

Khmhu Responses to the Land Allocation Policy: A Case Study from the Lao PDR¹

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Introduction: Lak Sip Village

Lak Sip is located 10 km outside the town of Luang Prabang on the main all-weather road that links the provincial capital to Vientiane. It is a predominantly Khmhu village, whose inhabitants came originally from several villages in the area and beyond and were regrouped gradually over the last 25 years. For more than 20 years, Lak Sip village has been a pilot site for several bilateral development projects by the FAO, and is currently one of the sites for an MSEC multidisciplinary research programme involving the French IRD and Lao NAFRI researchers².

The village administratively belongs to the Luang Prabang district of Luang Prabang province. The area of the village land, including the village itself, was delimited at 433 hectares by government authorities in 1975. The altitude of the village is around 430 m though parts of its land rise to above 700 m. In general, the village land can be considered mountainous with slopes ranging from 3% to more than 35%. Luang Prabang province has a tropical wet-dry monsoon climate with considerable temporal variation in rainfall. Of the 1,400 mm of average annual rainfall, more than 90% falls during the hot and humid rainy season from April to October while the November to March dry season is cold and mostly dry.

¹ The case study presented in this paper is the result of several months of field work conducted in the area by a multidisciplinary team from the MSEC and NAFRI/IRD Projects. I chose to use the English transcription from E. Preisig's books on the "Khmhu" livelihood" (Simana and Preisig 1997).

² Lak Sip village land includes the Houay Pano study catchment of the Managing Soil Erosion Consortium (MSEC), a multicountry collaborative effort at understanding better land degradation and finding potential solutions in the upland areas of Southeast Asia. The MSEC is coordinated by the International Water Management Institute (IWMI), with substantial contributions from France's Institute of Research for Development (IRD) using Lao researchers from NAFRI (National Agricultural and Forest Research Institute).

The village is under strong influence from the nearby town as more and more young people move out to seek employment in Luang Prabang. There are a growing number of commercial opportunities such as small shops, taxis or the selling of vegetables in which Lak Sip villagers are regularly involved. Lak Sip is often referred to by provincial authorities as a model village. For example, several district and provincial officials come to the village to celebrate the Khmhu New Year. Similarly, villagers are part of the Ethnic Festival performed each year in Luang Prabang. The village has been part of many agrarian and development projects in the district and is often visited whenever government officials from Vientiane or foreign visitors pass through Luang Prabang. Nevertheless, there were and still are many tensions both amongst the villagers themselves, and between village leaders and the local authorities. For example, the village's electricity bill has been unpaid for several years. There is poor involvement from village leaders in projects supported by the district and provincial authorities, and sometimes a direct challenge is made, as when a former village headperson encouraged villagers to extend the slash-and-burn practices despite the government ban. In many ways, it can be said that Lak Sip is quite representative of many minority villages in the Lao PDR nowadays.

Lak Sip is nowadays considered a Lao village by the provincial authorities though the villagers are mainly Khmhu, regrouped here since the early 1960s. They originally came from five different villages of various backgrounds. Many Lao, mainly from Luang Prabang, have settled here in recent years. Prior to 1975, there were several Hmong hamlets within Lak Sip territory, but these people fled in 1973-1974. Some relatives of these Hmongs are today attempting to claim old fields farmed by their forefathers. One Yao family is running a poultry farm, and Chinese from Yunnan have started a brick factory on a block of land, not far from the village area, that was previously controlled by the Lao army. With many movements of groups since the late 1950s, these fluctuations in the local population are representative of both the local and national history.

Settlement on Lak Sip village land began in 1962 when three families, two from the neighbouring province of Udomxai and one from the neighbouring district of Meuang Nan, founded the village of Houay Oup on the current site of Ban Lak Sip. Others followed these original families, often fleeing from the war in the northern provinces (1954-1975). Ban Lak Sip was formally created after the introduction of population resettlement policies following the 1975 revolution. This was done with the relocation of five neighbouring villages. Since that time, the village has experienced three main immigration phases. In 1975-1976, the mainly Catholic population from the neighbouring village of Houay Tong was moved to Ban Lak Sip along with two families from another nearby village (Ban Kiupapai). In 1982-1983 the families of Ban Naxone, located less than 1 km away, were moved here. Finally, between 1996 and 1997,

several households living in Houay Nok Pit, 2 km into the mountains, moved to Ban Lak Sip³. By 2003, the village population had reached 503 inhabitants.

Ban Lak Sip's residents are involved in a variety of farming activities for their livelihood, though annual cropping – in particular upland rice production – constitutes the single most important source of livelihood for virtually all households. Annual cropping takes place within a shifting cultivation system, and plots are now commonly cultivated for one or two successive years before a three-year fallow period.

