

Rethinking state–ethnic minority relations in Laos: Internal resettlement, land reform and counter-territorialization

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A B S T R A C T

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Democratic participation and the political weight of ethnic minorities have generally increased across Southeast Asia. Indigenous movements, alliances with nongovernmental organizations and legal challenges have become important instruments for laying claims on customary resources and influencing or countering state territorialization. While such strategies are generally not feasible in one-party states such as the Lao People's Democratic Republic, minorities may also engage in more subtle and covert forms of counter-territorialization. This paper provides a detailed account of local responses to internal resettlement and land reform in two minority villages of northern Laos. Drawing upon Michel Foucault's description of governmentality, it discusses the functioning of state–ethnic minority relations and argues for a critical yet nuanced perspective on the agency of ethnic minorities vis-à-vis state territorialization.

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Introduction

As Vandergeest and Peluso describe, “all modern states divide their territories into complex and overlapping political and economic zones, rearrange people and resources within these units, and create regulations delineating how and by whom these areas can be used” (1995: 387). Through this territorialization process, states include or exclude individuals and social groups within particular geographic boundaries. The outcomes of state territorialization are therefore contingent upon state–society relations, political representation and associated configurations of power (Buch-Hansen, 2003). In Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines, for instance, political devolution and the development of the civil society have strongly enhanced the ability of ethnic minorities to lay claims on customary lands and resources and thereby influence or counter state territorialization projects (e.g., Bryant, 2002; Isager & Ivarsson, 2002; Peluso, 1995, 2005). In these countries, counter-territorialization efforts have often followed prescribed paths and involved protest movements, legal challenges and alliances between indigenous communities and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). While such strategies are generally not feasible in one-party states like the Lao People's Democratic Republic, minorities may also engage in more subtle and covert

forms of counter-territorialization, which on a day-to-day basis, compromise state territorialization.

In fact, among politically-marginal populations, gentle forms of resistance such as passive non-compliance, foot-dragging and deception are often preferred to open rebellion for they minimize the risk and the potential intensity of repression by opposing parties (Scott, 1976, 1985). While they certainly differ from rebellion and even more so from engagement in formal politics, everyday acts of resistance are nevertheless always politicized. As Holmes argues, “the continuation of banned practices is itself a political statement, as it contains, alongside other motivations, an implicit statement that these practices should be allowed – someone hunting inside a national park is automatically and implicitly making a statement that hunting should be allowed in a national park” (2007: 188). Obviously, illegal actions may not be primarily motivated by a willingness to contest the rule imposed by powerful actors. There is a qualitative distinction between explicit resistance, where illegal actions are meant to express particular claims or discontentment, and implicit resistance, where illegal actions are not deliberate (i.e., done without knowledge of the legal context or driven by external circumstances). In practice however, because they persistently undermine the efficiency of state projects, everyday acts of resistance can be the foundations for broader scale change, even if they take place in restrictive political environments (e.g., Beard, 1999, 2002; Kerkvliet, 1995, 2005). Beyond simple resistance, counter-territorialization may also involve compromises and knowledge alliances between minorities and local state agents responsible for applying and enforcing state rule (Li, 1999, 2005;

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Robbins, 2000). The degree to which these relations can challenge state power and territorial ambitions remains debatable (Scott, 2005); however, they do provide a medium for local actors to assert claims and alter broad scale projects.

This paper examines such counter-territorialization strategies among ethnic minorities of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. With a single-party regime that is often qualified as "authoritarian" (e.g., Jönsson, 2002; Stuart-Fox, 2005), Laos is also one of the most ethnically diverse countries of Southeast Asia. A total of 48 non-ethnic Lao minority groups are officially recognized, who account for more than two-thirds of the total population (UNDP, 2002). Recognizing the challenge that such diversity can represent for nation building and political stability, the government has long advocated ethnic pluralism and equality (Ovesen, 2008; Stuart-Fox, 2005); thus, the Lao Front for National Construction was in 1988 tasked with assisting the government in designing appropriate development policy in ethnic minority areas and facilitating the participation of minorities to national development plans. In 1991, principles of ethnic unity and equality were entered into the Constitution, and in 1992, an official policy aiming specifically at alleviating poverty and inequalities among ethnic minorities was established (GoL, 1992). Although there is no specific legislation with regard to indigenous rights, the country celebrated for the first time – with support from the United Nations – the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples in 2009 (IWGIA, 2010).

According to some assessments, however, these sustained efforts toward enhanced social justice have not yet succeeded in striking a balance in the political organization of the country. As described by Stuart-Fox (2005), there are important inter-ethnic disparities in terms of political representation. The ethnic Lao and the Hmong have dominant positions in the upper echelons of the Party, the government and the army, while other ethnic groups have a very limited number of representatives above the provincial level. Successive decentralization (late 1980s) and recentralization (early 1990s) policies may have contributed to accentuating these inequalities by reducing the autonomy of local governments where the highest diversity of ethnic groups is represented. In recent years, however, renewed decentralization efforts and the creation of "village clusters" (*kum ban*) as new sub-district administrative units have probably contributed to restoring some balance. For the United Nations, limits to political participation are aggravated by the fact that most minority groups live below the poverty line, have limited access to education and, therefore, have limited opportunities to play influential political and economic roles (UNDP, 2002). As Rigg summarizes, "minorities are thinly represented in government, have significantly worse health and education profiles than the Lao, and are *de facto* if not *de jure* socially, politically and economically excluded" (2005: 67). In this context, ethnic minorities may be considered as having very limited agency vis-à-vis the internal territorialization of state power.

