Indigenous Peoples and Development in Laos: Ideologies and Ironies

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Jan Ovesen
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Over the past three decades or so, an increasing number of minority ethnic groups have striven to improve their social and material situation by claiming the status of Indigenous Peoples. Such claims are primarily addressed to the nation-states to which the minorities in question belong. Many more or less ‘tribal’ people have been concerned to “reframe their long-term collective identities based on criteria such as ethnicity or livelihood to embrace a new identity as ‘indigenous’” (Hodgson 2002: 1040) and to rely on this identity in their struggle for recognition of their rights to resources and for their plea for self-determination. Correspondingly, many anthropologists have reframed their research agendas to engage with indigenous rights movements, adopting occasionally overlapping positions on a continuum “from advocacy and collaboration, to dialogue and discussion, to scholarly detachment” (ibid.: 1044). No matter where the anthropologist positions him/herself on this continuum, the engagement entails involvement in politically sensitive issues of nation-states’ treatment of ethnic minorities.

In this paper, I shall discuss a case of a couple of ethnic minority groups for which the status as indigenous is not an option because they live in a nation-state, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, that strongly discourages any discourse involving rights based on indigeneity, and effectively and efficiently prevents the emergence of ethnic associations, let alone movements.1 In spite of the regime’s staunch denial

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of the relevance and legitimacy of possible claims by potential ‘indigenous peoples,’ the notion of indigeneity is not altogether absent in the Laotian context, primarily because of the active recognition of that notion by major development-financing institutions, such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, on which the Lao government depends for a number of significant undertakings. This state of affairs does not make the Lao situation any less politically sensitive.

On the basis of my involvement as a short-term anthropological consultant for an industrial development enterprise in Laos – the commercial extraction of gold and copper deposits in the hinterlands of Savannakhet province – I shall discuss the predicament of the local population in the area and what the unrealizable status of indigeneity has to do with it. While I like to see my contribution as a consultant (i.e., the submission of a report) as one of advocacy of the interests of the local population that will be affected by the enterprise vis-à-vis those of the Lao authorities and the mining company, I do not see these interests as necessarily conflicting in themselves – and neither does the local population. What I do see, on the other hand, is that the ideological attitudes toward the notion of indigenous peoples on the part of different stakeholders – some of whom are committed to it, while others are committed to its rejection – do little to facilitate possible measures to improve the lot of the local people. Philip Hirsch’s observation that hydropower projects in the Mekong region “politicize the very status of peoples as indigenous or otherwise, involving contestation between funding agencies, NGOs, national governments and affected peoples themselves” (Hirsch 1999: 38) is valid for the mining operation as well.

In the following, I shall first discuss, from a position of scholarly detachment, the notion of indigenous peoples itself and my own ambivalent attitude to it; then I shall briefly review the question of ethnicity in Laos and its political ramifications as a necessary background to my ethnography and discussion of the particular case from the planned mining operation in the south-central part of the country.

**THE NOTION OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES**

Since it entered the global consciousness in the early 1970s, the notion of indigenous peoples has evolved in some interesting ways that highlight its both politically and epistemologically problematic nature (for an overview, see Niezen 2003). The notion originated in, and was shaped by, area-specific geo-political situations of European conquest and colonization of technologically simple aboriginal populations, primarily in the Americas, Oceania, and the Circumpolar region. The focus of the indigenous-rights movement was the quest for self-determination of the descendants of these populations, and its response to European colonization and encroachment was from the beginning formulated in moral terms by relying on a ‘noble-ecological-savage’ rhetoric. Indigenous peoples were supposed to possess a greater environmental consciousness by virtue of a type of cosmology that stresses man’s spiritual relationship of dependence on Nature. Because of this mind frame, indigenous peoples were assumed to be morally superior, and they were struggling valiantly to preserve their indigenous way of life.
and keep it free from the destructive influence that comes with the introduction of modern technology.

This initial moral and ideological message made indigenous-rights movements attractive to a number of First-World academics, political activists, and NGOs, as well as to an increasing number of minority ethnic groups. From the late 1980s onwards, the global movement was joined by a number of newly formed ethnic associations and unions, notably in Asia (for an overview, see Kingsbury 1998). These later adherents to the movement had more varied experiences of oppression and domination because of the historically much more complex situation of population movements in many parts of Asia, where colonial conquests had taken place long before the arrival of the Europeans. Along with the expansion of the movement, therefore, a certain shift of focus took place, from self-determination as a way of redressing the historical injustice of European colonialism, to self-determination as a way of resisting oppression and gaining political and economic advantages within the respective contemporary nation-states.

While self-determination in principle includes the right to pursue traditional modes of livelihood, such as hunting, gathering, swidden cultivation, or pastoralism, this aspect is nowadays often played down, at least in the Southeast Asian context; it can be difficult to win support from environmentally concerned First-World activists for practices that increasing population density has made ecologically unsustainable, while at the same time maintaining the myth of the ecological wisdom of indigenous peoples. Instead, the focus has come to be on (the anthropological concept of) culture, and the rhetoric of the movement’s spokespeople has to some extent shifted towards an emphasis on the indigenous peoples’ predicament as bearers of unique but threatened indigenous cultures.

The application of the notion of indigenous peoples as a political tool is now an indisputable ethnographic fact. Increasing numbers of disadvantaged groups nowadays attempt to mobilize their ‘culture’ for political ends; and the possibilities of recognition of such groups’ claims have been enhanced during the Indigenous Peoples’ decade (1995-2004), which has seen the establishment of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (established in 2000).

Indigeneity, Capitalism, and Development

The expansion of indigenous-rights movements during the 1990s coincided with an increasing attention not only from the UN and human-rights organizations but also from such major development-financing institutions as the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the World Bank (WB), and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Following the lead of the 1989 ILO Convention (ILO 1989), the World Bank two years later adopted an Operational Directive (WB 1991), according to which development initiatives seeking funding from the World Bank, if planned for areas in which indigenous peoples are present, must take special care that these people are not adversely affected by the project and must make particular efforts so that extra benefits accrue to them. In 1994, the Asian Development Bank adopted a similar directive (ADB 1999).
Unless we believe that the Banks issued their directives out of a sentimental affection for a particular category of people, or because they had suddenly been converted into guardians of threatened cultures and quaint customs, we should suspect sound capitalist reasons behind their stance. Whether or not we concur with Paul Cammack’s contention (2002) that the policies pursued by the World Bank over the past decade amount to a systematic program for the establishment and consolidation of capitalism on a global scale, we may recognize that increasing numbers of the world’s poor, including indigenous peoples, are being turned into pawns of global capitalism. But at the same time, the Banks’ ‘capitalist’ program includes environmental protection, the provision of jobs, education, health services, and roads and transportation – assets that very few people, indigenous or otherwise, would want to refuse.

With the Banks’ attention, the notion of indigenous peoples has become a potential tool for development planning, and this may make it also a practical concern for anthropologists working with such planning processes. For Bank purposes, it is largely immaterial whether a certain group of people may claim descent from the first inhabitants in any given area. Consequently, the definitions of indigenous peoples adopted by the WB, ILO, and ADB do not insist on aboriginality:

“Indigenous peoples should be regarded as those with a social or cultural identity distinct from the dominant or mainstream society, which makes them vulnerable to being disadvantaged in the process of development” (ADB 1999: 6).

