

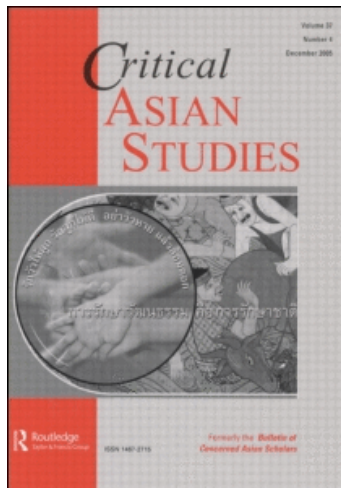
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Holly High

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THE IMPLICATIONS OF ASPIRATIONS

Reconsidering Resettlement in Laos

Holly High

ABSTRACT: Numerous scholarly publications and unpublished development reports have debated the merits of “resettlement” in Laos: the movement of predominantly rural people closer to government services or to new lowland fields. Advocates have argued that settlers benefit from closer incorporation with the state and markets; critics have countered that resettlement actually exacerbates poverty. Using two case studies of resettlement villages in Laos this study illustrates significantly differing experiences, but notes that the experiences also coalesce on key points. Resettlement taps into deeply held aspirations for poverty reduction and modernity among Lao rural residents. Settler’s expectations were jarred, however, as they met with inadequate government services and lowered incomes. This tension between expectation and actualization cannot be encompassed simply in terms of the state’s domination of the people. Rather, settlers employed an experimental and aspiration-oriented mode of engaging with the project and, through it, the state. Settlers judged the lack of government services and charity to be the causes of the horrific conditions of resettlement villages, rather than resettlement itself. By highlighting the role of local aspirations, notions of modernity, and the experimental ethic, this examination of resettlement in Laos casts new light on how rural residents and officials achieve the “experimental consensus” on which these projects run.

Rigg notes that orthodox development wisdom has been that poverty arises from isolation from markets, services, and opportunities: the primordial condition is that of poverty and development can bring a release from these old bonds.¹ By contrast, critics of resettlement have often identified poverty as a recent arrival to Laos. Rigg identifies this line of reasoning as the “new poverty” perspective.² The “new poverty” school argues that tradition offered sustain-

able lives where wants were well within means while the intrusions of the state have brought poverty, as traditional means of production and redistribution were undermined and wants expanded well beyond means. The image here is of a traditional original affluence before resettlement and an impoverished state after resettlement. This view is summed up by the phrase “policy-induced poverty.”³ Donor-funded reports in Laos have found alarming rates of mortality and illness in resettlement villages. Incomes in such villages are typically less than half pre-settlement levels, and promised services such as schools, medical care, and markets have failed to materialize. Some have reasoned that these results are driven by resettlement policy itself.

Why would the government of Laos pursue a poverty-creating policy, while at the same time claiming to be acting to reduce poverty? Critics of resettlement have identified a number of possible reasons. One is simple incompetence or lack of awareness among policy-makers or those responsible for implementation. Another is the desire for the “cultural integration” of ethnic minorities.⁴ Some policy-makers, it has been noted, regard swidden agriculture as environmentally destructive, backwards, and indicative of poverty. Indeed, the Government of Laos has announced a target of eliminating swidden agriculture by 2010, and it frequently lists the “stabilization” of swidden cultivation as a poverty reduction target.⁵ This is a policy pursued despite evidence that certain forms of swiddening can be extremely productive (that is, not an indicator of poverty) and sustainable (that is, not destructive of the forest, but potentially beneficial to biodiversity). Some critics of resettlement have concluded that rather than being determined by *rational* motivations, policy-makers have a *cultural* preference to transform highlanders into the image of the dominant ethnic group. They argue that while this motivation may not be mentioned in official documents, it *is* implicit.⁶

This motivation of “cultural integration” emerges as a kind of cultural imperialism when it is linked to notions of coercion. For example, Baird and Shoemaker’s main theoretical argument is that there is no tenable distinction be-

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1. Rigg 2005.
 2. Rigg 2006a, Rigg 2006b.
 3. Chamberlain 2001.
 4. Baird and Shoemaker 2005, 10–11; Baird and Shoemaker 2007, 872.
 5. This policy — while evidently bound up with highly local perceptions of the environment — has also found enthusiastic support among some international organizations, including large development organizations and environmental lobby groups, such as the ABD. See Ducourtieux et al. 2005, 504.
 6. Resettlement is also closely related to the rearrangement of land regulations in recent years, particularly the Land-Forest Allocation Program (Rigg 2005, 103–23; Rigg 2006, 126–27; Baird and Shoemaker 2007, 876–77; Ducourtieux et al. 2005, 502–7). This program, in tandem with the AusAID/World Bank-funded “land titling program,” aims to zone lands according to permissible uses. In the lowlands, the aim is to formalize private ownership with the presumption that this is a precondition to economic growth. One effect has been a significant rise in landlessness. In the highlands, the effect has been to limit land access for swidden cultivators, effectively shortening fallow periods and reducing yields (Ducourtieux 2005).

tween “voluntary” and “involuntary” resettlement: all resettlement is essentially involuntary because of the political climate in Laos. To demonstrate their commitment to this position, it is worth quoting at length this key passage:

The terms voluntary and involuntary fail to adequately describe the decision-making process or the local context that results in the movement of communities. The process leading to resettlement is usually a long one, which begins with government officials both promoting the idea of resettlement and making it clear that not resettling is not an option. This message is often reinforced by various officials and at different venues, with village leaders being put under particular pressure. Those who resist resettlement are discursively labeled as “being against the government,” a risky designation for people living under a one-party political system such as Laos. Thus, when people eventually “volunteer” to resettle it is important to understand the campaign to break down and isolate “troublemakers” that has preceded this decision. More accurate terms of definition might be “villager initiated” and “externally initiated” or “coerced” resettlement, but even these cannot represent the complex situations that often develop. What is clear, however, is that very little of what is classified as voluntary resettlement in Laos is truly villager-initiated. Despite claims that there is no involuntary resettlement in Laos, resettlement often takes place after a number of escalating steps that are designed to fundamentally influence or coerce villagers to agree to the resettlement option.⁷

The framework employed here to understand resettlement is that of domination and resistance. Resettlement is defined as a result of government power, either subtle or brutal. Those who do not move are described as resisting this power.