As described by Evrard (2002), state territorialization in Laos involves a joint process of de-territorialization and re-territorialization of ethnic minorities. De-territorialization occurs when minorities move or are moved away from their lands and their ecological, social, cultural and technological frames of reference. It may happen physically – e.g., resettlement – or more figuratively – e.g., land reform. Re-territorialization occurs then when minorities settle in new environments or when they are confronted with new social, cultural, economic and regulatory contexts. Rural development policy and, in particular, internal resettlement schemes and land reform play a key role in propelling this joint process (Lestrelín, 2010). Although the Laotian authorities have long claimed that they do not have a resettlement policy per se, internal resettlement schemes have been implemented since the creation of the Lao Democratic People's Republic in 1975 for the purpose of facilitating

national integration and rural development (Baird & Shoemaker, 2007; Evrard & Goudineau, 2004; Goudineau, 1997, 2000). The underlying rationale is that the relocation and gathering of remote populations in valleys and plains would provide them with better access to state services and market opportunities.

In 1989, a Village Relocation and Consolidation strategy was established which advocated the merging of villages with less than 50 households (GoL, 2008). In 1998, a Focal Site approach was introduced in the National Rural Development Program, which advocated the merging of 1200 villages and the development of state services in the corresponding new sites (e.g., agricultural extension, schools, health centers, power and clean water) (Evrard & Goudineau, 2004). More recently, in 2004, an order was issued by the Central Committee of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party setting the lower population limit at 500 residents for lowland villages and 200 residents for upland villages (Baird & Shoemaker, 2007). Alongside resettlement, other regulations were designed to clarify local land rights, establish boundaries between agricultural and forest land, promote agricultural intensification and limit deforestation and land degradation – deemed to arise mainly from the traditional shifting cultivation practices of ethnic minorities (see Lestrelín, 2010); thus, in the 1990s, a Land and Forest Allocation (LFA) program was undertaken countrywide that consisted of zoning and classification of different land use types at the village level and the allocation of farmland to individual households. In 2005, the program was implemented in two-thirds of the villages officially recorded in the country (GoL, 2005).

In many instances, resettlements and land reform have been depicted as having rather negative impacts on the welfare of ethnic minorities, including agricultural land shortage and decreased food security (e.g., Ducourtieux, Laffort, & Sacklokham, 2005; Lestrelín & Giordano, 2007) as well as uncontrolled migration, cultural trauma and ethnic discrimination (e.g., Evrard & Goudineau, 2004; Petit, 2008; Vandergeest, 2003). A number of scholars have argued that these measures constitute less instruments for fostering sustainable rural development than means for the state to strengthen its control over minorities and resources (e.g., Aubertin, 2003; Goudineau, 2000; Ireson & Ireson, 1991; Lestrelín, 2010). As described in neighboring China and Thailand, narratives of underdevelopment and environmental degradation may indeed represent powerful instruments for governments to legitimize coercive land regulation and resettlement policies and thereby increase state control over minority areas (Blaikie & Muldavin, 2004; Forsyth & Walker, 2008).

These assessments are of critical importance for highlighting the adverse, sometimes dramatic impacts that state territorialization efforts can have on the livelihoods of marginal populations. They fail, however, to tell the full story in at least one respect. Unquestionably, the marginal position of most ethnic minorities within Laos' political organization contributes to limiting their room to maneuver and most probably, to exacerbating the negative impacts of internal resettlement schemes and land reform among these populations; however, access to formal political institutions is not the only means for marginal actors to assert their claims or mitigate the claims of more powerful actors. This paper contributes to a growing body of research arguing that state territorialization is often, if not always, subject to resistance, negotiation and reinterpretation (Baird, 2009; Baird & Shoemaker, 2007; High, 2008; Petit, 2008). As a starting point for this project, the following section reviews key conceptual approaches to the state, its structure and its relations with society. The paper then provides a detailed empirical account of local responses to internal resettlement and land and forest allocation schemes in two minority villages of northern Laos. Drawing upon Michel Foucault's description of governmentality, it discusses the everyday functioning of state–ethnic minority

relations and argues for a critical, yet nuanced perspective on the agency of minorities vis-à-vis state territorialization.

