

**Panel: The Banalities and Intimacies of Power in Laos: New Perspectives on State and Society**

*Convenors:* Pierre Petit, Universite Libre de Bruxelles and Holly High, The University of Sydney.

Order of papers:

1. Christian Lund
2. Holly High
3. Pierre Petit
4. Mike Dwyer

1.

Christian Lund

Fragments of Sovereignty: Resettlement and Land Reform in Laos

Re-settlement and land reform were meant to dovetail in Laos. But moving people around through re-settlement schemes, on the one hand, and classifying all land into one category or another and fixing all land use, is not without contradiction. However the process reveals how the production of citizenship, property and territory hook into each other and together constitute a troublesome process of state formation.

Property rights and citizen rights in their broadest form only exist to the extent that they are produced, endorsed and sanctioned by some form of legitimate authority. In this perspective, citizenship and property and the public authority of the institution are essentially precarious. Rights (citizenship and property) are rights only if socially legitimate institutions sanction it, and the institutions are effectively legitimate only if their interpretation of social norms is heeded. Hence, public authority is continually constructed in the everyday practices of ordinary people and by the recognition by other institutions of their jurisdiction. Jurisdiction is thematic as well as spatial. Hence, the territorialization of these capacities – that is the processes through which spatial extent and circumscription of the power to determine questions of citizenship and property is sought established – is a defining feature of state

formation. All three processes are in themselves complex institutionalizations resulting from specific historical processes of competition over interests. My claim is that by investigating how institutional authority and citizenship rights, property rights and territoriality are recursively constituted we are indeed investigating governance and state formation processes. Moreover, these questions transcend scale and are equally relevant on grand and small scale alike. The ambition of the present work is therefore to provide insight into the *quality* of the organization of state formation at the larger scale through a series of case studies of the conjunction of these processes at the local level.

2.

Holly High

Experimental Consensus: Negotiating with the irrigating state

This paper proposes “experimental consensus” as a key concept for understanding state-local relations in Laos. It illustrates this concept through an examination of the irrigation sector, which for decades has been the recipient of government investment. In the village where I conducted fieldwork, a variety of machines were distributed to rural residents under a policy that required that the value of the machines would be repaid by private farmers through the sale of the second rice crops that the machines would enable. The second rice crop was also intended to supply a Village Development Fund that would in turn finance social investments designed to produce a take-off into economic growth. None of these grand transformations of materialised. Instead, farmers halted second season rice production after only a few seasons, without repaying any of the cost of the machines. They explained to me that they had followed the policy initially out of fear (part of what I term an “oppositional consciousness”) but also out of a willingness to experiment. When the project resulted in poor profits and even indebtedness for the poorest farmers, due to the high cost of inputs and the low value of the rice produced, irrigation was relinquished by farmers with a sense of authority and legitimacy allowed for by the terrain of “experimentation”. Thus what is needed to understand this case of farmer-led challenges to policy is a grasp of the political mode of experimentation, a concept relatively underdeveloped in anthropological and area studies.

3.

Pierre Petit

The multi-ethnic nation and its performance: From catalogue to intimate practice

As with other popular democratic republics, the Lao PDR regime has been based on a modernist and revolutionary ideology since its foundation in 1975. But in this country where ethnic “minorities” represent half of the population and where the State apparatus has been relatively weak up to now, no policy was ever promulgated to break with the whole set of popular traditions, especially since cultural heritage ideologies came (back) to the fore under the aegis of UNESCO and other organizations. Rather, the authorities repeatedly state their plan to make distinctions between “good” and “bad” traditions according to their compatibility with the program of national integration and development. After a discussion about the origins of the political agenda on “multiculturalism” in Laos, I will discuss the role of the Department of Ethnic Groups, based on an ethnic catalogue it has edited recently – and contrast it with the bureaucratic routines of some of its representatives. Through three specific examples (ethnic clothes, sacrifice of animals and traditional celebrations), I will then analyze the ways norms promulgated by the regime have produced a new pervasive frame for the expression of local identities – a frame which is nevertheless enacted and instrumentalized by people who give those norms unexpected new meanings, far away from politically correct assertions.

4.

Michael Dwyer

The cartographic state: Development and the search for state land in contemporary Laos

Although “the GoL” (Government of Laos) remains a convenient straw figure in Lao development discourse today, most who have engaged with this entity recognize it as far more varied and heterogeneous: unified and effective in some arenas; fractured, inconsistent and porous in others. One way in which internal structure is maintained (or, conversely, undermined and reworked) is through the creation and management of statistics – knowledge that renders territory and population not simply knowable, but commensurable at national and sub-national (e.g., provincial, district, village and parcel) scales. The practice of spatial formalization thus occupies a key juncture in contemporary Laos: that where a development agenda predicated on natural resource exploitation and spatial planning meets a heterogeneous landscape of intra-state (e.g., center-local, inter-ministerial, regulatory) politics. In this context, Vientiane’s efforts to inventory local governments’ investment cooperation deals have emerged as a particularly contentious and confusing process because they have raised not simply questions about local authority (and autonomy, accountability, etc.), but about the legal landscape itself. What, in particular, is the proper/legal way to find (or, as it may be, create) state land for concession projects? Can state land be conjured *ex novo*, or is the process constrained (or, conversely, enabled) by villagers’ patterns of farming and settlement? What about by earlier state efforts to create a formal landscape of well-defined land use zones? My talk will examine these questions by looking at one of the mundane “state” practices upon which these questions turn: the storage, management and redeployment of village-scale land zoning maps. Based on fieldwork conducted between

2006 and 2008 in northwestern Laos, my research challenges common narratives about corrupt, inept and technically unsophisticated local officials (as well as a narrative or two about development experts), and locates the finding/manufacturing of state land for foreign investors in the space where technical mapping meets the post-Cold War landscape of the northern Lao borderlands.