This is a significant conclusion because other commentators have found that the settlers involved in their studies express a personal desire for resettlement projects, or at least mixed feelings about the pros and cons of resettling.⁸ Rigg notes that while some moved out of “distress” others moved because they wanted to, and indeed both motivations could be at work in a single individual. In the areas Rigg studied, resettled people stressed that they had wanted to move and given the chance would not want to return to their former homes, despite significant drops in income.⁹ Baird and Shoemaker, by contrast, praise those development projects that attempt to “anchor” remote villages and “make it more difficult for the GoL [Government of Laos] or other international agencies to justify relocation.”¹⁰ Likewise, Vanderveest recommends that we in the first instance “shift our attention to finding ways of *preventing displacement*.”¹¹

7. Baird and Shoemaker 2007, 881.

8. See Rigg 2005; Evrard and Goudineau 2004, 947.

9. Rigg 2005.

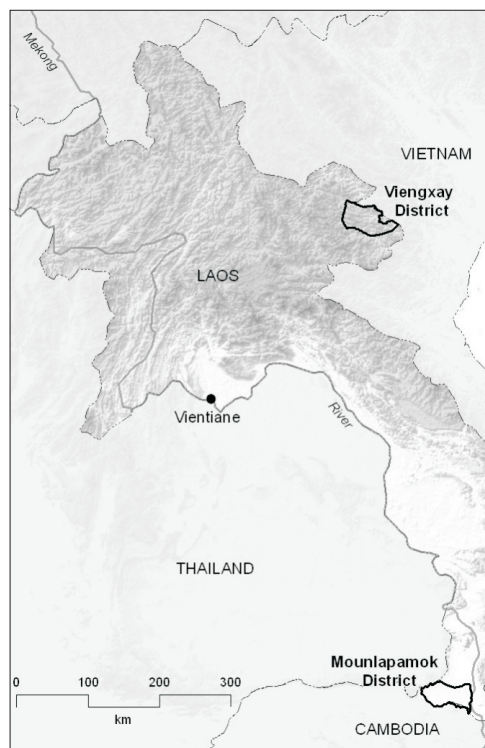
10. Baird and Shoemaker 2005, 34.

11. Vanderveest 2003, 55 emphasis added.

Baird and Shoemaker are persuasive in their argument that development agencies need to acknowledge the political implications of their activities: neutrality is not an option.¹² What is more, these criticisms of resettlement have shown that the apparently “rational” motivations for poverty reduction policies are in fact highly culturally specific: they entail worlds of significance. Furthermore, recognizing that swiddening is a potentially productive and sustainable form of agriculture is a valuable insight. Too often the tired statistic is heard that only 3 percent of Laos is arable. A grasp of the productivity found in the mountain slopes challenges this view, and helps rehabilitate an understanding of how livelihoods in mountainous places are achieved. But the position

as it has so far been formulated has risks: how can evidence of *aspiration* among settlers be understood if the language of domination and resistance predominates? As with those settlers interviewed by Rigg, the settlers I spoke with in both the north and the south of Laos expressed an experimental attitude to resettlement. They recognized the costs, but also the benefits — both potential and actualized — in moving closer to new fields or government services. I argue below that these aspirations are strongly held and embedded in a cultural context that endows them with a sense of normalcy. The development industry now insists that “local voices” be heard, and that these be the determining factor in deciding policies: the local voices I heard in both the north and the south of Laos expressed a significant degree of convergence with the language of the state. They spoke of a desire for fertile fields, schools, hospitals, and roads. They spoke of a desire for change, a break with what were perceived to be old patterns of poverty and marginalization, and a future that was marked by change from the present.

In the following case studies, I demonstrate the centrality of aspiration in understanding the appeal and the tenor of resettlement in Laos. An understanding of aspiration complicates any notion that any mobility to take advantage of state services is “displacement,” or that poverty is “new,” or that the state operates



Map showing Vieng Say and Munlapamok districts. (Note variant spellings.)

12. Baird and Shoemaker 2005, 2007

primarily through coercion. Analysts may debate the value of modern arrangements of land tenure, state administration, and markets access, but modernity is not simply the sum of these economic and political arrangements. Modernity also holds cultural and social valences. In particular, modernity is significant as “an ideology of aspiration.”¹³ To illustrate this important aspect of resettlement, I present two case studies followed by a consideration of the implications of aspirations for how we conceptualize not only resettlement, but state-society relations more generally.

Development Village

My first case study comes from a location not frequently discussed in this context: Munlapamok district in the southern lowlands near the Thai-Lao border.¹⁴ This district has experienced significant landlessness among rural residents in recent years as the enforcement of restrictions on land clearance and land titling has virtually halted the spontaneous creation of new fields. In 2003, landless people were offered the chance to move to a village that I will refer to here as “Development Village,”¹⁵ in the west of Munlapamok district, in a state-sponsored scheme for the controlled establishment of new rice fields.

Munlapamok district’s western reaches are celebrated in district documents as an empty forest with great potential for wet-rice agriculture.¹⁶ In the district capital, logging trucks queue down the main street waiting for clearance to take the ferry across the river. And as logs are hauled out of the district’s interior, settlers move in the opposite direction, hauling their few belongings and their aspirations inland. On my journey by bicycle to Development Village in 2003, I was struck by the unestablished, uncertain-looking villages and fields, dotted with charred tree stumps and scrub. My companion, Jit, surprised me by commenting: “The fields here are beautiful — not old like in our village.” “Our village” — Don Khiaw — is located on an island in the Mekong River. Established for well over 150 years, it has a distinguished history as a center for religion, healing practices, and administration. The landscape there was, to my eye, much more beautiful: mature and shady fruit trees, neatly stacked fields, and elegant old homes. But Jit explained that, because it is an old village, the soil is depleted. Yields are low, and to compound matters, the population is relatively

13. Knaft 2003, 33.

14. It should be noted that even with official research permission, I was able to obtain almost no media or official documentation on this particular project. The village chief of my main fieldsite passed away soon after the resettlement project began, and the man who inherited his papers was not able to locate the orders that had been served to that village to guide the project.

