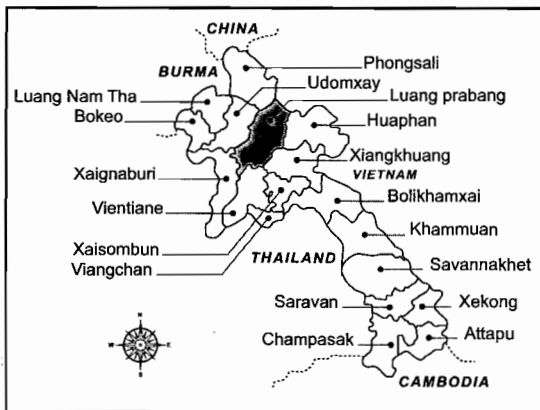


5 *The rural development policy and the transformation of upland/lowland relationships in Laos since 1975*



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My paper gives an overview of the changes that occurred in rural areas of Laos since the start of the communist regime in 1975, in terms of mobility and relations to territory. It insists especially on the effect of the new State regulations concerning the mountain agriculture methods and the resettlement of highland villages to the lowlands. These regulations have transformed, rather than suppressed, traditional forms of mobility in a way that the State cannot always control.



Map of provinces of Lao P.D.R.

Since the independence in 1975 and the end of the war, Lao countryside has undergone a territorialization or “settling process” which has profoundly transformed social dynamics inside the villages as well as interethnic relationships. This territorialization process has gone along with huge migrations, many of them from highland to lowland areas, but also in the lowlands as well as towards neighbouring countries. Some of these dynamics are similar to those experienced in Thailand or in Vietnam but, as we will show, they nonetheless occur in a specific context, from a demographic, ethnic, geographic and political point of view. While Laos is culturally close to Thailand, the share of the ethnic minorities (who constitute overwhelming local majorities) and the ideological perspective which was adopted by the central regime after 1975 differ markedly from its neighbour where the minorities account for less of one per cent of the total population and have many difficulties to get the same legal position as other Thai citizens. Conversely, the Vietnamese interethnic and ideological context may seem close to the Laotian one but population density in the lowlands as well as the technical and human resources are much lower in Laos.

We propose to distinguish three periods in which this territorialization process occurred in a different ideological context and with different features: the immediate war aftermath from 1975 to the end of the Cold War; the period of the 90s and the period since 2000. These three periods have seen the remote ecological and cultural margins of the old Lao kingdom becoming buffers zones which needed to be secured, then borders to be conquered, exploited or developed; and finally transnational corridors to be opened in order to ensure the regional integration and the success of market-oriented policies. This evolution parallels the shift from a people-focused resource system in pre-colonial periods to systems that emphasize control of land and networks of communication: the lowlanders now need uplanders’ land much more than their products (Tannenbaum & Kammerer, 1996: 4). Such a chronology may prove too simplistic since these periods overlap and do not always apply equally to all local contexts in this country. However, it is useful as a first approximation and as a way to fit in the format and the time constraint imposed for this presentation.

From 1975 to the end of the 80s: From margins to buffer zones

Prior to the establishment of the Lao PDR on the 2nd of December 1975, two decades of an international and civil conflict have had a deep impact on the human geography of Laos. Between 1953, date of its formal independence from the *Union Française* and 1973, date of the disengagement of the American troops in Vietnam, the country was progressively divided into two major zones of influence. The lowlands and the Mekong valley were controlled by the royalist troops supported by the American Air Force, while the highlands and north-east were mostly occupied by the Pathet Lao army supported by North-Vietnamese forces. This very schematic overview would need to be detailed since there were actually some highland areas under the influence of royalists military and their American advisers, for instance in the mountainous areas of the South near Cambodia as well as in the North near Luang Nam Tha where most of my fieldwork has been conducted during the past 15 years.

What is important to keep in mind here is that highland areas were for the first time in history thrown in the front stage and became crucial zones to control in order to ensure security or shelter for the troops. They used to be loosely controlled remote areas at the margins of the main regional powers and in less than two decades, they become crucial issues. This was especially true for the highlands at the border of Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia but also for those at the border with Thailand in Sayaburi and Bokeo provinces or near the Chinese border in Phongsali province. While a huge number and a great variety of migrations occurred during this period, two kinds of displacements concerned specifically the highlands and could be said to prefigure their systematic depopulation during the 90s: the displacements for security reasons and those undertaken by the villagers themselves to respond to the call of the new state.

