

*Natural Potency and Political Power: Forests and State Authority in Contemporary Laos.* Sarinda Singh. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012. 224 pp.

### Can Animals Mediate Neo-liberalism?

It comes as no surprise to many that developing-country settings often display a major gap between formal government policies and the actuality of governing. In the case of Laos, as Sarinda Singh illustrates in her recently published village ethnography of forest-resource politics, the extreme bifurcation between policy and practice is a central theme for important new research on Lao political practice. The split is the effect of, on the one hand, impossible demands for coherent environmental policy on the part of international donors and, on the other, the profound social contradictions generated by several decades of intensive transnational resource extraction. “[F]ew people take [forest] policy as a guide for practice”, writes Singh (p. 131), in a passage that describes how the obvious fabrication of statistics can serve to ward off criticism. Rather, optimistic policy assertions function as warnings: “Forest decline is not to be linked to the state” (p. 131). Her book is about how those links are made explicit in spite of official optimism.

Singh’s anthropological contribution to the political ecology of Lao resource extraction is an important step in the study of the country’s resource regimes, and in orienting a new generation of critical scholars of Lao political ecology. Particularly welcome is Singh’s sustained effort to think about the form of the Lao state, as she does with respect to three processes: “the policy-practice divide, patronage politics, and practices that rely on and perpetuate secrecy, fear and uncertainty” (p. 7). By 2004, the time of Singh’s fieldwork on the Nakai Plateau in central Laos, the area’s wealth had been systematically plundered by monopolistic military logging enterprises, wildlife depletion made easy by the porous border with Vietnam, and the planned Nam Theun 2 hydropower facility, which

had provided almost a decade of anticipated prosperity and demise. This was plenty of time to work out the details of localized control over remaining resources and the hegemony required to hold that control in place. In this sense, Singh's ethnography of decline is an ethnography of what is left after liberalization.

One might say the book's primary question is, "what is the legitimacy of the Lao state in the context of its having presided over the systematic decline of the country's natural wealth?" Its answer is roughly: the state's hegemony is secured through a combination of rigorous intimidation of villagers' knowledge and suppression of their expertise, the perpetual promise of prosperity, and the symbolic importance of animals and forests. Her contribution rests on its attention to the sociocultural symbolic importance of specific animals, whereby the decline of forests and wildlife consistently pose a symbolic critique of state legitimacy and therefore form a political resource that political elites literally have no control over. Villagers are left hunting field rats while watching thousand-dollar trees head to Vietnam by the truckload, but more importantly, the symbolism of animals and trees calls state legitimacy into question.

The structure of Singh's argument about legitimacy is built across the five core chapters. To simplify in broad brushstrokes, the chapter on conservation sets up the limits on what can be discussed, limits defined by blaming international conservation groups for stifling development. The subsequent two chapters on wildlife then establish the symbolic resources for debate, and the last two chapters, both concerning forests, explore how the struggles over hegemony play out.

In that resource conservation is the excluded term, discursive hegemony is established by powerful actors shouting down any suggestion that conservation might be important. Singh describes the way in which serious conversation about environmental effects of the planned hydropower dam "ended rather abruptly when one young woman — the daughter of a wealthy businessman — emphatically asserted, 'We must do NT2, people are poor, your

country is already prosperous and Lao people want the same!” (p. 121). In addition to this kind of belligerence, hegemony is established by anticipatory promises of affluence, what can be called the commodity fetishism of fun. “We want the dam, we want electricity, we want karaoke, we want them quickly!” (p. 125), she quotes one of her young interlocutors saying.

As a core component of the book’s argument, the tension among legality, state patronage, and the promise of affluence — each of which is ambiguous or capricious — is captured in Singh’s term “potential”. That is, the political economy of Lao resource extraction is configured with respect to the potentiality of these nodes of power. Potential takes various forms, such as uncertainty of punishment from the state, expectation of development or prosperity, straight opportunism, or the government’s capacity (potential) to ensure protection of the forest or economic prosperity. Hence, part of the significance of animals lies in the reality that “beliefs about wildlife consumption actually express the ambivalence surrounding development” (p. 81): symbols also have a latent potential, just as wildlife is an important material-semiotic resource as both symbol and foodstuff.

