

# Institutionalizing Duality Lowlands and uplands in the Lao PDR

The recent development strategies proposed by the Lao PDR government and presented to the donor community are strongly contingent upon a sharp dichotomy between the country's uplands and its lowlands.<sup>1</sup> The conceptualization of a border in between the inhabitants and landscapes of the Mekong Plain, and those of the mountains above, is nothing new to Laos. But today it is being put forward not according to narrow ethnic criteria, but more generally on environmental grounds. What I examine here is the persistence of this frontier.

By CATHERINE AUBERTIN

**Research Project**  
The French colonial regime, as its Communist successor, had constructed a model for national unity, for a country comprised of sixty-six distinct ethnic groups (according to the 1991 Constitution, but recently reconfigured again into forty-nine specific ethnicities). These have been aggregated into three broad categories, defined according to the topography, which they supposedly occupy:

- Lowland Lao (Lao Loum): the Lao-speaking peoples of the Tai-Kadai linguistic group, who in the course of their southward migration pushed the indigenous population upwards into the hills;
- Upland Lao (Lao Theun): those former Mon-Khmer plain dwellers displaced by the Lao Loum, now living at mid-slope.

- Summit Lao (Lao Sung): the most recent immigrants (from China in the nineteenth century); Hmong-Yao and Tibeto-Burman linguistically, who occupied the highest elevations left unsettled by the Lao Theun.

Such a trinity is the vehicle for a presumed national unity and centralization around the dominant ethnic group (Lao Loum) who comprise a little over half of the country's population. Thereby, the actual history of peopling the landscape and of establishing the present national boundaries at the turn of the last century is being obscured. In Laos, 80 per cent of the land is formally considered mountainous, with 47 per cent of the country nominally under forest cover. Some 60 per cent of the Lao population live in the mountainous regions. The official view, nonetheless, is to consider all upland dwellers as ethnic minori-

ties practicing subsistence-based slash-and-burn cultivation.

In the present environmental approach, the mountains and the forests are conflated. The ecological argument (forest resource protection) is highly emphasized to justify diversely motivated policies, primarily among which is integrating the minorities.

The recent Government strategy for the agricultural sector is contingent upon a dichotomy between the 'modernized' lowlands, to be subjected to market forces, and the 'backwards' uplands; now experiencing large-scale public interventions. Towards meeting a two-fold objective, a fully modern agriculture (irrigated rice) down in the plains, and a forested upland region 'protected' from the minorities, the agroforestry and horticulture systems actually practiced by nearly all Lao farmers are ignored. Such a model of economic development promotes sedentarization and the industrialization of agriculture: both of which may well be ill suited to mountainous ecosystems.

Official statistics (e.g. the agricultural census) translate khao hai, (swidden rice culture production), as upland rice in contrast to khao na (flooded rice production), translated as lowland rice. This tends to ob-

scure the significant reality that within the upland regions, there exists considerable wet rice production in valley bottoms and terraces. The use of such simplistic terminology falsely implies that upcountry Laos only to produce 'upland rice'; it also obscures the widely varying rice production technologies employed by upland peoples.

The forestry resources management strategy similarly creates this sharp frontier between plain and forest dwellers. Slash-and-burn, a symbol of backwardness and an absolute environmental evil, is denounced - notwithstanding most

mountains as a problem-ridden site. Problems, moreover, requiring external solutions. The defense of the environment, the struggle against drugs (most opium production is located at elevations over 1000 m), national unity, and industrial interests in timber and hydropower. The practice of slash-and-burn is held to destroy the forest, and is therefore threatening the hydrology of major hydropower schemes (already the principal source of foreign currency and a sector set for great expansion), as well as the river's water supply and thence the irrigation in the plains.



The construction of Lao Unification on the national currency. The Lao Loum is at the centre, flanked by the Lao Soum on the left and the Lao Theun on the right. The That Luang, to the right of the women, is a Buddhist symbol for the country but also for the Lao Loum. It replaced the 'hammer and sickle' on the old currency.

empirical evidence - as the principle cause of deforestation. Left unmentioned is the monopoly over timber exploitation, countrywide, divided into three holdings controlled by the Lao military.