According to the ADB and WB, there are two kinds of characteristics that may be reasons for such vulnerability. One is indigenousness in the literal sense, i.e., the group members are descendants of the aboriginal population, or, at least, of people who have been present in the area before modern states were created and international borders defined (ADB 1999: 5). The other is a cultural specificity that implies some, if not necessarily all of the following traits: (1) a close attachment to an ancestral territory and to the natural resources therein; (2) self-identification and identification by others as members of a distinct cultural group; (3) the use of a separate language, often different from the national language; (4) the maintenance of social and political institutions distinct from those of the dominant culture; and (5) a primarily subsistence-oriented production (see WB 1991).

Anthropology and Indigeneity

The transformations that the notion of indigenous peoples has undergone over the past decades makes it anthropologically challenging. From supporting moral claims based on the historical primacy of territorial occupation, the notion is nowadays mainly invoked to support political and socio-economic claims based on contemporary vulnerability. In other words, the initial moral condemnation of modernity has been transformed into a demand for a fair share of its economic and material benefits. Ironically, at the same time, the moral concomitants initially associated with indigeneity have largely gone undisputed.

*Moussons* 6, 2002, 69-97
With the application of the Bank kind of definition, the question arises of whether indigeneity can be a matter of degree. While various groups may be more or less vulnerable, and more or less susceptible to capitalism and development, allegedly because of their 'culture' and history, it is more of an open question whether they may also be more or less indigenous. Does it make sense, for example, in a given area, to characterize a certain group of aboriginals, which fulfills all five Bank points for cultural specificity, as more indigenous than a neighboring group of comparative latecomers, which scores only three of the five Bank points? Or does it make better sense (to us, and/or to the groups in question) to simply class them both as indigenous, and make no finer distinctions?

In order to engage with such questions, we need to separate the different and, indeed, contrasting definitional dimensions that the notion of indigenous people contains, but which are all too often conflated. The ‘classic’ dimension is the cultural-environmental one, according to which indigenous peoples are ecologically responsible and morally superior custodians of the environment by virtue of a mental disposition dictated by their precious but now threatened culture. This cultural, or culturalist, dimension is promoted to some extent by the indigenous organizations themselves, and not least by partisan NGOs and other spokespeople of the indigenous cause, but its general empirical veracity has been severely questioned by anthropologists. Thus, Roy Ellen, for example, has argued that the reason why indigenous peoples have done so relatively little damage to their environment is mainly to be found in the limitations of their technology (Ellen 1986). Nevertheless, even for Southeast Asia, we may still occasionally be told that indigenous peoples in their relationship to the land “accommodate themselves to it in an attitude of respect and stewardship,” because the land “is held to be sacred, a gift from the Creator” (McCaskill 1998: 44). We are further asked to believe that, because of their ‘spiritually-based’ culture, indigenous peoples perceive “development practices imposed from the outside as a threat to their way of life” (ibid.: 45). However, the fact that some people venerate the spirits of the land entails neither a superior ecological wisdom nor necessarily the rejection of technological and socio-economic development (see Ovesen 2000b).

Another dimension, to my mind more pertinent, is the sociological one (also employed by the Banks), according to which indigenous, or ‘tribal’ peoples are conceived as marginal(ized) in relation to the majority population of the nation-state to which they happen to belong. Along this dimension, indigenous peoples are characterized by the absence or rudimentary nature of supra-local socio-political organization, and by their explicit or implicit social opposition to the state organization and the majority group(s) that represent it, either because their society works ‘against the state’ (Clastres 1974), or simply because they resent being oppressed. The representatives of the state populations, in their turn, often see indigenous groups as troublesome and backward, and their traditional subsistence strategies as harmful to the environment. This sociological dimension, thus, necessitates a more serious engagement with the respective nation-states and their policies towards their ethnic minorities.
The contrast between the culturalist and the sociological viewpoints has certain similarities to that between essentialist (or primordialist) and constructivist (or situational) approaches to ethnicity. The latter, to which most anthropologists nowadays subscribe, entails the realization that economic and political processes play an important role in the formation of ethnic, particularly indigenous, identities. As Tania Li has observed, this approach “contrasts with assumptions about primordial difference that inspire indigenous rights activists to defend the autonomy of culturally distinct communities” (Li 2001: 41). It is important to keep in mind, though, that the constructivist approach does not amount to questioning the perceived reality of ethnic identity in general and indigenous identity in particular. Ethnic and/or indigenous self-identification is a process that might be described as constructivist essentialism; even people who are themselves conscious of having changed ethnic identity, as individuals or as a group, will perceive their current affiliation as no less authentic than their previous one (see Evans 1999a and Proschan 1997 for examples of the complexities of such issues; see also Tapp 2002). It is also important to note that the rejection of the essentialism that is characteristic of many indigenous-rights activists does not on principal grounds prevent the anthropologist from engaging in advocacy on behalf of indigenous groups. Here I just want to argue that we have an intellectual obligation to be aware of the epistemological grounds of our eventual engagement.

**Indigeneity and Minorities in (Post-)Socialist States**

If anthropologists’ engagement with indigenous issues is mainly of academic interest, the attention to those issues by the international community and the Banks has forced nation-states to respond. Asian states’ attitudes to indigenous-rights movements range from apprehensive to downright dismissive. The latter attitude is most pronounced in the post-socialist states of China, Vietnam, and Laos; it may be exemplified by a 1995 statement by the Chinese government to the UN Commission on Human Rights:

“The Chinese Government believes that the question of indigenous peoples is the product of European countries’ recent pursuit of colonial policies in other parts of the world. […] As in the majority of Asian countries, the various nationalities in China have all lived for aeons on Chinese territory. Although there is no indigenous peoples’ question in China, the Chinese government and people have every sympathy with indigenous peoples’ historical woes and historical plight” (quoted in Kingsbury 1998: 417-418).

This specimen of classic socialist rhetoric explains the stance taken also by the governments of Vietnam and Laos. Since there is no ‘indigenous peoples question’ (among other things because the regimes do not allow the formation of indigenous-rights movements), it is deemed irrelevant to be concerned about indigeneity at all. The historical fate of the aboriginal populations as subjects of ‘internal colonialism’ (Evans 1992) within the boundaries of these contemporary nation-states is conveniently obscured by reference to the respective country’s ethnic-minority policy with its constitutionally guaranteed equality between ethnic groups – see, for example, Tapp (1995) for China, McElwee (in press) for Vietnam, and Stuart-Fox
The similarities of the minority policies in the three countries rest on a common conception of the place of minority ethnic groups in a multiethnic state, which ultimately goes back to the Stalinist Soviet model of ‘nationalities.’ The official policies insist not only on ethnic equality but also on the harmonious co-existence of the various ethnic groups, characterized by mutual respect for each others’ cultures and traditions, and the regimes are given to occasional self-congratulatory pronouncements that this is also the empirical reality.

In what follows, I shall address the empirical reality of a local ethnic situation in the eastern part of Savannakhet province in Laos. That locality forms part of a larger cultural area of indigenous Mon-Khmer-speaking groups, which extends from the eastern part of Khammuan province through the Boloven plateau to the Central Highlands of Vietnam and the Cambodian provinces of Rattanakiri and Mondulkiri.

ETHNICITY AND INDIGENITY IN LAOS

Space does not permit a detailed analytic account of ethnicity in Laos here; this has been done elsewhere (Ovesen, in press; see also Evans 1999b, Proschan 1997, Trankell 1998). I shall briefly sketch the general ethnic situation, to provide the necessary background and context for the subsequent case study.