Theorizing state–society relations

The position of the state relative to society represents a long-standing issue for social theory. While an unequivocal definition of the state would require distinguishing it from society, the boundary between the two concepts appears elusive, porous and dynamic. According to Mitchell, the state should be considered as a structural effect of “processes of spatial organization, temporal arrangement, functional specification, and supervision and surveillance, which create the appearance of a world fundamentally divided into state and society” (1991: 95). Approaches to the state–society issue should address the “producing and reproducing of this line of difference” (Mitchell, 1991: 95). As a theoretical approach to the project of government, Foucauldian literature also points to the central importance of the producing and reproducing of boundaries between the state and society. For scholars like Allen (2004), Herbert-Cheshire (2003) and Murdoch (2000), the deployment and exercise of state power rely on dynamic networks linking state and non-state entities. As Rose and Miller put it, “To the extent that the modern state ‘rules,’ it does so on the basis of an elaborate network of relations formed amongst the complex of institutions, organizations and apparatuses that make it up, and between state and non-state institutions” (1992: 176). In Foucault’s view, the state itself can actually be seen as a dynamic ensemble of political relations that is reconfigured as practices and project of government change (Jessop, 1990, 2007). From there, the state does not only deploy networks linking state agencies to local actors in order to govern at a distance (Murdoch, 2000), but as described by Lemke (2007), it also establishes and constantly remolds a strategic frontier regime between state and non-state, public and private, residents and outsiders and so on, which in turn provides resources of power.

In a more empirical fashion, other approaches to state–society relations have focused on the ways state intervention is mediated by social actors, and ultimately, the ways mediation processes reflect tensions between state perspectives and particular “social realities” (e.g., Kerkvliet, 1995, 2001; Scott, 1990, 1998). For Kerkvliet (2001), the state is embedded in society as a particular, if not the ultimate, socio-political organization that attempts to set rules for social life and regulate human behavior. Considering the inextricable intertwining of state and society, he argues that rather than attempting to delimit what is part of the state organization and what is not, a more productive approach to state–society relations is to think about the domains of contention between, on the one hand, the state agenda and visions of society and, on the other hand, the actual organization, practices and projects of the individuals within society. This way of examining state–society interactions culminates in the work of Tania Li (1999, 2005). Drawing on Foucault’s work and questioning the optic of Scott (1998), which she argues attributes too much coherence, unity and autonomy to the state, she suggests a more nuanced image of a differentiated state, constituted by a multitude of actors (with their own subjectivities, cultures, personal concerns and so on); thus, rather than a center of power and unified source of intention, the state appears more as a strategic and dynamic social network linking particular actors, claims and practices. On this basis, she further argues that the actual outcomes of state planning and intervention are very much contingent upon everyday forms of social interaction – i.e., compromise and collusion – between actors located both “within” and “outside” state networks (see also Mood, 2005; Robbins, 2000).

In general, approaches to state–society relations – be it through a focus on the state’s structure (e.g., Mitchell, 1991), on the project

of government (e.g., Foucault, 1991) or on the actual accomplishment of the latter project (e.g., Li, 1999) – suggest that if there is indeed some sort of boundary between the state and society, this boundary is politically constructed, constantly remolded by power struggles and permeable to all sorts of social forces. Using empirical material from two upland villages, the following sections deal with two fundamental questions posed by the above scholars: “What is the nature of state–society relations in Laotian minority villages?” and “How is state territorialization actually accomplished?”

Methodology

The following empirical material is derived from six months of fieldwork conducted between January 2003 and December 2006 in two study villages: Ban Lak Sip and Ban Done Kang. Fieldwork involved a questionnaire survey conducted among the 93 household heads of Ban Lak Sip. The information collected (e.g., previous area of residence, reasons for migration and year of settlement) was used to map the spatial distribution of the households resettled in the village. In addition, a total of 48 interviews were conducted in Ban Lak Sip (28) and Ban Done Kang (20) with village headmen and deputies, early settlers and village elders, heads of resettled and non-resettled households. The head of the District Agriculture and Forestry Office (DAFO) was also interviewed twice in Luang Prabang. Conducted within the framework of a broader research program, the interviews focused on a wide range of topics, including local livelihood and environmental change, resettlements, land regulation and environmental governance. Although interview data has partially informed the research, most of the empirical material presented below is derived from a more ethnographic approach, consisting of field observations, informal discussions and treks to agricultural plots, village boundaries and former village lands with villagers.

While a majority of interviewees in the two study villages are members of the Khamu minority, all the interviews and discussions were conducted in Lao with the translation of an English-speaking Lao student during the first period of fieldwork; thus, interviewees were selected among those villagers who could converse easily in Lao language. During the early stages of fieldwork, limited language proficiency (in Lao for the researcher and English for the translator) had an impact on the amount and quality of the information collected through interviews. Affiliation to an international research organization – the Managing Soil Erosion Consortium – has played an ambiguous role in terms of access to information. Such affiliation, with all the credibility it presupposes, has been an asset for gaining access to state officials; however, it probably limited the willingness of officials to share information on sensitive matters with a representative of a foreign organization. Similar constraints have perhaps limited the depth of some villagers’ answers, especially because the research program within which this study was conducted involved scientists from a national research institution. In this regard, however, relatively long and repeated stays in the study villages and a loose connection with the activities conducted by the national partners have contributed to building a relationship of trust and respect between the researcher and some villagers. As reflected by the empirical material presented in the following section, this relationship has allowed for discussing sensitive issues with interviewees and most likely, observing practices that would otherwise be concealed.