The Afflicted-by-Poverty vision of upland peoples denigrates and delegitimizes their knowledge, skills, and 'traditional unsustainable practices'. But only uplanders' practices are so denigrated, as if there were no important threatened forests in the plains. Also, if upland people are affected by poverty, improving the living standards of forest dwellers is no target of the Resources Strategy. Forest management is essentially presenter as a conservation challenge. But then again, in actuality, large-scale exploitation is reserved for State corporations. Prime Ministerial Decree No. 11 reduces forest dwellers' involvement in forest management, thus heavily handicapping conservation projects wishing to engage the local population.

### Slash-and-burn

These policies are manifest in forest zonation (some 70 per cent of the forested area is classified as a protected zone), in the creation of National Biodiversity Conservation Reserves and in land allocations favouring the privatization of communal resources. Reducing the available land acreage per family to three times the maximum that they can cultivate in a single year clearly implies a three-year rotation, and precludes slash-and-burn. The forest policies also include the effective displacement of upland ethnic minorities down onto the plains. Such solutions bring into question the very survival of those populations.

These policies, however, do meet the objectives of interest groups otherwise very sharply opposed. Wrongly identifying the 'non-plain' dwellers with the forest itself has institutionalized a concept of the

Thus, upland people are denounced as poor and ignorant, armed and dangerous. In the name of wildlife protection, mountaineers have seen their firearms confiscated. Government is both seeking to integrate minorities into the national economy and assert its own control over the national territory. With the knowledge that about half of the country's villages are inaccessible to motor vehicles during the rainy season. Their inhabitants are thus being relocated into 'focal zones' - down in the lowlands where possible, or otherwise along the highways.

The negative effects of such resettlements - including land pressures in the plains, marginalization of the displaced populations, lack of basic infrastructure (e.g. water supply) in resettlement sites, and absence of agricultural extension services - have been evaluated critically elsewhere. Originally supporting uplands resettlement schemes, donors (AsDB, the EU, UNDCP, JICA, and Sida) have now nominally taken their distance, but still are largely funding the land allocation programs directly threatening the survival of mountain peoples. ■

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Government's Strategic Vision for the Agricultural Sector A discussion paper prepared for the Donor Round Table Conference, Vientiane, 8-9 November 1999.

### References

- Strategic Vision of Forest Resource Management to the Year 2020, Policy Dialogue Meeting on Round Table Process 2000-2002, Luang Prabang, 8-9 September 2000.

Dr Catherine Aubertin is an economist and the Research Director of the Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD), Paris, France.  
E-mail: Catherine.Aubertin@bondy.ird.fr

partly economic (ensuring logging revenues replenish Burmese and not Karen coffers), and, not least, partly cultural (eliminating a rival claim to this frontier region).

In recent years, I have turned my attention to the politics of natural resource exploitation and conservation in the Philippines. There, I have found some similar processes of frontier creation and contestation as issues of politics, identity, and natural resource control swirl around each other.

What I have found to be most intriguing, though, is how questions of biodiversity conservation have become associated with frontier imaginings so as to create 'biogeographic imagined communities' across the Philippines (Bryant 2000). Here, instead of often destructive natural resource exploitation as the leitmotif of 'nation-building' endeavours, we have a more complex discursive agenda centred on notions of 'biodiversity' and 'conservation' which are, in turn, linked to the perceived national or even global good. And yet, such top-down 'born-again environmentalism' has rarely found full favour with local communities living in frontier areas. Instead, many local communities have sought to redefine 'biodiversity hotspots' into their own terms of reference as 'ancestral domains'.

This difference is both instructive and important. It is instructive both because it reveals that many local communities are well aware that the recent push to conserve biodiversity is often no more than 'old wine in a new bottle' - traditional frontier

politics with an environmental twist - and their simultaneous recognition of the central role of discourse in articulating the new phase of frontier 'development'.

'Old wine in  
a new bottle' -  
traditional frontier  
politics with an  
environmental  
twist.

Thus, and as I have seen in various parts of Palawan and Luzon, ancestral domain is commonly an assertion of ethnic and cultural identity as well as being a particular ethos of 'sustainable' human-environmental conduct linked to local management and control. The differences symbolized in contrasting notions of 'biodiversity hotspot' and 'ancestral domain' are also important because they have rapidly moved to centre-stage in the political and ecological struggles that characterize modern Philippine politics.