The cropping process generally begins in February when plots under fallow are slashed. In March, the fields are burned and the soil usually left bare until the beginning of June. Crops are then planted and harvested around November. While this farming cycle aligns production processes with rainfall it also means that the period with the least cover for the soil coincides with the time of the highest rainfall. In addition to upland cropping – often interspersed with the growing of vegetables – and vegetable production based on a 'continuous' cultivation system, the collection of firewood, mushrooms, bamboo shoots, rattan, and grass, the hunting of mainly small rodents or birds, as well as livestock farming and perennial tree plantations also form important land-based livelihood activities.

Lak Sip, formerly called Houay Oup, was previously occupied by Hmongs, who used most of the land, but it is not clear if the village was created by them or by other groups before them. In the early 1990s, the total area of the five villages, mentioned above, was declared a national forest and is now protected by the new land and forest laws. In 1995, the forested areas were zoned and categorised according to the new Lao classification. It resulted in a drastic shortage of arable lands that triggered movements of villagers away from Lak Sip. There is not enough land now available for all the villagers to farm, thus forcing people to find other alternatives: employment in town, work at the brick factory and migration, in order to survive. Moreover, the yield is decreasing each year, while soil erosion is increasing and fewer alternatives are available. The growing impoverishment of villagers has been noted as a direct consequence of land allocation (Lestrelin and Giordano 2004).

The resettlement and land classification policies as applied to Ban Lak Sip have been successful in meeting two of the primary objectives, namely encouraging farmers to shift from slash-and-burn agriculture to sedentary

³ In 1996–1997, 24 families moved from Houay Nok Pit. It seems that most of them, against district advice which had planned to move them closer to town, chose to settle in Lak Sip in order to remain closer to their former village (personal communication from the head office of the District Agriculture and Forest Office, DAFO).

production, and to develop market-oriented produce. However, these same policies have also engendered an artificial land shortage without providing either additional resource for farmers to adapt to new conditions or, as yet, meaningful alternatives for livelihood. In response, farmers have combined shortened fallow, lengthened cropping periods, and increased labour – especially for tillage and weeding – in an effort to maintain crop production and food security. The unfortunate outcome of these changes appear to have been a decrease in land productivity, a deterioration of working conditions and an increase in land degradation and soil erosion – the exact opposite of the ultimate goals of these policies. Lak Sip with a highly mixed population, a lot of internal conflicts, a growing social laxity at the village level and proximity to a main town, gives an image of a much unstructured village compared to others in the same district, which are more isolated or mono-ethnic in composition.

In recent years, Luang Prabang and other outside pressures have had an increased impact on the lives of villagers and village resources. Several plots of land, formerly part of the village asset, have been sold to people from Luang Prabang who turned them into teak plantations or vegetable gardens. This has resulted in villagers being used as a labour force on their own land. Various individual short-term strategies and initiatives, prompted by the land allocation, have accentuated wealth differences between villagers. The overall failure of the EAO project and a succession of new rules and laws have contributed to reinforcing the negative feelings of villagers towards district and provincial authorities.

Land Allocation

Pilot land use planning activities were started in the late 1980s. Land use planning at the village level was identified as a tool to improve protection and management of natural resources, to clarify boundaries between villages and to differentiate between areas that could be used for agricultural production from those in need of protection. Furthermore, land use planning was seen as a precondition and a step leading to land allocation for residential areas and agricultural plots that become part of the poverty alleviation efforts of the Lao government.

In 1993, the government created a National Land Use Planning and Land Allocation Programme (LUP/LA). It was mainly the Lao-Swedish Forestry Programme (LSFP) with its sub-component on "Participatory Village Development and Sustainable Land Use", which assisted the Lao government to develop and institutionalise the LUP/LA approach and conduct extensive capacity building measures. Various other donor-funded projects also supported the LUP/LA programme financially and technically. Based on the experiences

gained in the LSFP target provinces, a national LUP/LA manual was published in 1997 and revised in 2001. The LSFP has produced numerous technical guidelines, working papers and brochures further describing the proposed LUP/LA approach.

Administratively, the Lao PDR is divided into 17 provinces and one municipality (Vientiane) district comprising more than 10,000 villages. National funds were made available to the provincial authorities in support of the LUP/LA programme. Provincial and district LUP/LA steering committees, under the chairmanship of the vice-governors, supervised the training activities, selected priority areas and coordinated implementation. While the district and provincial agriculture and forestry offices (DAFO and PAFO) were responsible for the overall organisation of LUP/LA activities, it was mainly the forestry staff who took the leading role in the implementation of the programme. In numerous cases, due to the lack of staff in DAFO, other institutions such as the Office of Finance, the army and sometimes the police were requested to second additional staff to the LUP/LA teams. In recent years, the LUP/LA programme has been continuously reduced due to the lack of funds, but the general target of reaching all villages by 2005 is still being maintained.

