

“Join Together, Work Together, for the Common Good — Solidarity”: Village Formation Processes in the Rural South of Laos

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This article explores the concept of the solidary village in contemporary Laos. It argues that the “village” today is not a fixed, primordial entity, but a continually emergent formation resulting from numerous processes, including but not limited to modern state processes. The notion of “village” circulates in the ambiguous “common sense” pertaining to rural Laos, in the attitudes, expectations, representations, and regulated requirements of the rural, in what I term village formation projects. Case studies of “village formation projects” in one village in southern Laos illustrate not only the importance of the village concept, but also its indeterminacy and fluidity, and the ensuing difficulty of achieving the “solidarity” and cooperative donation required by poverty reduction policies.

Keywords: Village formation processes, decentralization, poverty reduction policies, Asian village, contemporary rural Laos.

In a village situated among the lowland rice fields of Champassak province, Laos, a village chief, Bunmii, has just heard that the village statistics are due this afternoon — it is a surprise and there is a rush to complete them.¹ He, the deputy chief Cit and a schoolteacher Khúu Leet are sprawled on the bench under a mango tree among a mountain of forms and exercise books.

Consulting a form, Bunmii reads out:

How many families are short of food?

Khúu Leet says, “Put in ‘lots’. It is lots and lots.”

Bunmii consults the record from last year: “Seventeen?”

“More than last year,” responds Khúu Leet.

Bunmii enters “Twenty”.

How many young men?

Bunmii hazards a guess: “Ten? Can we count ten?”

They come up with five names. They decide not to count people who study elsewhere during term time. They count again and get seven. Bunmii writes down “Eight”.

How much land ruined by flood?

“Oh it was a hectare.” Says Khúu Leet, “It was a lot. Two hectares.”

“2.10?” suggests Bunmii.

“Yeah.”

Condition of roads?

“Very bad,” says Khúu Leet. “Write that they are very bad and they will come and fix them,” he laughs.

The questions continue for hours. They interrogate aspects as various as the number of Buddha figures in the temple, how many families use mosquito nets, and incidents of crime. The three men use answers from last year, their best estimations and what they can count or recall. Nearing the end of one form, Bunmii reads out:

What year will poverty be abolished?

Without consultation, he diligently writes “2020”.

Surprised, I ask, “Really? Do you think so?”

He smiles, “I don’t know what to say. That’s the year the government told us. Would you be brave enough to say differently?”

“No.”

“See! So we say 2020. Who knows? It’s still 17 years away. We’ll raise animals and grow crops. Maybe we will abolish poverty.”

The next question was about the village’s plan for development. Bunmii is stumped. The men toss about some ideas — irrigated rice? But people won’t do that. “If we say irrigated rice, then in dry season they come and ask for information, and we haven’t done it ... ohh ...” he smiles and laughs.

They ask my advice, and I tell them that everyone should move to Boleven Plateau and become cattle traders — this elicits a laugh, and then some reflection on Boleven Plateau lifestyles. Khúu Leet explains that he thinks it is better here because here in their lowland home they have their own rice. “We only use money in the family

to buy clothes. The people in the Plateau sell their coffee and have to buy rice.” They decide on the answers: “increased livestock and crops” and “follow the policies of the government and party”.

When they are finished, Khúu Leet must hand-copy a duplicate. “This is going to take a long time”, he says. I decide to leave, and as I go, Khúu Leet comments that he will be going to the Boleven Plateau tomorrow. “To trade cattle?” I ask, eliciting more chuckles. “No, to cut wood.” He’ll be there until just before school resumes, employed as a labourer in the forestry industry. His teacher’s salary has not been paid for many months, so he needs to make money to support himself and his family.

This occasion highlighted a fundamental paradox of contemporary poverty reduction policies in rural Laos. While state policies ask residents to form development plans and poverty reduction strategies as a spatially bound village community, actual lived responses to poverty are personal, and often multi-sited. The statistics-gathering exercise called forth the village as a unit: it required the village to be represented as a group of people in a fixed area who could be counted, organized, and known. The final questions on development and poverty reduction took this village as a site of development and common activity to alleviate poverty. Khúu Leet’s trip to cut wood, however, indicates that personal attempts to alleviate poverty are not limited to the village as a spatiality or a community. The statistics gathering exercise created knowledge about a “village”. But it would be hasty to assume that this creation and knowledge is a feasible and ready basis for development and poverty-reduction interventions.