The argument about animals and natural potency takes the book in directions not quite predictable in the context of its focus on state legitimacy. Documenting the surge in popularity of wildlife-as-food allows Singh to show that animals’ symbolic importance resonates with new sorts of resource capitalism from which local people are excluded or in which they can differentially participate as producers. The structure of resource capitalism applies to forests, of course, and also to domestic and regional (Thai and Vietnamese) tourists’ consumption of meat from the disappearing hinterland. “We used to eat [pangolins and turtles]”, she quotes one apparent supplier saying, “but now we only sell. They are too expensive to eat!” (p. 78). In contrast, “you cannot eat elephants”, potent animals to which Singh devotes a chapter, because “they have large meat fibres (*sen nyai*), people do not want to eat them” (p. 97). Singh shows that people’s relationships to unsettled spaces of the

*pa* (forest) are generative and speak, almost literally, to their political predicament.

*Sen nyai*, in addition to referring to large meat fibres, is also a core trope of political sociality, meaning something like “powerful connections” of reciprocity — precisely the power relations that define Lao patronage networks. Animals, but perhaps not trees in the same way, refer directly to legitimacy and therefore provide an ongoing commentary in a language outside the control of political brokers. The implication seems to be that villagers’ *sen nyai* are quite clearly broken because the ruling elite are no longer leaders but brokers within transnational extractive economies. Reciprocity, the basis for mutual claims in power-laden contexts (Scott 1976), is broken. But neither Singh nor the villagers seem to take their analysis so far.

“Material-semiotic” — which could be used to describe the spiritual potency of animals — is one of several missing conceptual terms, and some readers may feel that Singh’s argument suffers because her book’s conceptual resources are unnecessarily constrained. Terms like “hegemony”, “neo-liberalism” and “knowledge” are also largely missing. Their use could streamline and make richer Singh’s analysis. Her preferred terms from symbolic anthropology are “belief”, “perception” and “worldview”, which are politically evacuated and sometimes serve to disenfranchise villagers’ knowledge. She also relies on a conventional interpretive anthropology with a touch of cultural Marxism.

But it seems that natural symbols are the main (only?) discursive resources that villagers clearly control. Are villagers able to access any authoritative claims to knowledge? Can that kind of question be asked in Singh’s language? For example, she does not clearly distinguish between hegemony and legitimacy, nor does she draw out the full implications of a neo-liberal order that rests on promises to come. Further limitations involve what appears to be an editorial decision to frame the book in terms of a discredited localism, including the inability to engage with more contemporary conceptual approaches. Lao studies, like the country itself, deserves not to be provincialized.

On the other hand, the term “potential” has become increasingly important in the social sciences, linked tightly to neo-liberal orders similar to those operating in Laos (Berlant 2011). The experience of ambivalence between aspirations of modernity and the loss of village security is a function of crossing lines of potentiality. To give an example, Singh writes, “The inherent uncertainty and potential inequity of social transformations within Laos mean that desires are also indefinite and contradictory” (pp. 81–82). People’s commitment to the Lao state unsurprisingly hinges on their expectation of being included within these resource regimes. The book includes an important, illustrative treatment of villagers’ complicity with illegal logging and an accompanying discussion of the value of the payments for their labour vis-à-vis the value of trees.

Some of the best passages come late in the book, when Singh analyses questionable statistics from the grey literature as power/knowledge practice in relation to the state’s disenfranchisement of villagers’ knowledge. In fact, when villagers articulate unsolved, intractable problems stemming from their inability to gain access to resources, officials have nothing to say (pp. 94, 126). Conservation is the term that no one can utter, and its discursive exclusion is therefore the keystone to state-elite resource hegemony. As she writes, “the Lao state effectively manages the common perception of conservation as opposed to development to obscure its own role in allowing, facilitating, and encouraging failures in conservation initiatives” (p. 149). These passages also make apparent what a thorough analysis of the Lao state might look like and make clear that Singh has opened research questions that may help to define the field for the next generation of research on environmental and development processes in Laos.