Empirical cases

The two study villages are relatively recent settlements in the vicinity of Luang Prabang, the provincial and district capital. Both villages are located in the same narrow valley along the national

road No. 13, and their lands stretch out on the overhanging steep slopes. Shifting cultivation of subsistence (upland rice), animal feed (maize) and commercial (Job's tear) crops represents the mainstay of local livelihood systems; however, the economy of the two villages has become increasingly diversified in the recent years with the emergence of non-farm opportunities (e.g., petty business, construction and industrial labor). Although both villages are populated by a majority of Khamu (from the Khamu *ou* sub-group) and ethnic Lao residents, the histories of the two settlements are different: one marked by internal resettlement schemes and the other characterized mainly by chain migration. Settlement of Ban Lak Sip land began in 1962, and the population slowly increased with the arrival of new families fleeing the war in the northern provinces of Laos until 1975. Then, the village underwent three important immigration waves in 1976, 1983 and 1996 during which a total of 47 Khamu households were resettled from neighboring upland villages. In 2003, the village was composed of 503 inhabitants (93 households) of which a majority belonged to the Khamu and Lao ethnic groups (86 and 11% respectively of the population). Settlement of Ban Done Kang land began in 1972. Since then, apart from five Hmong families relocated from a neighboring village in 1996, the village has undergone a quasi-continuous immigration flow largely guided by kinship relations (e.g., families coming to join their relatives, young men marrying village residents and settling in the village). Recently, civil servants from Luang Prabang also moved to the village, attracted by the low costs of living and access to land. In 2004, the village had 321 inhabitants (64 households) mainly belonging to the Khamu, Lao and Hmong ethnic groups (60, 30 and 8% respectively of the population).

The surveys did not include a detailed record of the distribution of political power at the local level and its potential relation with the ethnic composition of the communities studied. It seems, however, that the two villages have been marked by an important turnover in local government where the Khamu have generally played a preponderant role. In Ban Lak Sip, for instance, 13 different individuals (10 Khamu and 3 ethnic Lao) have succeeded as village headmen during the 1975–2005 period. Resettlements have favored this turnover because leaders of relocated communities were elected as village headmen or offered positions as deputies in order to avoid potential conflicts between gathered communities. At the time of this study, economic success and non-farm employment also represented important criteria. Female village chiefs are not very common in Laos. Yet Mrs. Joy, a Khamu trader married to a civil servant, was elected “headman” of Ban Lak Sip in 2003. In Ban Done Kang, Mr. Heu Ya, a wealthy middleman and member of the Hmong minority resettled in 1996, was elected in 2003 and replaced in 2005 by Mr. Bounlerd, a relatively prosperous Khamu shopkeeper.

Undertaken at different times and under different forms in the two villages, land reform has represented a major instrument for delineating forest conservation areas and limiting the extent of shifting cultivation. In Ban Lak Sip, the LFA program was implemented in 1995. The area put aside for agricultural activities was 136 ha (31% of the village land), while conservation, protection and production forests – banned from agricultural use – were set at 281 ha (65% of village land). Agricultural land was then allocated to individual households, with a maximum of three plots per household. Brought to the household scale, LFA contributed to the reduction of the average land tenure by one third, from 3.9 to 2.7 ha. Implemented before the enactment of the LFA program, land reform in Ban Done Kang has consisted of land zoning without formal allocation of agricultural plots. In 1986, the village was allocated 1200 ha of land: half of it classified as watershed protection forest and managed by the National Water Supply authority (with an office established in the village), and the other

half usable for agriculture. In 1989, the agricultural land was further subdivided into 20 new hectares of protection forest, 150 ha of regeneration forest and 270 ha of land usable only for perennial crops. Again, land reform resulted in a significant reduction of the land available for shifting cultivation, leaving only 1.6 ha per household. In Ban Done Kang, the emphasis put on watershed protection and perennial land use was directly related to the existence of a drinking water source on the village land that constituted a key supply source for the neighboring city of Luang Prabang. Whereas shifting cultivation – an assumed prime cause of land degradation and soil erosion in the country (Lestrelin, 2010) – could still be practiced with shortened fallow lengths in Ban Lak Sip, with less than 2 ha per household, the practice would quickly become unsustainable in Ban Done Kang.