It is reasonable to question how a programme that is apparently people and community oriented, and which requires strong local participation, can have such negative side effects. Often, with new land reforms or agricultural policies, the initial ideas are rather good but the implementation process is very poor (Putzel 2000). This is precisely the case with the land and forest allocation in the Lao PDR. The "focal site" strategy had all the ingredients to be successful; it advocated a centralised, very participatory area-based development and aimed to promote the empowerment of local communities. But as pointed out in many reports, success was rarely achieved and the pitfalls were numerous. One quotation says it all: "However, repeated evidence indicates that as currently practised, land allocation may aggravate poverty." (UNDP 2001).

The main criticisms of land titling can be outlined as follows; with poor implementation, such a policy may lead to loss of control of land, generate growing class inequalities (in many instances small farmers are forced to sell) and prompt displacements (Evrard 2002). It has been pointed out that non-uniform practices by district and provincial agriculture officials during the implementation process led to lowlanders taking advantage of the system. They cleared some land in order to gain title to upland areas. Meanwhile, to grow sufficient rice, many villagers were forced to travel to remote areas or old village sites, and to swidden farms in old abandoned fallows or forested areas that had remained unnoticed by or were inaccessible to officials. This poor implementation was not in accordance with policy objectives and induced severe

hardships for swidden farmers. For example, fallow periods were reduced by three to four years at the most, leading to insufficient rejuvenation of the soil and a lack of biomass for forest regeneration. Taking into account the various social, technical and natural factors combined, it has been recorded that in most of the cases, yields fell by 50% (ADB 2001).

The implementation of the land reform associated with forest zoning led to a change in the territorial perception of most villagers. Their new perception was of two mutually exclusive categories of space: where swidden was authorised and where it was not. According to their former space classification and beliefs, if swidden was not permitted in an area, then it was not forest, and consequently it did not require any specific protection from the community since it no longer belonged to them. It is similar with conservation campaigns that ban hunting activities; they are well perceived locally only if they have direct effects on increasing wildlife resources for future hunting purposes (Johnson et al 2004). According to farmers, forests are defined according to their uses: wood and timber stock; reserve of future arable land; protection of spring for paddy fields; wildlife reserve; and sacred or ceremonial purposes. If decision-makers want to encourage communities to take forest preservation into their own hands, these traditional uses of forests lands cannot just be ignored, as has been the case so far.

Directly and indirectly, the first and main effect of land allocation has been to increase pressures on land in almost all villages where the programme is established. As a result, there are increasing social tensions between recent migrants to a village, following government-sponsored resettlement, and the original or more established inhabitants. Tensions are also increasing between neighbouring villages as a result of a new type and conception of the "border" (or limit) between villages. In the traditional system, there existed some areas with diverse and legitimate claims from surrounding villages, as well as some kind of co-management of these border spaces by the various, neighbouring villages. Now there are "administrative spatial units" (*khét phok khong ban*), i.e. separate and homogenous space units as defined by an administrative process. With this homogenous definition of spatial village units with exclusive ownership and management rights officially recognised for one single village, the traditional overlapping rights for some activities (hunting and wild-fruit harvesting/gathering) are no longer jointly managed, causing an increasing number of disputes over these rights.

Situation in Lak Sip

While Lak Sip village has not yet been subjected to the Land and Forest Allocation Programme, it is under the LUP/LAP. Therefore, though there are

already numerous rules and restrictions regarding the management of land, no official titling has yet been performed with individual households or at the village level. The situation as observed throughout 2002 and 2003 is briefly outlined in the following paragraphs. Since field research is still under progress, more comprehensive results should be available in the coming months. Published materials on this village are already available in other research areas (de Rouw, Kadsachac and Gay 2003; Lestrelin and Giordano 2004; NAFRI-IRD-IWMI 2003).

Below is a brief description on how land reforms were implemented in Lak Sip village and the direct effects it has had on people's access to arable land. It is from a study conducted by two scientists in order to evaluate how conservation initiatives, such as the land allocation may in some cases directly lead to land degradation.

"As practiced in Ban Lak Sip, the allocation programme has consisted of a simple agreement between village authorities, organised in a committee for the occasion, and the national authority represented by the District Agriculture and Forestry Officers as well as other district financial or planning officers. The agreement reached determined the boundaries of the land available for agrarian purposes, with the remaining land (old fallow, pre-existent forests, summits and riparian land) classified into various categories of restricted use to be managed as common property of the village community. Agricultural land distribution within the village community remained with village authorities who were instructed to limit each household to three plots. This simple restriction, to which was later added a rule limiting fallow periods to five years, was designed to reduce cropping rotations, and in line with rural development objectives, make shifting cultivation no longer viable. The area put aside for agrarian activities was set at 136 hectares (31% of the village land). Protected areas (*paa sangouane*) and production forests (*paa tamgkan palit*) were set at 281 hectares or 65% of village land while the remaining 16 hectares was devoted to 23 houses and other buildings. Most of the land bordering streams and located on the hilltops, crests and upper slopes was classified as protected forests and banned from agricultural use. While the land reclassification programme largely succeeded in its goal to preserve forest cover over a major part of the village land, a secondary effect was a sudden and substantial reduction in the agricultural land available. Brought to the household scale, in one year the average agricultural land availability was reduced by one-third, from 3.9 to 2.7 hectares" (Lestrelin and Giordano 2004).