Several questions about state practice in the context of new resource regimes lurk in the book’s background — in my view an opportunity to formulate them as research problems even if they are beyond the scope of her text.

Singh seems to suggest that the patronage system functions on its own terms, largely unrecognizable to international observers except as seen in negative terms, as low capacity, falsified statistics and corruption. In other words, the superficial veneer of policy talk in the vernacular of international organizations is a crucial element in the Lao government's management of donors and non-governmental organizations. But it does not necessarily have anything to do with how that government actually functions, and international observers are left blinded by their own categories, incapable of understanding the processes in which they participate. It is a classic case in which the study of unrecognizable difference makes possible a strikingly different perspective on what is already taken for granted. Can anthropology rediscover the alterity of political cultures, all the more difficult now since that alterity gives the illusion of recognizability through too-easy categories like "bureaucracy" or "policy implementation"?

The symbolic valences of wildlife imply questions that exceed their immediate political ecology and deserve further scrutiny. What does it mean to eat one's symbols? What is the affective intensity for people with long-term relations to forests and animals, in conditions in which their ability to understand the structural dimensions of ecological transformations is severely hampered? If prosperity as a cultural symbol has a distinctive temporality, what is the time frame of the transitional economy (see Ferguson 1999)? What is the implication of the resurgence of "traditional" forms of power in the context of anything-goes resource capitalism?

Questions about legality become increasingly important, since it would be simply wrong to assume that the law has no status in Laos. What is the form of the law in conditions in which it is partially evacuated? What are the valences of formality and informality in other post-socialist developmental states? Does "potential" stick in other contexts? I am intrigued by this question in particular as I struggled with the form of bureaucratic practice in the context of my own dissertation on Lao hydropower (Whittington 2008). I tried to understand why certain Lao experts in development bureaucracies

strongly affirmed the role of international environmental standards. It was, in fact, precisely because they viewed resource elites as illegitimate. I argued that rules (laws, standards or procedures) appeared in the form of “expectations”, a formulation not too different from Singh’s.

Finally, more questions proliferate around the stakes of neo-liberal transformations, which clearly have made Lao resource regimes possible. Liberalization began in Laos in 1986 with the New Economic Mechanism (NEM). The NEM decentralized fiscal management to the provinces and hence played a major role in the establishment of the military logging monopolies. Logging in turn provided the country’s major source of foreign exchange at least until the late 1990s, when the Theun Hinboun hydropower project came online. And the contrast with hydropower is stark, for large dams require centralized financing to organize the multiple flows of transnational capital that circuit through the sovereign state. How, we must ask, does the political organization of hydropower play out vis-à-vis that of forestry where both come together in central Laos? Is hydropower a centralizing move, and if so how does that move play out as regards the form of the state? If politics is the domain of big men, can animals’ *sen nyai* continue to mediate the transformations of the neo-liberal state locally, as Singh seems to want to believe? Or have neo-liberal reforms created a real-world resource anarchism in which the powerful and powerless alike do whatever they can?

Hence Singh’s ethnography is good to think with. Her primary audience will be Lao studies scholars working on matters of environment and development, and the ethnography will read well as an introductory text on the cultures of nature in Southeast Asia. She shows that villagers’ symbolic resources provide limited potential for environmental politics. The natural symbols of wildlife and forests in her argument serve to represent the social space of the village and forest, which grounds Singh’s culturalist argument in the interpretive tradition of identifying crucial oppositions and analysing the rules through which symbols can mediate real-world

contradictions. When people talk about elephants or trees, they call into question the legitimacy of the state because “the Lao state has authority for management of social and physical worlds” (pp. 93–94). If sovereign dominion over nature is implied in symbols, then rampaging elephants or forests without trees or wildlife are already a critique of the legitimacy of rule. Furthermore, stifling talk about decline becomes an attempt to force legitimacy, most explicitly through systematic dismantling of villagers’ knowledge about life worlds that they know quite well. For the academic audience, this much-needed contribution raises the bar for future publications and provides important material for reframing Lao political ecology.

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