Responses to internal resettlement

At the core of internal resettlement schemes is the idea that despite a very significant diversity of ethnic groups, cultures and traditions, Laos is primarily populated by Laotian citizens unified by their adhesion to shared national values and a common project of society (Goudineau, 2000). Viewed through this lens, gathering populations from diverse sociocultural and geographic backgrounds may be considered as a simple issue of logistics and resource management. Empirical material from Ban Lak Sip suggests a rather different perspective. With a total of 47 households resettled, the village was strongly affected by internal resettlement schemes. Yet, despite the facts that a very large majority of displaced households are from the Khamu *ou* ethnic sub-group and that they have been moved from nearby locations (i.e., less than 4 km), the homogeneous mix of communities inherent to the government's vision of a national unity has not exactly occurred. As illustrated by the map of Ban Lak Sip's residential area (Fig. 1), displaced households appear to have gathered in clusters of the same migratory origins and aligned toward their former villages.

It is not clear whether this particular spatial distribution results more from a desire of the resettled households to re-create their former communities than from simple patterns of land availability in the village; however, other empirical elements suggest that community affinities have played, and still play, an important role for resettled populations. Interviewed in November 2005, Mrs. Bounlong, a woman resettled in Ban Lak Sip in 1996, described a meeting with the district authorities where the villagers of Houay Nokpit were given the choice between two possible recipient villages: Ban Densavanh where land was available for new settlers but where there was a poor road access, or Ban Lak Sip where land was limited but which benefited from an access to a major road. According to Mrs. Bounlong, a majority of the Houay Nokpit households, including her family, chose to move to Ban Lak Sip not only for the attractiveness of the road (e.g., potential for new economic activities, easy access to town), but also because four Houay Nokpit families had already moved there a year before. Nowadays, despite being split between Ban Lak Sip and Ban Densavanh, the Houay Nokpit community still maintains some cohesion through economic alliances. For instance, since 2003, Mr. Bounlong and other Houay Nokpit residents resettled in Ban Lak Sip have been raising pigs and cultivating maize, cassava and watercress on their former village land (now classified as protected forest). Once the pigs are ready to be sold, they are transported 4 km to Ban Densavanh. Former Houay Nokpit residents resettled there then sell the animals in the market of the small municipality of Xieng Ngeun and, minus a commission, remit the money of the sale to Mr. Bounlong and his associates. This system allows Ban Lak Sip residents to sell livestock produced on illegal grounds without attracting the attention of the Luang Prabang District Agriculture

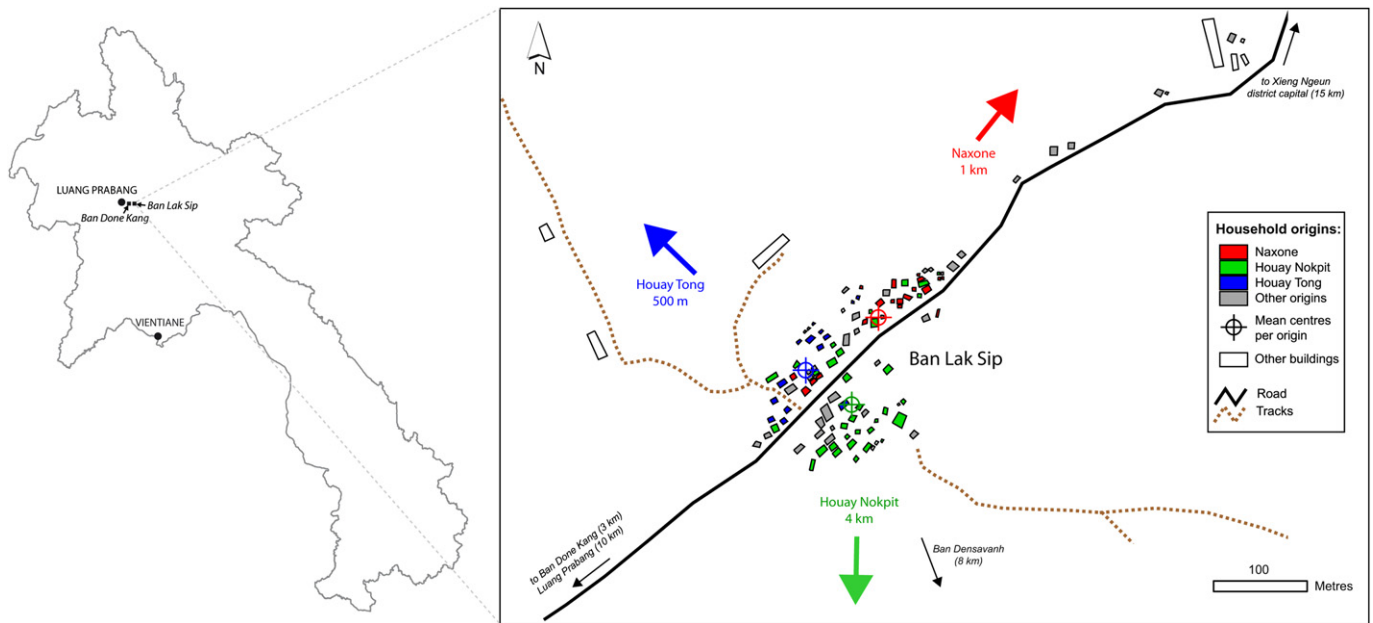


Fig. 1. Spatial distribution of the households resettled in Ban Lak Sip, 2004

and Forestry authorities, whose agents are believed to be more rigorous and are more numerous than those of Xieng Ngeun district.