The pre-colonial Buddhist kingdom of Laos, Lan Xang, traces its history back to the thirteenth century; it was founded by ethnic Lao who, together with other Tai-speaking peoples, had migrated into the area from the north since the eighth century. Like most Southeast Asian pre-colonial states, the viability of the Lao kingdom depended to a large extent on its ability to incorporate comparatively large numbers of people, voluntarily or by means of slave-raiding. The subject population included ethnic Lao peasants, a number of non-Lao (and non-Buddhist) Tai groups, and the aboriginal population of different Mon-Khmer-speaking groups; the last category was collectively referred to as kha, a Tai word that denotes both their ethno-linguistic affiliation and socio-political status as ‘slaves’ (Proschan 1997: 96). Despite this politically subordinate position, certain kha groups were acknowledged as being in charge of the worship of the spirits of the land, with which they had a privileged relationship because of their aboriginality (see Smalley 1964, Trankell 1998). In his analysis of Charles Archambeault’s ethnography, Göran Aijmer noted that “[t]he aboriginal inhabitants maintained control over the ritual rights connected with the territory, while their legal territorial claims had been given up and Lao political dominance accepted” (Aijmer 1979: 74; see Archambeault 1973: 42 et passim). In the north of the country, the ethnic picture was eventually complemented by the migration into the area of groups of Hmong (derogatorily referred to as Meo) and Mien (Yao) from the early nineteenth century onwards (Culas 2000). These people settled in the high forested mountains and were generally regarded as savages; apart from trading opium with the lowlanders, they remained peripheral to the affairs of the kingdom.

For the ethnic Lao there was never any doubt that their kingdom was predominantly Lao, and after decolonization, prime minister Katay Sasorith could proudly express the prevailing Lao ethnic chauvinism: “If we leave out a few
ethnological Minorities (Khas, Meos, etc.) that are scattered here and there, generally in the heights, the whole of Muong Lao spoke the same language, honoured the same genii, cultivated the same religion and had the same usages and customs” (Sasorith 1959: 30).

In actual fact, however, the ethnic Lao comprised less than half of the population, and when the communist liberation movement, the Pathet Lao, organized in a bid for power during the American War, it needed all the support it could muster, so the ‘scattered Khas and Meos’ became important for the revolution. A classification scheme had already been promoted by the leaders of the first Lao national independence movement, the Lao Issara, during the 1940s (Kossikov 2000: 231), according to which all ethnic groups were identified as some kind of Lao. The ethnic Lao and the other Tai groups were designated as Lao Lum, the Mon-Khmer-speaking groups as Lao Theung, and the Hmong-Mien (as well as small minorities of Tibeto-Burman speakers) as Lao Sung. The words lum, theung, and sung are Lao for ‘valley,’ ‘slope,’ and ‘high altitude,’ respectively. These topographical labels were meant to characterize the habitat of the three categories of people, as inhabitants of different altitude zones: The Lao Lum are the ‘lowlanders,’ the Lao Theung the ‘uplanders,’ and the Lao Sung the ‘highlanders.’

The great attraction of this scheme, apart from its simplicity, was for the non-Lao groups that, at least rhetorically, they could be recognized as equals of the Lao. During the liberation, this entailed that they could feel proud to become mobilized for the revolutionary cause of the Pathet Lao. After the Pathet Lao victory in 1975, the threefold ethnic classification persisted and gained wide popular appeal. The national unity that it expressed was depicted as three women wearing the traditional costumes of the three ethnic categories, a picture still found on banknotes and on large billboards in major cities and towns. In spite of such official recognition of the national ethnic trinity, it does not figure in the Constitution of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, promulgated in 1991. Instead, general reference is made to ‘ethnic groups,’ as well as to the ‘multi-ethnic Lao People’ (Stuart-Fox 1991, Drouot 1999). The latter expression, however, logically implies that the non-Tai minority groups are also somehow ‘Lao;’ the official name of the country carries the same implication.

The threefold classification scheme is an artificial construct, the result of an ‘essentialist constructivism,’ and its neatness is, of course, deceptive, particularly since it is generally assumed that it is congruent not only with linguistic affiliation and altitude, but also with subsistence strategy and religious practice. Thus, the Tai-speaking Lao Lum are all assumed to be lowland wet-rice farmers living in permanent villages and practicing Buddhism, while both the Mon-Khmer-speaking Lao Theung and the Lao Sung, consisting of Hmong-Mien and Tibeto-Burman speakers, are seen as more or less migratory swidden cultivators practicing local animist religions. These assumptions constitute a stereotype that contributes to sustain the feeling among the ethnic Lao of their cultural and moral superiority; the Lao Theung and Lao Sung are regarded as backward and less susceptible to socio-economic development, because they are still thought to be governed by their
archaic cultural traditions that include a penchant for swidden cultivation.

As for indigeneity, it is certainly not in the interest of the ethnic Lao political elite to remind itself and others that their ancestors once conquered and displaced the Mon-Khmer-speaking aboriginals nowadays known as ‘Lao Theung.’ So, the current endeavor is “to obliterate the antiquity of the Austroasiatic [Mon-Khmer] populations and to lead us believe in a collective indigeneity: the ‘Lao trinity’ was there from the outset” (Goudineau 2000: 24).10

THE SEPON PROJECT

My recent work in Laos (2001) landed me among ‘Lao Theung’ groups, as I was asked to do an anthropological study, on a short-term consultancy basis,11 as part of the social and environmental impact assessment of the Sepon Project, a planned gold and copper mining project in the hinterlands of Savannakhet province, in south-central Laos (see Map 1). My terms of reference did not mention indigenous peoples, but when in the field, I was asked by my employer to address the issue in my report, in view of the commitment to this question on the part of the project’s potential financial investors. In the Sepon area, professional prospecting had been going on for almost ten years, and the company had established a permanent camp for its personnel; about one hundred local people were permanently employed at the camp, and some twenty foreigners were there on assignments of varying lengths. At the time of my study, the company was about to move from prospecting to commercial mining, hence the impact assessments.12

The purely environmental impacts of the Sepon project have allegedly caused some concern (IWGIA 2002: 298). It is inevitable that the strip mining of a few square kilometers in four different places within the project area will have some impact upon the natural environment. But this should not make us overlook the fact that the area’s environment is already seriously degraded, both due to the timber logging carried out by a Vietnamese company that has a concession adjacent to the project area (see Photo 1) and, most notably, due to the effects of the American war in Indochina. The road running through the area formed part of the so-called Ho Chi Minh Trail, a network of transportation routes that the North Vietnamese Army used to supply personnel, weapons, and provisions to the guerrilla in South Vietnam. For this reason, the involvement of the American air forces had devastating effects on the area (but very little effect on the efficiency of the Vietnamese military operations). Because of the strategic importance of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the area was the most severely hit of the entire country, the bombing concentrating mostly along roads and rivers. Between 1965 and 1973, 1.1 million tons of bombs were dropped on the Trail (Robbins 2000). Villages were deserted or destroyed by bombs and fires, livestock was killed – buffaloes were deliberately targeted by low-flying fighter aircraft to deprive the enemy of food – and the village population took refuge in the forests. Agricultural production was reduced to a minimum because of this, and because of the American use of defoliants. Bomb casings are literally all over the place, many of them being put to good use as house posts (see Photo 2), fencing, or onion beds in front of the...
Map 1. Situation.
Photo 1. Logs ready to be transported across the border to Vietnam.