However, the notion of the stable, cooperative village is increasingly being called upon by state policies aimed at poverty reduction in Laos. In early 2002 a headline in the English-language newspaper, the *Vientiane Times*, announced “New Government Measures Against Poverty”. In this article, the main themes of contemporary Lao development policies were outlined: Laos was to escape poverty by 2020, and as part of this, “development” efforts were to be “decentralized”, with a key element to be that of building “the village as the implementing unit” of the Lao administration (Vorakhoun 2002,

p. 1). With the endorsement of international organizations such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the government of Laos now uses words like “decentralization” and “participation” to describe the systematic devolution of state duties and responsibilities to the village level. Today “the village” in Laos is the primary site for the extraction of labour, cash, and other contributions from the rural populace towards state projects. This scheme, which might be termed “participatory corvée” (Ribot 1999), runs on certain views of villages as being stable, cooperative units, prone to group effort for the common good: villages in this scheme should act with *sāamākhūi* (solidarity).

This article explores the notion of village in contemporary Laos. The first section introduces the village as “the implementing unit”, that is, as the lowest tier of Lao government administration, and one that is taking an increasing prominence under policies of decentralization. Case studies of such state activities in the village demonstrate that these decentralization policies require villagers to donate their time, efforts, and possessions under the rubric of “solidarity”, but that this ideal of “solidarity” is contested and often unrealized. The second section introduces theorizations that have been made of “village” in the region, particularly in relation to the state’s influence on villages and the suggestion of village solidarity. This section concludes that the contemporary Lao village is best seen neither as a primordial, naturally solidary unit, nor a state-engineered artifice of no reality, but instead as a process. The notion of “village formation projects” is proposed as a means of conceiving how “village” emerges through everyday representations, ranging from state policies to personal mobilizations in a process that is inherently mutable and incomplete. The third and final section explores three instances of village cooperation: the maintenance of the school, the avoidance of conscription, and the village fair. All of these were organized around the principle of village “solidarity”, with markedly different effects. These ethnographic examples lend weight to the conclusion that the notion of “village” circulates on the plane of social representation, which includes but is not limited to notions of solidarity.

The Village as the Implementing Unit

As the aforementioned newspaper article reported, the village is increasingly being designated as the “implementing unit” for state policies. The responsibility for meeting these decentralization demands rests for the large part on the shoulders of the *cát tàng bần* (village organization). The village organization is composed of several official positions. The most important of these is the village chief. Every village is required to have a chief (ostensibly elected every two years after nominees have been designated by the district). The duties of village chiefs are broad, and officially include the maintenance of law and order, the application of the policies and decisions of higher governmental bodies, the maintenance of village records and overseeing village “development” (the role of the village chief is similar to that described by Moerman [1969] in Thailand).

The chief is assigned two unpaid deputies, referred to as the second and third village chiefs. The second village chief is responsible for police and security duties, and the third for culture and education. These deputies are expected to co-convene village meetings and attend events in place of the village chief if he is unable to attend. The mass organizations (National Front for Reconstruction, Women’s Union, and Youth Union) require representation at the village level, though in the village of this research, their activities were minimal, extending to, at most, collecting fees on behalf of the district and mobilizing donations for festivals.

The village is divided into five sections or *cu*, numbering about ten houses each. Each *cu* has a leader who is responsible for collecting fees and disseminating information such as notification of an upcoming meeting to the households. Each *cu* also has security officers, elected men responsible for recording incidents, such as long-term movements of residents and any crimes or disturbances. There are also a number of further administrative positions such as the tax collector, voluntary village health worker, and the secretary which are filled from the village populace. Policies are delivered either in the form of a letter to the village chief or relayed to the village

chief at monthly regional meetings. At these meetings, chiefs report a summary of compliance to policies and orders for the past month and present a plan for the coming month to district officials. The district officials then disseminate advice and any further policies and orders. The village chief relays these orders to the village residents, principally through village meetings.

Recent decentralization policies are increasing the requirements made of the “village”.² This move towards decentralization has been more accurately termed “deconcentration” (UNDP 2001) because, while the push involves the transfer of responsibility for implementation to the lower tiers, this is without significant transfer of decision-making power. This push in Laos is regulated by Instruction No. 01/PM/March 11, 2000, which enshrines the catch phrase: “build the provinces as the strategic units, the districts as the planning and fiscal units, and the villages as the implementation units” (LPDR 2003, p. 30). In this policy, “village communities are to take initiatives to ensure sustainable growth at the local levels to reduce poverty” (LPDR 2003, p. 30). That is, “villages” are envisaged as sites of poverty: the causes of poverty are to be found there, and it is through communal action within the village and the donation of goods and labour by villagers that poverty is to be addressed.