The picture presented by Ban Lak Sip differs significantly from what could be expected from the vantage point of the government. Despite a common ethnicity and a long-standing status of neighbors, the populations gathered by resettlement policy have not (yet?) entirely merged into a single community. Far from the concept of “good Laotian citizens” united behind the state’s development project, geographically distant members of the same original community are engaged in tangible alliances aimed at circumventing state regulation. Beyond subtle and undercover maneuvers of counter-territorialization, such alliances also illustrate the micro-physics of power (Jessop, 2007) and the way they structure the politics of the Laotian minority areas. As put forward by Foucault (1976, 1997, 2004) and further discussed by other scholars (e.g., Hindess, 1996; Jessop, 2007; Rose, 1999; Rose & Miller, 1992), power does not irradiate from particular centers such as the state or other bounded social entities that would channel it toward particular nodes of governance. Rather, power emanates from a multitude of changing relations between individuals and circulates through such malleable networks. In this system, the state is a privileged but not unique relational ensemble through which power relations are strategically codified and temporarily crystallized in an attempt to govern people, resources and ideas.

Following this line of thinking, Latour (1986) emphasizes the empowering role of networks (see also Allen, 2004; Hillier, 2000). He argues that power should not be considered an explanation for success in the establishment of networks aimed at governance. Rather, it should be seen as a result of the composition of these networks. In other words, power stems from one’s ability to mobilize a set of actors, institutions and procedures and through this process, compose a network of forces orientated toward the pursuit of particular social, political and economic goals. These reflections allow the replacement of the “Houay Nokpit alliance” at a broader conceptual level. Just as the Laotian state deploys networks of forces aimed at governing peoples and resources (e.g., the governmental apparatus linking central authorities with

provincial, district and local agents), minorities are also composing and sustaining social networks which allow them to pursue their own, sometimes contested objectives. As a result, these networks alter the expected imbalance of power between the state and marginal ethnic minorities. Approached with this conceptual lens, counter-territorialization is not simply a matter of going against or circumventing the rules of the authorities. It is also about devising ways to transcend state power.

Responses to land reform

Further observations can be made when comparing encroachment of annual cultivation in the protected areas of Ban Lak Sip and Ban Done Kang. Indeed, the proximity of the villagers to state authority appears as an important element explaining differences in local practices of resistance to land regulation. The Water Supply authorities are long established in Ban Done Kang and responsible for monitoring the protected watershed, its drinkable water source and the waterworks supplying Luang Prabang. This proximity and the fact that a number of civil servants reside in the village have probably had an effect on the compliance of the farmers with state regulation. During the entire fieldwork period in Ban Done Kang, encroachment of annual cultivation in protected areas was not observed once. In fact, it was not reported as a frequent practice by interviewees who instead emphasized the importance of illegal (small-scale) logging and overexploitation of forest resources (e.g., firewood, bamboo shoots) in protected areas.

Cultivation in protected areas appeared to be much more frequent in Ban Lak Sip. During the fieldwork period, several cases illustrating local resistance to the national land regulations were observed. In 2003, a number of households displaced from Houay Nokpit slashed and cultivated large areas of secondary forest near the southern border of Ban Lak Sip. The same year, as discussed above, seven of these households established pig husbandry micro-enterprises and large fields of maize and cassava on their former lands. All the areas concerned had been classified as protected forests since 1996. However, probably due to the remoteness of these areas (i.e., no road access, long walking distances, cleared areas invisible from the valley bottoms), the district authorities did

not trouble any of these households. Other emblematic cases were observed during the following years. In 2004, one of the deputy chiefs of Ban Lak Sip slashed a large area in a protected forest located on a crest, just in front of the DAFO's windows in Luang Prabang. He was caught by the district officers, had to pay a fine and let the forest re-grow. Considering that at that time he was the deputy responsible for land-related issues in the village, this act can even be considered open rebellion.

One year later in 2005, a number of households started to cultivate long coriander (*Eryngium foetidum*) under the foliage of the neighboring Phou Pheung protected forest. The head of one of these households had for several years been tasked with the responsibility of monitoring the protected area. When asked about the problems he could incur if the district authorities were aware of his activities, he explained that he was not under threat of being fined because he had the explicit permission from an officer of the Water Supply office in Ban Done Kang. He further described that the officer concerned was a long-standing friend with whom he went to primary school. Similarly, some form of resistance to centrally planned policy was observed within state agencies themselves. For instance, during an interview conducted in early 2003, the director of the Luang Prabang DAFO acknowledged that, in some cases, his organization did not implement national land regulations because they were considered unrealistic. In the case of Ban Lak Sip, he mentioned a national regulation aimed at prohibiting agriculture on sloping lands. "If we had implemented such a regulation there," he stated, "the villagers would not have any land left for agriculture."

