Violent Landscape: Global Explosions and Lao Life-Worlds*

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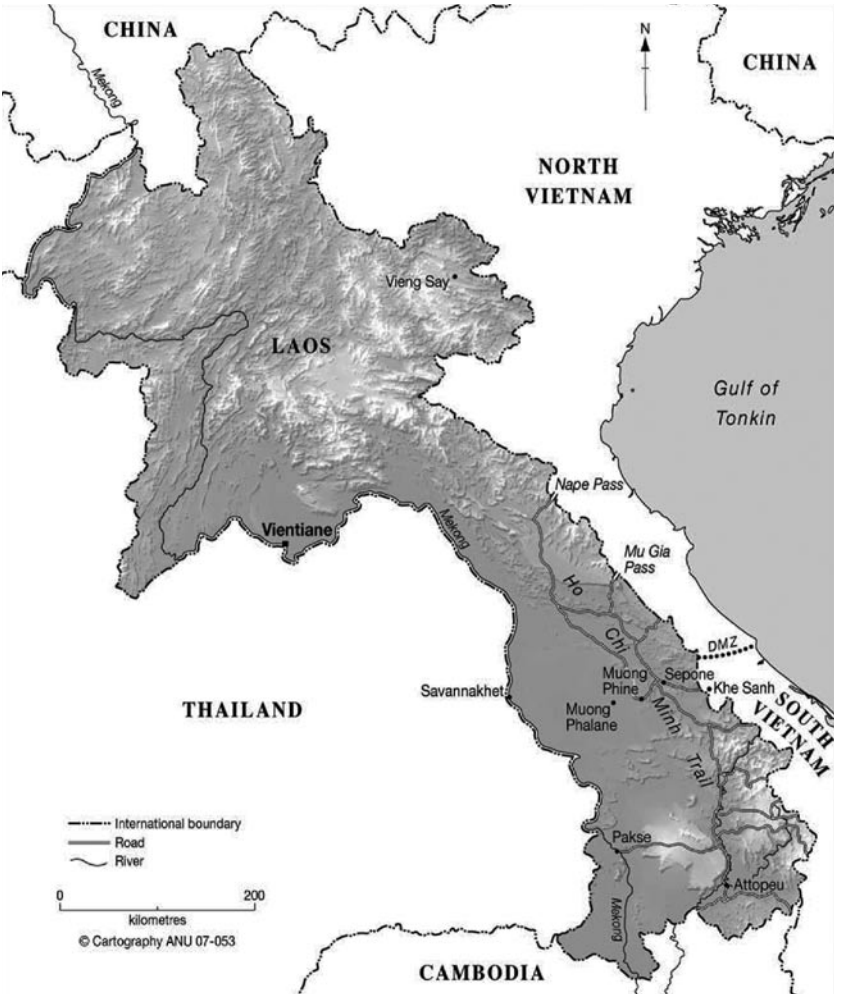
Introduction

In December 2006, I visited Vieng Say, the former stronghold of Lao Patriotic Front (NLHX) (see figures 1 and 2). When US bombardment began in 1964, the NLHX entrenched themselves in a network of caves there so extensive that it included a theatre, a hospital, and a sweets factory, as well as a full set of ministries, embassies, and residences for leaders. Today, the

Figure 1. Map of Southeast Asia, including Laos, created by The Australian National University Cartographic Services

* Part of this research was made possible by Central Research Grant Scheme funding from Deakin University, for which I express my thanks. Earlier drafts of parts of this paper were posted on the website "New Mandala: New Perspectives on mainland Southeast Asia" in December 2006 and January 2007 (http://rspas.anu.edu.au/rmap/newmandala), and this paper has benefited from a number of helpful and encouraging comments from the readership of that site. This paper

Figure 2. Map of Laos, indicating Vieng Say, created by the Australian National University Cartographic Services



was presented at the "Environmental History of the Cold War" conference held at the German Historical Institute, Washington DC in March 2007. I would like to thank the organisers and participants of the conference for giving me the opportunity to present this paper, and to benefit from their helpful advice, comments and suggestions. The suggestions of the reviewers of Global Environment were also very helpful in improving this paper.

sound of airplanes and explosions are rare, and Vieng Say seems beguilingly peaceful. Where President Kaysone Phomvihane[1] once bunkered down, luxuriant gardens are tended. And where a blast wall was erected to protect the government store and warehouse the roots of a giant tree now strangle the cement blocks. Abundant foliage cloaks the limestone karsts, formerly targets for the US pilots. It has even been suggested that Vieng Say is now a "place of peace" and that one of Vieng Say's draw cards for future tourism is its "unspoilt" natural surroundings, as if this former stronghold were an untouched Eden.

