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Politics,
Meanings,
&
Memory
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Sarinda Singh

NATURAL POTENCY AND POLITICAL POWER

FORESTS AND STATE
AUTHORITY IN
CONTEMPORARY LAOS

**Natural Potency
and Political Power**

Natural Potency and Political Power

*Forests and State Authority
in Contemporary Laos*

SARINDA SINGH



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David Chandler and Rita Smith Kipp

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PREFACE

The fieldwork that this book draws on followed what Tsing (2005, x) has aptly described as “patchwork ethnography”: a result of delays in obtaining official permission to reside in a rural village and an open approach to unexpected possibilities that arose. Although often dictated by circumstance, this multisited fieldwork did allow me to learn from a diverse array of informants, including Lao people and foreigners, rural villagers, and urban residents. I spent most of my time with Tai ethnic groups and had little time with other ethnic minorities.

As an AusAID-funded volunteer in Vientiane in 2003, I assisted with wildlife research projects based in Luang Namtha Province and training Lao university students who were enrolled in science and forestry degrees. During my subsequent fieldwork (March 2004–June 2005), I stayed in rural areas of central Laos for over six months, in the latter half traveling regularly between Vientiane and the upland area of Nakai District, Khammouane Province. The importance of the Nam Theun 2 (NT2) hydropower project in Nakai prevents anonymizing this locale. For most of my time in Nakai I lived with district forestry officials in a dormitory in the district center as an informal guest while trying to obtain official permission to stay in a village. I also traveled regularly with officials from Nakai to the capital of Khammouane Province, Thakek, and elsewhere. For simplicity, I refer to the Nakai district center by its administrative position. Lao people usually called it Hua Phou, meaning ‘head of the mountain,’ in reference to its location at the edge of the Nakai Plateau. Residents rarely used the official name of the district center, Ban Oudomsuk, meaning ‘village of abundant happiness.’ In the Nakai district center, I benefited hugely from conversations with Pho (‘Father’) Sone—an elderly man who became my informal teacher on ‘Lao culture.’ Pho Sone’s personal history also reflected the recent history of Nakai. He was originally from Vientiane, became a royalist soldier as a youth, received training from US forces in Thailand, was sent to the reeducation camp in Nakai after the revolution, married locally, settled permanently in the Nakai district center, and worked for a state-owned forestry enterprise before his retirement.

When in the Nakai district center, I also would occasionally cycle to nearby villages, and I made contacts in a village I will call Ban Som. After

receiving formal permission to stay in a village in Nakai in the final month of the main period of fieldwork, I was able to stay with a family I already knew in Ban Som. Ban Som is one of seventeen villages on the Nakai Plateau and is more representative of life outside the district center. The majority of the 1,500 residents of the district center are ethnic Lao (about 50 percent) and other Tai ethnic minorities (30 percent) who began to move from lowland areas about twenty years ago (NTPC 2004). Residents in the Nakai district center mostly work as government officials, service providers, or for one of the various contractors involved with NT2. The district officials with whom I stayed were all ethnic Lao emigrants to Nakai. In contrast, Ban Som had less than four hundred residents, most of whom were of the Tai Bo ethnic minority, with some ethnic Lao and Brou (Mon-Khmer) people. Swidden cultivation was the primary source of rice in Ban Som, complemented by raising buffalo and cattle, collection of natural resources, and some intermittent wage labor. In addition, I visited over fifteen villages in districts that surround Nakai—to the south, Gnommolat and Bulapha Districts (Khammouane Province) and to the north, Khamkeut District (Bolikhamxai Province)—as part of a short consultancy and subsequently returned to some of these villages by myself. I also draw on later visits to Laos as part of consultancies in Nakai and also in Attapeu Province, though I do not address the extensive changes seen in Nakai after the commencement of NT2 (but see Singh 2010).

TRANSCRIPTION, NAMES, AND CURRENCY

A standardized system for romanization of the Lao language is yet to be developed. This book follows common spellings, though aiming for simplicity and readability. Lao words are written in lowercase italics, except for names of people and places. I follow conventional spelling of place names and geographical features. For instance, when referring to village names, the Lao word *ban* when meaning 'village' is written 'Ban,' as in Ban Som. To avoid confusion, I refer to Nakai District and the Nakai district center in English, since both could be called *muang nakai* in Lao. As multiple versions could be used to refer to the same place or polity, I use the most common version, such as Vientiane instead of Viang Chan and Lan Xang instead of Lan Sang. Pseudonyms are used for people throughout this book, unless they are publicly recognized figures. In writing the names of the latter, I follow common usage; for example, Phetsarath rather than Phetsalat. For confidentiality, I use the term 'consultant' to refer to Lao and foreign staff working on any type of project in Laos, irrespective of the duration of their work or specific institutional affiliation. All references to monetary values are in US dollars. During my fieldwork, US\$1 was approximately equivalent to 10,000 kip, the Lao currency.