Photo 2. American bomb casings used as house posts.
houses. The thousands of bomb craters all over the area are not conducive to paddy agricultural development. But far more serious is the density of unexploded ordnance (UXO). This poses a sad hazard to the population, not least the children, and several incidents of children being killed or maimed by picking up live fragmentation bomblets were reported during my stay. At the same time, the UXO represent an economic value for the poor population, and several adults are reported to be (or to have been, until a fatal accident occurred) quite experienced in defusing the explosives.

The UXO also impede the further development of paddy land, since thorough search and destruction in a given area is too costly, time consuming, and dangerous for both the local population and the district authorities. However, the project planning has involved, and still involves, extensive work by the company’s professional Explosive Ordnance Demolition (EOD) teams. In my opinion, the mine’s negative environmental impacts on the Sepon area are amply compensated by the improvements in the life quality of the local population that ensue from the EOD efforts.

The designated project area covers a stretch of about twenty-five kilometers along Road 911, which runs parallel to the Nam Kok River in Vilabuly and Sepon districts. The population, numbering about 6,500, live in some twenty-five villages and belong to five different ethnic groups. About half of the population are Phutai, a Tai-speaking group that, by virtue of its linguistic affiliation, is perceived to belong to the category Lao Lum. The rest is divided between four Mon-Khmer-speaking groups, the Makong, Chli, Katang, and Taoey. Of these, the Makong, in the northern part of the area, and the Chli, in the southern part, are by far the most numerous (accounting for 95 percent of all Mon-Khmer households). Some twenty Katang households inhabit a single village, while the Taoey consist of a half-dozen immigrant families present in a handful of villages. The Mon-Khmer-speaking groups are defined collectively as Lao Theung, in accordance with the state’s classification system. But it is most significant that they also define themselves as such. When pursuing ethnic exactitude during my visit, I naturally elicited the specific ethnic affiliation for all villages in the area, but in all Lao Theung villages I was consistently told that their particular ethnic affiliation was unimportant, for they thought of themselves as Lao Theung, a label that they applied to themselves with some pride.

**Ethnic Stereotypes and Ethnographic Facts**

The fact that the population of the Sepon area is equally divided into these two ethnic categories, Phutai and Lao Theung, has important consequences for their mutual relations, not least because of the commonly applied ethnic stereotypes about the respective categories. While not necessarily always totally wrong, neither are such stereotypes accurate empirical statements, of course. But in any case, they should be taken seriously. They are important because, regardless of their accuracy, they serve to shape the perceptions of all actors involved in the administration and development of the area (local people, district authorities, company staff and...
consultants) and they influence their actions in conscious and non-conscious ways, irrespective of the actors' ethnic affiliation. By way of introduction, I was given the following ethnographic information about the Sepon area by a district official:

“The population consists of two groups, the Phutai and the Lao Theung. The Phutai are Buddhists, the Lao Theung are animists, they have no temples and there are no monks at their funerals. They prefer to live in small villages, while the Phutai have larger settlements. The Phutai have the wedding ceremony at the bride’s house and the married couple may live with either the bride’s or the groom’s family. The Lao Theung have the ceremony at the groom’s house, and the bride must live with the groom’s family. The Phutai have a higher level of education, and they are cleaner. The Lao Theung women [see Photo 3] do most of the agricultural labor, this is their ancient custom. The Lao Theung believe in spirits, and if a person has committed an offence against tradition, he or she must pay by means of an animal sacrifice to the spirits. Even when the government introduces improvements or changes among the Lao Theung, you always have to provide animals for sacrifice, even if the changes are to their benefit. The Phutai women are skilled in weaving; the Phutai have many kinds of songs, the Lao Theung have only one kind, and the Phutai have many musical instruments, while the Lao Theung have only the khène.”

These statements translate socio-cultural differences into degrees of civilization. The more ‘civilized’ Phutai are assumed to subscribe to the national religion of Buddhism, to have larger villages, to be better educated and cleaner. Their society is less male-dominated. They are more skilled in traditional crafts like weaving, and their aesthetic culture is viewed as richer. The Lao Theung, on the other hand, are perceived to be still very dependent on their ancient beliefs and superstitions and, thus, less susceptible to development. While from the point of view of the district authorities, most of these statements give their honest opinion and reflect some of the problems that they are struggling with in their daily administration, they are naturally biased because they are made from the social and cultural horizon of the ethnic Lao (which coincides with that of the national government). It is worth noting that even district officials who are themselves Lao Theung seem to accept these stereotypes; they are part of the discourse of ‘government,’ whatever private views individual officials may hold.

Ethnographically speaking, the Phutai of the Sepon area conform remarkably poorly to the Lao Lum ideal, however, but exhibit striking similarities to the Lao Theung groups in terms of such salient socio-cultural dimensions as subsistence economy, post-marital residence, inheritance, religion, and mortuary customs. Both groups subsist primarily, or to a large extent, on swidden cultivation, while the Lao Lum ideal is wet paddy cultivation; and topographically, the two groups share identical habitats. The Phutai may be nominally Buddhists, but in the Sepon area only one village had a functioning temple (another had a derelict one) with only one (temporarily absent) monk and no novices. The spirit cults dominate practical religion among both groups. Both groups bury their dead (they may even share a cemetery), in contrast to the customary practice of cremation among the Buddhist Lao. Among both groups, post-marital residence is mainly virilocal, in contrast to the Lao preference for uxorilocality. Inheritance is predominantly patrilineal among both
Photo 3. Lao Theung women.
groups, in contrast to the Lao, who favor the practice of female ultimogeniture. In terms of physical appearance, dress, and material culture, the differences between the two groups are inconspicuous.

Relations between the Phutai and Lao Theung in the Sepon area are on the whole amicable. The groups keep separate in the sense that they form separate local communities; villages are on the whole mono-ethnic. At the same time, there is a certain amount of intermarriage between the groups (see Photo 4), which explains the occurrence of a few Lao Theung families in some Phutai villages, and vice-versa. In cases of intermarriage, the ethnicity of the couple is reckoned, in the statistics kept by the village headman, as that of the husband, while the ethnic affiliation of the children is determined by the locality of the married couple rather than by any descent principle. Thus the children of a mixed couple living in a Phutai village will become Phutai, whereas they will become Lao Theung if living in a Lao Theung village. 15

The Phutai and Lao Theung, to a large extent, share the condition of being relatively poor and disadvantaged, even though this is more pronounced for the Lao Theung. There is an acute awareness among the Lao Theung of their inferior status in the eyes of the Lao (Lum) representatives of the authorities and other influential bodies. And there is a very strong resentment of this state of affairs among virtually all Lao Theung. They feel discriminated against by the authorities in terms of infrastructure, education, and employment opportunities. Several of their villages are very difficult to

Photo 4. Wedding between a Phutai man and a Lao Theung woman.
reach by road, and this gives the inhabitants a very real feeling of being outside the mainstream society. For most of the smaller villages, the school is at quite a distance from the village, and the children have a long way to walk, the result being that school attendance is often minimal for these children. Where schools do exist in Lao Theung villages, they are often in a bad state of repair, compared to those in Phutai villages, and the inhabitants frequently complained about the lack of basic equipment such as blackboards, desks, and chairs. As for job opportunities, the company camp is the main (if not sole) provider of salaried employment; a very common complaint among the Lao Theung is that they are very rarely offered employment, and if they are, they will only get the most menial and lowest paid work at the camp. Nevertheless, the Lao Theung are proud of their (state constructed) ethnicity and (in contrast to the authorities) explicitly associate it with indigeneity. When discussing the low level of education among them, they explained that their children had to learn a foreign language (Lao) in order to go to school, something they saw as an injustice, since they had lived in the area before the Lao speakers arrived.

