



Political Memories, Economic Land Concessions, and Landscapes in the Lao People's Democratic Republic

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Lao People’s Democratic Republic**

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Abstract

Recently I have argued that ‘political memories’—which are crucial for establishing and maintaining ‘political capital’, based on individual and group positioning during past wars and conflicts—are important when considering varied outcomes from negotiations that occur in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic in relation to large-scale economic land concessions (see Baird and Le Billon 2012, *Political Geography*). In this paper I expand on the idea of political memories by considering the concept in relation to the theoretical framework presented by Hall *et al.* (2011) in their book *Powers of Exclusion*, which stresses the importance of interactions between *regulation*, *force*, the *market* and *legitimation* for understanding different types of exclusionary processes, especially in relation to access to land. I argue that political memories are particularly relevant when it comes to the idea of *legitimation*, and that the concept of political memories fits well into Hall *et al.*’s framework. In relation to large-scale plantation, mining and hydropower dam concessions, I stress the importance of political memories in (re)shaping understandings of landscapes.

Introduction

Since the early 2000s, the government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR or Laos) has allocated many large "economic land concessions", covering hundreds of thousands of hectares in various parts of the country, to mainly foreign investors. Numerous land concessions have been granted for large-scale mining exploration and development (Haglund 2011; Kyophilvong 2009), the investigation and development of large hydropower dams (Molle *et al.* 2009; Baird and Shoemaker 2008; Lawrence 2008; International Rivers Network 1999), and for developing industrial-scale plantations for 'boom crops', especially for rubber (Baird 2010a; 2011; Shi 2008; Luangaramsi *et al.* 2008; Diana 2008).¹ Yet the potential negative social and environmental impacts of these land concession has frequently been underestimated, partially because Laos is often imagined as a resource frontier, rich in resources and virtually empty of the people (see Barney 2009). Along with foreign investors, many elites in Laos imagine that there are plenty of unused and open spaces ready to give to foreign investors in the form of large-scale concessions.

Economic land concessions have been quite controversial locally and nationally in Laos. Plantation concessions have frequently resulted in serious negative impacts to the environment as well as to local livelihoods, especially those of rural peasants and upland ethnic minorities (Baird and Le Billon 2012; Kenney-Lazar 2012; Baird 2010a; 2011; Thongmanivong *et al.* 2009; Luangaramsi *et al.* 2008; Lao Biodiversity Association 2008; Dwyer 2007; Obein 2007; Chamberlain 2007; Schipani 2007; Hanssen 2007). Mining development has also resulted in

¹ The boom in rubber production in Southeast Asia has occurred due to high demand for rubber in India and particularly China. Rubber is used for many products, of which car tires are the most important. The price of rubber is linked to the price of petroleum products, as rubber constitutes a substitute for many products made with petroleum products. As long as the price of oil remains high, the price of rubber is unlikely to decline dramatically.

serious pollution problems and land conflicts in various parts of the country (Sengdara 2010; *Vientiane Times* 2010; Baird 2010b). Hydropower dam concessions have also led to serious environmental and social impacts, virtually all of which virtually have been inadequately compensated for (Molle *et al.* 2009; Baird and Shoemaker 2008; Lawrence 2008; International Rivers Network 1999). Indicative of the extent of the problems that have arisen in relation to various kinds of land concessions, in June 2012, when the National Assembly in Laos was in session, by far the most frequent citizen complaints received through the National Assembly's complaint "hotline" related to land disputes (*Vientiane Times* 2012a). Indeed, land conflicts related to large-scale land concessions are now of considerable concern in Laos.

Land conflicts related to plantation concessions emerged as a particularly significant issue during the 2000s—since before then there were very few large-scale plantation-based land concessions in the country—and in May 2007 Bouasone Bouphavanh, the Lao Prime Minister at the time, announced a moratorium on allocating new plantation land concessions. Conflicts between villagers and Vietnamese rubber concessions in southern Laos were particularly important for influencing the decision to implement a plantation concession moratorium. One of the main reasons for the moratorium was to centralize the decision-making process in relation to land concessions, since some larger land concessions had previously been approved only at the provincial level. When the ban was rescinded in May 2009 by a Prime Minister's decree on state land leases and concessions, the National Assembly voiced its concern, due to the large number of complaints received from villagers who have had their agricultural lands and common lands taken from them for developing land concessions. Thus, in June 2009, less than two months after the first moratorium was revoked, the government suspended large-area plantation concessions again, although those less than 1,000 ha were still permitted, but only when approved by the