However, the signs of violence remain clear on Vieng Say's landscape. In an obvious reference to the legacy of war, some of the caves that the NLHX used to shelter from the US bombardment have been preserved as memorials to their former occupants, and now form Vieng Say's major tourist attraction. Staff at these memorials explicitly reject the idea that these represent a "place of peace": they describe these instead as representing the "*hua cak patiwat*" (the brain and engine of the revolution). The caves are preserved with the memory of struggle. Part of "the tour" staff provide of the caves is to point out the craters formed by bombs that are visible on the roadside, by cliff faces, amongst rice fields. These craters form convenient pools in which buffalo wallow, or dents in mountain fields in which rows of corn grow undaunted. In the compound that was Prince Souphanouvong's[2] garden, a bomb crater has been lined with concrete to make a fish pond, literally setting in stone the crater's tangible reference to violence. The references to violence in the Lao landscape are not limited to memorials. Laos today has perhaps the world's most serious unexploded ordnance (UXO) problem, and these explosives have become a key part of how land is used and experienced in Laos. Thus, the traces of and potentials for violence have become an in-

[1] Kaysone Phovihane was the leader of the Lao Communist Party from its foundation in 1955, and Prime Minister of the Lao People's Democratic Republic from its foundation in 1975, until his death in 1992.

[2] Prince Souphanouvong, known as "the red prince", was a Lao aristocrat and also one of the founding members of the Lao Communist Party. He would later become President of the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

tegral part of these Lao landscapes and life-worlds. These have not been effaced by thirty years of peace, but instead have become a persevering and preserved part of the landscape.

Landscapes, Ingold and others have argued, are fundamentally temporal. Through their daily activities humans create change: this can be seen in Vieng Say in the way memorial gardens are tended, or the way path are beaten by the footsteps of passing tourists and locals. Both intentional and unintentional consequences of human action are marked on the landscape. But humans do not simply inscribe change onto to the landscape, like a painter adding brushstrokes to a painting, for the human is not outside and acting on a blank canvas, but already part of and produced by the landscape. Ingold writes: "[o]ur actions do not transform the world, they are part and parcel of the world's transforming itself".[3] A landscape is the sum of these changes "congealed into a solid medium".[4] For this reason, landscapes are a particularly evocative site for considering historical changes, because changes are "collapsed" into an assemblage of features in the landscape.[5] Ingold draws on Inglis, who describes a landscape as "the most solid appearance in which a history can declare itself. It is not a background, nor is it a stage. It is history made manifest".[6]

Just as people's actions create effects on the landscape, so too does the landscape shape peoples' life-worlds. Merleau-Ponty has argued that "the perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence".[7] As Bourdieu has argued, spaces are not only structured by human actions, but structure them in turn, embodying the mixed mastery and uncer-

[3] T. Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill*, Routledge, London and New York 2000, p. 200.

[4] Ibid., p. 198.

[5] *Ibid*.

[6] F. Inglis, "Nation and community: a landscape and its morality", in *Sociological Review*, 25, 3, pp. 489-514. The first sentence of this quotation is quoted in Ingold, *Perceptions of Environment* cit., p. 198.

[7] M. Merleau-Ponty, "The primacy of perception and its philosophical consequences", in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays*, J.M. Edie (ed.) Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Il 1964, p.13.

tainty of habitus.[8] Ingold describes the "lifeworld" view as an understanding of the world that places the experiencing human subject at the centre, encircled by successive spheres of surroundings. An example of this view might be that a student finds herself in a classroom, that classroom being in a building, the building on the grounds of a university, the university within a city: the sense of the world is of one place nested in another, centred on the experiencing human. This has been the dominant understanding of the world among many societies past and present, but Ingold points out that in "global" conceptions of the world humans are not understood as at the centre of successive spheres, but on the outside of a single, opaque globe. The view of earth from space (first photographed in 1966, a period when the bombing of Laos was gaining unparalleled momentum) epitomises this "global" view, where the earth appears as "suspended in the dark universe, delicately furnished with clouds, oceans and continents".[9] By allowing a vantage where the human is not at the centre, but on the outside looking in, the world in this view can be understood as an object of "science, planning and politics".[10] And, I will argue, violent intervention.

When President Kennedy spoke to the American people in 1961 to prepare them for a possible military entanglement in Laos, he maintained that "Laos is far away […] but the world is small".[11] Kennedy was articulating a worldview predominant during the Cold War that, as NSC-68 stated, ours was "a shrinking world".[12] It was this logic of "a small world" that made Laos – formerly viewed as, at most, peripheral to US interests – seem to be "the present key to the entire area of

[8] P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1977.

[9] W. Sachs, "Global ecology and the shadow of 'development'", in W. Sachs (ed.), *Global Ecology: A new arena of political conflict*, Zed Books, London and New Jersey 1993, p. 18.

[10] *Ibid*.

[11] "The President warns of our peril in Laos: 'Far away… but world is small'", *Life Magazine*, 50, 13, 1961, p. 19.

[12] National Security Council, NSC-68 "United States Objectives and Programs for National Security", April 14, 1950. Available at: http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsc-hst/nsc-68.htm

South East Asia".[13] Walter S. Robertson, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs under Eisenhower, suggested that the reason for US involvement in Laos was evident on any map of the region:

> *(W)hen you look at the map you will see that Laos is a finger thrust right down into the heart of Southeast Asia*. And Southeast Asia is one of the prime objectives of the international Communists in Asia because it is rich in raw materials and has excess food. We are not in Laos to be a fairy godfather to Laos, we are in there for one sole reason, and that is to try to keep this little country from being taken over by the Communists […]. It is part of the effort we are making for the collective security of the free world.[14]

The fate of Laos was viewed, then, as central not only to the region, but to the world understood in global terms.

