

***Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding in Laos: Perspective for Today's World.* By Stephanie Phetsamay Stobbe. Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge, 2015. Hardcover: 157pp.**

*Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding in Laos* offers an ethnographically rich portrayal of Lao cultural ceremonies and rituals that stresses the importance of grassroots practices to conflict resolution. Authored by Stephanie Phetsamay Stobbe, a former Lao refugee and now an academic at Menno Simons College in Canada, the book includes insightful and descriptive personal vignettes of Lao cultural practices. It is unfortunate, however, that poor academic rigour and notable methodological flaws weaken the book.

The central aim of *Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding in Laos* is to consider how grassroots level conflict resolution processes promote justice and maintain relationships in contexts where formal legal systems are underdeveloped. Stobbe argues that an appreciation of cultural value systems is key to conflict resolution — particularly when conflict arises between different cultural groups — and that “Western” practices of “mediator neutrality and professional third parties in dispute resolution” have often been incorrectly assumed as superior to other models (p. 4). Indeed, with respect to Laos, she argues that “grassroots systems are far more capable of providing justice than the professional systems espoused by Western developed countries” (p. 7).

For scholars of Laos, the most valuable chapters are undoubtedly Chapters 2, 3 and 4, in which Stobbe provides a detailed analysis of cultural ceremonies and conflict resolution practices such as *op-lom*, which are aimed at maintaining social harmony and restoring “face” or “one’s respect and status in a communal relationship” (p. 35). Through a thorough examination of what the author describes as the Lao Conflict Resolution Spectrum, these three chapters convincingly argue the importance of personal relationships in Lao conflict resolution practices, and that the avoidance of public confrontation has led many Laotians to consider formal legal trials as uncondusive “to rebuilding positive relationships” (p. 57).

For those interested in conflict resolution more broadly, Stobbe’s claim that dispute resolution processes of formal, rule-of-law-type legal systems are impractical and incapable of providing social justice for much of the world’s population is perhaps her most important intellectual contribution. Significantly, while the majority of Stobbe’s analysis is on traditional or indigenous grassroots practices, she

is also careful to address the question of whether grassroots and professional systems can coexist. Through a comparative analysis of Laos' conflict resolution practices with New Zealand and Canada — where parallel traditional and legal conflict resolution systems have been implemented with some success — Stobbe convincingly demonstrates that culturally-sensitive, informal, grassroots practices for conflict resolution and community well-being are of value to many post-colonial societies.

Where *Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding in Laos* may frustrate some readers, however, is the author's limited engagement with the growing body of academic literature on Laos (Chapter 2, for instance, cites just six sources) and her consequent shallow analysis of the complex debates that surround many issues discussed in the book, such as ethnic identities, heritage preservation, socio-economic development and the historicizing of nationalist narratives. Many statistical sources cited are outdated and there are numerous cases where the author's choice of reference material is problematic. To provide just a few examples, on p. 1, Stobbe offers a statistic on unexploded ordnance contamination that is fifteen years out of date. Similarly, on p. 22, Stobbe gives Laos' United Nations Development Programme's human development index ranking from 2009 and income statistics from 2006, despite this information being updated annually and easily accessible. More concerning is that the manuscript draws heavily on a 1995 "Country Study" for the Federal Research Division of the US Library of Congress (cited in five of nine chapters), sponsored by the US Department of the Army. Aside from the obvious (undiscussed) concerns regarding both the age and institutional affiliations of this text, Stobbe incorrectly cites the author of the text as "Savada" when in fact this work is an edited volume. Lastly, while Stobbe's descriptions of Laos as "a place of serene calm and beauty" (p. 2), where the people are "caring, gentle, and peace loving" (p. 3) and the "way of life, customs, rituals, religion, and social and civic organization have remained largely unchanged since the great Thai and Khmer empires dating back 1,000 years" (p. 8) demonstrate a notable appreciation of her birth country, such language is a little too romantic for an academic text.

Turning to the author's methodology, while her decision to conduct lengthy in-country fieldwork and to use "stories and narratives to gain insight into the conflict resolution world of Laos" is appropriate to the research aims, the significance of statements provided by research participants is let down by a lack of any explanation as to how or why particular participants were selected, when, where or

in what context selected quotations were made, or any discussion of the researchers own positionality within the field.

Furthermore, given that the central focus of the book is on the differences between Western-style judicial systems and more traditional conflict resolution practices, the text would have benefited significantly from some engagement with members of Laos' formal legislative structures, such as the National Assembly and the Lao Bar Association. Stobbe rightfully asserts that the implementation of a Western-style judicial system has faced numerous challenges in Laos including corruption, poor technical training and limited legal representatives; however, such a legal system is nonetheless operating and to entirely leave out the voices of those involved in this system is a missed opportunity.

Finally, Stobbe notes that "there are conflicts [in Laos] that do not seem to have an appropriate outlet for resolution" (pp. 58–59) under her Lao Conflict Resolution Spectrum. Significantly, and as the author notes, such conflicts include patron–client relations and the growing land disputes that have spread across the country from the 1980s onwards. As a stated aim of the text is to use Laos as a means to consider how "conflict resolution mechanisms build infrastructures that support social harmony and address larger-scale conflicts within communities, nations and international arenas" (foreword), more consideration could have been given to how community-scale conflict resolution processes might be scaled-up to address such nation-wide concerns. While no text can be expected to cover all forms of conflict in Laos, given that land disputes are currently a major political-economic issue across Southeast Asia, the author would have gained a much wider readership had she included further discussion on this issue.

Such concerns aside, this short, accessible, book does bring new themes of analysis to the study of Laos. It also provides rich ethnographic descriptions of Lao conflict resolution practices that are likely to be of interest to both students and scholars of peace and conflict studies, particularly those concerned with alternative approaches to legalistic retributive justice systems. It is encouraging to see the Lao diaspora taking an academic interest in their country of birth, particularly from an intellectual standpoint that seeks to contest Western conceptual frameworks.

---

KEARRIN SIMS is an Institute Associate at the Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University. Postal address: Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University Building EM, Parramatta Campus, Locked Bag 1797, Penrith NSW 2751, Australia; email: k.sims@uws.edu.au.