Decentralization has made a wide variety of demands on the rural population. Responsibility for land tax collection, for example, has been transferred to the village. Land tax is payable not only on all forms of land, but also on items such as carts, bicycles, boats, ploughs, buffalo, cows, TVs, and video/CD systems. Village representatives are required to calculate the household dues. The tax required of households in the area of this research varied from a low of just 690 kip (US\$0.07) to a high of 44,805 kip (US\$4.40) with the bulk of houses liable for 20,000 to 40,000 kip (US\$2 to US\$4). These figures were arrived at after painstaking manual calculations of minute amounts by the village tax collector with the assistance of the village chiefs. The tax collector and chief then collect payments from each household and deliver 90 per cent of it to the district taxation authorities. The remaining 10 per cent is to be used as a

“village fund”. While in policy this fund is to be used for “village development” initiatives, in practice, however, it was kept by the tax collector and chiefs as a reward and recompense for calculating and collecting the tax (the tax collector is not officially paid).

Not only are residents to pay (and in fact collect their own) taxes, they are also expected to make contributions to state projects in other ways: through labour, cash, items, skills, and managerial capabilities. Some of these “donations” are recognized and recorded somewhat euphemistically in the *2003 District Poverty Reduction Report and Plan* as “people’s funds” (*thñ páśáson*). In the *Report and Plan* “people’s funds” are listed as one funding source for government projects, along with district funds and loans. In some projects (such as creating a revolving medicine fund) the people’s fund was absent. In others (such as the plan to extend electricity lines) it reached 50 per cent of project spending. A staff member in the office that produced the *Report and Plan* explained:

Suppose that the villagers are building a school; the people are expected to contribute funds, materials and labour. Sometimes they pay in cash or rice. Sometimes they just give nails, wood or corrugated iron. Sometimes all they contribute is their labour. That is the people’s fund.

The district education office reported that there were no funds provided by the government in this district for primary schools. Occasionally the district has been able to obtain foreign assistance to build primary schools, at about US\$47,000 each. This is rare, however, and most villages are required to construct and maintain their own schools using their own resources.

While the political language of “decentralization” and “participation” meshes closely with the latest in international development rhetoric, there is nothing new in a policy platform that demands locals to give freely to the state. Evans reports *corvée* extractions under the rule of Fa Ngum in the 1300s (2002, p. 13). He characterizes the pre-colonial indigenous states as featuring “armies [that] could sweep away peasants for months at a time as porters or for state-sponsored works” (Evans 2002, p. 52). With French colonial rule, *corvée* was

instated as a key plank of extraction from the populace (Stuart-Fox and Kooyman 1992, p. 49; Stuart-Fox 1996, p. 24; Gunn 1990, p. 48). Gunn mentions that, contrary to what might be expected, wages were at times paid for certain *corvée* tasks (in 1935, US\$3.50 for the extraction of a cubic metre of laterite and US\$2 to transport it a distance of one to four kilometres) (Gunn 1990, p. 90). *Corvée* continued until the Japanese intervention, and was reinstated in the post-war period, when each Lao citizen was repeatedly required to offer five to six months' service, and labour could be sporadically requisitioned for work duties (*ibid.*, p. 54). By the 1950s Kaufman asserted that much infrastructure in the Vientiane plains was still maintained through *corvée* labour, rallied by the *taasëeng* (canton) level administration (Kaufman 1961, p. 24). When relating their life histories to me, older men consistently reported going to *hêt tháang* (do road works) as among the defining events of their youths (reporting that it was one of the few means of making money). One of the promises and attractions of the Pathet Lao during the civil war years was their vow to abolish the *corvée* which was so detested, especially by the upland minorities (Stuart-Fox and Kooyman 1992, p. 79). However, Evans notes that "communist *corvée*" was common in the liberated zones, particularly for tasks such as portage for the army and road works (2002, p. 130). The present regime has continued this approach to appropriation. Through policies such as collectivization of agriculture, the provision of irrigation to "Water User's Groups" and the establishment of village-based branches of the mass organizations, the current regime has consistently promoted village "solidarity" as an official policy and as a means of extracting labour. Trankell identifies it as a "general opinion in Lao planning authorities that farmers are essentially underemployed and that the farming population therefore represents a potential source of available labour" (1993, p. 82). Noting the contemporary congruence between international development rhetoric of "decentralization" and "participation", and the historical appropriation of citizen's labour, it is possible to apply Ribot's diagnosis of "participatory *corvée*" (1999).