This global outlook sparked what might be termed "topophobia" rather than Tuan's "topophilia".[15] The Lao landscape itself acted as an enemy and became the object of attack. The "hostile weather and terrain in Laos"[16] included monsoonal weather that was cursed by pilots,[17]

[13] R.J. McMahon, *The Cold War: A very short introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2003, p. 88.

[14] W. Robertson in W. Haney, "The Pentagon Papers and the United States Involvement in Laos", in *The Pentagon Papers*, N. Chomsky and H. Zim (eds), Beacon Press, Boston 1972, p. 251. Emphasis added.

[15] Y.F. Tuan, *Topophilia: A study in environmental perception, attitudes, and values.* Prentice-Halls Inc., Englewood Cliffes, New Jersey 1974.

[16] J. Van Staaveren, *Interdiction in Southern Laos: 1960-1968*, Center for Air Force History, Washington D.C. 1993, p. 72.

[17] Consider for instance the memoires left by Drury (R. Drury, *My Secret War*, Aero Publishers Inc., Fallbrook, CA 1979). In describing his memories of flying A-1 propeller-driven bombers during the 1960s over Laos, Drury begins with the sentence "Insanity! It's sheer insanity to fly through that weather" (p. 9). He goes on to commit the entire first chapter of his book to a vivid description of a flight through a storm over the south of Laos. He "fought the storm as if my life depended on it" (p. 12) and describes "outwitting the weather" (p. 9), "brawling with the elements" (p. 13), and how even after he landed the wind and chased after him "as if I were being hunted" (p. 14). Later, while attempting to unwind by a hotel pool in Bangkok, he reflected on his experiences: "I had come from a place where every day was drama and violence, the roar of aircraft engines, *fighting weather, fighting an enemy*" (p. 57, emphasis added).

precipitous slopes and jungle housing "a variety of dangers", including "wild animals, malaria, and swift streams".[18] The jungle foliage, meanwhile, was deliberately used by the North Vietnamese and NLHX forces to disguise their movements, and was even found to be effective in mitigating the effects of B-52 bombing. Natural caves were used by these forces to shelter from the US air reconnaissance and attack. Rather than a passive object acted upon by warriors, the Lao landscape was an active agent in the war. The landscape limited warriors in some respects, and accommodated or incited them in others.

Against these natural adversaries, the US fought back with devices inspired by images of technology and science. General William C. Westmoreland called for "the automated battlefield" fitted with "data links, computer assisted intelligence evaluation, and automated fire control".[19] This was carried out in the form of radar systems;[20] "weather modification" (cloud-seeding) and "mudmaking" (the chelation of soil);[21] and the acoustic and seismic sensor anti-infiltration system known as IGLOO WHITE.[22] Herbicides formed one of the

[18] B.C. Nalty, *The War against Trucks: Aerial Interdiction in Southern Laos 1968-1972*, Air Force History and Museums Program United States Air Force, Washington DC 2005, pp. 3-4.

[19] J. Dower, "Ten points of note: Asia and the Nixon doctrine", In *The Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 2, 4, 1970, pp. 56-57.

[20] In 1966, the US launched COMBAT SPYSPOT, a radar system that allowed the US to conduct the air war despite the difficulties posed by weather and darkness (Van Staaveren, *Interdiction in Southern Laos* cit., p. 178). The effectiveness of this radar was controversial. For instance, even with radar guidance the "friendly" town of Muong Phalane was accidentally bombed "five or six times" in three years, leading Sullivan to suggest that a giant helium filled balloon be tied to the town bridge so that US bombers would be able to distinguish the town (Ibid., p. 218)

[21] Van Staaveren, *Interdiction in Southern Laos* cit., pp. 227-228. These chemical approaches were initially hailed as "a valuable technological weapon" (Admiral Sharp cited in Ibid., p. 238). Ambassador Sullivan excitedly advised the State Department "Chelation may prove better than escalation" and enthused "make mud not war" (Ibid., p. 238).

[22] The information was to be relayed to a plane circling overhead, and from there to an intelligence Surveillance Center in Thailand. Bombing targets would be selected from this information. The Surveillance Center was, reportedly, "(a)n example of technology in all its complexity." (Nalty, *The War against Trucks* cit., p. 19).

most controversial additions to America's science-backed technological warfare on Indochina.[23] By September 1966, 49,490 hectares in Laos had been sprayed with the compound known as herbicide orange.[24] Herbicide white[25] was introduced in October 1966, and used in conjunction with herbicide orange and (from November 1969) herbicide blue.[26] From this time until September 1969, 16,502 hectares in Laos were sprayed with these herbicides. The environmental impact of these technological approaches to the war are difficult to assess. However, they do give an insight into how the war was perceived and fought by the US. Nature was seen as an enemy, hampering efforts at reconnaissance, bomb damage assessment, ground attack, and flight. The US response focused on overcoming these difficulties through technology.[27] The aesthetic impulse, if not the actual outcome, was towards the automated battlefield.