15. This is not the real name of the village, although officials often used the phrase “development village” to refer to this site.

16. When I first started collecting maps of Munlapamok, this Western expanse was often depicted as simply blank white, as if empty, awaiting settlers to animate it with villages and farmland. More recent maps, on the other hand, have depicted the area in another kind of expectant waiting. Much of the area is slated as a “proposed protected area” and may become part of the extensive system of National Protected Areas.

high, with a significant degree of landlessness. As we rode into the western frontier, he saw space, fertile soil, and low population: a beautiful sight in his eyes. Along the way, we stopped to visit friends of Jit who had been settled there five years earlier. They reported that the fields were fertile, fish



The author's bicycle. "On my journey by bicycle to Development Village in 2003, I was struck by the unestablished, uncertain-looking villages and fields, dotted with charred tree stumps and scrub."

(Credit: all photographs by the author)

were plentiful, and bamboo shoots were abundant: "Life is good. We are not usually short of anything."

In Development Village, household plots were arranged in two straight lines either side of the road. Very few trees remained standing and the ground was treacherously uneven, giving the streetscape an undomesticated appearance despite the attempts at uniformity. Jit and I visited the village chief briefly to announce my presence. The chief furnished me with some basic statistics,¹⁷ and told me that the village had been the recipient of some assistance, including eight tons of rice aid — distributed in return for labor digging the "road" — and 333 hectares of rice fields. But, he was quick to add, "The assistance is not enough, it is only a little."

Later, friends from Don Khiaw who had settled in Development Village concurred with the village chief. The common refrain was: "We will not eat rice this year." Each household had been given one or two hectares of land to cultivate, in addition to a 20 x 30-meter household plot in the village. The household plots were three to four kilometers distant from assigned fields, an unfamiliar hardship for many farmers accustomed to living in settlements strung out beside their fields. Once land was allocated, the new owners had to clear and fell trees and burn the forest cover. Then, a large tractor came to complete the initial plowing of the land. For each hectare, a debt of 3.5 million kip (US\$350) was incurred for this service, to be repaid over five years to the Agricultural Promotion Bank.

Drought prolonged the dry season. When the rains finally came, the new owners set about plowing and harrowing. No one had buffalo. The government

17. Established in January 2003. Development Village contained 1,168 residents in 227 households.

was expected to provide mechanical plowing machines, but they never materialized.¹⁸ Left without machines or buffalo, the owners plowed and harrowed with hand and hoe, churning the mud with their feet. The tractor that had initially plowed the land had cut the earth very deep — people spoke of wading through mud up to their chest. The work was exhausting, and none of the farmers were able to cultivate all of their new land. What is more, the tractor had broken the base pan, so that water quickly leached out of the fields. This, combined with the drought, created a very poor looking crop. The plants I saw were yellowed, with few grains on each panicle.

In addition to the debt incurred for the tractor plowing, the villagers were charged for a range of other benefits, including thirty sheets of corrugated iron for each household and the cost of the water pumps. (Development Village has no other source of potable water.) Being some of the poorest families in the area, it was not surprising that many of these people were heavily indebted even prior to moving to Development Village.¹⁹ One family I knew had incurred substantial debts from a failed state-sponsored irrigation project in the late 1990s. I asked family members what would become of that debt and they replied that since they had relocated to Development Village in accordance with the government's wishes, they were exempt from their irrigation debt.

All families I spoke with in Development Village had resorted to "begging" as a major survival strategy. Vegetables (either cultivated or collected from the forest), forest animals such as turtles, and handicrafts such as rice baskets were taken to nearby villages and offered in exchange for food. While this sounds like a form of barter or sale, residents insisted that it was "begging" (*kbo*) because the establishment of Development Village populated with poor settlers with failed crops had sent the local price of rice skyrocketing.²⁰ Even with the items that they offered in exchange, residents could not afford to actually purchase rice. Heavily indebted, with a disastrous crop and reduced to begging, settlers in Development Village seemed to be dire straits. Thinking this, I asked a pair of sisters if they intended to stay. One replied, "We miss our family and friends, but there is no place for us to build or farm there. We have to stay here." Furthermore, residents understood that if they left, even for the dry season, they would lose their entitlement to their fields in Development Village.

The one viable source of income that seemed open to residents was to cut trees from the forest to sell as logs. The cutting of wood from state-owned forest is illegal under the new land allocation arrangements, but Development Village residents told me that local authorities tolerated their logging of the forest.

18. Each group of ten households was to receive one machine, the cost to be repaid as a debt to the bank. "That was the plan, but we have not seen the machines," one man explained. A group of men I spoke with noted their frustration with the very idea of sharing a plow: "If we do it *luam* [together] it is difficult. If they give it to individuals, it is better. If it is ten houses, say we plow your fields first, then mine, and then the machine breaks, who will fix it?"

19. My information is based not on survey techniques but on participant observation and informal interviews in the village of over one thousand residents.

20. From 50,000 kip per 50 kilos to 80,000 kip over the space of a few months.

"They [government officials] don't do anything else to help us," Phan said. The village chief concurred that villagers were allowed to cut wood, stating that it was "so that we can buy rice to eat. It is necessary to cut wood — the people have nothing to eat." A small tree was said to fetch from 100,000 kip (US\$10) to 500,000 or even 600,000 kip once sawn into planks. The process of sawing planks requires two men: one for each end of the saw. Working together, a pair can cut five or six planks a day (less than one whole tree). Village residents reported that the *nanubay* (regulation) allowed the men of the Development Village to cut as much wood as they liked so long as no mechanical means, such as chainsaws, were used. The men bear the wood planks back to the village on their shoulders; there, the planks are sold for the equivalent of U.S. fifty cents per plank. Customers included nearby settlers and an army settlement.