It is those in the village organization (*cát tàng bàu*) who often bear the task of convincing villagers to donate their time, labour, belongings, and cash. In this task the members of the village organization have few resources at their disposal. In the village of this fieldwork, one day a year was dedicated to carrying out repairs on the local school. The difficulties encountered by the village organization can be illustrated by an example of a day of school maintenance. About 20 men and 30 women attended the event. The women worked on cutting out the vegetation and digging the post holes while the men worked on the structure of the fence and building. There was much resting, play, and conversation. At the end of the day, the workers assembled to hear a summary of the day's work from Phō Amnuay, the leader of the village National Front for Reconstruction. He expressed disappointment with the day's efforts, commenting that *săamăkhi* (solidarity) had not been achieved: "We have to join together, work together, for the common good — *săamăkhi* (solidarity)," he admonished the assemblage.

Individuals must decide for themselves to work together. Don't just come and that's all. Don't just come and sit around. Your friends call you to help and you don't get up. They ask you to carry wood and you just keep sitting around. Don't do that!

"Well, wood is really heavy," quipped one man, raising laughter from the meeting.

The quip is telling: wood really is heavy. The labour required at these events, euphemized as *thn păsáason* (people's funds) in Lao, or "participation" in the international language of development interventions, is still labour. It is arduous, time-consuming, and tiring. If people are to undertake these tasks, they need motivations to do so. While fines, coercion, and reporting to the higher levels are available to village leaders to extract "people's funds", in the events I observed the effects of these resources were subtle and at most implicit. Instead, the most overtly used motivator in efforts to cajole donations was the notion of *săamăkhi* (solidarity).

Phō Amnuay's appeals to "working together", "the common good", and *săamăkhi* (solidarity) evoke ideals of what a village could

and should be. A village teacher expressed a rendition of this ideal to me one evening as he took a break from a work party he had called to assist him in threshing and carrying in his rice harvest:

This is how Lao people do things. They help each other. You help me, and when you need help, I will help you. We do things for the common good. We do things together. Listen: we don't use money. We help for free. We do it together. In your village, people buy and hire. In this village, people give and help.

In the rice-threshing party mentioned above, it should be noted that only a handful of people attended, based on the teacher's personal network, not on a generalized village. My point here is that the idea of *săamăkhú* (solidarity), mutual support, and collective action is one concept of the village that circulates. And indeed, much state policy requires the village to be such a cooperative unit. These ideals provide some basis for collective action actually occurring: the school was repaired, though Phᵛᵛ Amnuay might have complained at the pace, thoroughness, and enthusiasm. But this is an ideal that struggles to find materialization. In the school repair activities, village leaders expressed frustration that people did not live up to these ideals.

Village leaders often bemoan that residents do not display, or do not display enough, *săamăkhú*. Directly after the school repairs discussed above, the third village chief complained as follows:

Did you see today? If I dig with them, they will dig, but if I rest for a moment, they all sit down. If everyone works, the work would be done in very little time. But in reality, people just sit around. Maybe half the people work, no solidarity. So it takes a long time. I am too embarrassed to tell them to work. My friends will hate me. They hate the politicians and the leaders. They don't like us to tell them to work ...³

The village, then, is represented as both a locus of solidarity, and as a divided, difficult group whose people are reluctant to work together. These conflicting representations of village circulate concurrently, shaping various formations of village. The vision of "solidarity" cannot be relied upon to produce the kind of actual cooperation and donation that decentralization policies require. If

the demands for the donation of *thɯ̃n pásáason* find implementation challenging, it is because the village as a cooperative unit is not a pre-existing unit to be exploited — it is best seen as a process and a social formation, thus characterized by conflicting representations, change, and ambiguity, as we shall see below.

Theorizing the Asian Village

Theorizations of the village in Asia can be classed into two broad categories. First, primordial views of village are those that have described the village as an essential and timeless feature of the Asian countryside, existing before and largely independently of the state. In contrast, alternative revisionist views of village have portrayed the village as arising concurrently and in articulation with the modern state. While it is important to recognize that the state has a profound influence on the formation of village, it is important also to recognize that the village “genie” has escaped the bottle of the state and now finds various expression in a multitude of notions pertaining to rural Asia. “Village” features in the “common sense” of the contemporary Lao countryside. As such, I suggest that the village is best understood in terms of “village formation projects”.