Coping Strategies

As always, when faced with a situation created by outside forces, either from natural disasters or from the interference of other people upon their livelihoods, farmers in the Lao PDR have come up with various coping strategies in direct answer to the implementation of land reforms and its immediate aftermath. These strategies are treated in detail in several reports (ADB 2001; Evrard 2004; Jones 2004; Lao Consulting Group 2002; Thomas 2003; UNDP 2001) and are listed below, followed by a case study from Lak Sip Village.

These strategies vary depending on the location, local opportunities, time of the year, and significance of change or ethnic group. They can be placed in the following categories, which are not mutually exclusive: increased reliance on natural resources, either for self-consumption or sale; rice for work or wages, either within the village or outside; sale of produce, livestock and handicrafts; borrowing of rice; sale and exchange of NTFPs; forest food resources; sale and exchange of poultry and pigs; cutting trees for timber sales; changing of eating habits; migration. These strategies are often conducted on an individual basis and with short-term objectives. They are very damaging, both socially and environmentally, but are employed because they are unavoidable and badly needed. The immediate causes and impacts of these strategies must be listed, analysed and corrected before the situation deteriorates further and slips out of control.

In Lak Sip Village, selling of plots of land, plantations and timber is being recorded in increasing numbers. Work is sought on rich people's fields, in town or at the nearby brick factory. Several farmers have cleared old fallow in remote areas and if fined, have interpreted this as the price to pay for getting access to land. Some farmers have hired out their fallows to people from neighbouring villages, despite the shortage of land, in order to generate the cash required to pay land taxes. The development of small enterprises like tuk tuks or small shops is noticeable, and in recent years the number of people leaving to seek work in nearby towns has increased greatly. This is especially true amongst younger villagers resulting in a shortage of labour. Sale of NTFPs and trafficking in wildlife is booming, as is the raising of small livestock, despite many thefts and diseases.

For the purpose of this paper and in order to illustrate how farmers develop strategies to adapt their practices or perceptions according to new constraints, I have chosen to concentrate on one initiative, the "clearing of old fallows" for several reasons. Firstly, because we were able to follow it almost step by step throughout the cultural calendar and through various important rituals between 2002 and 2003, both at the level of the decision-making process and the

occurrence of various events and people's reactions. Secondly, because it seems very revealing of a deeper identity crisis more than just the lack of arable land, that by clearing old fallows those Kmhmu farmers were expressing some ethnic revival initiative and their renunciation of the land allocation. Finally, because it was a direct challenge to both the local government authorities, as well as to some Kmhmu from Lak Sip village.

Clearing of Old Fallows in Ban Lak Sip

In early 2002, the former headman from Huay Nok Pit, gathered some relatives together and decided to clear some eight to 12-year-old fallows that were located outside the current village territory, delimited by the district authorities but within the land of their former village⁴. According to the headman, the decision was made for three main reasons: there was not enough land in the Lak Sip and there was a need to extend the area of land allocated to villagers; some Hmong people had been hunting and collecting various forest products in the Huay Nok Pit area. They were a potential threat if they decided to open new fields in the abandoned territory. The former residents from Huay Nok Pit were Kmhmu people and as such it was their sole right to cultivate these plots of land used formerly by their parents or relatives.

Apart from being the former headman of Huay Nok Pit, that man was at one stage one of Lak Sip's official village leaders. At that time he was in charge of reporting to local agriculture and forest authorities any violations regarding the felling of trees in protected areas of Lak Sip. While he held that position he had acquired a lot of legal knowledge. He also had the opportunity to establish for himself and his close relatives a good network amongst Lao officials in Luang Prabang. The areas that he and his relatives chose were located mainly underneath a high power line. He quoted a rule from the Lao Electricity Authority stating that large trees had to be pruned every 10 years, or even cut down should they pose a risk to the power line, especially in remote areas. In this particular case the trees were far from being a potential risk since the power line was three times higher than the highest trees. Nevertheless, he approached the authorities with this argument and no one seemed interested in questioning his initiative. Neither did local representatives from the Lao Electricity Authority or DAFO who visited Lak Sip to check if the trees represented a danger or not.