Managing the emergency and refilling the lowlands

During the war, huge movements of population occurred between communist and royalist controlled areas: officially, 27,000 people were displaced in 1958, 90,000 in 1960, and 125,000 in 1962 and

up to 730,000 in 1973 during the cease-fire (Taillard, 1989: 95; Zasloff and Brown 1975: 274). After the change of regime in 1975, more than 300,000 people (including the majority of the country's technicians and well-qualified cadres as well as many members of ethnic minorities who had supported the royalists) fled to Thailand (Stuart-Fox, 1986: 52), from where many of them went to France and to the United States of America. Taking all these migrations together, more than half of the country's villages actually moved during this period of hostility (Goudineau, 1997: 11). These migrations and exodus chiefly concerned the lowlands areas and one of their results was the abandonment, or the under use of many paddy fields in the major plains of the country.

Simultaneously, the communist authorities invited the highlanders to come down and participate to the rebuilding of the country by repopulating the lowlands, refilling deserted towns and cultivating these abandoned fields. This situation was the logical outcome of the egalitarian perspective adopted by the Pathet Lao leaders during the war and the promises of development they had made to the highlanders. Such migrations started as early as the end of the 50s in some areas, especially in the Northern provinces of Luang Namtha, Phongsali and Samneua. They were voluntary, ideologically motivated and undertaken under the influence of local ethnic leaders who were rewarded later by official positions in the new provincial administrations (cases of Khmu and Phu Noi populations for instance, see Évrard 2011) as well as with material support (rice, cattle, construction wood) for their followers. These early migrations should also be seen in some cases as the first attempts to test a policy of collectivization of agriculture, which was later implemented at a national scale between 1975 and 1979 (Evans, 1990).

Securing rebel areas

The fighting during the war were bitter, long, and complex. They created divisions not only between ethnic groups but also within them. The mountainous terrain of Laos made for warfare of raiding, air strikes, and patrols, with conflicts occurring at the local scale over a number of years. First, the French, then the American-backed royalists, and then the eventually victorious Communist

Pathet Lao forces, allied selectively with some highlanders and fought continuously with others. When they finally took power in 1975, the Communists then asserted their control over the highlands. However, some areas were not completely pacified until the late 70s and even as late as the mid-80s. Paramilitary troops trained by the Americans and receiving support from abroad formed counter-revolutionary groups and continued to stage attacks on Lao territory. Often based in Thailand, these rebels looked for support among neighbouring highland villages (mainly Khmu, Hmong, Yao and Lahu in the Northern part of the country). In some instances, they forcibly requisitioned food and men¹.

In order to keep control of the villages and cut off supplies to the rebels, the government decided to remove all villages from unsecured areas to sites along the main roads. This campaign against the subversive groups lasted until the end of the 1980s in several provinces and led to the nearly complete depopulation of entire areas located either along international borders (Phuvong district in Attapeu province at the border with Cambodia; eastern part of Phongsali and Xiengkhuang province at the border of Vietnam; central part of Sayaburi province at the border of Thailand) or forming internal margins inside Lao territory (Phu Bia range in Saysombun area ; Vieng Phu Kha plateau in Luang Nam Tha for instance). In such cases, only one or two villages were usually left on site with a heavy presence of army patrols in charge of watching over the border.

The 1990s: from buffer zones to “new frontiers”

The transformation of the relations between lowlands and highlands areas during the 1990s should be considered first in the light of the shifts that occurred in the regional geopolitics at the end of the 1980s. The warming-up of the relationships between the Soviet Union and China was followed by the withdrawal of the Vietnamese army from Cambodia and the restoration of full diplomatic relations between Laos and China. It also led to a rapid and spectacular warm-up of the relations between Thailand and

¹ For an overview of counter-revolutionary armed groups among ethnic minorities of Laos after 1975 and their actions in the upland villages, see Stone, 1980.

Laos at the end of the 1980s, a few years only after the violent clashes that occurred at the border between Sayaburi and Nan provinces between Lao and Thai armies. The two countries thereafter agreed to set-up a joint Lao-Thai border committee, to bridge the Mekong and to facilitate trade.