This tendency to see technology and science as able to conquer and

[23] On herbicide use in Indochina see John Lewallen, *Ecology of Devastation: Indochina*, Penguin Books Inc., Baltimore, Maryland 1971; B. Weisberg (ed.), *Ecocide in Indochina: The ecology of war*, Canfield Press, San Francisco 1970; T. Whiteside, *The Withering Rain: America's herbicidal folly*, Dutton, New York 1971; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *Ecological Consequences of the Second Indochina War*, Almqvist and Wiksell International, Stockholm 1976; A.L. Young, J.A. Calcagni, C.E. Thalken, J. W. Tremblay, *The Toxicology, Environmental Fate, and Human Risk of Herbicide Orange and its Associated Dioxin*, The Surgeon General, United States Air Force, Washington DC 1978; W.A.J. Buckingham, *Operation Ranch Hand: The Air Force and Herbicides in Southeast Asia 1961-1971*, Office of Air Force History, United States Air Force, Washington DC 1982; D. Zierler, "Against protocol: Ecocide, détente, and the question of chemical warfare in Vietnam", presented at *Environmental History and the Cold War*, a conference held at the German Historical Institute, Washington DC March 22-25, 2007.

[24] Composed of 50% n-butyl ester of 2,4-D and 50% n-butyl ester of 2,4,5-T.

[25] Sold commercially under the brand name "Tordon", this herbicide was composed of 80% trilsoprepanolamine salt of 2,4-D and 20% trisopropanolamine salt of pinloram.

[26] 100% sodium salt of cacodylic acid.

[27] Lewallen terms the impulse "switchboard destruction". Lewallen, *Ecology of Devastation* cit., pp. 146-154. See also D. Shearer, "Automated War", in B. Weisberg (ed.), *Ecocide in Indochina: The ecology of war*, Canfield Press, San Francisco 1970.

subdue nature is part of a more general "managerial" view of nature that is linked to the "global outlook" outlined above. Sachs has argued that this outlook has underlain a "hubris", where a growing class of "ecocrats" presume that science and technology offer them the tools to control the environmental crisis – from how many degrees of global warming to what degree of biodiversity the passive and managed globe will host.[28] Likewise, King has argued that it is separation between human consumers of natural products from the actual experiences extracting products (such as the separation of Australian consumers of commercially-marketed fish from the act of commercial fishing) that allows natural features (such as the ocean) to be understood as radically unpeopled entities, and thus best preserved by restricting or eliminating human uses altogether.[29] But in the case of Laos, the "global outlook" led to a managerial view mediated by technology focused not on *preserving* an imagined unpeopled globe or landscape, but on *destroying* it. Descriptions of bombed areas in Laos during the war were prone to describing them as no longer earthly, as "moonscapes" or "lunar landscapes".[30] Warner, in his journalistic account of Lam Son 719, has one character state "bitterly. '*Your air force has bombed Tchepone off the face of the map*. There is nothing at Tchepone (Sepon) but that dusty spot where two roads come together'".[31] To the extent that this destructive bombardment of Laos was underlain by a "global outlook" that encompassed a characteristic managerialism and technology-fetishism, the explosions that transformed Lao landscapes into moonscapes were "global explosions".

In what follows, I describe these global explosions from two perspectives. The first is from the perspective of the UXO (Unexploded Ordnance) problem that persists in Laos today. I argue that the

[28] Sachs, "Global Ecology" cit., pp. 18-19.

[29] T. King, "Crisis of meanings: Divergent experiences and perceptions of the marine environment in Victoria, Australia", *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 16, 3, 2005, pp. 350-365.

[30] See for example Lewallen, *Ecology of Devastation: Indochina* cit., p. 103.

[31] R. Warner, *Shooting at the Moon: The story of America's clandestine war in Laos*, Steerforth Press, South Royalton, Vermont 1996, p. 313. Parentheses and emphasis is added.

bombs sown in the Lao landscape more than thirty years ago are today continuing to offer their harvest, and in this sense they have become part of the Lao landscape: Laos, today, is a violent landscape. The second perspective is that offered by local historians and memorials in Vieng Say. In these instances, the violence of the war is retold and memorialised through natural symbols encased in stories and cultivations. The regeneration of "natural beauty" in Vieng Say post-bombardment, it is shown, has not effaced the violence of the landscape, but has in fact formed an integral means of expressing and memorialising this violence.

To sow and to reap: Global explosions and the Lao landscape

"The bombs dropped like a man sowing seed"

Lao saying regarding the US bombing campaign, 1964-1973

In the allusive language of military reports, the use of explosives in Laos is referred to in terms of sowing seeds. Pilots were ordered to "reseed" Nape Pass in Laos' east, and it was said afterwards that they "reseeded other routes with bombs".[32] Highest priority was given to "sowing gravel mines".[33] Ordnance thus implanted in Laos included 500, 750, 1000, 2000 and 3000-pound "general purpose" bombs, cluster bomb units, rockets, mines, and incendiaries including smoke, napalm, phosphorus, white phosphorus, thermite and fire bombs. The bombing of the trail was hoped to "crater" the road, or trigger landslides, thereby creating bottlenecks of trucks and troops that could be attacked and destroyed. Bombing was also hoped to be effective in directly destroying caches of food, as well as weapons and enemy personnel, fortifications and shelters. Bombing was also aimed at destroying crop land, the cratered landscape being both difficult and dangerous to farm for enemy troops and their supporters. Some of the

[32] Van Staaveren, *Interdiction in Southern Laos* cit., p. 59.
[33] Ibid., p. 291.

most important uses of bombs, then, were those that denied or altered the way people living in these areas could use land.