The fact that a number of different Mon-Khmer-speaking ethnic groups live interspersed may seem surprising, but it is consistent with the broader ethnic picture of south and south-central Laos (e.g., Ovesen 2000a). One reason for the contemporary dispersal of the linguistic and cultural minority Mon-Khmer groups, in the Sepon area as well as in southern Laos as a whole, lies in the historical events of the nineteenth century. Following the Siamese conquest of the Lao kingdoms of Vientiane and Champassak in 1830, the Siamese policy was to empty the plains on the left (east) bank of the Mekong of people in order to discourage the other great power in the region, the Annamite (Vietnamese) empire of Hue, from expanding westward, on the assumption that the Vietnamese would not find the area attractive as a possible conquest if there were neither agricultural riches nor slave labor to be gained from the military effort. The majority of the Tai (Phutai) lowland population either was deported to the right (west) bank of the Mekong or fled into the hinterlands. The upheavals that this policy caused in the region in general also affected the aboriginal Mon-Khmer-speaking groups – see Chamberlain et al. (1996b: 9-10) for Khammuan province, and Breazeale & Smuckarn (1988) for the region in general. In a couple of Lao Theung villages in the area, the social memory of the inhabitants was of deportation to the other side of the Mekong, from where they allegedly fled and eventually took up residence at their present location. Other local communities presumably took refuge deeper into the forests and mountains, during both the nineteenth-century Siamese War and the much more recent American War. Also, after the revolution, communities were relocated (see Goudineau 1997, 2: 122-130, 170-175, for examples from Salavan, Sekong, and Attapeu provinces). The contemporary ethnic mix is the result of all these processes.

Indigeneity

It is evident that the Lao Theung, apart from being descendants of the country’s aboriginal population, fulfill most of the aforementioned Bank criteria and should thus unambiguously qualify as indigenous. But it might be argued that the Phutai
are almost as aboriginal as the Lao Theung. If the early history of their immigration into the area is unknown, they have been there for at least several hundred years, and certainly before the modern (post-colonial) state of Laos had its international borders defined. Further, they exhibit a sufficient number of Bank criteria to qualify (i.e., self-identification and identification by others as members of a distinct cultural group; maintenance of social and political institutions distinct from those of the dominant culture; and a primarily subsistence-oriented production). Had they, for instance, been the neighbors of a group of relatively affluent lowland paddy farmers instead of an even poorer group, there would have been no doubt about their status as indigenous.

As for the criterion, usually regarded as highly important, of ‘close attachment to an ancestral territory and to the natural resources therein,’ the situation in the area, as we have seen, is far from clear-cut. Today, neither group can claim a definite tangible advantage over the other in this respect, although the cosmology of the Lao Theung indicates a closer attachment to the natural environment, while that of the Phutai rather focuses on the social environment. Thus, the religious practices of the Phutai are centered on the cult of the village spirit (phi ban) and reflect their basic social ethos, which is towards the village as the fundamental focus of social orientation (see Condominas 1975). The village is at the same time a social and moral community. The phi ban has to be propitiated in case of breach of any of the social norms that regulate village life; this is most evident in cases of family disputes that threaten to upset social harmony. But it is also significant that cases of severe illness are brought before the phi ban. A person’s state of physical health is thought to be a reflection of his or her moral status, and illness is an indication that the person may have transgressed the social norms of the community and thus offended the phi ban.

In outward appearance, the spirit cult of the Lao Theung has many similarities to the phi ban cult of the Phutai. But the Lao Theung spirits are spirits of nature, of salient features of the territory. Whereas Phutai communities venerate one single spirit, that of the village as a social and moral community, the Lao Theung shrines are dedicated to a multitude of nature spirits, of the mountains, rivers, and forests within the territory that forms the natural habitat of the people, as well as to ancestral spirits. All these spirits are invoked collectively by spirit ‘priests,’ mau phi. A major sacrifice is performed every year at the start of the swidden farming cycle, i.e., in February, before beginning the clearing of new swidden fields. At this occasion, each family contributes a chicken. Another sacrifice, also related to farming, is performed in May-June, before the sowing of the fields. At this time, usually a pig is offered to the spirits. The most important religious event is the buffalo sacrifice to the ancestors. This is in principle performed every third year, usually in December, but sometimes at the first full moon in March (like among the Ngae in Salavan province; see Ovesen 2000a). This festive occasion involves the whole community. The person contributing the buffalo is compensated with twelve kilos of rice from each family. The meat of the buffalo (or buffaloes) is shared among all families, who in turn may share it with relatives from other communities.
The fact that the triennial buffalo sacrifice cannot always be performed according to schedule, because of the high cost of the sacrificial animals, is a source of frustration for many Lao Theung, not only because it highlights their poverty, but also because it places them in a position of incapacity to perform their duty towards the ancestors, on whose favorable disposition they depend for a harmonious community life.

Apart from these recurrent sacrifices to the spirits, an individual mau phi may occasionally decide to hold in his house a yao ceremony, during which he invokes all the spirits with whom he has habitual relations, in order to display his spiritual powers (see Photo 5). This is an occasion for members of his own and even neighboring communities to attend and partake of the blessings of the spirits, conveyed by the mau phi by blowing water over the assembly, and to acknowledge his spiritual leadership.

Even though the Lao Theung and Phutai generally venerate different kinds of spirits, this does not imply that they are unaware of, or indifferent to, the existence of those of the opposite group. The spirits, no matter who pays attention to them, are after all a fact of life rather than a question of belief dictated by cultural affiliation or theological conviction. It is significant that the spirits venerated by the Lao Theung are recognized, including by the Phutai, as being the most powerful: They are the spirits of the land, and the Lao Theung, as the aboriginal inhabitants, are the ones who have the ability to relate to them. They do this, not only on their own behalf, but also on behalf of the Phutai.
So, being asked to determine the eventual indigeneity of the Lao Theung and Phutai, respectively, placed both I and the Lao Theung in a no-win situation. Materially and socially, the two groups exhibit more similarities than differences. The Phutai are only marginally less poor than the Lao Theung. Both groups have, in practical terms, been deprived of any close attachment to their ancestral territories, although vestiges of such attachment are discernible in the spirit cult of the Lao Theung. While the Lao Theung are descendants of the aboriginal population (and recognized as such also by the Phutai), and the ancestors of the Phutai belonged to the invaders who many hundred years ago helped in the subjugation of the aboriginals, the Phutai have had a continued presence in the area for several hundred years. The Phutai are linguistically and culturally related to the ethnic Lao, with whom they sometimes identify and are identified, and who also represent the political state power.

Given that the representatives of the state dismiss the relevance of the notion of indigenous peoples for its subjects, little would be gained by insisting on applying it to the group that most deserves it, the Lao Theung. But given that people who are in a position, through their financial investments, to ensure that the project is carried out – something that everyone desires – are committed to the question of indigenous peoples, equally little would be gained by ignoring it. To declare indigenous all people in the area (as has been done for the Nakai plateau; see Sparkes 1997) would be rather a non-solution, as it would only perpetuate the existing interethnic situation in which one group, the Lao Theung, feels disadvantaged in comparison with the other, and downtrodden and discriminated against by the authorities. In other words, the epistemologically muddied notion of indigenous peoples is just as unhelpful for the practical purpose of promoting equal development as is the state’s insistence that ethnicity cannot be a justification for affirmative action.