Simultaneously, the Lao PDR government progressively accepted to liberalize the economy –while the Party still kept a firm control over the internal political scene. This turn had been initiated already in the early 80s and made official during the fourth Party Congress in 1986 when the “New Economic Mechanism” was officially endorsed. However, it was accelerated by the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and the reduction of the Soviet aid, which was accounting for more than half the total foreign economic assistance received by Laos. The country therefore had to turn toward Western aid as well as toward bilateral agreements with capitalist states. This opened the way to massive investments in hydroelectric projects or in timber and mining industries, which are still on going today. It also meant that the Lao government had to implement development policies following the guidelines of the major international institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB): that entails, among other things, new regulations on access to land.

The state-led depopulation of the highlands...

In this context, the highlands became valuable areas, new “Eldorado” to be conquered for their lushness (water, forest, soil) and used as commodities in exchange for external assistance and private investments. Simultaneously, they were constructed as zones of endemic poverty that had to be “developed”, that is economically and culturally integrated to the rest of the country. In both perspectives then, the highlands were turned as “new frontiers” for the development of the nation. As an outcome, resettlement of the highlanders to the lowlands became a crucial feature of the Lao rural development policy: it allows the State to better control its geographic and ecological margins while at the same time providing a radical method to integrate the ethnic minorities both economically and culturally in the lowland society.

Officially though, Lao government has always insisted on the fact that resettlement was not a policy but only a tool: “*chatsan asib khong ti*” (to create the conditions for a sustainable professional activity on one place) was the expression used to refer to the eradication of slash-and-burn practises, the merging of small settlement into bigger units and the settling of the population in the lowlands near markets and public services. It appears to be an attempt to rationalize the rural development practises: it is less expensive and more efficient from the Lao point of view to bring villagers from remote areas to the existing services, rather than to take the services out to them. It might also be considered a necessity, since there is an obvious lack of space for irrigated agriculture in upland territories: in a country with one of the lowest population densities in Asia, it could indeed make sense to offer these villagers a chance to settle in the larger river valleys (Goudineau, 1997: 17).

Concretely, this means that during the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, local administrations have evaluated and mapped out the capacity of each district to develop specific economic activities (permanent inundated or irrigated rice fields, animal livestock, market gardening and cash crops etc.), as well as the estimated number of families that could be settled and provided with a decent standard of living through these new activities. Then, “*each district regarded as overpopulated according to these criteria organized the migration of its surplus population to other districts or areas that were supposed to have more space to settle new people*” (Goudineau, 1997: 20).

Crucial in this process was the definition of levels of “poverty” which were thereafter used to calculate not only the number of people to be resettled but also the amount of development funds given to the district administrations either by the central State or by the provinces -which are now supposed to find part of their budget themselves by contracting private donors or NGOs. The way this “poverty” is defined and calculated systematically favors lowland lifestyle² and perpetuates myths such as the “nomadic” (or

² When comparing the productivity of wet-rice and swidden agriculture for instance, the calculation only takes into account rice production per hectare, but does not include all the other kinds of food which a swidden provides (maize, taro, various vegetables) and therefore the security net it constitutes for local livelihoods.

“semi-nomadic”³ lifestyle of the highlanders or their “subsistence economy” in order to better advocate the market integration. I am not arguing that there is no hardship in the highlands or that some villagers do not suffer from remoteness but, rather, that the idea of poverty is eminently relative. Highland lifestyles are not necessarily perpetuating it while, conversely, development policies do not always improve livelihoods; they can also generate “development-related kinds of poverty”, which are often more extreme than “pre-development kinds of poverty”: for instance, the poorest of the poor rely less on agriculture than on wage labour and are often found in peri-urban settings rather than in remote highland villages. In other words, poverty is socially constructed, both conceptually and in practice (Riggs, 2005). The current definition of rural poverty, which justifies most of the resettlements done in Laos, is part of a process by which the State also intends to have better access to peripheral land and better control over its people.