central government (Baird 2010a). Still, these bans on new plantation concessions have proven to be far from effective, and many new concessions have been granted since the bans were announced, especially to Vietnamese companies with strong political capital in Laos (Baird and Le Billon 2012; Baird 2011; 2010). Problems linked to land concessions for plantations have not diminished, and considerable controversy continues to surround land concessions. Thus, on June 26, 2012, the government of Laos announced that, “The government won't consider any new investment proposals in mining or [plantation] land concessions for rubber and eucalyptus plantations until December 31, 2015” (*Vientiane Times* 2012a). The Minister of Planning and Investment, Somdy Duangdy explained that the government plans to conduct a nationwide survey to assess the status of previously granted land concessions. As he put it, “We approved large plots of land without looking into the details, like what land belonged to the state and which belonged to local people” (*Vientiane Times* 2012a).

In this paper I consider the politics of memories and landscape creation associated with the issuance and development of large-scale plantation, mining and hydropower dam economic land concessions in Laos. I have argued elsewhere that “political memories”—which are crucial for establishing and maintaining ‘political capital’, based on individual and group positioning during past wars and conflicts—are important for understanding the varied outcomes from various kinds of negotiations, both formal and informal, that occur in the Lao PDR in relation to large-scale economic land concessions (Baird and Le Billon 2012). Here, I expand on the idea of political memories by considering the concept using the theoretical framework presented by Hall *et al.* (2011) in their ground-breaking book *Powers of Exclusion*. Hall *et al.* stress the importance of interactions between *regulation*, *force*, the *market* and *legitimation* for understanding different types of exclusionary processes, especially in relation to access to land. Ultimately, I argue that

the concept of political memories fits well into Hall *et al.*'s conceptual framework, and it seems to me that political memories are particularly relevant when it comes to the idea of *legitimation*. I also, however, want to stress the importance of political memories in (re)shaping understandings of landscapes, thus creating historically constituted 'political landscapes'. That is, political memories are not just important for determining the outcome of land concession development processes, but are a crucial element, at particular times and places, for constituting landscapes themselves, something that geographers have long generally recognized, but have not specifically considered in relation to economic land concessions.

Powers of Exclusion

In their recent book, *Powers of Exclusion*, Hall *et al.* (2011) provide us with a useful new theoretical framework for considering how *access* and *exclusion* are related to land issues. Using a wide variety of examples from various parts of Southeast Asia, Hall *et al.* (2011) argue that when considering land tenure, it is useful to think of exclusion as a necessary condition, rather than as something that is undoubtedly negative. Instead of framing exclusion as the opposite to *inclusion*, they urge us to think of exclusion as the contrary to *access* (see Ribot and Peluso 2003). They convincingly illustrate that exclusion is a necessary part of land tenure. For example, even poor farmers need to know that they can reasonably expect to be able to exclude others from harvesting before they are likely to be willing to invest capital and labor into planting agricultural crops.

Hall *et al.* (2011) emphasize the importance of interactions between *regulation*, *force*, the *market* and *legitimation* for understanding different types of exclusionary processes. Our ideas about political memories fit well into their framework, especially in relation to the idea of

legitimation, as memories about past conflicts are certainly crucial for determining whether concessions are granted or not, and how they are actually implemented on the ground (Baird and Le Billon 2012). As Hall *et al.* (2011: 18) put it, *legitimation* is “[u]nderstood as justifications of what is or of what should be and appeals to moral values.” They go on to write, “Arguments framed in terms of what is right and appropriate provide the normative underpinning to regulatory, forceful and market powers.” They also point out that “the range of legitimations for exclusion on offer in Southeast Asia is enormous.” Memories are an important element for legitimations related to access or exclusion. They are the basis for the senses of normativity that are linked to morals, which are themselves strongly associated with history and societal senses of what is right or wrong. Although we certainly should not assume that right and wrong means the same thing to everyone, memories of the past certainly provide points of comparison in societies that provide legitimacy, even if we rarely think of memories as being crucial for determining and maintaining particular socially constructed morals.

Political memories are important for influencing access and exclusion, as they have the potential to not only affect the ways access can be legitimized or not, and thus how landscapes are viewed, but also to shift those understandings, thus creating what I call here, “political landscapes”, landscapes that are not only seen in relation to conflicts that occurred on them, but are understood with regard to the people associated with them in memory, due to the involvement of those people—regardless of what side they supported—in past conflicts.