**DYNAMICS OF STATE AND ETHNICITY: CONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION**

Whether or not the Makong, Chli, Katang, and Taoey of the Sepon project area may be classified as indigenous by different stakeholders, they themselves have no doubt about their indigeneity, and they realize that this indigeneity is a major cause of their disadvantaged position in the local society. They have embraced the common designation Lao Theung that, ironically, was originally forced upon them from the outside; and in a different national political climate, they would most likely have been able to organize as an indigenous people under that label. It is thus a further irony that, for the last couple of years, the Lao government has been working towards the abolishment of the three general categories Lao Lum, Lao Theung, and Lao Sung, as part of its ambition to attain ‘scientific’ accuracy by classifying each ethnic group under its own specific name (Pholsena 2001, 2002, IWGIA 2002).  

The work on ethnic classification is carried out by the Department of Research on Ethnic Groups, a branch of the Party organization, Lao Front for National
Construction (LFNC); this work was commenced shortly after the revolution, in 1976 (Goudineau 2000: 22). The LFNC’s efforts are a reflection not so much of the dynamics of ethnicity as of the dynamics of Party political thinking. As Goudineau has suggested, the government, as early as 1976, may well have feared that “the artificial identifications [of the three general categories] might one day engender real identities” (idem) – and this, as we have seen, was exactly what happened in the case of the Lao Theung, at least in the Sepon area. The government’s purported goal, however, has always been to finally arrive at a scientifically ‘correct’ classification of all the country’s ethnic groups. Officially, such a definitive classification is necessary in order for the government to be able to determine which groups are the most impoverished and the least well-represented in government (IWGIA 2002: 298). In the national census of 1995 (Lao Census 1995), ethnic affiliation to one of the forty-seven ethnic groups on the official list was recorded, and the government is still working to update and refine the list.

Interpretations of such government measures vary. Surprisingly, IWGIA17 sees them as ‘good news for indigenous peoples’ and believes that the abolishment of the threefold classification and the listing of each particular group under its own name ‘represents a good start to improving the classification of ethnic peoples [sic] in Laos’ (IWGIA 2002: 297). It is all very well to make ‘improvements’ on a list, but it is far from clear in what way and to what extent this will facilitate the various groups’ struggle for self-determination, to which IWGIA is committed. I, for one, have certain misgivings about the ‘good news.’ Just as the government’s policy of relocating forest villages to ‘focal sites’ under the guise of rural development (see Ovesen, in press) may very well have as its real aim to ‘deterritorialize’ the minorities (Goudineau 2000: 28), its ethnic classification policy looks very much like an effort to prevent the minorities from forming bonds of socio-political solidarity across ethnic boundaries. Such misgivings are indirectly supported from an unexpected quarter, as the following example of the ‘ethnic group’ Bru will illustrate.

**The Enigma of the Bru**

Before going to the Sepon area, I was told by a colleague well acquainted with Savannakhet province that the Mon-Khmer-speaking peoples in the area would probably be Bru (Olli Ruohomäki, pers. comm.). This group did not figure in the 1995 census list of forty-seven ethnic groups, but it had been reported from the Nakai plateau in the neighboring province of Khammuang.18 According to linguist James Chamberlain (1996a/b), the Bru are the numerically dominant group on the plateau; their language belongs to the West Katuic branch of Mon-Khmer. Chamberlain claimed that ‘Bru’ is the group’s own name for itself and that they are known to outsiders as Makong or Sô. This information was reiterated by anthropologist Stephen Sparkes, who added, however, that the people became embarrassed when he used the name ‘Bru’ about them; they preferred to be called Tai Sô, since ‘Bru’ was associated with backwardness (Sparkes 1997: 16).19

In the Sepon area, nobody ever volunteered the name Bru, and when I asked about it in a Makong village, I was told that it was a derogatory and ‘colonial’
term, now obsolete. I was therefore intrigued when Vatthana Pholsena, in her doctoral thesis (2001; see Pholsena 2002), related efforts to rescue the term Bru from oblivion. It appeared that one of the officials in charge of the LFNC’s ethnic research department, himself a Makong, was actively lobbying for the official recognition of the ethnic category Bru while conducting field surveys for the ‘correct’ official list, in preparation for the 2000 census. In his scheme, Bru should be the official name for the people belonging to the Katang, Makong, Chli, Taoey, Pako, Suay, Katu, and Triang groups, and he explained to the people that “[w]e must no longer name [these groups] one by one. Each of them, singled out, makes too low a number, whereas the ‘Bru’ would amount to more than 300,000 persons. That makes a bigger population, more influential” (quoted in Pholsena 2002: 187).

Since the ‘correct’ list is to be based on the people’s self-designation, the LFNC official presumably felt that, if he could get people to present themselves as ‘Bru,’ that term should deserve inclusion in the list. Both in the Sepon area and elsewhere in the south (Ovesen 2000a, Pholsena 2002: 187), however, the spontaneous answer of the Mon-Khmer-speaking peoples to the question of ethnicity is usually ‘Lao Theung.’ Considering that this answer has been dictated to them by the authorities as the politically correct one for at least twenty-five years, and that, as a consequence, it has become ‘indigenized,’ the chances of eliciting a different one in a foreseeable future must be regarded as slim. But the example shows that, even among certain government officials, there is a greater awareness of the dynamics and political implications of ethnic classification than the official policy can admit.

CONCLUSION

Contrary to IWGIA’s optimism about the future of indigenous peoples in Laos, once they have been minutely classified according to their own preferred designations, to my mind the government’s efforts represent a classic instance of a divide-and-rule policy that will erode any possibility of self-determination for the smaller minority groups. Ironically, it appears that my misgivings are shared by one of the central actors in the government’s scheme, the ethnic researcher from the LFNC. Also, he presumably realizes that, in the given circumstances, there is simply no materially significant area of life (such as production, education, health) that a tiny minority can meaningfully determine for itself. And here lies the final irony: After having done their bit for their country (the Pathet Lao) and the revolution, the ‘Lao Theung’ have been waiting a long time to see what their country would do for them, only to be told, in effect, that they can now go back to being ‘ethnological minorities, scattered here and there,’ while the ethnic Lao take care of ‘their’ country and state.
APPENDIX:
A Note on the Circumstances of the Sepon Anthropological Study

The presentation of ethnography and analysis produced in the course of consultancy work in development contexts is often met with a certain amount of suspicion among academic colleagues. The fact that the ‘development anthropologist’ is typically allowed one month, rather than, say, one year for fieldwork may raise methodological questions as to the quality of the ethnographic data. And the fact that the anthropologist is hired to do a study for the specific purpose of contributing to a process of planned social and technological change (‘development’) may raise ethical questions of whether s/he is compelled to deliver ‘results’ that serve the interests of the planners rather than those of the population that is subjected to the study. These are valid concerns, and I shall address them here in some detail insofar as they pertain to my own work in Laos in general and to the particular context of the Sepon project.

