Towards a historical anthropology of Upland Laos

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When travelling across Houaphan province in upland north-eastern Laos in 2010, I took with me a copy of James Scott's (2009) *Art of Not Being Governed*. This thought-provoking book offered fresh perspectives to exploring this 'Zomian' landscape and its ethnolinguistically diverse population. Indeed a historical frontier zone of refuge and opportunity, Houaphan's forested mountains always constituted an escape option for people facing (Siamese, Vietnamese, lowland Lao, or French colonial) imperial interventions (Boutin 1937; Tappe 2015). Even today, the different ethnic groups of Houaphan demonstrate a wide range of flexible livelihoods such as swidden cultivation that carried them through times of crisis and war at the margins of lowland state formations, often seeking creative ways to keep state authorities at bay.

Yet my initial scepticism, in spite of the nonetheless inspiring read was fuelled in the following years over the study of archival documents, oral history and mythology. Apparently, 'anarchic' elements of upland societies seem to be only one side of the story. Historical evidence, as I will discuss below, rather suggests interactions and mutual appropriation across cultural difference, processes that question the simple binaries of upland-lowland and state-non-state. Still under the impression of Scott's vast amount of examples – from SW China to insular SE Asia) and compelling arguments, I aimed to move away from 'the state' as all-encompassing historical force and to focus instead on local socio-political dynamics that include not only the "state repelling" (Scott 2009: 128) dimension of upland agency, but also instances of 'the art of being governed' – that is, local views and strategies of how to balance and negotiate (hierarchical) relations to external powers.[1]

Scott claims a history of "purposeful statelessness" (Scott 2009: 337) among Southeast Asian uplanders until around WWII, when processes of enclosure such as increasing migration of lowlanders into the Zomian frontier apparently reduced uplanders' economic and political options. For mainland Southeast Asia, he borrows evidence for his argument mainly from authors that worked under the impression of colonial interventions and increasing ethnic antagonisms – as in the case of Edmund Leach's seminal study of upland Burma (1954; cf. Jonsson 2017). Interestingly, examples from Lao history – with 80% of its territorium qualifying as uplands, and around half of the population ethnic minorities – are conspicuously

[1] See Lentz (2019) for a recent excellent study of the upland groups' active role in the making of NW Vietnam state territory.

rare in Scott's account. I would argue that upland Laos and its diverse population, due to its ambiguous history of interaction and difference, mutual attraction and distance, only partially fits into Scott's clearly antagonistic interpretation of Zomia. Historical anthropology might reveal these ambiguities and helps to sketch a more complex picture than the stereotype of the egalitarian, anti-state uplander suggests.

Mountainous Houaphan, home to about a dozen of the official 49 ethnic groups in the Lao People's Democratic Republic, offers ample test cases for the Zomia narrative, as already indicated. The province has no clear ethnic majority, even though Lao and upland Tai (Tai Dam and Tai Deng) hold key positions in the political administration. Mon-Khmer-speaking Khmu and Phong form large communities in the southern districts, while Hmong settlements can be found everywhere due to decades of resettlement campaigns and ongoing spontaneous movements in the Lao-Vietnamese borderlands. Upland livelihoods include swidden cultivation, also among 'lowland' Lao and Tai villages. All groups share a history of migration, and in fact no group claims autochthony in the region.

With the Hmong being relative latecomers in the region (late 19th century), the relationship between the groups of the Tai-Lao and the Mon-Khmer language families is key to the understanding of socio-political dynamics in Houaphan. As in other regions of Laos (see Badenoch and Shinsuke 2013 for NW Laos) the linguistically and culturally different groups form part of more or less stable networks of (hierarchical) political and economic relations – the *müang* as ambiguous political principle of socio-political organisation. In Houaphan, small Lao and Tai polities (dismissed by Scott as mere "mimicry states"; 2009: 37) are connected to surrounding village societies that in old sources are often categorised as *kha* (slaves), indicating hierarchy and inequality. Yet oral history accounts mention not only upland-lowland antagonism but also instances of collaboration and exchange.[2]

It is true that in Laos (as elsewhere in Southeast Asia) the idea of an essential upland-lowland divide, exemplified by the developmental state, was shaped by both colonial and socialist discourses. For example, already in the late-19th century, the French explorer Cupet blamed the Hmong for being "the greatest destroyers of forests" (Cupet 2000 [1900], p. 35), a resilient negative stereotype that influenced Lao state discourses of upland 'backwardness' (later framed in historical materialism in socialist Laos and Vietnam; see Evans 2002; Salemink 2011). The Hmong, in particular, seem to confirm the (almost prototypical) image of the unruly, independent uplander, depicted as either freedom fighters or mercenaries, notorious as opium growers (poppy as "agriculture of escape" according to Scott 2009: 178).