Ireson, in a series of articles published in the 1990s (1992, 1995, 1996), presents the primordialist village-community view. Ireson specifically positions himself against authors such as Kemp (1991, explored below), who have pointed out that villages have historically arisen in the context of state power. In contrast to Kemp, Ireson suggests that villages in Laos originated prior to any state formation, and persist in isolation from the state. Ireson suggests that “villages in Laos perhaps more than in any other region of Southeast Asia can be characterized as self-sustaining communities relatively unconnected with larger political or social units” (1996, p. 221). Ireson discusses the “traditional” period variously in present tense (1996), in the past simple tense (1992), as existing “even as late as the mid-1980s” (Ireson 1995, p. 541), as “still evident today” (1996, p. 219), and as currently under threat from capitalist encroachment (1992). In a kind

of double vision, then, the “traditional” village appears in both the imaginings of an ancient past and as a contemporary reality. In both views, the “traditional” cooperative village exists because of isolation, particularly from the state. Ireson sums up his own position:

This paper suggests that at least for Laos, social organization must be understood first and foremost from the village level. As village communities must have developed prior to any larger political groupings, larger entities — whether *muong*, kingdoms, or modern states — must in certain fundamental ways accept and acknowledge the importance of village autonomy and self-reliance so long as the village remains an important unit of social organization. Laos’ late development as a modern state, and the relatively minor impact French colonialism had on the rural population, allowed traditional patterns of social organization to persist well past the middle of this century. Despite 30 years of civil war and a communist revolution, many of the fundamental values and behaviours of village life are still evident today. (Ireson 1996, p. 219)

In this isolated village, survival seems precarious, necessitating in Ireson’s view the cooperation he proposes as basic to the “cultural and social unity of Lao villages” (1992, p. 73). With solidarity so closely associated with the “natural”, “self-evident”, and “enduring” isolation of the village unit, it emerges as a given, as itself natural and enduring, a timeless tradition that has facilitated survival. He notes mechanisms of social control, such as ostracism and gossip which may afflict villagers who do not toe the cooperative line (1996, p. 235), so that cooperation appears as not only common but motivated by powerful sanctions. In proposing this view of the solidary village, Ireson appeals explicitly to Scott’s notion of a village “moral economy” (Scott 1976).

The “village” here is a “survival” from the past, gaining both its character and import from an imputed isolation from wider contexts. If wider contexts impinge, Ireson sees this as likely to undermine the solidarity of villages. He writes:

Three interlocked and mutually reinforcing elements seem necessary to maintain village cooperation and solidarity: a village ideology of mutuality, successful events of cooperation, and shallow socio-

economic stratification. Should any one fail, the overall system is weakened. We see this happening today, especially in areas more closely linked to urban markets. (1996, p. 244)

Thus, contacts outside the village are seen as eroding cooperation. This vision relies on a notion of a pristine original condition where contact and cooperation are posited as antagonistic to each other.

The idea of the village-community in Southeast Asia, however, has come under considerable attack. Breman writes of the notion of the “timeless Asian village” as “not only a cliché which lacks any real empirical base, but ... also a construction which, for the most part, originated during colonial rule” (1988, p. 10). Breman finds such a view of village “rife with romantic paternalism” (*ibid.*, p. 17), yet one that has powerfully taken root in imaginings of the Asian past. Both colonial and contemporary states have used this model of the past and consequently moved to “reinstate” the village in state administrations and interventions. Breman notes “continual efforts to revitalise that community, however, have been strikingly ineffective, mostly because it is impossible to model the present on an imaginary past” (*ibid.*, p. 38).

In applying a similar approach to rural Thailand, Kemp argues that historically the region was highly urbanized, with low populations huddling together along rivers and a few roads (1988, p. 2). This is particularly true today of the region where D๔๐n Kh๑aw is located, the Sii Phan D๔๐n area of the Mekong River. In these southern reaches of the Mekong, the banks and islands are almost continuously inhabited, settlements strung out in a long thin line along the shore. Households face the river, orientated to this source of sustenance, materials, and transport. With riverboat transport the easiest and cheapest form of mobility, even for short distances, the river acts as a hub, a pathway to everywhere else. This resonates with colonial descriptions of the area. Garnier notes the “continuous line of palm trees, houses and gardens beside the banks” of the Mekong (1996, p. 73). He comments that “(e)verywhere, the densely populated and cultivated banks present convenient and well-stocked places to stop over” (*ibid.*, p. 76), and describes the capital Khong as bustling

with trade and commerce (ibid., p. 74). Pavie also notes that along the river in this region “(t)he villages succeed each other without interruption” (1999, p. 427). We have a consistent picture, then, of southern Lao Mekong settlements as taking a “strip development” format, strung out along the riverbanks, with the river acting to link rather than to isolate.

Rather than isolation, historians suggest that low populations gathered together into *muang* (political centres):

The famous “lack of people” in the region in this era does not mean a thin stipple evenly scattered. Rather, population was concentrated in and around city-states, each of which was separated from others by large empty expanses of forest, mountain, and sea. The passages between *muang* were perilous journeys. (Baker 2002, p. 173)

The picture of the isolated village, cast out alone in the forest with few links, is not one suggested by the history books.