Since 1992, I have spent a total of about ten months in Laos, most of the time doing anthropological consultancy work in different parts of the country. This does not make me primarily a ‘development anthropologist,’ however, since I have spent about ten times as much time during the same period as an academic anthropologist, specializing in Southeast Asia and teaching at a university. I regard the academic and development activities as anthropologically equally worthwhile pursuits, and I believe in a certain cross-fertilization between them. Despite the amount of time spent in Laos, I have never made a concerted effort to learn to speak Lao properly, so in my work I have always been dependent on the help of an interpreter. For the Sepon study, I was assisted by a member of the socio-economic survey team (from the Lao National University), whose work for the project had been concluded immediately prior to my arrival. While I do not dispute the conventional anthropological tenet that it is better for the ethnographer to work with people directly in their own language, there are certainly advantages in working with a counterpart who does not only translate at interviews, but with whom one can discuss the interpretation of informants’ statements in the context of the situation. It is obvious that the longer one has the opportunity to work in the field, the more profound the insight into local social and cultural conditions one may gain. But I am reasonably confident that the ethnographic data I have adduced are accurate and sufficiently consistent to bear out my analytic points.

A factor that is perceived to hamper anthropological research, particularly in Laos (and in certain other countries in which the regime has a similar propensity to politically motivated surveillance of people’s lives), is the restrictions placed on foreigners’ movements and activities. Officially, a foreigner is not allowed to stay overnight in a village, which obviously limits the participant dimension of fieldwork. Furthermore, a foreigner doing temporary work in the country is supposed to be assigned a counterpart appointed by the government, and having a government official as company during conversations with local village people is quite correctly assumed to severely limit the openness of the latter and make them tell you only
what they believe the government wants them to say. Such constraints, in my experience, are more damaging to academic research than to consultancy work; a consultant works on a project that is not only approved but usually actively promoted by the government. The formal restrictions may therefore be considerably relaxed in practice. On previous assignments in Laos, I have had no difficulty in staying for several weeks in villages, accompanied only by an interpreter hired directly by myself or my employer.

For the Sepon study I stayed at the company’s camp, which was the only practical possibility. (Incidentally, from the district administration’s point of view, the camp had the status of a village, and the camp’s director was accountable to the district in much the same way as a village headman.) Also for practical, logistic reasons, I made use of the camp’s means of transportation (cars and boats) and had to abide by the camp security regulations (so as not to get in the way of UXO detonations, for instance).

For the rural population in Laos, outsiders (be they Laotians or foreigners) who officially visit a village are from the outset automatically associated with the ‘government.’ The more exact nature of this perceived association is usually sorted out during initial conversations, which will determine what kind of information villagers feel it safe to reveal. My interpreter was by no means a party comrade; despite (or because of) having spent the first two years after the revolution in a re-education camp in the northern province of Huaphan, he had never been convinced of the blessings of Marxism-Leninism, and it was not in his temperament to hide his personal opinions. My impression that the local people did not perceive him politically as a government representative is corroborated by the fact that several Lao Theung informants (including village headmen) were unusually outspoken about the discrimination that they felt being subjected to by the government. I am convinced that such sentiments would not have been expressed in the presence of a representative of the Ministry of Information and Culture or the LFNC. On one or two occasions when I was accompanied to a few villages by one of the mining company’s two public relations officers, I noted a significantly greater reluctance on the part of the local people to volunteer their ideas and opinions.

As for ethical considerations, the idea of the anthropological consultant as simply a person in the service of development planners is simplistic and, in my view, mostly inaccurate. The bodies planning or initiating development projects (in the broad sense) may be international organizations, bilateral development agencies, ministries, NGOs, or private or semi-private commercial companies or consortia, or some combination of these. Such bodies will typically commission studies necessary for the planning process (such as environmental and social impact assessments) from either individual consultants or, often, from an independent firm of consultants that may, in turn, hire outside sub-consultants (such as myself); the commissioning body is known to the consultants as the client. For project implementation, the client is usually directly or indirectly dependent not only on the results of the consultants’ efforts but also on financing bodies (international or bilateral ‘donors’ or the development Banks), which are bound by their various policies (such as the Banks’ indigenous peoples policies).

*Moussons* 6, 2002, 69-97
Anthropologists are (or should be) guided by the ethical rules of their profession, laid down, for example, in the code of ethics of the American Anthropological Association (AAA 1998), which emphasize, among other things, the anthropologist’s primary responsibility towards the people s/he studies. The anthropologist usually has the opportunity to discuss the proposed Terms of Reference with the employer, to estimate – on the basis of available project documents, previous experience, and anthropological knowledge of the region – whether they can be realistically fulfilled under the given circumstances, for example in relation to the allotted time for the study, and to ascertain that they do not violate the code of ethics.

Notes
1 An early draft of this paper was presented in a panel on “Indigenous Peoples” at the European Association of Social Anthropologists conference in Copenhagen, August 2002, and subsequent versions at seminars at the universities of Bergen, Helsinki, and Uppsala. Among many people who made critical and encouraging comments, I would like to thank Robert Dentai, Søren Hvalkof, Gunnar Håland, Beppe Karlsson, Olli Ruohomäki, Ing-Britt Trankell, and Moussons’ anonymous reviewers.
2 The founding Declaration of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples (1975) was formulated by ‘men of wisdom’ united in a ‘corner of Mother Earth;’ it invoked a pre-colonial past when ‘[t]he earth was our nurturing mother, the Sun and Moon were our parents, all were brothers and sisters, our chiefs and elders were great leaders, and justice ruled the law and its execution.’ This mythical paradise was lost when ‘other peoples arrived, thirsting for blood, for gold, for land and all its wealth.’ Without knowing our ways, ‘they considered us lower than animals, stole our lands from us and took us from our lands, they made slaves of the Sons of the sun’ (quoted in Kingsbury 1998: 423).
3 The label ‘post-socialist,’ proposed by Grant Evans (1995: xi-xvii), implies that these regimes have abandoned socialism as an economic system by liberalizing the economy while retaining the monopoly on political power by the ‘communist’ parties.
4 In this respect, they compare favorably with Thailand, for example, where the ‘hill tribes’ are not necessarily granted citizenship.
5 In the case of Vietnam, McElwee (in press) cites a Hanoi newspaper stating in February 2000 that, since the birth of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1975, there had been no ethnic conflict in the country. Exactly one year later, however, thousands of indigenous minority people in the Central Highlands demonstrated against the long-time colonization of their ancestral lands by ethnic Vietnamese settlers, and against the persecution that they suffered from the authorities because of their (not-so-ancestral tradition of) Evangelist Christian denomination. The government responded by rounding up and arresting purported leaders of the demonstrations (HRW 2002). During the rest of the year, more than 1,000 highlanders fled across the border to the Cambodian provinces of Rattanakiri and Mondulkiri; some were apprehended and taken to the capital, Phnom Penh, from where most of them were granted asylum in the United-States; others were sent back (‘repatriated’) to Vietnam, where the charge of illegal emigration could be added to their list of sins. Since then, unrest has flared up occasionally, most lately in December 2002, when the authorities allegedly prevented the people from celebrating Christmas. For Laos, James Chamberlain, ever apologetic of the regime, has stated that the few instances of serious inter-ethnic conflict that have occurred are all “attributable to foreign or colonial intervention in internal affairs” (1999: 4), that the government’s attitude to minorities is ‘essentially benign,’ and that cases of ethnic discord “spring from local prejudice towards minority groups in direct contravention of government policy, or [...] ensue unintentionally from uninformed thinking” (idem). At the same time, he cites a case, among a number from Khammuan province, in which fifteen out of twenty-five families belonging to a forest-dwelling indigenous minority were forcibly relocated to the plain, with the result
that all but two individuals died. Chamberlain admonishes that, “if these groups are allowed to become extinct, the Lao nation and the world will lose an irreplaceable source of knowledge and understanding” (ibid.: 12). Apparently, what makes these people worthy of Chamberlain’s interest is the contribution that they make to the world’s cultural diversity, rather than their sufferings as human beings at the hands of Lao authorities.