However, the reality is more complex. For Houaphan, the French archival sources reveal instances of resistance and escape, as well as (political and economic) interaction and even collusion with external state powers (Tappe 2015). In addition, keeping the state at bay does not necessarily imply egalitarian structures, as Scott would have it. Not only upland Tai and the

[2] That said, I do not deny that Laos actually provides considerable material to sustain many of Scott's points, most notably reflected by lowland discourses of *sivilay* (civilised) that maintain an essential difference between lowland Lao state civilisation and upland 'backward' minorities (Turton 2000; Evans 2002), and corresponding socioeconomic marginalisation. In Scott's words: "Hilliness per se is disqualifying" (Scott 2009: 100). But do such modernist discourses justify a projection of a lowland state vs upland societies antagonism in the past?

Mon-Khmer, apparently under constant pressure of 'Tai-isation' (Evans 2000; Condominas 1990), but also the Hmong revealed tendencies towards social inequality and political hierarchisation, even if only temporarily.[3] The picture of the state repelling, egalitarian uplander is only one side of the story and calls for more (ethno-)historical scrutiny.

Important methodological and theoretical approaches developed in recent years, increasingly paying attention to historical dynamics, contribute to the understanding of 'Zomian' socio-political and cultural complexity. Jean Michaud (2007; 2013) demonstrates the value of colonial (missionary and military) ethnography as a source to investigate past livelihoods and intercultural relations. Pierre Petit (2015), in his discussion of upland Tai mobility in the Lao-Vietnamese borderlands, calls for a turn towards local oral traditions inspired by longstanding research traditions established in African anthropology (Vansina 1985). Such approaches enrich the existing excellent anthropological research among upland communities that stress relationality and (ritual) negotiation across cultural difference, (Sprenger 2006a; Évrard 2006; Jonsson 2014; Bouté 2018). Moreover, meticulous studies of indigenous chronicles document regional economic and political networks (see, for example, Grabowsky and Wichasin 2008).

In order to illustrate my own approach towards a historical anthropology of upland Laos, I will give a few brief examples starting with a myth of the Phong, a Mon-Khmer-speaking group of about 15,000 members settling mainly in south-eastern Houaphan province. They differ from neighbouring Khmu not only linguistically but also due to their conversion to Buddhism already in precolonial times (Macey 1905). The latter aspect was presumably the reason why some French administrators did not categorise them in the pejorative 'Kha' category like fellow Mon-Khmer groups (yet others use 'Kha Phong', see Macey 1905). Today, oral accounts by village elders recall the older autonym 'K'nieng' (not in use anymore) and the title of *phanya* (lord), a Lao title that reveals a certain 'feudal' structure of Phong society in the past, and a longstanding relationship with the Lao realm (see as well Macey 1905: 20; Bouté 2018: 45 for such titles among the Phunoy; see below).

A well-known myth informs us about this (hierarchical) socio-political relationship. It exists in different, detailed versions (locally divergent oral history and colonial recordings, see Plunian 1905; Lagrèze 1925; Deydier 1954) and tells, in a nutshell, the following story: A lowland Lao princess miraculously gives birth to a child, and it turns out that an eremit from the far-away mountains is the father. The boy, named Hat Ang, is very intelligent, brave and morally good. Following intrigue at the Lao court, the young family has to leave and after numerous twists and turns end up back in the mountains. With the help of magic tools that he has received from a mythical animal, Hat Ang breaks the rocky ground and thousands of people emerge from the earth, peopling the new kingdom of the Phong. The prospering community causes envy among Hat Ang's Lao cousins in the lowlands. In the tragic culmination of the myth, a malicious Lao prince encourages Hat Ang to build a huge wooden

[3]As Mai Na Lee (2015) shows in her insightful study of Hmong history, internal inequalities and power asymmetries, leading to internecine conflict and shifting alliances with lowland powers, personified by eminent figures such as Touby Lyfoung, Faydang Lobliayao and Vang Pao (not to mention their predecessors who in one way or another aimed to negotiate external powers for their communities' benefit).

tower overseeing the whole country. When Hat Ang and hundreds of his people climb the tower, the Lao lay fire on it and the collapsing tower buries the poor Phong: "Ce fut la fin du royaume des Pungs (sic)"[4] (Plunian 1905: 130).

The myth suggests a kinship relation between lowland Lao and the Phong, where the 'Kha' has to follow Tai uxorilocality and finds himself in an inferior position within the social hierarchy of the *müang* (see Condominas 1990 for other examples of 'Tai-Kha' mythology). The offspring of this couple, Hat Ang, is still associated with his father's ethnicity and enjoys a privileged relation to supernatural forces (adding yet another dimension to upland social configurations, again beyond a mere state – non-state question). Lao mistrust and envy results in his family's exclusion, and he later establishes an upland kingdom to be destroyed by begrudging lowland rivals. Therefore, mythology and oral traditions reveal a close yet latently conflictual relationship between upland and lowland people, and even an ill-fated state building in the uplands modelled after lowland examples.