The man, Bouthan, and his close relatives received support for their initiative from the elders of Huay Nok Pit, now settled at Ban Densavanh, a

⁴ According to local people, a similar attempt had been made several years earlier but it had prompted a quick reaction from the DAFO staff and the Kmhmu who had initiated that move had to abandon their plan.

village not far from Luangprabang Airport. This village, which is the new location of the spirits' altar from Huay Nok Pit, was the place where Bouthan and his relatives had refused to move to when they had had to leave Huay Nok Pit in 1997. Once the village was abandoned, the altar spirits had to be moved and the oldest people chose its new location. The village spirits' altar, according to Kmhmu beliefs, is central to establishing and maintaining good relationships between human beings and the various spirits that inhabit the village territory (mountain spirit, water spirit, and wild animals' spirits). Once a year in November, after all the rice has been harvested, the village elders perform a ceremony at the altar. All households make offerings ranging from poultry to buffalo. Only the village's male representatives are allowed near the altar. This annual ceremony is performed to ensure the village spirits' support to all households in the coming year (health, wealth, good yields, etc), and to thank the spirit for previous yields. Thus, this support was very much like an approval from the Huay Nok Pit village spirit of Bouthan's initiative and it reinforced his claim.

Bouthan and his relatives from Huay Nok Pit are definitely the most cohesive social group within Lak Sip, as well as the ones who have preserved most of the Kmhmu's religious, cultural and social beliefs and practices. For example, the annual ceremony at the Lak Sip spirits' altar has long been abandoned. Many of Lak Sip's Kmhmu residents are either Buddhist or Catholic and who have over the years developed some sort of syncretism in religious beliefs. When questioned about their ethnic identity, they prefer to present themselves as Lao Theung, rather than as Kmhmu, thus emphasising the government's classification⁵. On the other hand Bouthan and his group have always claimed to be Kmhmu and above all Huay Nok Pit people. Their cohesiveness and their internal autonomy within the village is reflected in their houses which are all grouped together, forming delimited blocks within Lak Sip and facing in the direction of their forefathers' land.

All the people, men and women alike, were actively involved in various stages of preparing the fields and helped with all agrarian tasks when needed. In order to achieve this, they claimed to have used the old "Kmhmu system" of mutual aid, no longer practised in Lak Sip. Furthermore, no wages were paid for the entire work. This is unlike that done with other residents of Lak Sip who rely largely on paid labour, either to cultivate their own fields as a result of land

⁵ This classification was elaborated in 1975 and although officially abandoned is still widely used when referring to ethnic categories (Schliesinger 2003). It differentiates people according to artificial criteria, such as the altitude at which they are supposed to live: Lao Loum (lowlanders); Lao Sung (highlanders); Lao Theung (hill people). Moreover, they are all vested within the Lao ethnic group, regardless of ethnic, cultural or linguistic differences. A similar classification was used in Thailand in the late 1980s.

degradation (Lestrelin and Giordano 2004) or to improve their standard of living according to their needs (Daviau 2004).

In Lak Sip, most of the social and ritual customs connected with agrarian practices have been gradually abandoned. The Kmhmu from Huay Nok Pit were very casual in their observance of these rituals, at least when they were cultivating plots of land located within the Lak Sip area. However, for the clearing of old fallows in the Huay Nok Pit territory, they followed carefully, right from the beginning, all social rules and ritual practices that used to be performed in the traditional Kmhmu system. For example before cutting down trees, permission was sought from elders and authorisation from the former users of the plots. Then specific markings were made on the larger trees to demarcate individual plots. Prayers and offerings were made to land, forest and soil spirits. Bouthan, who is an *ikon*, or traditional Kmhmu priest from Huay Nok Pit, was the first to perform each of the agrarian tasks since he represents the fertility and harmony that is needed by farmers to grow rice within Kmhmu territories (Evrard 2001). Afterwards, important days for slashing, burning, sowing and harvesting were chosen with the help of a local *Mo Cam*, who specialises in the Kmhmu calendar⁶, unlike in Lak Sip territory where the Kmhmu calendar was used only to choose the appropriate days for burning and sowing. Bouthan and his relatives performed appropriate agrarian rituals at each stage of the preparation of the fields and throughout the entire agrarian calendar. One other major difference was that most of the ceremonies were conducted in the Kmhmu language, which was not the case for ceremonies performed by the same people when cultivating within Lak Sip territory. Only harvesting ceremonies are conducted in both Kmhmu and Lao languages. Bouthan explained to me that since the rice soul was on its way to Lak Sip, considered by the Huay Nok Pit people a Lao village, they needed to use both Kmhmu and Lao since the rice was passing from Kmhmu to Lao territory⁷.

As one could expect, with such long fallow periods, the yields were very good in these places and, prior to harvesting time, fields were described as being "fully black with rice". The colour black is associated with the notion of "plenty and security" amongst the Kmhmu. Special varieties of black rice, very

⁶ The Kmhmu calendar is quite complex. It is based on the moon cycle and extensive knowledge of seasonal variations that are important for farming, as well as on mathematics. The result is a combination of a 10-day week with a 12-day cycle. It seems inspired from the Chinese calendar. For more details see Evrard (2001).