To understand the modern record of natural resource exploitation in countries such as the Philippines or Burma it is vital to appreciate the many ways in which 'frontier' thinking helps to bolster nation-building efforts that are so often (literally) fuelled by natural resources. Yet it is also to understand that notions of frontier and imagined community are themselves partly constituted in the light of knowledge and desires linked to human use of the biophysical environment. In this way, and as my research seeks to show, the social construction of nature and of political identity are inevitably linked through a notion such as the frontier in a way that has profound consequences for social action and thought. ■

### References

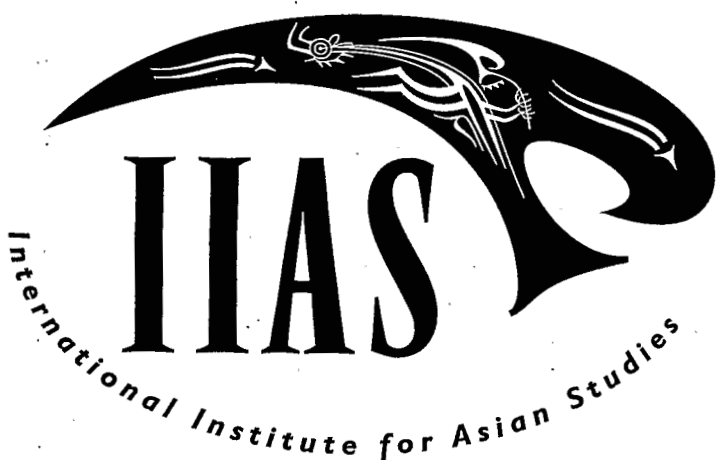
- Bryant, R.L. 'Asserting Sovereignty through Natural Resource Use: Karen forest management on the Thai-Burmese border', in R. Howitt (ed.), Resources, nations and indigenous peoples, Melbourne: Oxford University Press (1996), pp 32-41.  
- Bryant, R.L. The Political Ecology of Forestry in Burma, 1824-1994. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press (1997).  
- Bryant, R.L. Politicized Moral Geographies: Debating biodiversity conservation and ancestral domain in the Philippines, in Political Geography, 19 (2000), pp. 673-705.

Dr Raymond L. Bryant,  
Department of Geography, King's College  
London, United Kingdom  
E-mail: raymond.bryant@kcl.ac.uk



Fonds Documentaire IRD  
Cote: B\* 24 668 Ex: 1

VISIT OUR WORLD WIDE WEB HOMEPAGE: [HTTP://WWW.IIAS.NL](http://www.iias.nl)



INCLUDING THE

Pink Pages

# NEWSLETTER 24

FEBRUARY

2001

P.O. BOX 9515, 2300 RA LEIDEN, THE NETHERLANDS, TELEPHONE: +31-71-527 22 27, TELEFAX: +31-71-527 41 62, E-MAIL: [IIASNEWS@RULLET.LeidenUniv.NL](mailto:IIASNEWS@RULLET.LeidenUniv.NL)

- Forum
- People
- Institutional News
- Research Project
- Report
- Call for Papers
- Publication
- Asian Art
- Vacancy
- Internet
- Agenda
- Short News

## GENERAL NEWS

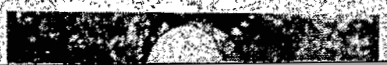


On 27 October 2000, Deepak Lal was welcomed to Leiden to deliver the IIAS Annual Lecture, entitled 'Asia and Western Dominance: Retrospect and Prospect'. - (p.3)

★ In 1967, as the US was losing its grip on the Vietnam War, the new ASEAN had been an anti-

## CENTRAL ASIA

A brave but prudent book that deserves to be read by specialists from all sciences dealing with the prehistory contacts across the Bering Strait, as well as by historical linguists at large. Wolfgang Behr reviews Michael Fortescue's *Language Relations across Bering Strait*. - (p.15)



## SOUTHEAST ASIA

Per Lundberg purports that the establishment of the Nordic Burma Studies Group (NOBUS) may point to resurgence in research on Burma in northern Europe. - (p.22)



## EAST ASIA



FOTO: JETTE ROSS

## Pink Pages IIAS NEWS



ONE VAN DER HOEK