Political Memories and Landscape Production

Memories are not only important for making conflicts of the past relevant for present-day access, they are also critical for socially constructing landscapes themselves. Landscapes are not

only physically altered by past conflicts (although they sometimes are). They are not simply made meaningful based on their raw physical characteristics. Instead, landscapes are complex social constructs that become meaningful based partially on their biophysical characteristics but also crucially through memory. Various memories, including those that legitimize access and exclusion, thus result in particular places becoming embedded with certain meanings (Gordillo 2002). Thus, landscapes are inevitably and fundamentally laden with politics, as they are always constituted in part through memory, which is never politically neutral, because the ways we remember things and events is always affected by our own views and politics, whether we like it or not (Fentress and Wickham 1992).

Geographers have long recognized that landscapes are linked to memories. Although some landscapes do not require any material representation or overt symbols of the past to be meaningful to particular individuals and groups in certain contexts and circumstances, material representations are often important nonetheless. Owen Dwyer (2004) has, for example, pointed out that people frequently use geographical features to symbolize particular memories, which he calls “discourse made material”, which demonstrates how memories are linked to landscapes. Yet, not everyone understands the codes and clues that link landscapes to particular memories. Therefore, some groups and individuals strive to move beyond the hidden transcripts that make particular landscapes meaningful, in order to increase the political meanings of certain landscapes. Various forms of material symbols, memorials or other representations of past events are, for example, often used as tools for helping to enhance the political meanings associated with particular places and landscapes, and to make them readily understandable to a broader group of people. One can recognize various examples of such efforts in Southeast Asia (see, for example Tappe 2011; Pholsena 2006; Hughes 2006; Keyes 2002; Evans 1998) but one is just as

likely to encounter this sort of situation in other parts of the world as well (i.e. Kaiser and Nikiforova 2008). Indeed, ‘memory work’ frequently occurs in highly politically charged arenas, where ‘memoriscapes’, as Kaiser and Nikiforova (2008) refer to landscapes constituted by memory, become highly contingent and variable spaces. While certain symbols and physical representations may only be meaningful for particular individuals and groups of people who have the necessary background to be able to understand material representations, sometimes groups and individuals work vigorously to make others who do not possess the memories aware of them through material representations.

The use of material symbols to represent particular memories and associated views with landscapes is often contested, as is evident in many parts of the world. For example, places like in the old quarter of East Jerusalem, where devout Jews worship the “wailing wall”, believed by some to be the Western Wall of the second temple, and therefore a critically important religious space. This powerful material symbol of the Jews is contrasted by the nearby Al Asqa Mosque, the third most sacred religious site in Islam, following only Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia. In fact, these powerful religious symbols lay claim to the same overall landscape for two different religious groups. It is, indeed, the political memories associated with these religious landmarks that have resulted in the landscape of East Jerusalem becoming highly political.

Emphasizing the importance of the links between memories and landscapes, William Turkel (2007) characterizes certain landscapes as constituting “archives of memory”, thus demonstrating multi-layered and complex relationships between memory and landscape. Memories are often generated through iterative processes of performative story-telling. Bill Cronon, for instance, has written about “telling stories about stories” (Cronon 1992: 1375), thus illustrating how memories are constructed and reconstructed over time.

Below I provide examples of how legitimizing political memories, following Hall *et al.*, are linked with economic land concessions and landscape creation in Laos. I hope to demonstrate how political memories are linked to access and exclusion, and the creation of political landscapes, which are recognized not as simply the products of their materiality, but also the social stuff that gives them meaning, and is inevitably remembered by people, albeit in different ways.

The Creation of Political Landscapes

Baird and Le Billon (2012) demonstrate that memories associated with people and villages linked with past conflicts was a crucial determinant of how negotiations related to plantation land concession development played out at high levels of government as well as at the local level. We do not, however, address the ways that such processes work to actually transform landscapes. The following shows the transformative changes that occur to landscapes due to political memories. As we have emphasized, political memories, which are based on political capital (see Bourdieu 1980), frequently affect the ways that negotiations related to plantation economic land concessions develop. It is also, however, important to consider how political memories literally create landscapes, transforming them beyond the meaning of their materiality into new types of political landscapes.

One example worth considering relates to an incident in Bachiengchaleunsouk District, Champasak Province, southern Laos that unfolded a few years ago in which an ethnic minority government official threatened a Vietnamese employee of a Vietnamese rubber concession with a rifle. The Vietnamese man was threatened with being shot he if did not stop clearing the agricultural land of the minority. The conflict became well known amongst villagers. While the

event has long since ended, and there are no remaining physical traces of the tense moment when the Vietnamese tractor driver was ordered to leave the property, the location where the confrontation occurred still evokes memories of the event for some people who come in contact with the place in question, even they did not actually observe the standoff. For example, some people in the area, based on political memories of the past, associate the land with resistance to Vietnamese rubber development every time they walk past it, even if nothing is spoken. Some, however, frequently comment on the meaningfulness of the event when they see the landscape where it occurred. Thus, the event has essentially transformed the meaning of the landscape, at least for some, into a political landscape, with political memories being the key to keeping the landscape in the realm of the political. There are no physical or material symbols to mark the place where resistance occurred, but the conflict and the political memories that emerged have legitimized villager access to the land in question, and have in turn shifted the landscape into the realm of the political.