The conventional history books usually place the total tonnage dropped over Laos at two million tonnes, making Laos the most heavily bombed nation on earth.[34] This figure, along with other shocking statistics (such as that one quarter of the population had been at some time refugees in their own country) have become iconic in describing the destruction and loss wrecked on Laos. However, this tonnage tally has only ever been an estimate. Stuart-Fox cites as his source a *New Yorker* article from 1990 based on "Pentagon sources". Currently emerging evidence suggests that the actual figure may be more than two and a half times this figure, some 5.7 million tonnes.[35] It is estimated that 80 million cluster bomb dispensers were dropped in Laos, scattering around 277 million submunitions. Approximately 84,048,237 are thought to be still lurking in Lao soil. UXO removal operations to date have only removed a total of 341,299 of these. This data suggests that 83,706,938 remain to be found.

Today, more than thirty years after the cessation of hostilities, these submunitions carry on their deadly "anti-personnel" functions indiscriminately. Victims can be children, farmers, scavengers: anyone who uses land in any way. When I asked the head of a district social welfare office in Vieng Say, Huaphan Province, how many people were killed by UXO each year, he candidly stated that he did not know. He pointed out that most people injured by the UXO died outright, and their deaths were not counted separately from other deaths. But he and his office mate did recall specific tragic events: in 2006 a man digs underneath a cluster of bamboo to catch a bamboo rat, and is killed. In 2004 four children light a fire to keep warm in the chill of the morning. Their fire is on soil concealing a bombie, and it explodes,

[34] See for example M. Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, p. 144; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *Ecological Consequences of the Second* cit., p. 14.

[35] John Dingley, Senior Technical Advisor at UXO Lao, personal communication. This figure is based on US Air Force data provided to UXO Lao. Unfortunately, the data has many errors, and exact figures are still unclear.

killing them all. In 1989 two children dig for frogs by the side of a lake. Their digging stick hits a bombie: both are killed. In 1991 a farmhand labouring in an upland field steps heavily down the slope and is killed by a bombie. Here there is danger in the most everyday of activities. The land that yields so generously frogs, bamboo rats, firewood, and rice fields – the very substance of life – also deals out sudden and unexpected bursts of violence.

UXO removal is slow and expensive. Each and every metal object identified by the metal detectors must be investigated: in a land scattered with the debris of war, such work is painstaking. UXO Lao requires about 2,000 – 3,000 USD to clear a hectare. This cost is prohibitive for many land users, and in general new buildings, rice fields, and roads are established without UXO clearance. Official policy allows poor people to move into "unclaimed" land in the countryside to establish new fields, mainly upland fields. Depending on the history of military actions in the area, upland areas may have been some of the most defended, and thus most contaminated areas. In addition, Vietnamese traders will buy scrap metal at the rate of 1,500 kip per kilo. Both halves of a bombie dispenser case will fetch about 100,000 kip, or about a third of the monthly salary of a mid-level office worker. A 750-pound bomb will fetch about 125,000, or about half a month's salary. Where once it was reportedly common to see bombie dispenser shells put to use in gardens or homes, such scenes are far from common nowadays. Even the monument to Prince Souphanavong in Vieng Say has been robbed of an old, large bomb casing that used to lie outside his cave. Staff blame "people who don't understand", that is, people who do not value the bomb casings for their historical significance, and instead sell them as scrap metal. Some claim that it is now illegal to buy or sell such bomb casings or other metal gleaned from UXO. Others I spoke to, however, claimed that it was far from illegal. And all agree that the trade still prospers. Some scavenge deliberately, but it was emphasized to me that all kinds of people sold scrap metal, if they chanced upon it. It seems that Laos will be cleared of UXO eventually, but scrap metal merchants and pioneering land users may be driving the clearance much faster than UXO Lao can.

A statue located in Vieng Say town symbolises some of the am-

Figure 3. Statue in Vieng Say, Huaphan Province, Lao P.D.R., depicting three Lao citizens standing in triumph over a bomb marked "USA"

biguities of the UXO legacy (see fig. 3). Three figures stand in victorious and hopeful poses – a farmer, a soldier, and an industrial labourer – their faces raised as if greeting a bright future. The labourer

rests his foot triumphantly on a bomb marked "USA". His pose is cocky, and the statue can be read as a celebration of the Lao resilience and eventual triumph over the US bombardment. But there is more than one reading possible here: it is distinctly unwise to rest one's foot on a live bomb, and the location of the explosive at the foot of the figures also suggests how today UXO poses a continuing danger undermining Lao agriculture, security and industry. UXO has become part of the very ground livelihoods are built on.