⁷ The return of the rice soul to the village after harvesting is most delicate. Before sowing, the rice seeds are taken from the village to the fields during which the rice soul is considered as fragile as a child. Once harvested, there is a strong risk that, if not helped by the right people and appropriate prayers and incantations, it may lose its way between the fields and the village, or get corrupted by negative spirits. This is why during harvest, only villagers are allowed in the fields and all outsiders are usually banned from the village's territory (Tayanin 1994).

important in many rituals and offerings throughout the year, are planted near the field's hut and are the last to be harvested (Tayanin 1994; Evrard 2001). However, for Bouthan and his relatives, this abundance of paddy was attributed not to natural factors but a vindication of their right to cultivate land that was their own and it showed that they had the full support of all the spirits in the area.

I have only selected the main events of this initiative that, according to my understanding of the local situation, reveals several local tensions and conflicts as well as a revival of ethnic consciousness that was expressed at different levels.

Local Tensions and Conflicts

According to local authorities from the Forestry Department, the Huay Nok Pit people had attempted to get authorisation to return to the location of their former village and cultivate fields but were denied permission. Consequently, they had no alternative but to acquire land in Lak Sip. Since all arable land available had already been allocated to residents, it was not possible for them to be allotted land on the basis of kinship. Thus, they were forced to sell some cattle in order to purchase land from their relatives from Lak Sip. Subsequently, the former residents of Huay Nok Pit, who were very bitter on that particular issue, interpreted this as a breach of Kmhmu traditions.

Further tension related to land access arose from the fact that many of the Hmongs' relatives or their offspring, who once occupied the area, were attempting to get access to arable land in villages whose populations had moved to Lak Sip. Huay Nok Pit was one of the villages under such threat. Some Kmhmu in Lak Sip, especially those, who had taken over Hmong houses and properties when they fled, supported the latter in their land claim strategy. This support triggered further internal tensions amongst Kmhmu residents of Lak Sip.

It is also very clear that some influential Kmhmu individuals from Lak Sip took the opportunity of the land survey to accumulate land for themselves and their close relatives⁸. The same people sometimes favoured outsiders rather than Kmhmu from other villages when distributing land in order to make a profit at a later time. This was also a good opportunity to establish a network of dependants that would be easier to control than relatives. Similarly, although there was a shortage of land in Lak Sip, we recorded several cases in which uncultivated fields were rented to Hmongs rather than to Kmhmus. The reason

⁸ This is not an isolated example of the inequality in land distribution resulting from the land survey. Many of the people directly involved in the survey took the opportunity to favour their families in the land distribution process (Daviau 2004).

of this is not clear but it has contributed to sharpening internal conflicts amongst Lak Sip's Kmhmu residents.

There was also a specific conflict involving the province's former vice-governor and the Huay Nok Pit leaders. The politician had used his influence to log in the Huay Nok Pit sacred forest, near the cemetery, without their approval. They and the villagers, who had left the village not so long before, felt betrayed as he had promised them that he would support their claim for fertile land and would ensure protection of their former territory. However, more than his misconduct, they were afraid of the reaction from the village spirit (*phi hor*)⁹. This spirit is potentially dangerous if ignored or neglected by those inhabiting the area regardless of who had initially breached the taboos, such as logging near a cemetery in a sacred forest. Thus, the entire Huay Nok Pit community was under the threat of the spirit's revenge and they needed to perform specific ceremonies (Kmhmu rituals, usually performed thrice a year, to restore harmony between the local spirits and human occupants). Therefore the clearing of old fallows was an opportunity to re-enact some ceremonies and to re-establish ties between the Huay Nok Pit leaders and the village spirit.

In regard to these tensions and conflict over the land, the district agriculture and forest authorities had chosen not to enforce strictly the land allocation rules in Lak Sip village and to let the villagers settle land disputes and conflicts amongst themselves. These local authorities were and are aware of the shortage of land and do acknowledge traditional land rights as long as they do not conflict with the current situation regarding the use of land. This was no longer possible, as in recent years two former headpersons of Lak Sip village had encouraged villagers to slash and burn in restricted forest areas, prompting a strong reaction from both the district and provincial authorities resulting in the dismissal of these people.

In the case study presented, the Huay Nok Pit people made a clear and obvious move to show their discontent with the current situation regarding land access and use. Their open challenge, which is very unusual, may reveal a profound social and identity crisis. They cleared old fallows – illegal if more than four years old – in their former territory. This violation was accentuated by the fact that all land from resettled villages had been declared national forests. They even made an attempt to rebuild houses in Huay Nok Pit. They did it through the construction of a few “temporary” hamlets in the vicinity of the former village. This was a direct challenge to the authorities and a clear renunciation of both the resettlement policy and the land allocation.

⁹ “The place spirit, *roy ès*, is the owner of the land, the wild animals, the water and the trees. Before a hunter goes to hunt or to make a trap, he must perform a special ceremony asking permission from the spirit of the place he intends to hunt in.” (Tayanin 1994).