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This book is the product of the generosity of numerous people in Laos who shared their time and knowledge with me. Out of concern for confidentiality, I do not name most individuals. But for all the people who shared experiences, insights, and concerns, I hope that the end result does justice to their contributions. Many villagers, government officials, consultants, and others in Nakai, Thakek, Vientiane, and elsewhere were kindly tolerant of my seemingly endless curiosity. Particular gratitude is due to my 'father,' 'mother,' 'older sister,' and 'younger sister' in Nakai who made special efforts to teach and look after me, as well as Touk, Lae, and Anouma in Vientiane. They all continue to help me appreciate the joys and challenges of life in Laos.

For administrative support that allowed some fieldwork to continue during the lengthy process of obtaining formal research permission, I am particularly grateful to Earth Systems Lao and Nanong Khotpathoum for his assistance and trust. I am also grateful to François Obein, formerly at the Nam Theun 2 Power Company, for generous help in facilitating permission from the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, which was necessary for my stay in Ban Som. As a prelude to my fieldwork, I was an AusAID-funded volunteer on a placement with the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) in Laos. I was lucky to learn from all the staff and to work with Malaykham Duangdala and an enthusiastic group of Lao university students. I am especially grateful to Arlyne Johnson, codirector of the Lao office, for many discussions over the years.

The financial support for this study was provided by an Australian Commonwealth Government Post-Graduate Research Award, with funding for fieldwork through Resource Management in Asia-Pacific Program at the Australian National University (ANU). Throughout my graduate studies I benefited from the support of my supervisory panel at ANU: Andrew Walker, Nicholas Tapp, and Colin Groves. As the chair of my panel and as an exemplary supervisor, Andrew Walker offered scholarly insight and encouragement that was crucial in the development of this work, which I hugely appreciate. I am grateful, too, for the support from Resource Management in Asia-Pacific Program, the Anthropology Graduate Program, and the Thai-Lao Studies Group run by Craig Reynolds at ANU. Discussions with other scholars and

consultants in Australia and Vientiane contributed to the ideas expressed here as well as adding much enjoyment to the learning process. In particular, I must thank James Chamberlain, who was always generous in sharing his wealth of knowledge on Laos. And my former housemates in Vientiane—Vimala Dejevongsa, Emily Hunter, and Holly Schauble—made our house into a space for reflection and reinvigoration.

I benefited from the input and support received from colleagues at the School of Social Sciences at the University of Queensland, where a postdoctoral fellowship allowed the time needed for revision of the manuscript. David Trigger offered support and encouragement throughout. His feedback, along with that from Sally Babidge and Wolfram Dressler, helped refine and strengthen the arguments in certain chapters. I very much appreciate the detailed comments on the entire manuscript from the series editors, David Chandler and Rita Smith Kipp, and from an anonymous reviewer, which paved the way for tightening and clarification of the arguments. I appreciate the interest and support from Pamela Kelley at the University of Hawai'i Press, which enabled this publication. I was also fortunate to receive practical support during the final stages of the manuscript preparation as an adjunct research fellow at the Department of Anthropology, Archaeology and Sociology, James Cook University.

The Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies Cartographic Services at ANU prepared Maps 1.1 and 1.2, with slight modifications helpfully made by Jon Prangnell at University of Queensland. All photographs were taken by me. Publishers granted permission to reprint material published elsewhere: Earlier versions of parts of chapters 2, 5, and 6 first appeared in a single article (S. Singh, 2009, "Governing anti-conservation sentiments: Forest politics in Laos," *Human Ecology* 37: 749–760); and a different version of chapter 3 has been published (S. Singh, 2010, "Appetites and aspirations: Consuming wildlife in Laos," *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 21: 313–329).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarinda Singh completed her Ph.D. in anthropology at the Australian National University. She has a background in ecology and social psychology and has worked on environmental-management projects for the Queensland government and as a volunteer and consultant with resource-management projects in Laos and Cambodia. More recently she conducted fieldwork on cross-border relations with Lao-Khmer villagers living in northeastern Cambodia. She is presently a postdoctoral fellow in anthropology at the University of Queensland.