The state-led depopulation of highland areas is not an isolated case in Southeast Asia (similar dynamics are at stakes in Vietnam or in Malaysia for instance) nor is the use of resettlement for area-based development policy entirely new in Lao history⁴. However, what happened during the 1990s in Laos is remarkable for at least two reasons. First, resettlements have been massive relatively to the total population of the country: 50% of the highland villages everywhere in the country have disappeared and this ratio climbs up to 80% in some areas (Évrard and Goudineau, 2004). These massive resettlements are remarkable since Lao State did not have, at the beginning of the 1990s, human and technical resources comparable to those of neighbouring countries, such as Thailand or Malaysia, nor the power of coercion and control of Vietnam -where huge resettlements programs were also implemented but

³ As many specialists of Southeast Asia have already noted, mobility has historically been higher in the lowlands than in the highlands. Today is no exception and the urbanization of the lowlands, while often referred to as a « sedentarization » process, implies indeed an increased ability for mobility.

⁴ Prior to the 1990s, resettlement schemes had been implemented already by the French colonial administration on the Boloven Plateau (Riggs, 2005: 106), by the Royal Lao Government with American assistance around Luang Prabang and by the Pathet Lao in the mountainous area of Samneua. However, the Lao government had never defined, until that time, « any long-range program of resettlement for the tribal peoples » (Halpern, 1964: 71).

where a colonization of the uplands (plantation economy in the Central Highlands) by the lowlanders took place at the same time.

This leads to the second remarkable feature: such an ambitious resettlement programmes could not have been implemented in Laos without the technical and financial support of the international donors. It includes the main development agencies, especially the World Bank⁵, because they provided most of the funds used in rural development actions, but also NGOs whose projects have been usually directed towards already resettled villages rather than towards upland villages. Such dependency upon foreign aid was particularly clear in the implementation of the so-called “Focal Sites” which were conceived as “models” for the future of rural Laos. They were designed to receive most of the displaced villages and public investments and to experiment the implementation of new laws regarding forest and land allocation. In 1998, the Lao government announced the creation of 87 focal sites by 2002, gathering together 1,200 villages and 450,000 people (12 per cent of the rural population of the Lao PDR), half of them coming from displaced communities (Government of the Lao PDR, 1998: 26). These focal sites were, right from the start, heavily dependent upon international support: of the 154 billion Kips (around US\$ 115 million in January 1998) of public investment directed toward these Focal Zones in the 1998–2002 five year plan, 128 billion (83%) were mobilized from foreign funds (Government of the Lao PDR, 1998: 31).

...and its contrasted effects

In the course of the last 15 years, this development policy has had contrasted impact at the national level. On the one hand, it allowed the provincial administrations, with the help of foreign aid, to provide basic service infrastructures to many villages, mainly access to clean water, school and roads. The positive impact

⁵ In recent years, the World Bank has become the major international source of funding for land settlement schemes, for instance in Malaysia (the FELDA programme) and in the transmigration project in Indonesia (King, 1999: 80). It also adopted guidelines concerning involuntary resettlements induced by development projects but these guidelines appear less efficient when they are applied to a “settling process” as it is the case in Laos rather than to an involuntary resettlement in the strictest sense.

of these new infrastructures on the daily life of the villagers is obvious and major health or education indicators at the national level have greatly improved over the last two decades. On the other hand, resettlements were often poorly implemented, with sometime dramatic consequences for the villagers during the first years after they moved from their previous site: higher mortality rates, epizootics and insecure livelihoods⁶. There was also the emergence of new, development-induced forms of poverty, and of increased inequalities between and inside settlements. The land allocation programme in particular was considered as a source of impoverishment by the villagers because it directly reduced the amount of land legally available for swidden agriculture while at the same time, transition toward wet-paddy cultivation was hampered by geographic and technical constraints, especially in the North of the country (Chamberlain, 2001 & 2006). This led to a paradoxical situation where land shortage started to occur in some regions in a country that has the lowest human density in Asia (Riggs, 2005: 114; Évrard & Goudineau, 2004).

There were cases where resettlement provided the villagers with new opportunities and proved beneficial. Those who had cash at their disposal and access to institutional or economic networks (including transnational ones) could invest in new activities, such as rubber plantation, and rapidly make good benefits from it. The case of Hmong villagers of Hadyao in Luang Namtha, who resettled from Xiengkhuang at the beginning of the 1990s, is often cited as a good example of such a successful transition. However, the introduction of rubber in the village economies, while presented as a panacea by the local officials, often meets with contrasted results, depending on various factors such as human and social capital, land availability and ownership or food security among the local communities⁷. Since the early 2000s, various studies (see for instance Cohen, 2009) have underlined the limits of the “all rubber” strategy followed by the provincial governments in Laos

⁶ There has been a huge amount of studies and reports on these questions. For a comprehensive overview, one can refer to Baird & Shoemaker, 2005.