In the district capital, an Agricultural Promotion Bank official informed me that a household granted two hectares would have to pay about one million kip (US\$100) each year in debt repayments.²¹ I pointed out that these people were already beggars, and that they would not be able to raise the cash to pay their debts. He smiled and nodded his agreement: "We will extend the contract — I'll ask the level above so that the people will have a chance to pay." Remembering the belief of some Development Village settlers that their debts for irrigation had been forgiven, I asked him if this was so, and he replied, "We can't — our government is too poor. We can't forget it." He said he would recover the irrigation loans from whomever signed the contract, even those who relocated to Development Village. The head of each family, he explained, would have to find the income each year to pay their debts. "But how?" I asked. "The people in Development Village do not even have enough rice to eat!"

"If they cut wood, they'll be able to pay," he smiled reassuringly.

The establishment of Development Village was a project managed by the District Agriculture and Forestry Office and I visited this office to ask for more information, particularly about the village's relationship to the forest. There, after some prevarications and awkward silences, I was ushered into the office of the head of the District Agricultural Office, who told me:

All the forest belongs to us, to the state. If you need it to repair your house or you are really poor, or you need it for a village building, you can cut the wood. But it may not be sold. It is only for personal use. You should just write that all the forest belongs to the government.²²

Thus, although village residents and the village chief spoke in terms of a *nanubay* that allowed them to cut wood to sell, this right was also not recog-

21. From 13 April 2003 to 25 July 2003 seventeen loans were extended to the village from the bank through the agriculture office. The total debt owed to the bank was 1,115,307,000.00 kip (US\$111,530) at 7 percent interest per annum. Each household was required to pay 750,000 kip (US\$75) for thirty sheets of iron, and 149,000 kip (US\$14.9) for the water pumps. The total debt in the village for iron was 7671,000 kip (US\$767) and for water 4229,000 kip (US\$422). The bank staff planned to collect repayments once a year in April.

22. Author interview with the head of the District Agricultural Office, 2003.



An as-yet unused high school in a resettlement village. "[S]ettlers evidenced a significant aspiration for incorporation into the state, particularly through health, education, and prestigious jobs. These aspirations are key reasons...why people in Laos engage in resettlement programs."

nized at the district level. Likewise, although some villagers believed that by acquiescing with government suggestions and moving to Development Village they had escaped their debts for irrigation, at a district level this was not a recognized arrangement. To compound the

ambiguity, the staff of the Agricultural Promotion Bank expected to be able to collect these old debts as well as the new debts accrued in the Development Village because they expected settlers to obtain money by selling wood, wood that the District Agriculture and Forestry Office denied that they had a right to sell.

Given this picture, it could be said that Development Village existed in a productive state of illegitimacy. The extraction of logs from the forest by settlers was tolerated but not officially sanctioned. It was this gap between tolerated activities and legitimacy that allowed the exploitation of poor settlers and the forest itself. And the relationship between Development Village residents, the surrounding forest, and timber consumers was undoubtedly exploitative. Logging was the only reliable source of income available for the settlers, but because this activity was illegal, settlers had to avoid using noisy chainsaws and trucks in their logging activities lest they draw attention to themselves. Instead they cut the trees and sawed and transported planks by hand, an arduous task. The planks were sold at rock-bottom prices in return for the most basic necessities. This state of productive illegality produced cheap labor, cheap planks of wood to sell or to build houses for more settlers, and a morally compelling reason to clear forests that might otherwise be off limits. The aid that settlers did receive could also be considered exploitative: for instance the penny-pinching approach of "user pays" assistance, the accrual of debt for public services, and "work for food" modes of assistance asked settlers to essentially "help themselves." Yet settlers had moved on the understanding that they would be the recipients of state and development largesse.

It would be easy to leave our analysis here, and conclude that resettlement in Laos has once again turned out to be a disastrous intervention, a move that may have created a more legible landscape of settled peasants among orderly rice fields, but one that has not ameliorated poverty. Two interlinked elements complicate this conclusion, however. These are the questions of aspiration and coercion. It was apparent in Development Village that the most powerful coercion

that was forcing villagers to tough out the deprivations of resettlement was poverty. Rather than emerging from a state of original affluence where “tradition” fulfilled all of their desires, these were people who were already identified as poor: they had no buffalo, no land, and no capital. In fact many were already heavily in debt to the Agricultural Promotion Bank for earlier development schemes. Their chronic poverty resulted in part from their long and ongoing relationship with the state. Thus, the settlers were not moving from a position of isolation from the state, but from one of marginalized incorporation. In tandem with this long-running identification as poor were clearly articulated aspirations for modernity, prosperity, and change. Successful settlers living only a few kilometers from Development Village reported, after all, that “we are short of nothing.” There was a strong desire to take this opportunity to emulate the success of others, and possibly exploit an offer from the state to help them do so. This aspiration is an important element in understanding why people engage with state-sponsored development programs.