Kemp dates the arrival of the “village” organization of settlement in Thailand at the end of the 19th century, with King Chulalongkorn’s push for administrative modernization based on European models for controlling population and generating state revenue (1989, p. 13). Kemp asserts, “The Thai peasant village community is an ideological construct rather than an empirical reality” (ibid., p. 6). Rigg, also writing of Thailand, comes to a similar conclusion: “The ‘roots’ of the village, so often held up for all to admire, may be fiction” (1994, p. 132).

Evans suggests that the experience of Laos was quite different from that of Thailand, as Chulalongkorn’s reforms were not implemented in Laos (1990, p. 28). While the French made some reforms (ibid., p. 29), Evans writes that the most significant administrative controls over the countryside came with the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party’s seizure of power in 1975. With new restrictions on the movement of people and goods, “Lao villages tend to become less open and more corporate” (ibid., p. 188). Evans sees this as a “contradiction”. He writes, “on one side its policies often reinforce corporate tendencies, while on the other it tries to extend modern administration into the villages. It is, therefore, a profoundly contradictory process” (ibid.,

p. 190). But the growth of the corporate village alongside the growth of state intervention need not be viewed as a contradiction. Kemp, Rigg, and Breman have demonstrated that state intervention has invented and created the “village” in many parts of Asia, so that state and village formations are part of the same process. More broadly, Wolf’s classic argument of the very concept of the corporate village is that it is “the child of conquest” (1955, p. 154). Wolf argues that the village is the outcome of specific historical relationship between structures of domination and a subordinated peasantry. Villages, then, “are neither simple ‘survivals’, nor the result of ‘culture lag’, nor due to some putative tendency to conservatism said to be characteristic of peasants” (ibid., p. 158). Writing of Java, for instance, Wolf notes that the village only arrived with the Dutch.

Kemp, Rigg, Breman, and Wolf’s view that the village was historically a response to colonialism or an administrative invention provides a direct contrast to Ireson’s primordialist view of the village as “prior” to any form of state. But does recognizing the village as historically a state colonial creation mean that contemporary villages have none of the solidarity that Ireson attributes to them? Are they “constructions” in the sense of fabrication? “Fiction” in the sense of make-believe? While we may accept that the village is a rather recent state-sponsored invention, it does not follow that all contemporary experiences of village are purely administrative experiences. Indeed, Wolf, Kemp, and Rigg strongly assert that the contemporary village is much more than an artifice.

In contemporary Laos, the concept of village is bound up with concepts of belonging, place, mutual support, and aspiration. And these ideas are amorphous. They are never singular, and are often contradictory: in a single breath a young return migrant tells me that she missed her village *and* that she wants to leave again because the village is not fun. At a village work event, a man tells me that working together is “how Lao people do things” *and* tells me how difficult it is to convince people to work together. The concept of village is multiple, variable, and often conflictual. Village is always in formation. Policies, idealizations and demonizations of the village are all instances of what I term “village formation projects”.

The inspiration for this term comes from Omi and Winant's term "racial formation projects". Working in US race studies, Omi and Winant argue that race must be seen as neither essence nor illusion: it is a process of social representation. As such, it is historical, subject to change and often contradictory and confused, but nonetheless has a fundamental and concrete impact on lived experiences. The social representation of race is perpetuated through racial formation projects, those instances large and small where race finds expression and enforcement, such as media images, policies, and conversations, including comments such as "funny, you don't look black" (Omi and Winant 1994, p. 59). In these historical projects, race is constantly being formed as part of the ambiguous social "common sense". Using a similar approach, I propose that village be seen not as essence (as Ireson would present it, as primordial, discrete and "prior" to any other social formation), nor should it be seen as illusion. By questioning village as autochthonous, bounded, and fixed, it is not necessary to view village as therefore non-existent. Following Omi and Winant, we can see that the concept of village circulates as a social representation, part of the ambiguous social "common sense" of rural Laos, and continually produced through village formation processes. Thus, though the village may not be the harmonious, enclosed, and primordial unit depicted by Ireson, it is still important to acknowledge village formation projects that draw on, create, or demand the "village". These village formation projects are often confused and contradictory, but they remain fundamental in structuring and representing contemporary rural Laos.

Omi and Winant note that oppressive, racist views are often informed by essentialist simplifications of race. In a similar manner, it is important to note that some essentialist village formation projects are oppressive, particularly those essentialist visions of the "agrarian myth" that inform state policy. For instance, describing the disastrous collectivization of agriculture in Laos in the late 1970s, Kaysone asserted, "The new relationship constitutes the continuation and development of the tradition of mutual solidarity and assistance

among our people” (Phomvihan 1979). The supposed “traditional” solidarity of rural people was used to justify the demand to collectivize agriculture, a process that was linked explicitly to political control and economic extraction and ended in famine. As we shall see below, such essentialisms also underlie contemporary decentralization policies and the new vogue for “participatory” development programmes. These essentialist state and development interventions repeatedly marginalize rural residents.