Ethnic Revival

Land Claim

It is very obvious to me that there is a strong land-claim issue behind the case study I present in this paper. This claim is made at several levels. Firstly, it is directed towards government bodies and their local representatives. Secondly, it is aimed at the Hmong people since some of them were moving into resettled village lands in the area.¹⁰ Thirdly, other Kmhmu people are also targeted because they monopolise lands in Lak Sip territory. In response Huay Nok Pit's Kmhmu emphasised clearly that they have full traditional rights to some lands and no longer need to rely on the former to get access to land, especially if they have to pay for it. But more than just a plain land claim, there is a strong willingness to re-enact both agrarian and ritual practices that are the core of the Kmhmu's complex set of beliefs and religious system and which are intimately connected with slash-and-burn activities conducted according to the “Kmhmu way”. Such initiatives are not isolated as pointed out in many studies dealing with the Kmhmu, Lawa or Lamet. Specific relationships connecting land and spiritual beliefs, and the occupation of a specific area by the same people over generations combined with a system of beliefs and specific land uses, form the ultimate proof of full land rights. This cannot be challenged either by other ethnic groups or by the government (Mus 1933; Formoso 1996; Evrard 2002).

Refusal of the Land Allocation Plan

The land survey conducted in 1995 in Lak Sip, in order to delimit and zone the village territory, was done only with the village leaders. Moreover, not all agricultural lands were taken into account since some villagers did not declare old fallows. Interviews took into account only the fields cultivated over the three years prior to the survey, while other farmers understated the area of the land they had cultivated in order to avoid or reduce land tax. Once the territory was mapped, the arable land within the village zone was allocated in one contiguous block, which did not reflect the reality. Many forest uses were not taken into account. Furthermore, land claims made by villagers who had temporarily left the area were either ignored or underestimated. Several infringements by neighbouring communities have been noted in recent years and access to land is no longer controlled by village leaders as a result of a lack of cohesiveness and the challenge to their leadership. As a result of all these elements, the Huay Nok Pit people felt the most penalised by the Land Allocation Policy and made

¹⁰ Some of these Hmongs were claiming plots of land formerly farmed by their relatives. Others were just looking for available lands because of the land shortage in the area, but the threat was real and perceived as such by the Kmhmu from Huay Nok Pit.

several unsuccessful attempts to regain their rights over arable lands in the villages that they had occupied previously. Eventually, they decided to take the matter into their own hands regardless of the outcome, in order to show that the shortage of land was a real issue and to stress that land use as promoted under the Land Allocation Plan was not suitable for them. A Kmhmu leader stated, "land allocation has killed the spirit of rice." This strong statement was meant to show that because of land allocation and the shortening of fallow periods, many Kmhmu farmers in Lak Sip were being forced to cultivate Job's Tears, crops less demanding in soil resources and labour, which they could then sell in order to purchase rice. A high symbolic value is attached to home-grown rice in which it is believed that the best variety is grown in the uplands on Kmhmu owned and controlled territory. Rice that is purchased is soulless and an affront to their self-esteem.

Internal Conflicts

As already pointed out several times in this paper, there were many conflicts within Lak Sip village at different levels. Firstly, there were tensions between villagers and the district and provincial authorities. Secondly, old rivalries and war-related events combined with current competition for access to land, created harsh conflicts between Kmhmus and Hmongs. Finally, there were internal conflicts amongst Lak Sip's Kmhmu residents themselves. A new internal discord was prompted by the growing attraction of Luang Prabang to the younger generations; it had created some tension within the Huay Nok Pit group. I see the initiative taken by Bouthan and his relatives as an attempt to regain leadership over their younger relatives. When clearing old fallow during sowing and harvesting, young people from Huay Nok Pit, especially single, young males were drawn into the Kmhmu's mutual aid system, which had loosened slightly. This was a good opportunity for this group to express and reaffirm its social cohesiveness. With the growing influence of the Lao world into Lak Sip, more and more Kmhmu feel they are becoming "laoised" either by choice or because they have no alternative. Thus, by reaffirming their rights to their former land and re-enacting some agrarian rituals, Bouthan and his followers put themselves back into the Kmhmu world. Such initiatives have been noted elsewhere in many instances and were done when the outside world, either the State or other ethnic groups, was perceived as a direct threat to the land, access to it, or to ethnic identity (Moizo 1996, 1997; Sikor 2002; Daviau 2004).