⁷ For a comparison between two resettled villages engaged in rubber strategy in Luang Namtha with contrasted results, see Phoukeo Saokhamkeo (2010) *Adaptive Livelihoods Strategies in Rubber Plantation of Small Scale Farmers in Luangnamtha Province, Lao PDR*, Master of Arts in Sustainable Development, The Graduate School, Chiang Mai University, 132 p.

and have insisted especially on the risks concerning ecosystems (a threat for the development of ecotourism), access to non-timber forest products (a threat for food security), land dispossession and landlessness (a threat for prosperity and social security), dependency over foreign markets as well as disproportion between planted area and available labour for harvest. The situation seems even more worrying in the South, where large-scale land concessions and rubber plantations have dramatically turned upland farmers into landless labourers, while in the Northern regions rubber cultivation has been implemented by Chinese companies mainly through contract farming systems, thereby allowing the farmers to retain their landownership (Pinkaew, 2012).

One of the paradoxes of the rural development policy implemented by the Lao government is that, while it officially aimed at “settling down” the highlanders, the resettlements and the transition to market-oriented economy contributed to increase mobility in the rural areas. Partly uncontrolled secondary movements (or “reterritorializations”) followed many resettlements: villagers decided to go back to their old site or they moved to a new one without waiting for the authorization of the district administrations. This could happen at the village level or involve groups of various shapes (household, groups of households, lineages or part of lineages etc.), which used their personal and institutional networks to seize opportunities of relocation in better lowland areas, often in the suburbs of the main cities. This process is particularly clear in Laos where many political leaders at the provincial level are from ethnic background and have encouraged and facilitated the migrations of their relatives towards the main plains and roads. Nowadays, the relocation of entire upland villages tend to become scarcer but migrations at individual or household level is more frequent. Further studies are required to better understand this “background mobility” for, while it is not an entirely new phenomenon, its contemporary characteristics differ markedly from the previous periods: regional contrasts (between South and North, but also inside ethnically homogenous upland areas), multi-ethnic contexts, semi-urbanized environments, transformation of age and gender patterns, new competitions for access to land, development of commercial agriculture, resurgence of transnational migrations networks etc.

Since 2000: from borders to transnational corridors

Since nearly two decades, Mainland Southeast Asia is engaged in a movement of liberalization of flows, either material or human, which is supposed to peak with the implementation of the Free Trade Zone in 2015 among the countries members of ASEAN. Huge investments are currently directed towards roads infrastructures, bridges as well as trains to link China, Thailand and Vietnam, currently the most dynamic economies of the region, with Burma, Laos and Cambodia. International institutions support these investments, such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the latter promoting the implementation of “corridors of development” under its motto “community, connectivity and communication”. Laos joined ASEAN in 1997 and since then it has made of regional integration a key term in the formulation of national development politics. Several bridges have been built over the Mekong⁸, new international checkpoints have been opened on Chinese and Vietnamese borders and major roads have been upgraded to facilitate trade and transit of goods and passengers. Thai, Vietnamese and Chinese private companies became major investors in Laos⁹ and, in return for the construction of infrastructures in the countryside or in the capital Vientiane, they were granted concessions in border areas where they could either exploit natural resources (mostly timber, as in the case of Vietnam) or build “entertainment centres”, including casinos, such as Boten “Golden City” in Luang Namtha, or the “Golden Flower” tourist development centre in the Lao part of the Golden Triangle in Bokeo province. In post-war Laos, the old battlefields become the new market places (Dwyer, 2011).

Land-locked to land-linked (again?)

Several recent studies have already pointed out the dubious social impact of such « frontier capitalism » and what it says about the

⁸ The upcoming 4th Thai-Lao friendship bridge between Chiang Khong and Houay Xay will form the remaining crucial link of the Asian Highway 3, connecting Bangkok to Kunming through Bokeo and Luang Namtha provinces. China funds half the cost of the bridge which is expected to be completed between late 2012 to mid-2013.