However, Omi and Winant go further than simply stating that essentialisms can be oppressive. They refer to what have been termed “strategic essentialisms”, essentialisms that may defend the interests of those marginalized by oppressive essentialisms. The authors note that in the United States there has been a tendency to brand all notions of race as “racist”, and a “colour-blind” approach has been advocated. An example of the outcomes of such a view is the reaction to affirmative action measures such as the allocation of employment opportunities based on race, where these have been termed “reverse racist”. Omi and Winant suggest that such a “color-blind” approach conflates different kinds of essentialisms: oppressive essentialisms, and the defensive essentialisms that people form to combat oppression. This observation is important, as it reminds us that rural residents may use an essentialist vision of village as a basis for unity and strength.

The Strategic, State, and Religious Village

The idea of village is closely bound up with administration, but it is not solely a tool of state intervention, and indeed state definitions and ideals of village can be used to counter or overcome state demands. An instance of the “strategic village” was observed when news arrived that the village was required to give up two men to enlist for two years in the army. Mēε Kham said she pitied the person who must be a soldier: “cold and wet and lots of leeches”. Everyone agreed it was an undesirable outcome. Cit predicted, “Tomorrow all the young people will be gone. Thailand, Vientiane, Boleven Plateau ... wherever they have relatives. They will all leave.”

Indeed, at the village meeting the following day, the village chief announced a list of all the sons of the village. After each name, he said that they had gone somewhere — Paksan, Pakse, Boleven Plateau, Thailand, to study, or simply *nii* (run away). After the meeting, a small group remained behind: five fathers of young men and three young men who were married with young children. In the conversation that ensued, the group devised a plan for evading the conscription demands on behalf of what were termed in this conversation “the children of the village”. The plan, presented by the then village chief, was to report that all the young men from the village had vanished. It was agreed that they needed to present this story as a united front if they were to successfully evade this round of conscription. One of the fathers articulated the strategy: “There are 67 villages in this district. If we are the last village to talk to them, they will just want to be finished with their work, they won’t question us too hard.” Their conversation was smattered with appeals to *èkkáphàap* (unity), each member echoing the others’ statements of accord and words of comfort (“don’t be afraid”). A few days later I heard that the attempt at evasion had been successful: none of the young men had been conscripted.

In this instance, residents found solidarity in their joint vulnerability to a state demand. They were able to use this joint identity as a strength in avoiding conscription, to cooperate as a group to execute a task that required unanimous action. And the basis for this action was the idea of “village”: it was as co-villagers that they were subject to the state demand, and as co-villagers that they acted to avoid it. This is an instance of village cooperation that, from the perspective of the young men at risk of conscription, was successful, and where the notion of “village” was effective as a means of achieving their aims. The idea of village, then, finds varying degrees of success in application.

Another example of an arguably successful appeal to the solidarity of the village is the organization of the annual village Buddhist festival, the *bun phāwèet*. The *phāwèet* festival is typically held after the harvest is finished, and before the next transplant, roughly between January and April (Premchit and Dore 1992). Monks from the local

and surrounding temples are invited to receive offerings and to read the *Vessantara Jataka*, the story of the Buddha in his penultimate birth (an account is offered in Tambiah 1970). Laypersons from surrounding areas are also invited to listen to the story and to attend the accompanying fair, often sleeping at the temple overnight. The congregation care for the guests by offering refreshments. The festival fair features at least one night of music, dance, stalls, games, and movies played on a TV/VCD system. The fair is avidly anticipated as enjoyable.

Against the best hopes and efforts of the participants, however, the last *bun phāwèet* held during this period of fieldwork was foreshortened by rain before the live music could begin. In a village meeting held a week after that festival, a summary of the event was presented by the village chief. All proceeds and expenditures were itemized and read to the meeting. Reaching the expenditures for the live music, the village chief commented ruefully, “It was shaping up to be fun, wasn’t it?” Turning to me, he offered the extra, somewhat bitter observation, “Our village has a festival: and it rains.” There was a strong air of disappointment, even failure.

While the rain and the limited festival proceeds led some participants, such as the village chief, to view the festival as quite unsuccessful, the organization, donation, and cooperation which marked this process could be counted as a success. During the preparations for the festival, *sǎa sālā* (sacrifice), *sǎamākhǐi* (solidarity), and *nám kan* (together) were not only extolled but enacted. The voluntary labour, contributions, and collective will of the village cooperation had achieved their aims of holding a festival and fair — the musicians were eventually hired, even if the rain did inhibit their actual performance.