The second, and related, element is that of the nature of state-society relations apparent in Development Village. Classic domination and resistance models of state-society relations in Southeast Asia have elaborated on the state’s efforts to make a “legible” countryside by simplifying and standardizing the tangled and inherently state-repelling diversity of everyday life.²³ Through this lens, resettlement appears to be an archetypal state-making project, as people are removed from illegible forested areas and relocated in neat villages arranged in lines beside roads (providing access for state agents) and wet-rice fields (providing surpluses for extraction).²⁴ Development Village provides an ironic counterpoint to this interpretation, for this resettlement village was not a surplus-producing rice farming village existing in what was once unproductive jungle, but a village relying entirely on a productive jungle to sustain unproductive rice farming. Furthermore, this was not a settlement made legible and transparent to the state, but a settlement that was included in the state through a series of productive obfuscations, opaque and confused guidelines, muddled and muddling regulations. This gap between policy and actualization on the ground is not in any simple sense a “failure” (a word Evrard and Goudineau have used to describe resettlement²⁵), but is a space productive of state-local relations. It is

23. Scott 1998.

24. Scott’s 1998 *Seeing like a State* is an influential text that examines the logic of modern state interventions into the lives of nonstate peoples. Scott argues that a persistent theme in state activities is to try to make society “legible”; that is, to arrange people and places in such a way that they are easily known by the bureaucracy. Unlike premodern states, the modern bureaucracy demands a detailed level of knowledge about its subjects, expressed through the production of detailed maps, census information, taxation systems, documentation of licenses and qualifications, and so on. Scott tracks modern state efforts at creating legible populations from those people who have been particularly illegible: nomads, shifting cultivators, and independent farmers. He notes the widespread pattern of these efforts, but also the local forms of resistance whereby people endeavor to carve out zones of independence by maintaining a degree of illegibility.

25. Evrard and Goudineau 2004, 948.

in this space of confusion, rather than legibility, that Lao rural residents engage with the state. Because policies change so often, and because international development projects come and go, and because local bureaucrats are open to negotiation, and because poor people know that they can appeal to their poverty for ad hoc special treatment or exceptions to the rule: for all of these reasons, poor rural residents approach the state in a mode of experimental consensus. This is a mode that is fully encompassed neither by notions of coercion by the state nor by unqualified consensus with the state. Elsewhere, I have employed the term “experimental consensus” to evoke how poor rural residents express both fear and aspiration in their engagements with the policies and regulations emanating from the district, province, or Vientiane.²⁶ Development Village is an example of such experimental consensus at work. I will return to this notion in my Conclusion, but before I do, let us consider a second case study.

The North with Southern Eyes

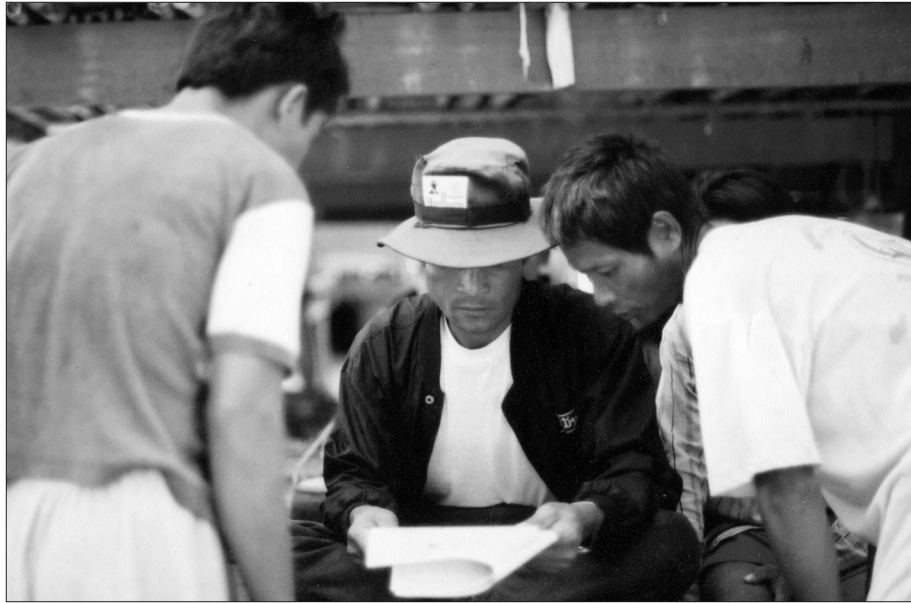
While some of the most important critiques of resettlement have acknowledged the situation in the south of Laos they ultimately contend that the center of gravity of resettlement lies to the north and some see this as an “exclusively” highlands issue.²⁷ In this section I present findings from a field trip I took to the north of Laos in 2006. While I cannot claim that my research in the north allowed insights of the depth of my southern research, I was surprised to find that many of the experiences of northerners had strong parallels with what I had witnessed in the south.

Baan Na Hay is a resettlement village in Vieng Say district, Huaphan Province. The village starts beside a large road, and continues up the slope of a mountain. Village residents are allocated land to farm on the other side of this mountain and along ridges neighboring the village reserve, and they make daily treks to the ridges, valleys, and slopes beyond to collect firewood, tend their crops, and care for their pigs. Like Development Village, the residents of Baan Naa Hay had come from many areas. Several families had been removed from what is now classed as part of Phu Loie National Protected Area. Bureaucrats explained that the resettlement was motivated by a combination of concerns with the conservation of the *kathing* (wild ox), and the desire to move isolated peoples closer to services such as roads, schools, and hospitals.

The dynamics of this resettlement scheme can be partially grasped through the experiences of one settler, Mentur. Despite the coercion evident in the plan to move people out of the newly declared protected area, Mentur explained that he was happy to experiment with moving to the lowlands. He wanted to be closer to services like the hospital, roads, and electricity. He also wanted the chance to farm wet rice in an irrigated field. He was certain that he would be capable of the task, given the chance, and that it would be an easier life than the one he had led on the mountaintops. He had a teenage son who was bright, and

26. See High 2005.

27. Evrard and Goudineau 2004, 959, 943.



A village chief reading instructions that have arrived from the district. "Despite the coercion evident in the plan to move people out of the newly declared protected area, Mentur explained that he was happy to experiment with moving to the lowlands."

he wanted to give this child the chance of an education, and perhaps one day a job working for the government. But when he arrived in Baan Naa Hay, he found that he had no access to any of these lowland features: the wet rice fields were already full, the hospital was too expensive to use, and he could not be sure he would have enough cash to pay his electricity bills. Just finding money to pay for his children's school fees and for schoolbooks was a stretch. As for roads, he found that they were for the rich with cars and motorcycles: at fifty years of age, Mentur had never even ridden a bicycle, and he did not think he would ever have enough money to acquire one. But he was adept on horseback: in the mountains he had horses as well as cattle, but fearing the diseases of the lowlands, he had left them in the mountains. In the lowlands, Mentur's income declined dramatically. He no longer had access to fully recovered upland fields. He was allocated a part of the village reserve, which was already overused. Moreover, Mentur had been deprived of his opium crop, an ideal cash earner.