Being Kmhmu

What has been discussed in the previous three paragraphs is directly related to the notion of being Kmhmu with all its components. It is difficult to define an identity since being Kmhmu has different meanings from one sub-group or individual to another. Nevertheless, it is obvious that nowadays most Kmhmu from Lak Sip express real concerns about "losing their identity" while becoming more and more Lao. What was triggered by the shortage of land due to the Land Allocation Programme amongst the Kmhmu subgroup originally from Huay Nok Pit can be seen as an attempt to strongly and vividly express what it is for this people to be Kmhmu. The Huay Nok Pit group has re-enacted one of the main components of Kmhmu identity (relations between man and territory) by expressing strong feelings for the relations that still exist between them and their former land and village territory. They feel their beliefs and identity are threatened, not so much as a result of mixing with the Lao, since the same people in the mid-1960s had already performed ceremonies dedicated to the village spirit in both the Lao and Kmhmu languages with mixed elements and symbolism used throughout the ritual (Doré 1972), but because they can no longer maintain the land use system that used to prevail in Huay Nok Pit. It is getting more and more difficult to grow rice on Lak Sip land, due to soil erosion and the shortening of fallow (Lestrelin and Giordano). Nevertheless, for a Kmhmu farmer it is important to grow rice with the full support of village, territorial, forest and soil spirits, which is no longer the case in Lak Sip as stated by one Kmhmu leader who claimed that the soul had gone. The Huay Nok Pit people clearly wanted to express their separate identity based on all the elements they draw upon, to clear and cultivate old fallows in their former territory, in order to differentiate them from other Kmhmu who, in their view, were no longer real Kmhmu.

I believe that the case study I have used to illustrate my argument shows quite clearly that any land reform has a much deeper impact and side effects than a simple change in land titling, land uses and livelihoods. In the Lao PDR, the impact of land reform in these three areas is important to such an extent that some adjustments have already been implemented and others under consideration (Moizo 2004). Unfortunately, very important factors are still being left unexplored in the land issues, for example the symbolic and complex sets of relationships that exist between swidden farmers and the area they live in. Also the importance of the identity components in the way people perceive, get access and use the land and more specifically their territory, made up of inter-related things – the village, the fields, the fallows, the forest, the secret and sacred places.... It is crucial to conduct in-depth studies in such areas, not only at the traditional level amongst ethnic groups, which are less well documented in

the Lao PDR, but also on the dynamics of change that occurred in the last 20 years in relationships between people and their land.

Overall, it is fair to say that land reform has been a failure. On one hand it has created more problems for farmers contributing to increased impoverishment in rural areas, while on the other hand deforestation is still increasing at an alarming rate despite the reduction of most swidden farming. The main cause of this failure is a direct confrontation, sometimes close to a clash, between representations and uses, prior to and after the implementation of the land allocation programme. For example, according to the new land law there are five different types of forests, classified according to governmental criteria on uses and control of slash-and-burn practices, rather than on farmers' uses and perceptions. Farmers and highlanders usually have one type of forest, the sacred one where access is strictly controlled and under heavy taboos. The remaining parts of forested areas are future or potential fields and areas where hunting and collecting activities, essential to the livelihoods are largely practised. Thus, the forests are fully integrated within the villages' territories. The land reforms initially intended to take into account the land rights and uses of farmers, and local communities were to be involved in forest management. However, after several years of implementation of the Land Allocation Programme, most case studies show the opposite: highlanders are caught in a schizophrenic turmoil in which their former perceptions are in direct conflict with the land law. In the past, these farmers did not have titles to the land but they controlled access and managed the use of resources within their territory. Nowadays, they may have land allocated to them and some land titling, but they no longer have the full right to manage their territory the way they want.

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Modernisation, Globalisation and Socio-economic Change in Sarawak, Malaysia: The Need for Sub-national Spatial Analysis*

Doug JOHNSTON

Introduction

Superficial observation suggests that there has been significant change in Sarawak since the end of the colonial era. In the cities, modern high-rise hotels, office blocks and apartments contrast strongly with the "traditional" two and three storey shophouses. Impressive public buildings (civic offices, government departments, libraries for example) compete for attention with such symbols of the global economy as KFC and Pizza Hut. Considerable attention has been given to providing attractions for tourists – and their presence is reflected in the numerous travel agents, tour operators, souvenir shops, upmarket restaurants and art galleries. Outside the cities, powerful express boats cut hours off up-river travel times while road length and vehicle numbers have grown dramatically since 1963. Similar observations of change were made in Dayak longhouses visited during 2003: television sets, electric fans, chain saws, piped water, solar panels, and concrete paths plus new designs and building materials for the longhouses themselves. Yet the individual observer in a limited time can only gain a severely limited impression of the changes that have occurred.

Some 30 years ago, geographers would have delighted in attempting to resolve the problem of the degree to which point observations did or did not give reliable impressions of broader regional or national patterns. Studies carried out under the rubrics of "geography of modernisation" or "territorial social indicators" sought to give meaningful (one hesitates to say objective) assessments of spatial patterns of "development" or socio-economic change. Since those days, the "cultural turn" in geography and the emphasis on critical theory resulted in a strong focus on the interpretation of the processes of change, consequently taking attention away from attempts to evaluate the outcomes of those processes. This paper is designed as a small attempt to redress the imbalance, to argue the importance of making measurements with regards to happenings in economies and societies (especially the latter), to stress the need

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