Rather than being an object of agreement between the state and local populations united in a common effort, land regulations are recurrently ignored, circumvented or even contested through everyday practices of non-compliance. Most of the time, these practices are as invisible and non-confrontational as possible. This may involve undertaking illegal activities in remote areas and/or concealing the illegality of these activities under the (alleged or actual) permission of state agents. In many cases, the political content of such resistance is limited to the simple and implicit statement that the ban imposed by the state on certain land uses is incompatible with what local actors need in order to construct satisfactory livelihoods. As described by a resident of Ban Done Kang:

In the protected forests, we should not clear the land in order to conserve the diversity of animals and trees living there. But some villagers cut the trees anyway, even if they know that protecting trees is important. Every time the district authorities come to the village, they tell us 'do not cut standing trees, you can only collect dead wood in the protected forest.' So, the villagers remove the bark of the trees, they wait for the trees to die and they come back to log them. The farmers have very low yields in their fields, so they must find other ways of making a living. In fact, if the Luang Prabang inhabitants need firewood and buy it at a good price, they somewhat promote deforestation in our village and all around the city (Mr. Yong, November 2005).

This description illustrates the subtle strategies that the villagers use to circumvent state regulation, present illegal practices as a necessity and attribute part of the responsibility for these practices to external actors and circumstances. In some cases, however, acts of resistance are more overt and provocative – as in the case of the abovementioned deputy village chief – suggesting that either their instigators are willing to engage in an open confrontation with the district authorities or they have underestimated the risk of repression.

Again, a Foucauldian approach to political power and the problematics of government casts an interesting light on the above

examples of counter-territorialization. The exercise of government is characterized by the existence of multiple and often competing rationalities. "Government is the historically constituted matrix within which are articulated all those dreams, schemes, strategies and maneuvers of authorities that seek to shape the beliefs and conduct of others in desired directions by acting upon their will, their circumstances or their environment" (Rose & Miller, 1992: 175). As Dean (1999) further describes, attempts to govern the existence and conduct of others involve political rationalities; that is, the discursive elements through which particular power configurations are defined and justified, and technologies of government, which are the various means by which some actors attempt to give substance to their governmental ambitions.

For abstractions such as spatial zoning, policies and regulations to be effectively transmitted to the local level, the state has to rely on networks connecting actors, institutions and procedures across various scales – what Foucault (1980) calls *dispositif* and Li (2007) assemblage. The administrative hierarchy that links central governmental agencies with regional agencies (e.g., provincial and district administrations) and local actors (e.g., village authorities and simple citizens) is one of the many facets of this latter form of government technology. From there, the state attempts to govern from a distance – i.e., to evaluate the conduct of distant actors in comparison to particular norms and reshape it in accordance with particular objectives. This involves making abstractions such as statistics or planning schemes transit multilaterally along government networks. Yet, as Murdoch (2000) describes, when abstractions are transmitted down to the local level, they become less and less in line with the complexity and particularities of place. In turn, discrepancies between state abstractions and local realities may engender resistance along government networks, undermine state power and force the emergence of new political rationalities. The empirical cases presented above illustrate that state agents may be key actors in the disruption of government networks. Clearly, such disruption is not always purposeful. Supporting the engagement of allies in activities prohibited by the state or setting aside the implementation of particular regulatory measures does not necessarily reflect explicit political protests. Counter-territorialization, in these cases, has more to do with an implicit denial of government rationalities, the formation of knowledge alliances that operate across scales between state agents and local actors and, more conceptually, the loosening of state government networks as they meet the particularities of place.

Discussion and conclusions

These observations do not ignore the wide-ranging and often negative impacts that several decades of internal resettlement and land reform initiatives have had on the livelihoods of ethnic minorities. As observed in the two study villages and demonstrated by an ever-growing body of research, including state sponsored assessments (e.g., SPC, 2000), resettlement programs and coercive land regulations have been, more often than is reasonable, rather detrimental to the welfare of minorities. Does this mean, however, that the territorialization project devised by the Laotian state is entirely successful and in the process of rearranging lives and landscapes in accordance with a national model? Not exactly. Despite official pressure and coercive land regulations, ethnic minorities can manage to retain a significant level of agency (see also Baird, 2009; Evrard & Goudineau, 2004; High, 2008; Petit, 2008). As for Scott's peasants (1985), such agency does not work through formal political institutions from which minorities are largely excluded. Formal protests, legal challenges, petitions or marches do not appear to be an option either. The risk and the potential strength of repression are perhaps deemed too important

by the villagers. Rather, local political claims and contestation often take the more indirect path of everyday resistance. In practice, resistance does not only involve individual and occasional acts of non-compliance to state rule. It also works through collective and organized actions aimed, in part, at minimizing the risk of state repression. As they are neither explicitly nor directly aimed at social transformation, these collective actions do not exactly fit Beard's definition of "covert planning" (Beard, 2002: 15). Nevertheless, just as with covert planning, they suggest that even in restrictive political and social environments, everyday resistance may take rather sophisticated and deliberate forms, and importantly, involve circumvention strategies planned and implemented at the community level. As covert planning does, these collective forms of resistance may also contribute to the modification of power relations between the state and local populations to the benefit of the latter.