Many state and development interventions meet with less success, especially those that assume or require cooperative behaviour and donation on a “village” basis. Those struggling to implement the state village formation projects at times explicitly articulated the discrepancy between the state and religious village. At another village meeting following the festival, while attempting to persuade

villagers to donate money required by the district for yet another district festival, the village chief pleaded: "Let's work together as we always have, everybody help together like before, in our festival." The village chief made a direct plea for the "village" of the village fair to act similarly as a "village" in response to the state. Moerman (1969) notes a similar event in a Northern Thai Lue village, where a district official exhorted villagers to cooperate and donate together to build a school, using their cooperation and donation to the temple as an example. Moerman notes that this exhortation was unsuccessful, with the villagers preferring to devote their energy and resources to upgrading the temple rather than the school. He links this to the idea of personal "reciprocity" in donations to the temple. Such donations have a strong personal, rather than village-based, motivation. There is no reason to assume that these motivations would apply to other village formation projects, such as state demands for voluntary labour and donations for building a school. Instances of village-wide cooperation, then, must not be seen as "generalized", as Ireson saw them as part of the primordial, eternal village. Rather, instances of village-wide cooperation must be seen as specific village-formation processes: contingent on the context and the motivations of the participants.

Conclusion: The Struggle for Solidarity

And so, with the village chief pleading for the village residents to cooperate in response to the state as they do for religion, we come again to the village as the contemporary state's "implementing unit". In recent moves towards decentralization and participation, rural residents are increasingly required to donate and volunteer in state projects. This is an approach to the rural which displays roots in a history of *corvée* requirements, though today these requirements are couched in terms of "people's funds" and "solidarity". In such state-sponsored events, the village is called into being, but it emerges as a site of struggle. It is clear, then, that the village is not a primordial survival that exists in isolation from or in spite of the state. Rather,

it is a process constantly under formation and called into action by the everyday uses of the concept. In the ambiguous “common sense” pertaining to rural Laos, the concept of village is part of the variable notions of what the countryside and its inhabitants could and should be. Some of the visions of village that circulate emphasize that it should be a cooperative unit, characterized by “solidarity”. But these are only some of the notions that circulate: other views of village include that of the village as a group of disparate persons who are reluctant to work together. Development and state interventions that assume or demand the village to be a unit of solidarity are assuming or demanding that one ideal become an actuality, that this complex ambiguous process be a fixed and singular essence. Having followed cases of actual “village formation projects”, from the school repair to the village fair, it is evident that solidarity in the village cannot be assumed. As one of the few tools available for rallying contributions, however, it is often extolled. The village as a solidary unit emerges not as a pre-supposed characteristic of the Lao village, but as a contested ideal.

NOTES

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1. It is significant that this fieldwork was conducted in the south of Laos, in a region inhabited predominantly by ethnic Lao, and in a settlement on an island in the Mekong River. In this sense, the findings presented here will have more in common with findings in other Tai settlements (including those in Thailand and Burma) than with some of the village formations predominant in the highlands of Laos among other ethnic groups.
2. For a comprehensive account of decentralization in Laos, the UNDP-funded Governance and Public Administration Reform Project (GPAP 2002) provides a summary.

3. These comments reflect the fact that the positions of village chief, and indeed every other village administrative position, are not desired positions. When the search was on for a new village chief, one woman commented, “People don’t want to be village chief, they are too lazy for all the travel involved. The salary is low and the work is a lot. No one wants to be the boss of their friends — if you are, your friends will dislike you.” Moerman has noted a similar reluctance to serve among the village chiefs in a Thai Lue village. Moerman writes, “all agree that the office is an unpleasant one which is best to avoid” (1969, p. 538). Similar to the perceptions of chieftainship which Moerman describes, the chiefs in Dɔn Khiaw complained bitterly of the difficulties of office, which was seen as time-consuming, difficult, and largely unrewarding. Accounts from travellers during the period of French colonization also suggest the precariousness and difficulties of leadership in the village. A traveller wrote of a village that:

Den Passa will always be remembered by the title of “Uproar Camp” that we gave to it. The reason for this appellation was that everyone in the village had a hand and a voice in its government, and as a result nothing was ever accomplished. There was a chief, but his power was negative, and the more he yelled at his men the more they answered back. The result was that the piroque men that he had promised us for the following day arrived but refused to work. The chief then turned sullen and attempted to place the blame for their refusal on the governmental order for boats and men that we carried. Between squirts of betel nut juice he claimed that the order was not valid, that he had no boats (Legendre 1937, p. 186).

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