnographic evidence from the non-ordained world of Lao Buddhism would have made the study fuller. He alludes to a number of conversations, especially about *phi*, with members of the laity (especially in chapter five), but I would have liked to have read more detailed interview transcripts. I would have also liked to learn as much about material culture in Lao Buddhism (images, amulets, ritual implements, texts, etc.) as he

offers on ritual observations (which are excellent, including the appendices on the Ramayana in Laos and the cult of Khwan). However, this is a long book and Holt, like most modern scholars, was under pressure from publishers to keep it under 350 pages. I had the advantage and pleasure of reading an earlier draft of this study and unfortunately much was left on the editing room floor.

There is much more to say about this book, especially Holt's argument about the reason *phi* belief and veneration have persisted in Lao society despite 150 years of colonial, American, Thai, Marxist, and tourist influence, as well as his reflections on "syncretism". Put simply, this is the first major study of Lao Buddhism in almost 40 years and a great addition not only to the fields of Lao Studies, but Religious and Southeast Asian Area Studies.

Oliver Tappe¹

Globalization, Culture and Society in Laos by BOIKE REHBEIN. London & New York: Routledge, 2007. pp. 171.

Although the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party still claims to "use Marxist-Leninist theory inventively" (Vientiane Times, 16 January 2009) for the modernization of Laos, the country's economy is consistently headed towards capitalism and economic integration into the dynamic ASEAN region. Heavily dependent on international financial aid and development cooperation, the Lao government is faced with both economic and political challenges due to the interaction of Laos with the globalized world. Lao society is currently transforming at a considerable pace, national identity politics is replacing socialism, and the mainly subsistence-based peasant economy is being confronted with a growing internationalized market economy.

These tendencies are thoroughly studied by sociologist Boike Rehbein (University of Freiburg), one of the few German experts on Lao language, culture and society. The author provides deep insights into the transformations of the modern Lao nation state which is increasingly affected by forces of globalization. This book presents an in-depth analysis of Lao culture and society. Rehbein carried out extensive field research with a multitude of methodological approaches over a period of more than ten years. As a specialist in Pierre Bourdieu's sociology, Rehbein applies and modifies theories and concepts of the French sociologist, reassessing them in the Lao context. The author develops a creative advancement of this theoretical approach while criticizing Eurocentric models. He comes up with the concept of *sociocultures* which encompasses cultural patterns and social differentiation. In Rehbein's view, different layers of sociocultures and hierarchized fields constitute variable configurations of Lao society. By adopting a historical perspective, he identifies the existence of pre-modern sociocultures within contemporary social structure, stressing the distinctiveness and complexity of the contemporary Lao nation state. Rehbein likewise works out a theoretical framework for analyzing the impact of globalization in non-Western contexts.

After dedicating the first two chapters of his book to theoretical conceptions and a general historical survey of Lao sociocultures, he explores specific fields such as economics, identity politics, language, higher education, music, and religion – or, with

¹ Ph.D. candidate at the University of Muenster (Germany), Department of Social Anthropology.

the author's words, "aspects of the kaleidoscope which is contemporary Lao reality" (p. 143). In chapters 3 and 4, Rehbein discusses the developments and transformations of the Lao economic field, analyzing social structure and economic habitus in both the centre and periphery. Chapter 5 provides the accurate observation that globalizing forces do not necessarily weaken the Lao nation state. Rather, globalization assists in the standardization of the state, e.g. concerning the financial, legal and administrative systems. Yet, these transformations hardly affect the political system, while the party continues to claim strict control over the public sphere and national identity politics. This leads over to a serious study of Lao language (Chapter 6). Discussing Bourdieu and Wittgenstein on language, Rehbein concludes that Lao society now faces both linguistic differentiation and standardization (i.e. sociolects vs. official public language). Furthermore, he explores recent tendencies of hybridization within the Lao academic field (Chapter 7) and the field of Lao music and youth culture (Chapter 8). Finally, the author discusses configurations of Buddhist and Animist belief systems, which in their interrelations and transformations are affected by processes of social differentiation and urbanization (Chapter 9).

Rehbein's merit is to show the complexities of Lao culture and society as it interacts with a globalized world. He presents his findings clearly to scholars and students of both Lao studies and social studies in general. The book should be of particular interest for Lao in exile because it provides interesting insights into current tendencies of their home country, for example concerning popular culture – even though the sociological jargon of the book might be discouraging at the first glance to non-experts.

The chapters of Rehbein's book can be read separately since recurrent theoretical references make them intelligible. However, this means a lot of repetition and redundancies, as the author admits in his introduction (p. 11). Some topics could have deserved even closer scrutiny and call for further investigations. There are many more Lao fields awaiting research (e.g. law, public health, sports, gender relations, ethnic minority sociocultures) for which Rehbein's approach can be highly stimulating and serve as a starting point.

In his conclusion, Rehbein states that the ruling party and the political field still occupies the leading position in Laos, although it is being increasingly challenged by the economic field and "threatened by symbolic phenomena such as language, cultural expressions, non-Lao identity symbols and globalizing cultural trends" (p. 140). It

remains to be seen if the fledgling urban middle-class, more self-conscious ethnic minorities or the internationalization of public discourses might contribute to the transformation of the political system of Laos. Surely, Boike Rehbein will be one of the first to notice.