⁹ During the last decade, China has dislodged Thailand as the largest investor in Laos. Since 2000, Chinese investment has totalled US\$2.9 billion, compared to \$2.6 billion from Thailand and \$2.2 billion from Vietnam. (*Vientiane Times*, 16 July 2010, by Ekaphone Phouthonesy).

contemporary geopolitics of aid and economic development in Laos¹⁰. Here, I focus rather on the changing relations between people and places and on the transformations of mobility patterns as part as a transition to a so-called “modernity”. The view generally held among international experts as well as Lao officials is that the improvement of road systems and the trans-border connectivity that they supposedly allow are bringing new potentials for economic development as well as new threats (communicable diseases such as HIV, illegal migrations, drugs and security issues, pollution, ecological impoverishment for instance) which should be mitigated by “pre-emptive measures” (ADB 2009, 12).

It is not always clear though what exactly makes the “newness” of these expected benefits and foreseen dangers. Historically, roads, as well as navigable rivers, have always and everywhere been associated with trade opportunities and simultaneously with risks of invading armies, deadly viruses or various forms of exploitation. Geographically, most of the recently built transport infrastructures in Laos (but this is true in other neighbouring countries) are enlargements and improvements of previously existing roads and tracks that have been used for ages by villagers, traders and soldiers. In that sense, the current transition from “landlocked to land-linked” or from a “buffer state to a crossroads” (Pholsena and Banomyong, 2006) is as much a return to a pre-colonial situation, after a period of nearly complete closure, as a real innovation¹¹. Finally, a quantitative argument is also deceiving: recent technological improvements led to an acceleration of flows but while peoples and goods are now moving quicker and in greater numbers, they also become passer-by, with fewer and shorter stops than the old mule caravans for instance. In sum, these arguments point out differences in degrees, not in nature, and they overlook two important dimensions.

¹⁰ See for instance Cohen, 2009 for a comparison of Chinese and Western aid in the post-opium context of Northern Laos; Lyttleton and Nyiri 2011 on Chinese megaprojects and the issue of “extra-territoriality” in the history of China; Keney-Lazar 2010 and Pinkaew 2012 for their analysis of land concessions implementation and social impact in South Laos; Michael B. Dwyer 2011 for similar issues in the North.

¹¹ The main difference lies rather in the predominance of road transportation over fluvial trade, which used to be a major activity and greatly influenced territorial organization, interethnic relationships and economic life in pre-colonial Laos.

The first one is ideological and relates to the value attributed to borders and connectedness. Modern roads, as opposed to old caravan trails networks, were a direct consequence of State building. They were first conceived as a mean to facilitate the control of the national territory as well as of marginal (and often ethnically distinct) areas in a context of amenity between neighbours during the Cold War. Typically, they were connecting a national and a provincial capital, or a provincial capital with its districts, but they rarely extended across national borders. Toward the end of the 1990s, a switch occurred in the public discourse, from geopolitical management to economic growth: the modern roads were then presented as avenues out of poverty (equated with isolation and food insecurity) because they facilitated market integration. This argument was already present in the previous period but it was, so to speak, “contained” inside a national frame: poverty was presented more as a result of the inability of the State to reach marginal areas. Thereafter, it gained autonomy and led to a region-wide perspective in which market-oriented policies, understood as the key to alleviate poverty, aim at facilitating trans-border connectivity.

Secondly, the improvement of transport infrastructures contributed to redesign the social relations between localities as well as inside them. As noted above, the switch from fluvial to road transportation has had major consequences for a country where rivers have for long structured territorial practices and representations as well as economic calendar and interethnic relationships. Roads have contributed to redefine the relations between the lowlands and the highlands, most of the time in favour of the formers. In some cases only, upland villages which were not resettled in the lowlands benefited from the new opportunities offered by the road and were able to keep the economic specializations and advantages they had in previous times. Even those cases however, it is now impossible to keep the market at a distance, due to the increasing share of the cash crops in the local economies. Unfortunately, there are still very little alternative visions for the on-site development of the highland villages. Cattle raising for instance, which could be a profitable activity for them, suffers from the lack of veterinary networks. It is also losing ground due to the encroachment on grazing lands of cash crop plantations.

