

Haunted Landscapes and Ambiguous Memories: Interactions with the Past in Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia

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Sacrifice, Heroism and the construction of a revolutionary lieu de mémoire – The case of Vieng Xay, Lao PDR.

Oliver Tappe

Vieng Xay, today a sleepy town of a few thousand inhabitants, represents one of the most dramatic episodes in Lao history. Between 1964 and 1973, the Lao highlands suffered constant air bombing by the Americans. Alongside the Plain of Jars and the Ho-Chi-Minh-Trail – discussed by Vathana Pholsena and Elaine Russell – Houaphan province in Northeast Laos was the main target of the bombing campaign since it harbored the headquarters of the Lao communist movement. Supported by the North Vietnamese, the Pathet Lao fought a fierce civil war against the Lao royalists backed by the US. When the bombings escalated, the leadership moved into the caves of the karst mountains around Vieng Xay. Thousands of civilians followed this example and a proper cave city with more than 20,000 inhabitants emerged. The revolutionaries built commando centers, warehouses, schools, hospitals and factories inside the caves. Yet, the people's everyday life meant constant struggle for survival.

Today, the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party highlights the legacy of the years in the caves as example of bravery, sacrifice and solidarity between Party and the so-called 'Lao multi-ethnic people'. Vieng Xay emblemizes the liberation struggle of the valiant Lao people against foreign aggressors. Therefore, it plays a key role within the narratives of official revolutionary historiography and museum exhibitions. In recent years, Vieng Xay was promoted as a tourism destination, now attracting many visitors from the lowland Lao cities and from abroad. On the one hand, the hardships of the war years are now presented to younger Lao generations; on the other hand, foreign visitors get aware of a less known chapter of cold war history. Unlike most Lao history books, the official cave tour also illustrates the small fates of the population that suffered from the war. Yet, the relation between heroism and trauma remains ambivalent. Vieng Xay represents regional pride and the commitment to revolutionary solidarity as well as individual suffering and traumatic memories. Official commemorative politics imply the transformation of suffering into sacrifice and heroism – the utilization of memory for ideological purposes. Besides, some aspects of the region's history such as the re-education camps are still suppressed as they would disturb the nicely arranged narrative of the righteous revolutionary struggle. This paper shall discuss the politics of memorial landscapes as media of shaping, reproducing, and controlling collective memory.

Transformed landscapes in south-eastern Laos: From the ruins of war to large-scale 'development'

Vathana Pholsena

This presentation focuses on a rural area in south-eastern Laos located on the Lao-Vietnamese border: Sepon district in Savannakhet Province. This area is predominantly inhabited by Mon-Khmer peoples, who are classified into two groups in Sepon (the Makong or Mangkong and the Tri) but known as one group in Vietnam (the Vân Kiều or Bru-Vân Kiều). However, there is also a significant minority of Tai-speaking Phuthai. The district of Sepon (formerly spelled *Tchepone*) is located in the east of Savannakhet Province on the 17th parallel that divided Vietnam into a communist zone in the north and a non-communist zone in the south as a result of the Geneva Agreements signed on July 21, 1954. Consequently, Sepon constituted a strategic centre and logistics base area for the North Vietnamese Army, and was one of the most important nodes on the transportation network widely known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Today, however, the landscape of (borderless) war – i.e. trails, craters, bare mountain slopes – is progressively giving way to a landscape of (national) development – asphalt roads, large-scale commercial plantations, hydropower projects. Traces of the past are receding in Sepon, though historical layers of ruins – remnants of war and reminders of the immediate post-war period – remain very much stamped onto the everyday landscape. In this paper, I interrogate the effects of this altering landscape on people's war memories, and more broadly, on their dealings with the past and negotiation with the present.

Laos – Living with Unexploded Ordnance (UXO): Past Memories and Present Day Realities

Channapha Khamvongsa and Elaine Russell, Legacies of War

Laos is the most heavily bombed country in history. U.S. Vietnam War-era bombings from 1964-1973 left nearly half of Laos contaminated with vast quantities of unexploded ordnance (UXO). Today, close to 78 million unexploded cluster bombs litter forests, rice fields, villages, school grounds, roads and other populated areas. Over 34,000 people have been killed or injured by UXO since the bombing ceased, and each year there are 300 new casualties. More than half of all confirmed cluster munitions casualties in the world have occurred in Laos. Nearly 40 years on, only a fraction of these munitions have been destroyed. UXO has shaped the lives of generations, challenging their spirit, ingenuity, and cultural beliefs. For those who lived through the war and aftermath, memories are still sharp and painful, while younger generations focus on the future and ways of coping with the current reality.

The presence of UXO in the day to day lives of the Lao people has caused terrible human losses and a heavy economic burden for a country struggling with extreme poverty. From contamination of half the arable land to strains on a grossly inadequate health care system, the impacts of UXO are far reaching. The constant and unpredictable threat takes a psychological toll. Children, particularly boys, are the most vulnerable, making up 60 percent of the casualties. Cultural beliefs and biases toward people with disabilities are challenged by the rising number of UXO injuries, which often result in lost limbs. When husbands are killed or injured, women assume non-traditional roles as the primary worker in the fields or by taking jobs, such as working for the all-woman UXO clearance team. Despite the risks, people have adapted and found creative uses for scrap metal, bomb casings, and defused cluster munitions. But the desperate need for income, has also led people to collect scrap metal for sale, which in turn has caused more UXO casualties.

Urban and rural lands in Cambodia: dealing with the scars of the past, building a memory for tomorrow.

Ariane Mathieu

The years of conflicts as well as the Khmer Rouge revolution and regime have strongly left their marks on the Cambodian land. I would like (i) to present the main transformations undergone by Khmer territories, and notably to underline the radical differences between rural and urban areas, and (ii) to highlight the way the actors manage to live with a kind of reasonable pragmatism in these spaces, which of course constantly remind of the sorrowful past, but should not inhibit current and future life. Besides, I would like to examine how the memory of Khmer Rouge times has been crystallized around specific places, both at national and local levels.

Breathing new life into remnants of war in Southeast Asia

Krisna Uk

This paper offers an ethnographic insight into the survival strategies of local communities living in a post-conflict environment that remains affected by explosive remnants of war. Despite the heavy bombardment of the Ho Chi Minh trail from 1964 to 1975, which destroyed the physical landscapes of Cambodia, Lao PDR and Vietnam, local populations living in former zones of heavy conflicts have developed practical ways to cope with the daily stress of environmental hazards. This paper examines the ways in which ethnic minority villages located in Northeast Cambodia has adjusted its daily livelihood by physically and psychologically coping with the multiple devastations caused by the wars. Whether in the form of live bombs, scrap metal, human remains, individual or collective memories, the material that is processed through collection, recollection, re-cycling and refashioning is key to a powerful therapeutic process that deals with an environment, which is emotionally and physically charged with a violent past. This paper seeks to discuss the extent of local resilience especially when it is confronted with the environmental damages caused by the extensive deployment of technological warfare by external powers. By drawing on the material culture of post-conflict ethnic minority communities, it argues that the life cycle of war-generated objects is illustrative of how the desolated landscapes of battlefields and memories can be ingenuously transformed so as to bear new meanings, take over new functions and embark into a new life.

The legacy of Agent Orange in Vietnam

Susan Hammond

[abstract follows]