The UXO legacy has challenged the presumed divide between technology and nature, as the weapons of America's technological war become naturalised in the wilds of Laos. In the eastern areas of north and south Laos, UXO is now part and parcel of the land. Uses of the land for mining, agriculture, and services such as schools must all grapple with the danger of UXO embedded in the landscape. Ironically, Sepon, the town mentioned above that had been bombed "off the face of the map", is now home to an Australian-initiated gold mine. The miners have introduced for the first time cyanide leaching to Laos. They are also responsible for the largest privately-funded UXO clean-up operation to date. And while foreign capital fuels the search for gold, the poverty of local scavengers fuels a different hunt for metal. The landscape in Laos may deal out gold, scrap-metal, sustenance, or explosions. The explosives sewn like seed into the Lao landscape are offering their harvest, and have become part of that landscape. Bombs began as a weapon of technology, but ended as weapons of nature. Laos today is a violent landscape.

Landscape as life-world: Remembering war and wilderness lost

While visiting Vieng Say, I saw a local history-teller, Keewpahn, sing at a farewell party. Other people were invited to sing their songs too, but only Keewphan sung history. Keewphan began with each of the cardinal points. He sang the north, the south, the east and the west, and sang their distinctive features. He sang of the forest with the large animals, the tigers, elephants, wild buffalo, and horned deer. He sang of the tall trees, the thick jungle that lay in this place

before 1960. Then he sang of the American bombing, of destruction, loss and sorrow. His song tells of the forest destroyed and the animals disappeared: a lyrical account of loss. He then sang of the establishment of the central party headquarters, the construction of caves, roads, and strongholds. His song mentioned the establishment of Vieng Say as a District in 1968. He named dates, places, and events accompanied by a single *kheen*.[36] Afterwards, Keewphan told me that few other people even know the history of this place. He was born in this area, while almost everyone else who lives in Vieng Say now was born elsewhere. His nephew, Bunthong, reaffirmed that few people in today's Vieng Say can speak with authority on the history of the region. In this section, I relate the history of the war and environment as told to me by these two men, Bunthong and Keewphan, in order to investigate how conflict and nature are configured in local memories and memorials.

According to Keewphan and Bunthong, the region that is now Vieng Say was originally a dense forest, and ancient literature referred to this forest as "Khang Sa-in". Human settlement was confined to small, infrequent villages in the valleys. Within the space of today's Vieng Say town, the two original villages were Na Kay north (with about six houses) and Na Kay south (with about four houses). Another village several kilometers south, called Sieng Su, was also founded.

But Keewphan and Bunthong emphasise that the mountains, cliffs and caves were left largely untouched, and the landscape was mostly forested. For both of them, narrating this place's history begins with an evocation of wilderness. They list the large animals of the forest: muntjack, deer, birds, monkeys, snakes, tigers, and gibbons. The gibbons, Bunthong says, were believed to be dead human ancestors. "The animals were not afraid of humans here, it was the humans who were afraid of the animals". People feared to venture near the gibbon communities, believing them to be powerful ghosts. But those who did approach them found that the gibbons were friendly: they were said to show no fear of visiting humans, and would touch their human visitors. Bunthong said

[36] A Lao wind instrument.

Figure 4. Silhouette of a stone outcrop on the peak of a limestone karst. This outcrop is said to resemble a tigress

that some people would try to shoot the gibbons, but it was impossible to hit them. Bunthong speculates that they were impervious to bullets because they lived on a healthy diet of fruit. One gibbon community, he recalls, lived on and around a limestone karst between Na Kay north and Na Kay south. It was a cliff populated by all kinds of animals, but particularly gibbons. Scaling this cliff became somewhat of a bravery contest for the people of the villages: to venture into the gibbon's territory was only an act for the strong of heart. It was called, accordingly, a *phaa* (cliff) *haan* (brave). On the very top of this mountain was a stone outcrop that – from the right angle – looked like a tigress lying down, paws daintily crossed in front, head erect and ears pricked forward in watchful, elegant vigilance. At her haunches, a tiger cub peeked his head up, the stone contriving there to look playful (see fig. 4).

It was this image of the tigress and her cub that, according to Bunthong, caught the eye of Kaysone Phomvihane. The leader of the NLHX had heard that this particular karst was known as a "cliff of

bravery," and the tigress figure that crowned it confirmed his belief that this would be a stronghold of courageousness. Kaysone had been based in Sieng Khuang, but with heavy bombing he had moved closer to the Vietnamese border. The nondescript village of Sieng Su, nearby