Besides, the intra-village hierarchies are becoming increasingly disconnected from the relations of production inside the settlements. They become the products of labour migrations or of small entrepreneurship involving in a way or another ability to move and to connect with other localities. Simultaneously, the construction or improvement of roads has been followed by huge resettlement dynamics (mostly from highlands to lowlands, but the reverse movement is also happening in Vietnam), which tend to homogenize the social landscape but which also created what has been labelled as a “new poverty” (Riggs, 2005). Therefore, the array of new economic opportunities brought by the new road is not equivalent for all and it interacts with embedded structures of inequalities at the local level as well as with previous patterns of mobility and territorial organization. In sum, what changed is less the number of people passing-by down the road than the relations between mobile and non-mobile populations, their “connectedness” so to speak.

***Labour migrations among highlanders:
the transformations of old mobility patterns***

A good example of these processes is provided by the transformation of the labour migrations of the Mon-Khmer populations in North-West Laos toward Thailand. These migrations –unlike those of most other highland or lowland populations of Laos and Thailand—are quite an old pattern in this area (at least from mid-19th century) and the upgrading of the A3 highway, a crucial axis in the so-called “Northern Economic Corridor” between China and Thailand has dramatically affected them¹². Therefore, they represent an interesting topic of inquiry to understand what precisely changed in the relation of people to places and mobility in the course of the last 10 years and the opening of the “economic corridors”. I have already given an historical account of these migrations in previous publications (see Évrard, 2011: 90-95) and I will therefore only summarize here the main findings of my fieldwork.

¹² Constructed by Thai and Chinese companies, it was completed early 2008 and it reduced considerably the time of transport between the Chinese and the Thai borders, from more than one day in 2006 to just 4 hours in 2010. Meanwhile, a huge number of highland villages, mostly Khmu and Rmet, have been resettled along this road since the early 90s (see Évrard, 1997: 21-22).

Northern Mon-Khmer populations, and more precisely the Khmu, as well as the Rmet, have a long history of temporary labour migrations toward the main cities of Northern Thailand. Such labour migrations are not unusual for highlanders¹³ in Southeast Asia but those of the Khmu—and of their close neighbours, the Rmet—are remarkable by their persistence over time (probably more than two centuries), their duration (usually several years) and the extended social networks which sustain them. Traditionally, young men travelled to the lowlands for several months, sometimes years, and sell their labour in order to acquire prestige goods, such as buffaloes, bronze drums or gongs which they thereafter brought back to their village. This mobility was then linked to old patterns of interdependence between lowland and highland populations as well as to the ritual economy of the highland villages. Prestige goods obtained through contacts with the outside world were traditionally used during marriages and funerals to perpetuate and reinforce the links between the wife-givers and the wife-takers on one hand, between the living and the ancestors on the other hand.

The origin of such migrations is difficult to trace precisely but it seems that they increased sharply in the mid-19th century following the development of the teak industry by foreign (mostly British) companies in northern Siam and Burma¹⁴. Between the two World Wars, these labor migrations were less numerous due both to the economic crisis and the slowdown of the teak exploitation. But following the industrialization of Thailand after the Second World War the need of cheap labor grew, and companies started to diversify their activities to tobacco plantations, stick lac factories, and import-export activities. As soon as the 50s however, the migratory networks begun to be disturbed by the military and political situation in Northern Laos. From that time on up to the beginning of the 90s, labour migrations were drastically reduced, and those which took place were never completely disconnected from political situation in Laos, either as a motivation to leave or

¹³ Lawa, as well as Karen also migrate in cities to find work, while some groups such as the Hmong and the Mien are known to avoid selling their labour. In the course of the last 20 years, temporary labour migrations also occurred among the lowland Lao.

¹⁴ In 1902, there were 83 timber companies in Chiang Mai, Lamphun and Lampang, among which 59 were British and 22 Thai (Vatikiotis, 1984).

a factor preventing to return home —which remains true today, even if a different way. With the reopening of the borders in the mid- 90s, labour migrations to Thailand however increased again and they now concern a wider array of ethnic groups, including lowland Lao.

