

## Book Reviews

DOI: 10.1355/sj35-3f

*Bomb Children: Life in the Former Battlefields of Laos.* By Leah Zani. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2019. viii+171 pp.

The title of the book refers to the deadly content of cluster-bombs: hundreds of small bomblets that the people of Laos, the most cluster-bombed country in history, call ‘bomb children’ (*luk laberd*). Even though the ‘Secret War’ of the United States occurred fifty years ago, these explosives—hidden in forests and rice fields—continue to kill and maim. In her insightful book, Leah Zani investigates the sociocultural impacts of military waste as a dangerous legacy of American intervention in Southeast Asia. In her creative and poetic ethnography, she puts these hazardous *remains* (referring to the physical war remains and also to the sociocultural effects on the people) into dialogue with *revivals*, which are the interweaving processes of socio-economic liberalization, rising religiosity, and authoritarianism in the post-war environment. Through this parallelism, Zani explores the uncanny ambiguities and hauntings of the present-day Lao People’s Democratic Republic (PDR), in particular “the unsaid, silenced, or contradictory” (p. 32).

The book sheds light on the scandal of the contamination of Lao territory with cluster submunitions during the Second Indochina War (1964–73). Cluster munitions were deliberately used by the United States to prevent the formation of a viable Lao socialist state, and they thus represent a hideous example of imperialist power and extended violence in the sense of Achille Mbembe’s theorization of necropolitics. Zani makes a strong point when she refuses to refer to deaths and injuries from cluster bombs today as ‘accidents’: “The risks of military waste are not an accidental by-product of war, but

a necessary practice of imperial control; a tactic in and of itself that systematically debilitates target populations, far beyond the cessation of conflict” (p. 14). In Laos, the boundary between war and ‘post-war’ is certainly blurred.

Zani worked in two field sites that are notorious for contamination with military remains: Xieng Khouang Province, with its famous Plain of Jars, a major battlefield that was turned into a wasteland by the unprecedented US bombing campaign; and the Sepon gold and copper mining area on the former Ho Chi Minh Trail, the heavily bombed supply lines of the Vietnamese communists during the Second Indochina War. In both sites, people are confronted with dangerous explosives and restless ghosts, which are latent and potential sources of misfortune for the community. Zani proposes an ethnography of hazards as a conceptual frame to trace the parallels between the risk of a bomb exploding and the hazards of state surveillance and police harassment (p. 62). Her theoretical and methodological meditation, including poetic parallelism inspired by Lao literary traditions, is a delightful read for anthropologists—perhaps less so for readers who just would like to learn more about Laos and its people.

The chapter on the Sepon mine is a beautiful account of what contemporary ‘development’ in Laos brings to light along with its new wealth: bombs and ghosts. The war and its violence still haunt the population, not least because explosions are associated with the agency of malevolent ghosts. The promise by the Lao state of future prosperity finds its uncanny parallel in “ongoing violence, spirit possessions, endangered lives, resurrected pasts, and contaminated futures” (p. 91). Religious revivals parallel with economic ones, exemplified by new temples and Buddhist rituals to appease restless ghosts of the past. The next chapter focuses on the dangerous work of explosive clearance technicians and the fate of the population of Xieng Khouang, who must endure the latent possibility of death, injuries and disability through exploding bombs. Zani postulates a “sociocultural blast radius [that] is much larger than the immediate area of physical destruction” (p. 127), marked by a climate of apprehension and deliberate listening.

The final chapter of the book takes the disappearance of Lao development expert Sombath Somphone in 2012 as a vantage point to explore the hazards of research under an authoritarian regime. Here the book shifts the focus more to the challenges for non-profit and faith-based development organizations (and affiliated researchers) than the daily life of the Lao population in former war zones. Sombath is certainly a powerful memento of the excesses of authoritarianism in the Lao PDR. If we consider, however, what happened in the last eight years in, say, Cambodia and Thailand, it is hard to believe that “terror provoked by political disappearance ... is ethnographically specific to Laos” (p. 133). That said, the book can be read as a gloomy comment on the recent “authoritarian revival” (p. 141) in Southeast Asia more generally, even if the author might not have had this in mind. This atmosphere of fear and uncertainty that the author evokes is, arguably, not country-specific.

The book is a compelling study of the multifarious hazards haunting former war landscapes in Laos and a fascinating literary project. As an innovative and creative reflection of anthropological methods and epistemologies, the book is an excellent contribution to the discipline. Readers sharing a general interest in Southeast Asian post-conflict and authoritarian contexts—if not scared off by jargon—will gain new perspectives from this thought-provoking book.

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DOI: 10.1355/sj35-3g

*Tales of Southeast Asia's Jazz Age: Filipinos, Indonesians and Popular Culture, 1920–1936.* By Peter Keppy. Singapore: NUS Press, 2019. xiii+269 pp.

A cursory perusal of this book would mislead one into thinking that the two popular culture stars presented—Filipino Luis Borromeo and Indonesian Miss Riboet (pronounced ‘*ribut*’)—are awkwardly