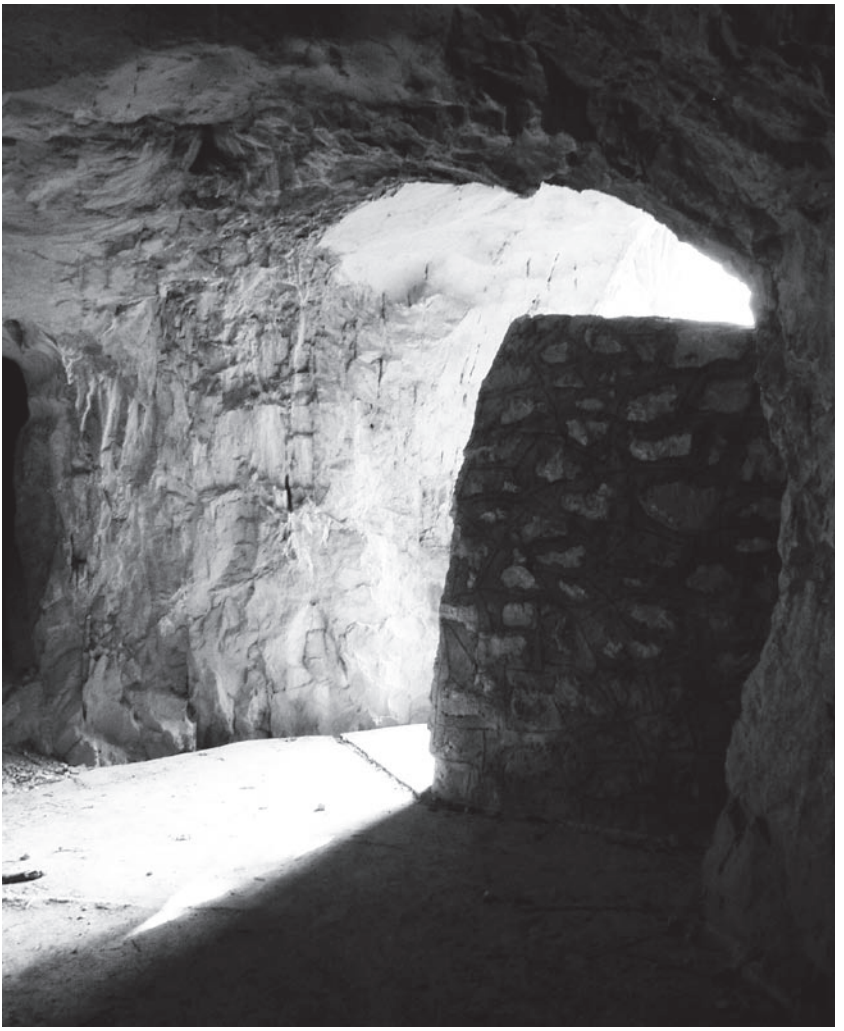


Figure 5. A blast wall constructed of stone and concrete at the mouth of a cave in Vieng Say

Na Kay, became the new secret headquarters for the NLHX. It was selected because it was near a road heading to Vietnam, but it held no defensive attributes: it was essentially composed of forest and fields. The headquarters at Sieng Su did not remain secret for long: CIA sponsored assassinations began, and soon the US air war made Sieng Su unsafe for the leaders of the NLHX. They sought safety in the caves of Khang Sa-in. Kaysone set up his home, office, and the NLHX headquarters in the caves under the tigress and her cub.

Some of the caves were natural formations, but they were enhanced with the significant investment by the NLHX and allies. Corridors and rooms were blasted out with dynamite. Level floors with drainage, platforms and walkways were constructed with concrete. Walls and corrugated iron roofing were installed. Iron bars, heavy steel doors, and blast walls regulated the various entryways (figg. 5 and 6). Emergency rooms with oxygen machines guarded against chemical attack. Soldiers and civil servants and politicians inhabited the caves, bringing their families. Apart from the original inhabitants of Na Kay, the area became a large military camp operating under strict regulations. Single men and women, for instance, were not permitted to speak to each other without written permission from their supervisors. The sheer investment evident in this stronghold is striking. The caves burrowed into the limestone like heels burrowed into the soil. They seem to say: "Here we will stand. We will not budge. We will endure and prevail". The caves give the impression that the NLHX were serious, well organized, well funded, and prepared to weather the US bombardment indefinitely.

In 1966, the area was renamed Samphan ("relationship") and in 1969 the name was changed again to Vieng Say. This name can be interpreted as "city of victory", but Bunthong recalls that this name was chosen because it was the code name of Kaysone Phomvihane. If Kaysone was the centre of the central committee, Vieng Say was the centre of the revolutionary landscape. This wilderness had become headquarters, or in more local idiom, *paa* (forest) had become *muang* (power centre). And the central element in this transformation was a natural feature: the limestone karsts and their caves. One karst in particular, the *phaa haan* (cliff of bravery) was held to have

Figure 6. A heavy steel door inside a cave in Vieng Say

special powers emanating from its natural features, especially the semi-magical gibbon community and the tigress with her cub. Bunthong claimed that the US bombers targeted Kaysone's cave, but that the tigress and her cub were impervious to all of their attacks. Stott, in explaining the *paa* / *muang* distinction that is so important

in Tai views of forest and civilisation, writes: "what is clear throughout is that the *pa* was not part of the world of the 'civilized' elite, although it was recognized as possessing great spiritual energy that could be harnessed under the right control and power".[37] Kaysone, I suggest, is depicted in this story as harnessing the power of *paa*, of the forest that was always on the edge of and "the Other" to the Tai civilised world. Vieng Say, then, is recounted by local historians very much as a centre of events. This resembles more closely Ingold's notion of the "life-world" described in the introduction, more than it does the "global outlook" that informed US bombing. In the "life-world" of Vieng Say, the caves of leaders like Kaysone form centres of significance around which successive spheres are arranged.