The biographies of the Khmu and Rmet migrants collected in Hueysay, Chiang Khong, Lampang and Chiang Mai show that their migration patterns have underwent several transformations since the pre-war period. First, new technologies (transports, communications) made the migration more individual and short-term planned than in the past. Young migrants look for jobs by calling friends who already work in Thailand. They usually leave Laos in groups of two to four people; before, these groups could be 15 or more. Some migrants even go alone and look for a job haphazardly by themselves, visiting factories or restaurants or gathering at certain points of the town. Secondly, while better roads have made traveling easier, the new political context tends conversely to make the migration more insecure. Migrants usually get a border pass on the Lao side, through their village headman¹⁵. This document allows them to stay three days in the Chiang Khong district only. The luckiest are able to apply for longer work permits and visas with the support of their company or patron but many just stay in Thailand illegally. Thirdly, these new political conditions explain why their travels tend to be geographically more restricted than in the past. The origin of migrants today also tends to be more restricted, with most coming from villages settled (or more precisely resettled) near the banks of the Mekong after the war, where temporary migration becomes a crucial component of the local economy.

¹⁵ In Laos, village headmen may act as informal facilitators for such migrations. They provide migrants with contacts in Thailand and keep (unofficial) records of who leaves and returns. Some of them also collect money from migrants before their departure and after their return as a compensation for their silence and unofficial collaboration.

Fourth, while many of the jobs done by the migrants are similar to 50 years ago¹⁶, the social value and livelihood importance of migration, however, are now quite different. Khmu migrants in Thailand used to convert their savings into prestige goods such as bronze drums or gongs or in silver coins (several shops used to be specialized in this trade in Chiang Khong), which were used for ritual purposes in their own society. Today, migrants invest in wood (for houses), irrigated paddy land (which is scarce in resettled villages in Laos) as well as pay for special expenses such as medical cares or education fees. In other words wealth now relates to a house or an individual, not a lineage; it moves quicker than it used to; and the social value given to displaying the kind of wealth acquired through migration is now less. It seems that migration now contributes more significantly for basic needs than it used to do, and it provides a useful contingency plan in the event of emergencies, or the need to raise cash quickly¹⁷. In that sense, it can be said that labour migrations contribute, more than it used to do, to a general strategy of “livelihood in emergency”: consequently, they are often shorter but repeated several times over the bachelor years.

Finally, and not importantly, women are now involved in labor migrations to Thailand while they were nearly absent 50 years ago. They started migrating in the 1990s and now account for about 40 percent of Khmu laborers. Women work in factories, restaurants, shops and guesthouses or as maids. This growth in female migrants probably results from better access to primary education and transportation networks; a greater expectation of women to meet the financial needs of their families in resettled localities; and a growing desire to be part of modernity and to experience life outside the village. It has important consequences for the social life

¹⁶ Some activities have nearly disappeared (such as timber extraction, mahout, or the production of stick lac), some older activities remain such as working in sawmills, rice mills and ceramic factories, or working as gardeners, cooks or waiters. A lot of migrants, both young and old, do also sell their labour on a daily basis, working in maize fields in Viang Kaen, loading trucks and boats in Chiang Khong, or carrying ice, rice or maize in Lampang. Their daily wages may be 100 to 300 baht depending on the kind of work. Monthly salaries vary from 3,000 to 8,000 baht. Many young people coming directly from Laos usually sleep and eat in their working place.

¹⁷ For a discussion on the changes in the social meaning of wealth among the Rmet in Laos, which largely applies also to the Khmu, see Sprenger 2007.

of the villages in rural areas, especially the matrimonial practices, which tend to be increasingly oriented toward the outside, for both young men and young women (ADB, 2009: 15). It is therefore an important topic of inquiry to better understand the “hidden mobility” among the contemporary ethnic villages of Laos, be they resettled or not, as well as the relationship between people and places in a rapidly changing environment.

Conclusion

As in other countries of Southeast Asia, the last four decades have seen the geographical and cultural margins of the old kingdom of Laos becoming increasingly “integrated” into the new Nation State, both politically and economically. Huge resettlement dynamics toward the lowlands have paralleled the (public or private) appropriation of natural resources in the uplands, the construction of an official discourse on poverty among the experts for rural development and, eventually, the (re)opening and the improvement of transnational economic corridors. The economic impacts of such changes vary greatly over time from one region to another, and even sometimes inside a single settlement. What is clear is that the access to modern communication systems, combined with market-oriented policies and resettlement, have profoundly changed the relationships between peoples and places: not only the patterns of mobility per se but also their social implications and the value attributed to connectedness.

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