Experiencing intolerable poverty, Mentur asked permission from the government to settle elsewhere, and in 1990 he was moved with official permission to another region. There he had plenty of lowland fields and forest to use, though the area was very far from any road or government services. The government, he claims, quickly reversed its decision, and ordered him to return to the outskirts of Baan Naa Hay. He intimated that he was the victim of a land grab by lowland Lao who coveted what had turned out to be a very productive area. The poverty that Mentur had already experienced at the Baan Naa Hay resettlement site made him feel that he had no real choice: he refused to return. In 1995 he was arrested and sent to "seminar" (reeducation) in Vietnam for one year. He claims that the camp housed people from China, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand, and

many of them were ethnic minority Hmong. He describes horrific conditions: he was not allowed to speak except to the guards. They spoke only Vietnamese, a language foreign to Mentur's ears. He eventually learned the words for "eat," "wash spoon and bowl," and "shower," and no more. He was shackled except when using the bathroom. After a year he was transferred to the prison at Sam Nuea in Laos for three months. Upon release, he returned to his fields, defying the threat of more imprisonment. He found that many other householders had left in fear. But his own family and fifteen other households remained. His family wept when they saw him: they had assumed he was dead, having heard no news of his whereabouts. Mentur became the village chief, and he and his family lived quite well, though they feared more retribution. Ten years later, the event he and his family had feared occurred: he was arrested again. The rest of the householders were forcibly removed to Baan Naa Hay. This time, he was sent to seminar in Vieng Say. He was shackled there for three months, he claimed. His wife bought him food once a day. His family was required to buy his freedom, at the price tag of 3 million kip (about US\$300). His wife sold livestock (cattle, pigs, horses) to raise half the amount. They borrowed the rest from a distant relative in the United States.

Mentur's story can be summed up in a saying that I heard repeatedly among Vieng Say's settlers, and that Mentur impressed upon me several times: "*Phu bang mi bo khaw khuk, phu thuk bo khaw hong mo*" (the rich don't go to prison, and the poor don't go to hospital). Mentur's story evidenced a dual violence: the state's assumption of the right to classify land exposed him to illegality, prisons, and violent enforcement, on the one hand, and on the other, the mundane exclusions generated by poverty meant that he partook in only a diminished sense of the possible benefits of incorporation into the state, in the form of schools, medical care, and transport. Like the suffering apparent in Development Village, Mentur's experiences are disturbing. The chain of events he described adhere closely to the sequence identified by Baird and Shoemaker quoted above. There are the elements of suggestion from government officials, the singling out of a "troublemaker," and the use of imprisonment. These tactics, as Mentur related them, do appear to be coercive. But the story differs from that presented by Baird and Shoemaker in one key respect: the initial motivation of aspiration. Mentur was adamant that he was not opposed to the original resettlement. He repeatedly stressed that he was confident that he would make a good lowland rice farmer, if he were only given the opportunity. The problem, as Mentur and others phrased it, was a systematic exclusion from the beneficial aspects of the state, such as roads, schools, and hospitals, and a disproportionate inclusion in the disciplinary arms of the state, such as prisons and arbitrary orders. This structured set of inclusions and exclusions summed up the nature of poverty for Mentur. It was this that he identified as the cause of suffering, not resettlement. Mentur was staunchly opposed to this inequitable structure of inclusion and exclusion, but he assured me that he was not opposed to resettling. Indeed, when I met him he was in the process of seeking to settle elsewhere.

And this is the great irony and tragedy of resettlement experiences. While some argue that the aim or even result is "cultural integration," what the pro-

cess of resettlement entails for many (though not all) is not integration, but further separation. Resettled peoples are not all “made the same.” Precisely at that moment of declaring their aspirations as convergent with those of the state, they are “made different” through structured forms of exclusion and marginalization. Mentur’s saying, “*Phu bang mi bo khaw khuk, phu thuk bo khaw bong mo*,” is the core paradox of modernity. On the one hand, modernity appears to capture the aspirations of marginalized people throughout the world, so they aspire to the promises of progress, development, and being “up-to-date” that seem so homogenizing. Yet at the same time, engagement with the modern produces not “sameness” but structured forms of inequality and intensified gradations of difference.

Aspirant Moderns

Across the ethnographic record of mainland Southeast Asia mounting evidence shows that certain tasks are associated with poverty and avoided while others are associated with modernity and valued outside of the cash earnings they promise. Brody, for instance, writes of janitors in Bangkok: even though they worked twelve-and-a-half-hour shifts, they expressed a sense that this was a “step up” in the world from their rural homes.²⁸ Despite systematic marginalization in their workplaces, these janitors from the rural northeast of Thailand claimed what Brody calls “small freedoms” by emphasizing their ability to endure hardship, their efforts to provide materially for relatives, and especially to carve out a better future for their children.²⁹ Mills, too, writes of the desire for certain physical and status transformations rather than for a mere pecuniary reward among migrant workers in Thailand.³⁰ Migration, Mills explains, is associated with local notions of “modernity” (*thansamay*), which is often expressed in personal transformations, either bodily (paler skin, clothing, adornment) or experiential (modern activities such as tourism or engaging in an urban environment). Whittaker makes a similar observation in relation to northeastern Thailand.³¹ She notes that it was bodily transformations toward locally defined images of “modernity” that were valued and desired. These findings indicate that poverty cannot be measured in yields or dollar figures but is, as Sahlins so famously concluded, a social status. To understand the contradictory tensions evident in resettlement it is important to take seriously the ethnographic evidence that in countries like Laos and Thailand poor people do not imagine their futures predominantly in terms of preservation and stasis, but in terms of valued transformations and mobility, both social mobility and physical mobility. It is these desired transformations that I am referring to when I use the term “aspiration.”