It is easy to fill these empty caves with scenes from your own imagination. In the large meeting hall cave formerly used by the military (fig. 7), I imagined hundreds of men and women ready to fight, and the leaders on the underground, sunlit stage, calling for a revolution. Keewphan's memories are not so romantic. Keewphan impressed upon me one very important point: "I hold no positive memory of the war. I don't want to see war ever return here again". It is clear that fear, hunger, and the injury or death of loved ones form part of the sorrow of war. But the image of loss that Keewphan speaks most readily of, and that sets the stage in his songs of history, is environmental loss. The metaphor of a lost Eden, Khang Sa-In, feeds his lyrical evocation of destruction.

His songs of history tell of how the bombing destroyed all of the big trees. Those that were not hit directly by ordnance had their leaves and branches sheared off by fragments. Those that remained standing were burnt by napalm. The big animals were killed or fled in fear. Asked if it was the bombs, and not the fact of human settlement that caused the devastation, both history-tellers were adamant that loss was caused by the bombs. True, the soldiers would kill and eat big animals if they saw them, they said, but they didn't see them: the animals were

[37] P. Stott, "*Mu'ang* and *pa:* elite views of nature in a changing Thailand", in M. Chitaksem, A. Turton (eds), *Thai Constructions of Knowledge*, School of Oriental and African Studies University of London, London 1991, p. 146.

Figure 7. The meeting hall inside Khamtay Siphandone's cave and former meeting place of the Lao People's Revolutionary Army

already gone. Now that the bombs have ceased, Bunthong asserted that the animals would "definitely" return. "Just the other day I saw the tracks of a *phaan* (muntjack) in the gardens here".

The gardens that are carefully tended around the caves are saturated with meaning. A red bushy ground cover that represents, it is said, the blood that was spilt in sacrifice flows in streams around the gardens and paths. Outside Khamtay Siphandone's cave, Bunthong points out a tree planted by a Princess of Thailand during her visit in 2002. Khamtay Siphandone was the leader of the Lao People's Liberation Army while Thailand committed ground troops as well as support for the air war against that very army. The tree, then, is

perhaps a blunt symbol of reconciliation between former enemies: where once there was death between these enemies, now there is growth. When I asked Bunthong what the tree symbolised, he said "this tree will grow large, and people will see it, and know that she planted it, and even after she is dead, people will know that she came here." But why will people care that she came? What did her presence here mean? The tree is a good symbol: it does not insist on any particular answer, but merely suggests and hints, allowing people to interpret and reinterpret as the roots steadily spread underground and the branches steadily reach toward the Lao sky. Bunthong and I eat a grapefruit that has grown in the garden, from a tree said to be planted by Kaysone Phomvihan himself. I was told that Kaysone established gardens around his cave as soon as the bombing ceased. In the memorialisation of Kaysone (what Evans calls the "cult" of Kaysone)[38] his aptitude for gardening is often emphasised. The flesh of the grapefruit is sweet and sour, and the combination of hearing this history while eating this fruit seems meaningful. But like the Princess' tree, the grapefruit declines to dictate.

Kept so meticulously, the caves and their gardens feel somehow empty, only hinting at that lives and liveliness that occurred in them not so long ago. But these caves, gardens, and memories tell of a thoroughly peopled landscape. This is not a place of peace, or a wilderness, but a place of struggle, and the story of this struggle is told repeatedly through metaphors of nature. Most striking, perhaps, is the way that the horror and loss of war is told through particular landscapes, real and imagined. The image of wilderness sets the baseline for measuring the impact and devastation of violence. The horror of war is remembered significantly as a horror against this wilderness: as a loss of the true forest and the wondrous animals. Rather than attempting to efface the evidence of violence, the urge has been rather to memorialize and symbolize war through certain cultivations: through trees planted by leaders and former enemies,

[38] G. Evans, *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance: Laos since 1975*, Hawaii University Press, Honolulu 1998.

through significant plants, through a careful tending of the natural symbols of devastation and bravery. In this way, nature is confirmed as a metaphor for very human stories.

Conclusion

To be in Vieng Say today, to walk among the caves, gardens, fields and homesteads, is to walk in a violent landscape. Violence is embedded both in the physical features of the land (craters, war memorials, unexploded ordnance) but also in how the land is made meaningful by its inhabitants: the stories they tell, the cultivations they tend, the paths they take through this landscape. Laos was for thirty years the site of conflict and violence that was rationalized (especially by the US) in terms of a "global outlook". Images of the globe made it possible to conceive of Laos as central to US concerns, and they also made possible a notion that the Lao landscape could be violently managed through technology and science put to military use. Thirty years after the US planes have halted their dispersal of bombs and experimental devices over Laos, it is evident that this global vision cannot hold. The bombs are not tools for the management of nature's dangers, but are natural dangers themselves. Nature has not subdued the evidence of violence on the landscape, but has come to mark and memorialise it. For local inhabitants, this violent landscape is not conceived of in global terms, but as a life-world that is inhabited and experienced.