More generally, plantation land concessions in Bachieng have resulted in farmers losing both their agricultural lands and their common forests and pastures has also politicized the landscape (see Baird and Le Billon 2012; Baird 2010a; 2011; Luangaramsi *et al.* 2008; Obein 2007). Thus, local people now often associate the plantations not as being symbolic of economic development and advancement, as some government officials and politicians do, but rather as representative of unjust processes of land expropriation and ultimately land alienation. Memories of these processes are, of course, deeply political, even if they cannot be expressed forcefully due to the oppressive one-party political system that exists in Laos. Moreover, the use of large tractors driven by Vietnamese workers to bulldoze down small-scale coffee, pineapple and durian plantations previously owned by the villagers in order to replace them with expansive

rubber plantations has resulted in particular bad and feelings and later memories that are now represented by the physical presence of the new large-scale plantations themselves. The memories of past ownership and use of the land by local people legitimizes access to the land in their minds, but these political memories stand in contrast with the physical presence of the large-scale plantations that have now transformed the landscape into—at least in the minds of many farmers—illegitimate rubber plantations. Political memories held by those who lost land result in the rubber plantations representing unjust oppression. The plantations have become a symbol of the unjust ways that the people lost their land.

Apart from the above example, I have recently written about how economic land concessions, completed and planned hydropower dams and a planned bauxite mine, and memories of landscapes are linked in relation to the Heuny (Nya Heun) people who live in Paksong District, on the Bolavens Plateau in Champasak Province, southern Laos (Baird forthcoming, 2013). In their case, particular landscapes are embedded in memories of their “former homes”, which they were had to leave due to forced resettlement to a different area in the territory of a historically rival ethnic group on the Plateau. These memories have been a significant factor in encouraging many Heuny to unofficially return to their former village areas from the resettlement sites where they were moved due to plans related to hydropower dam development in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Delang and Toro 2012; Baird forthcoming, 2013), particularly the development of the Houay Ho dam and the planned development of the still un-built Xepian-Xenamnoy dam (Baird forthcoming, 2013). Moreover, recently political memories of claims by the government that their former lands would be preserved for environmental protection and conservation reasons have been contrasted by holes in the landscape made by the company that received the concession to explore for bauxite on the land

that the people continue to recognize as theirs (Riseborough 2006; Baird forthcoming, 2013), even if they are officially not allowed to occupy it. For them, it is their memories of the past that legitimizes their access to the land, and tells them that outsiders, like miners and dam builders, should be excluded from the land. The mining exploration holes have been upsetting to the Heuny people, who see them as being symbolic of government betrayal of them, and also as representative of scars on the land (Baird forthcoming, 2013). They have become symbolic of illegitimate foreign intrusion onto the landscape. Thus, the political memories of the Heuny have created moral space for them and have legitimized their access to the land, as well as having turned the landscape into highly politicized and contested spaces.

Conclusions

I have only been able to provide summaries of a few examples of how large-scale plantation, mining and hydropower dam economic land concessions in Laos have become intertwined with political memories that have, following Hall *et al.*'s theoretical framework, constituted a crucial legitimizing force in relation to who should be morally allowed to access land, and who should be excluded. Still, it should now be clear that political memories linked questions of land access and exclusion have frequently deeply politicized the landscape, which is now full of public and more private symbols of unjust land expropriation, some evident through the development projects themselves. While material or physical symbols are not always required to create political landscapes, as is illustrated through the example of the official who stood up to the Vietnamese concession employee, they often do exist, sometimes in the form of the large-scale plantations, hydropower dams, or even the holes made in the landscape by the mining concession company searching for bauxite near the former homes of the Heuny people.

In that the processes that led to these changes in the landscape are seen as illegitimate and thus morally corrupt, the material changes to the landscape have come to represent what is wrong with past processes. The landscapes in question have, indeed, become heavily politicized.

Finally, by thinking about economic land concessions and other large-scale land acquisitions in relation to political memories, legitimacy, and changes to the landscape resulting from concession development, one can see why the concept of political landscape deserves attention, as it helps us to see how people think about and remember what they see as illegitimate processes related to—in the case of Laos—legalized land grabbing through government issued land concessions of various forms.

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