I want to add to this mounting evidence regarding the importance of aspirations my own observations recorded among residents in the south of Laos, in-

28. Brody 2006, 549.

29. Ibid., 549–50.

30. Mills 1997; Mills 1999a; Mills 1999b.

31. Whittaker 2000, 39.

cluding some people who eventually settled in Development Village. To summarize the argument that I have made elsewhere, a person-centered notion of both poverty and aspirations predominates in the area.³² Poverty is inscribed on the body but, at the same time, this inscription and the accompanying social status of poverty are not perceived as permanent. People regard their social status (and the physical markings of it) as open to change, especially through personal effort and personal transformation. For instance, rural women spoke of wanting to obtain the physical characteristics and adornments associated with both wealth and beauty: skin-whitening creams, nail polish, lipstick, powder, fashionable apparel, and gold jewelry. A young rural woman described her aspirations to me in these terms:

I want to be covered in gold — gold on every part of my body, my throat, my ears, my arms, my waist, in my hair. I like it so much. If I have lots of money, lots of gold, I will have a boyfriend, and friends. Holly, if you were Lao, and poor like me, you would be alone like me too. Lao people don't like people who are poor. If you don't have money, you don't have friends, and you don't have boyfriends.³³

Several aspects of this statement of aspiration are striking. First, these aspirations are entirely personal — to the point of being conceived in terms of a metaphor of a body covered in gold. Second, this woman expresses clearly the social nature of poverty. Poverty is not simply a matter of a lack of the necessities to survive, but is a matter too of symbolic achievement and beauty. These are closely linked to social inclusion and fulfillment, thus the motivations for achieving change are doubly persuasive. Third, an important aspect of malleability is evident here. This woman regarded herself as one of the poorer residents of her village, but she did not conceive of this social status as fixed. She often spoke to me of her plans for self-improvement, particularly her plans to migrate to Thailand to accumulate wealth. (She eventually migrated to the Bolaven plateau in Laos where she worked in a coffee and noodle shop). While migration is a key element in many people's plans for achieving class mobility and personal transformation, other plans were expressed too. A strong commitment to education for younger family members was a key element in the aspirations of some families. Others experimented with small businesses or commercial fish cultivation or cash cropping. The key features of such common aspirations were these: a focus on the person and personal transformation; compelling social and material motivations for achieving these transformations; and an ideology that supported the notion that these transformations both could and should be achieved through personal effort.

As is evident from these examples from both Thailand and Laos, aspiration is closely bound up with culturally specific notions of modernity. Knauff has argued that modernity can be understood as images and institutions that resonate

32. High 2004; High 2005.

33. This conversation took place in Don Khiaw during my fieldwork between 2002 and 2003.

with (without necessarily replicating) Western-style notions of economic and material “progress” and link these with images of social and cultural “development.”³⁴ Ideas about modernity and progress cannot be confined to “the West”: they are symbolically and socially compelling in many contexts. To say that settlers are modern aspirants is not to say that they are thus culturally generic, part of the unmarked group of “the West.” Modernity takes on very specific contours in this part of the world. Houses on stilts, Lao skirts, and wet rice agriculture are commonly identified aspects of resettled villages, but they can hardly be said to be “Western.” Likewise, pale skin, gold jewelry and government jobs are the object of desire, but these desires are not always or even mostly associated with modernity in the West. Thus the much commented upon process of “Lao-ization” said to be associated with resettlement may not be an instance of cultural integration so much as a question of locally configured modernity. This is not to argue that cultural beliefs and orientations regarding modernity are separate from, or a substitute for, an understanding of the political economy of development and change. I am arguing, however, that we must find our understanding of resettlement within the context of an understanding of modernity-as-aspiration that appears to make people more “the same” even as it makes them more differentiated. Sadly, often the aspirations for modernity are simply not realistic. The causes of poverty in Laos lie well beyond the borders of that small nation for the most part, and no remediation seems immediately available for these. And often, the moves taken to follow aspirations turn out to be more impoverishing, as many studies of resettlement have shown. Yet while aspirations for modernity may well be unrealistic, unattainable, and bound up with oppression, damaging to livelihoods and signifying a loss to traditional lifestyles, they cannot be ignored.

Thinking in terms of aspiration casts new light on how human mobility is understood. Those who see mobility itself as problematic tend to call mobility by other names, such as “displacement” or “deterritorialization” or “a rush to the lowlands.” For instance, Vandergeest describes resettlement primarily through its potentials for planned or unplanned “displacement.” In Vandergeest’s definition, “displacement” is a broad term referring to both forced resettlement and the resettlement that arises when people choose to move in order to take advantage of developments such as infrastructure and services, and his argument is that it should be prevented whenever possible.³⁵ It is worth noting that by Vandergeest’s definition, school graduates from rural Australia who decide to move to Sydney in order to attend university are “displaced” because the uneven distribution of government services such as tertiary education has made them choose to move closer to services. The comparison may seem flippant, but my point is that there is nothing in his definition that allows us to distinguish “good” mobility from “bad.” In his view, all mobility connected to service provision or development is displacement and is accordingly associated with pov-