Social alliances can play an important empowering role. In particular, it can be argued that if physical proximity with the state and its agents engenders more constraints on local activities and political agency, social proximity (e.g., friendship relations, common understanding of local issues) between state agents and local actors may in some cases help circumvent these constraints. As discussed above, besides uneven state intervention and local state presence, the observed differences between Ban Lak Sip and Ban Done Kang, in terms of compliance with land regulation, have also been shaped by different configurations of power between local communities and district authorities. In that sense, along with state regulation and factors like resource endowment, demography, local history or geographical location, village–local state relations can play a critical role in molding the constraints and opportunities for local socio-environmental change. In fact, they may constitute primary factors of differentiation and shape very different development trajectories in similar settings (Mood, 2005; Rigg, 2007).

Examples of counter-territorialization involving representatives of the state suggest also that what is recurrently framed under the rubric of "the state" should not be considered as a monolithic entity. If such categorization is useful for the purpose of highlighting power configurations between different classes of actors, it has the disadvantage of masking the real, hybrid nature of the state and the realities of governance. As Foucauldian literature reminds us, the state possesses "neither the unity nor the functionality ascribed to it; it [is] a 'mythical abstraction' which [assumes] a particular place within the field of government" (Rose & Miller, 1992: 174–175). A corollary of this condition is that the boundaries between state and society are often significantly blurred when observed at the micro-level. In Laos, the main representatives of the state at the local level are the village headmen and their deputies. They are the one transmitting most official information down to the local level, coordinating the implementation of state regulation, monitoring local behavior and reporting to higher administrative levels. Yet, for some villagers (see the quote of Mr. Yong above), the state is primarily embodied by externals to the village (e.g., the district authorities), suggesting a clear-cut society-in-here and state-out-there dichotomy. Adding further ambiguity into the local state–society divide, the case of Ban Lak Sip's deputy chief illustrates that local state representatives may also act in the capacity of ordinary villagers, transgress state rule and be caught by other, higher level authorities.

The state may be better approached as a strategic and dynamic network that links a number of actors, institutions, claims and practices, all orientated toward the pursuit of a common project of government. Rather than emanating from the center, power emerges from the very linkages that make up this network (Foucault, 1976, 1997, 2004). The exercise of government also means that power – as well as information, planning schemes,

policies, regulations and so on – flows through the same network, across the domains to be governed (Murdoch, 2000). At some point, however, the flow may be disrupted by actors operating within the network (Li, 1999, 2005). In the particular case of this study, the local scale seems to represent a preferential arena for this process. Here, the disruption materializes either through state agents' implicit denial of the national socio-environmental project or through the everyday resistance of ethnic minorities. Even when the state is powerful and domineering, its rationalities, strategies and policies are seldom, if ever, effectively and seamlessly transmitted to the local levels (Rigg, 2007). At some point during the transmission process, mediation, compromise and collusion engender a diversity of local development trajectories. These unexpected outcomes create and fill out interstices in the projection of the state design and result in hybrid development patterns. In other words, state–society relations often shape uneven and unexpected development paths.

These conclusions resonate with the debate raised by researchers such as Baird (2009), Baird and Shoemaker (2007), High (2008), and Petit (2008) on the internal resettlement issue in Laos. In line with the conclusion of Petit (2008), this study shows that the adoption of a micro-analytical approach to internal resettlement and other forms of state territorialization can provide a valuable supplement to the rather uniform and bleak picture of subjugation that emerges from large scale surveys.¹ As does the experimental consensus described by High (2008) in two resettlement villages of Laos, state–society alliances and the counter-territorialization strategies observed in Ban Lak Sip and Ban Done Kang suggest that a binary perspective – opposing a domineering state to powerless minorities and voluntary to involuntary displacement – is not suitable for approaching the complexity that is at play. Similarly, counter-territorialization is not simply a matter of resisting territorial projects that are deemed unsustainable or undesirable. It is also a matter of exploiting and colonizing interstitial spaces within and between existing territorialization projects.

As a corollary to the above conclusions, this study also suggests that while its foundations and primary sites of investigation remain in modern Western societies, Michel Foucault's theory on governmentality can also represent a valuable perspective from which to view state power and other problematics of government in non-Western, non-liberal contexts such as Laos (e.g., Goldman, 2001). As Sigley (2006) further argues, with the example of China, the theory itself could benefit from a stronger engagement with non-liberal government rationalities and a better integration of the authoritarian or coercive political measures that are deployed, for instance, in post-socialist states. In fact, as pointed out by Dean (2002) and Hindess (2001), even the most "advanced" liberal nation-states persistently deploy authoritarian measures, for the latter are often a primary means in liberal-democratic efforts to form autonomous subjects of government.

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Endnotes

¹ Provided that such approach is based on sufficient and appropriate empirical evidence – see the debate between Baird, Barney, Vandergeest, and Shoemaker (2009) and High (2008) on this issue.

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