Essentially, the myth does not suggest an a priori anti-state ethos but the possibility for ambitious individuals to rise within the sociopolitical upland-lowland continuum of the *müang* – certainly with the risk of hubris and failure. This reminds us of Leach's (1954) famous example of Kachin leaders risking estrangement within their own kin when incorporated into the Shan system. In any case, location at the upland margins of a *müang* does not preclude certain political and economic power (Badenoch and Shinsuke 2013: 40). However, as in the Phong myth, many mythical narratives in upland Laos also talk about uplanders being outwitted by lowland Tai people, or losing their wealth because of short-sightedness and other mistakes (such as the telling case of the Rmeet who fell their 'money tree' and thus lose the valuable fruit to the lowlanders; see Sprenger 2006b).

Another example of the ambiguous relationship – interaction across difference instead of state avoidance – between upland groups and more centralised neighbours is offered by Vanina Bouté in her ethno-history of the Phunoy from Phongsaly, the most northern province of Laos bordering China and Vietnam. This group constitutes a particularly rare example of a group belonging to the Tibeto-Burman language family that has converted to Buddhism. Similar to what Phong people told me in Houaphan, Bouté's informants claimed to have abandoned 'superstition' (according to official Lao state discourse) for the Buddhist religion, while still performing collective animist rites different from the ones of their Tai- and Mon-Khmer-speaking neighbours. Both Phunoy and Phong constitute particular cases of "continual ethnogenesis" (Bouté 2018: 7) shaped by processes of interaction, mutual borrowing and mimetic appropriation within a multi-ethnic social space (cf. Schlemmer 2017).

Speaking of mimesis, this seems to be a suitable heuristic tool to investigate processes of social and cultural change in past and present settings (Jonsson 2010; Roque and Ladwig 2018). In Houaphan history, Mon-Khmer-speaking groups incorporated elements from Tai religious and political systems, lowland Lao borrowed from the Zomia portfolio à la Scott (state and tax avoidance in the forested mountains, swidden cultivation, mobility), and also French colonial officials and local notables found themselves in cycles of mutual mimetic

[4] Lit. "It was the end of the Pung kingdom"

appropriation (Tappe 2018). Friction of terrain added a physical dimension to the history of interaction across difference, an aspect that could be elaborated further by taking political ecology into account.

Upland socio-political structures are certainly shaped by specific livelihoods and economic options such as trade of valuable forest products (e.g. benzoin and shellac in colonial Houaphan). Yet maybe more importantly, interaction with external powers is the crucial factor of processes of ethnogenesis. In the case of the Phunoy, Bouté shows how socio-political structures are shaped by centuries of interaction with neighbouring Lao and Lü polities (including marriage relations almost analogous to what we have seen in the Phong myth; Bouté 2018: 47). These twofold political influences resulted in remarkable structural differences between settlements on the two banks of the U River. Olivier Évrard (2006) notes similar processes of social and political differentiation among the Khmu in NW Laos. Instead of ethnic 'identity' we rather encounter fluid sociocultural configurations affected by external relations on different scales and to different degrees – perhaps a 'state effect', yet with different outcomes than Scott's model would suggest.

Looking again to Houaphan, we can see how different groups seek relations to external powers, within the *müang* logic that allows for political (hierarchical) relationships without necessarily being assimilated or incorporated. When the French entered the stage in the late-19th century, they misrepresented these hierarchies and 'ethnicised' them – the socio-political category 'Kha' even becoming an ethnonym in the first censuses (see Pholsena 2006). The 'civilised' Lao and Tai were co-opted to administer the region on behalf of the French, with colonial functionaries only disagreeing about privileging either Buddhist Lao or Christianised Tai Deng (Tappe 2015). Arguably, this contributed to the communist revolutionary struggle that attracted wide support from the side of Houaphan's disaffected ethnic minorities.

These brief examples for a historical anthropology of upland Laos illustrate the historical complexity and contingency of upland social and political structures, different factors of ethnogenesis, including trans-ethnic interactions, political ecology, regional geopolitics, and individual/household decision-making. I will conclude this short excursion with a few questions that might be worth investigating further in the 'Highlander' journal: How does written and oral history shape uplanders' worldviews and subjectivities today? What can socio-political dynamics over the *longue durée* of trans-ethnic interaction tell us about uplanders' aspirations and questions of belonging? How far can we include a broader range of actors including non-human (spiritual, environmental) forces in a historical anthropology of Zomia (cf. Århem and Sprenger 2016; Stolz 2018), further questioning ontological divides that still impede a fuller understanding of upland lifeworlds in Asia?

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