6 These writings all approach the question of ethnicity from a moderately ‘constructivist’ point of view, adopted by most contemporary anthropologists, which emphasizes the dynamics of ethnic identities and identifications and their political implications. In that respect, they differ markedly from the essentializing contributions of writers like Chamberlain (1995, 1996a) and Chazée (1999), who aspire to furnish an exhaustive and definitive inventory of the country’s ethnic groups. A pertinent critique of this latter endeavor has been formulated by Evans (1999b: 182-184).

7 Strictly speaking, ‘pre-colonial’ is a misnomer here, unless we think of colonialism as only a European phenomenon.

8 This is still the case (Evans 1999a: 125). Chamberlain (1996a: 2) estimates the contemporary proportion of ethnic Lao in the country to be as low as 30-35 percent. If we include Tai-Lao speakers other than the ethnic Lao, the proportion is about 60 percent.

9 The expression phu theung (‘upland people’) had long been used by the Lao for uplanders in the north, particularly the Mon-Khmer-speaking Khmu (Smalley 1964: 112, Proschan 1997: 97-98), but the combination of lao and theung only appeared with the nationalist movement.

10 “En d’autres mots, il n’y a pas de minorités véritablement autochtones, pas de ‘peuples indigènes’: ‘Ici nous sommes tous des indigènes’ est le message renvoyé par les Lao […] à tous ceux […] qui tentent d’importer localement des éléments du débat indigéniste, qui fleurit ailleurs” (Goudineau 2000: 24).

11 Fieldwork for the study was carried out in Vilabuly district, Savannakhet province, in February-March 2001; see Appendix for details.

12 Apart from the anthropological study that I was asked to undertake, the social impact assessment included a socio-economic survey, a health and gender study, an archaeological study, and a cultural heritage study. The environmental part of the impact assessment included a number of natural science (biological, ecological) studies.

13 Thus, Olli Ruohomäki reported the comments made on the Lao Theung by the chief of another district in Savannakhet province: “You have to constantly follow up with them, otherwise they will revert back to their old ways” (Ruohomäki 2000: 72). Similar sentiments were at an earlier epoch commonly expressed by French colonials about the native populations of Indochina as a whole. The Lao government seems to have taken upon itself a ‘civilizing mission’ vis-à-vis the ethnic minorities.

14 This phenomenon is even more pronounced at higher levels of the political-administrative hierarchy. “L’adoption de la culture dominante des Lao Loum en était le prix à payer […] par ceux d’entre [les membres des minorités] qui ont fini par accéder au cercle de l’élite du Pathet Lao” (Drouot 1999: 67).

15 The in-married spouse will probably more or less gradually change his or her own ethnic affiliation to that of his or her village of residence; for a discussion of such individual changes of ethnic identification, see Proschan (1997: 104-106).

16 How this move may be reconciled with the Constitution’s wording, “the multi-ethnic Lao people” (my emphasis), is an open question (see Drouot 1999: 59).

17 Founded as early as 1968, the non-profit organization IWGIA (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs) monitors and documents the situation of Indigenous Peoples around the world.

18 Anthropological work on the Nakai plateau has been carried out in connection with the planning of the Nam Theun 2 Hydropower project. As a consequence of the energetic critique of this project on the part of environmentalist organizations, the Nakai plateau is probably the area of the whole country that has received the most attention from ethnologists, journalists, and development experts in recent years.

19 Both Chamberlain and Sparkes spell the name ‘Brou.’ Apart from unnecessarily honoring a colonial
orthography, this spelling may invite confusion with the Brao, also occasionally spelt Brou, a West Bahnaric Mon-Khmer group found in the Cambodian provinces of Stung Treng and Ratanakiri (Matras-Troubekzoy 1974), where they are also known as Kravet, as well as in the four southernmost provinces of Laos, where they are known as Lave (‘Lavae’ in the 1995 Census list); see Le Roux (2001).

20 The French colonial term, however, was apparently ‘Leu’ or ‘Kha Leu.’ Gunn relates that, at least through the 1920s, this group “remained singularly refractory to French colonial goals” (Gunn 1990: 135). The group was found on both sides of the Laos-Vietnam border and had traditionally paid tribute to the court of Annam to avoid the heavier taxation imposed from Vientiane (idem). With the delineation of the international border in the 1940s, it seems that the ‘Leu’ population on the Vietnam side eventually emerged as Bru (Dang et al. 1993: 69-71). So when my informants in the Sepon area dismissed the name Bru as ‘colonial,’ they may have been referring to their traditional ‘colonial’ masters, the Vietnamese. As for the term ‘Leu,’ it is a (Mon-)Khmer word for ‘uplander’ (see Ovesen & Trankell, in press). Leu figures in the 1995 Census list. Chamberlain is inconsistent in his treatment: In one report (1995), he claims that ‘Leu’ is the insider term for the group that outsiders call ‘Bru’ (while he lists ‘Makong’ as both an insider and outsider term), while in others (1996a, 1996b), as we have seen, he gives ‘Bru’ as the insider term for Makong and Sô, and does not mention ‘Leu.’

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Abstract: This article deals with the epistemological status of the notion of Indigenous People and its applicability in Laos. Based on fieldwork among indigenous Mon-Khmer groups in southern Laos, it argues that, due to ideological incompatibility between the Lao government and major development-financing organizations, this notion is as unhelpful for the practical purpose of promoting equal development as it is epistemologically muddled. The government’s recent move to replace its popular threefold classification of the nation’s ethnic minorities with a more refined one based on the recognition of indigenous ethnonyms has met with the approval of advocates of the Indigenous Peoples cause. It is argued, however, that this rapprochement of the government’s goals and indigenous interests is but illusory, and that government policy in practice works against increased self-determination of the indigenous minorities.

Peuples indigènes et développement au Laos: idéologies et paradoxes

Résumé : cet article s’intéresse au statut épistémologique du concept de Peuple indigène et à son applicabilité au Laos. Une étude de terrain parmi des groupes de parlers mon-khmer du Laos méridional conduit à soutenir que, pour cause d’incompatibilités idéologiques entre le gouvernement laotien et les grands bailleurs de fonds du développement, ce concept est aussi inutile, dans la pratique, pour promouvoir un développement équitable qu’il est confus au plan épistémologique. La récente décision du gouvernement de remplacer sa classique tripartition des minorités ethniques du pays par une classification plus détaillée fondée sur la reconnaissance des ethnonyms indigènes a reçu l’approbation des militants de la cause indigéniste. Cependant, ce rapprochement entre les objectifs du gouvernement et les intérêts des minorités indigènes n’est qu’illusoire car, en pratique, la politique du premier obvie à une plus grande auto-détermination des secondes.

Key words: Laos, anthropology, development, ethnic minorities, indigenous peoples, ideologies, ethnic identities.

Mots-clés : Laos, ethnologie, développement, minorités ethniques, peuples indigènes, idéologies, identités ethniques.