34. Knauf 2002.

35. Vandergeest 2003, 47.

erty. Goudineau and Evrard recount one instance where some Khmu villagers were relocated to a lowland site. Soon, many other Khmu who moved without the prompting of government officials joined them. These spontaneous movements are characterized as a “rush to the lowlands.”³⁶ Evrard and Goudineau view this kind of mobility as “a serious concern” because it creates headaches for local administrators who are left to try to find land to allocate to the new settlers.³⁷ The worries and workloads of administrators aside, however, this example could be understood as revealing once again the strength of aspirations to evade poverty through mobility and personal effort. My point is not that mobility is necessarily good, but that it is not necessarily bad either. Malkki has identified as a powerful “sedentarism” in Western thinking regarding human mobility. This sedentarism posits “rootedness” or in this case “anchoring” as in and of itself preferable and mobility as *itself* pathological.³⁸ There is a danger of slippage between peoples, cultures, and soils, where any departure from the homeland is viewed as pathological, as “uprootedness.”³⁹ This slippage is linked to the perception of a divide between a pristine and sustainable tradition, and a disrupted, uprooted, post-settlement experience. Lao rural residents do not always share this pathologization of mobility in any simple manner, and evidence is strong that a valorization of mobility may in fact be more influential. In the Thai-Lao world, mobility is often associated with success, enjoyment, and valued personal transformations.⁴⁰

I suggest that a pathologization of mobility obstructs understandings of Lao resettlement by obscuring the role of aspiration. Repeatedly, Lao settlers have expressed the view that it is not mobility, but poverty, that is problematic in their settlements. Settlers explained that they had been willing to move and to experiment with government policy. Taking advantage of opportunities that arise through personal effort and mobility is a model that fits closely with the pattern of aspirations summarized above. Furthermore, the settlers evidenced a significant aspiration for incorporation into the state, particularly through health, education, and prestigious jobs. These aspirations, I suggest, are key reasons why people in Laos engage in resettlement programs.

The reasons why they often encounter poverty upon resettlement are related but distinct. In Development Village, the disaster with the deep plowing of the rice fields, the lack of buffalo, the failure of plowing machines to arrive, and the miserly approach to rice assistance — compounded by the resulting indebtedness of residents — was simply “not enough” in the words of the Development Village chief. It was not enough to meet the expectations of new settlers, it was not enough to relieve their poverty, and it was certainly not enough to provide for settlers as they established themselves. In the north, settlers spoke of the lack of rice fields, the comparatively expensive hospitals, and underdeveloped

36. Evrard and Goudineau 2004, 957; and Baird and Shoemaker 2007, 881.

37. Evrard and Goudineau 2004, 953.

38. Malkki 1992, 31.

39. *Ibid.*, 32.

40. Walker 1999, 139–62.

trade links as inequitable. Mentur, in noting that “the poor don’t go to hospital, and the rich don’t go to prison,” highlights the stratifying structures that characterize poverty. These are problems of service provision, support, and equality, but not mobility.

Conclusion

Mentur expressed his aspirations for a kind of modernity as his motivation for initially cooperating with demands for resettlement. He desired the benefits of health, education, and roads. While his was a particularly marginalizing encounter with the state, it is notable that even despite this he continued to aspire for a distinctly modern future for himself and his family. In particular, he struggled to find the resources to promote higher education for his children. Much of Mentur’s sense of alienation from the state — and his resentment of it — came not from his desire to be independent, traditional, or isolated, but from the realization that his modern aspirations for incorporation would likely be quashed by structured inequality similar to that which he had already experienced. His anger and disgruntlement arose not from the intrusion of the state, but from his exclusion from its benefits.

Likewise, aspirations for a recognizably modern future are the key to understanding the motivations of residents of Development Village. These residents had withstood almost unimaginable hardships. Yet, by cutting wood in the forest, begging in neighboring villages, asking for help from friends and family, and relying on other natural resources, they were determined to *ba kin* (find food), perhaps just enough for this year and the next, until the base pan hardened, the rice fields became established, and the school and other government services arrived. They looked to the comparative prosperity of the more established settlers only a few kilometers distant who claimed that they were “short of nothing” as both a model and as an aspiration. For many settlers, the chance to own their own land and the promises of assistance (either officially promised or imaginatively embellished in rumors and assumptions) were extremely attractive. Part of their determination and willingness stemmed from the fact that they were already marginal in their home villages, so any idea of original affluence does not apply, as noted above. But more than simply being desperate and therefore willing to try almost anything, these people were also actively experimental in their approach to Development Village. This general experimental ethic can be seen in the great interest shown even by comparatively well-off farmers in the Development Village project who also expressed interest in resettling. Even those who did not take up the offer watched the unfolding of the project with interest. Some of them walked out to the new village to measure the prospects for themselves. Their interest cooled when they saw that things were not going well, again demonstrating the experimental, proactive and open-minded approach Lao farmers take to government initiatives. The attitude

41. Baird and Shoemaker 2007; Evrard and Goudineau 2004.

of both settlers and those who observed them was oriented toward experimenting with an opportunity and maneuvering to maximize their chances of success.

Settlers in both the north and the south impressed upon me that they had no choice but to move to the site, due to their poverty, and in that sense their settlement was involuntary. But as I have illustrated above, more than fear motivated settlers in both instances. Thus the evidence presented here supports the argument (made by both Baird and Shoemaker and Evrard and Goudineau) that the distinction between “voluntary” and “involuntary” does not hold up in the case of Laos.⁴¹ It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that all resettlement is therefore involuntary. Instead, the evidence suggests that the great majority of Lao social life occurs in the vast territory between outright coercion and unqualified acquiescence. It occurs in a context of “experimental consensus”: resettlement was consented to, but on a basis of ongoing renegotiations and maneuverings within the state apparatus. One element of this “experimental consensus” is the murkiness and ambiguity through which the state functions. Settlers in both cases continually renegotiated, misinterpreted, or reinterpreted government policy. Another element is the apparent “success” state discourses have had in capturing the modernist yearnings of poor people. Far from resisting the notion that resettlement may lead to improved and desirable lives, poor people have embraced this narrative. What they rejected and resisted was the state’s failure to actually deliver on this promise, or make the narrative a reality. Thus, discourses of modernity break free from the control of any one source (state or society) and are appropriated, interpreted, and misinterpreted in ways that can only partly be understood in terms of domination and resistance.

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