

Southeast Asia

Yves Goudineau and Vanina Bouté, eds.

***From Tribalism to Nationalism: The Anthropological Turn in Lao;
A Tribute to Grant Evans***

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This compilation of essays is not only dedicated to the memory of Grant Evans (1965–2022) but will surely also be connected to the memory of Boike Rehbein, one of the contributors, who died unexpectedly and untimely in the summer of 2022. These two grand figures of international Lao studies have invested their work in strengthening research ties and collaboration with Lao colleagues and institutions and supported subsequent cohorts of scholars. Evans was one of the most prominent social science researchers on Laos, whose hospitality and generosity toward incoming researchers and colleagues are as famous as his commitment to the country in which he not only conducted research but to which he permanently moved in 2005 until his premature death in 2014. His influence materializes also in publications dedicated to him. This includes, apart from *From Tribalism to Nationalism*, a special issue in the *Journal of Lao*

Studies (edited in 2016 by Peter Cox and Rehbein) and another one published in *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* (edited in 2019 by Paul Cohen and Olivier Évrard).

This volume consists of an introduction and twelve chapters, all authored by renowned colleagues who conducted their first ethnographic fieldwork in Laos in the 1980s at the earliest and in the 2000s at the latest. These chapters are—with one exception (Oliver Tappe, see below)—reprints or translations of earlier published articles and book chapters, some of which were published already in 2008 in *New Research on Laos—Recherches Nouvelles sur le Laos* (Goudineau and Lorrillard 2008). The idea behind this, as the editors explain in their introduction, is to make these texts available to a wider, international, and English-speaking audience. The aim of bridging Francophone and Anglophone audiences and researchers is a very honorable one and thus has my sympathy. For those familiar with the original texts, there might not be much to gain from this volume—were it not for the introduction, which situates the volume against the backdrop of Evans’s oeuvre and research life, and for Tappe’s newly composed chapter on Houaphanh, which will be presented in relatively greater detail for this reason.

The introduction sets the scene for this volume comprehensively. Yves Goudineau sketches the development of scholarly interest in Laos and the various research collaborations that have formed the field of Lao studies. The impact of Evans on Lao studies and its “anthropological turn” that he has contributed to is discussed thoroughly by Goudineau, capturing the different projects and visions that Evans has pursued. Goudineau highlights Evans’s call for ethnographic fieldwork, a critical anthropology that does not shy away from dissonance, and, finally, a commitment to fostering collaborative ties to Lao colleagues and institutions with all eventual challenges implied. Lao studies, markedly influenced by Evans’s work, was further shaped not least by the contributors to this volume who have devoted their careers to commencing fieldwork-based Lao studies.

Nick Enfield’s chapter sets the tone that is also to be found in several of the contributions by pointing to rampant research lacunae, here in the field of studying the diversity of languages spoken in Laos. Rehbein deploys his variation of Bourdieu’s concept of “fields”—not rice fields, although there is an interesting twist here when it comes to professional language (43)—and their differentiation. Evans’s review of what happened with peasants and peasant studies in Laos (as of 2008) calls for more expertise in economic anthropology and understanding of economic strategies of peasant households for researchers but also declared “experts” consulted by international development funding agencies. Tracing the development of monasteries in the twentieth century and, especially, their decline as an educational institution, Patrice Ladwig analyzes the historical and political factors that have led to a formation of religious versus secular spheres, thereby tackling these fraught terms against the Lao background. Also looking back into the early phase of the Lao revolutionary fight, Vatthana Pholsena’s contribution is based on oral historical evidence for southeast Laos; it aims at illuminating different ways of relating to the past—contrasting Lao historiographical accounts of the “liberation” of Southern Laos and the experience-based retelling of a Vietnamese-born Lao war veteran. Goudineau’s overview on the state of the art of the anthropology of Southern Laos (as of 2008 but with some updates in the footnotes) highlights some of the then common misunderstandings and relative neglect of this area and discusses the problems of conceptualizing (and naming) ethnic groups using the example of the Kantu.

Ian Baird’s chapter discusses a spatial concept of the Brao in Southern Laos, *huntre*. *Huntre* denotes a spatial prohibition that governs the organization of the swidden fields

and beyond. According to Baird, this shows that spatial notions and ideas of borders existed in precolonial times. Évrards and Chiemsisouraj Chanthaphilith's historical and ethnographic contribution on the different mythical versions of the genesis of the town of Vieng Phoukha in Laos's northwest province of Luang Namtha captures and weaves together different pieces of historical, mythical, and oral historical evidence. Guido Sprenger discusses the discontinuation of (certain) rituals and religious practices of Rmeet speakers against the background of cultural values that inform which (parts of) rituals are deemed worthy of retaining. Vanina Bouté traces the relationship between Buddhism and animist ritual specialists among the Phunoy, residing in the uplands of Phongsali, carefully discussing and tracing the different roles and functions ascribed to Buddhist and non-Buddhist officiants in the context of rituals to ward off misfortunes.

In his fresh ethnographic chapter, Tappe shows that Houaphanh Province and its capital Sam Neua are currently changing due to Vietnamese investments and development initiatives. The new city pillar monument and a town park showcasing the province's multiethnic cultural heritage are aimed at broadening its self-image from the cradle of the revolution to a site of prosperity and (multi)cultural wealth. Tappe deploys the concept of "mutual mimetic appropriation" (296) in order to shed light on interethnic dynamics in this ethnically highly diverse region, thereby contributing innovatively to the debate on Tai-ization that Evans provoked. Taking the transethnic prominence of *lao hai* (the locally produced rice beer drunk from jars through straws) and the ubiquitous *taleao* bamboo signs (used for ritual purposes), both being primarily associated with upland lives, as examples, Tappe asks us to inquire more into the "long-term processes of mutual cultural borrowings" (298), thereby indicating that the mimetic appropriation is not a one-way road but rather a mutual process.

This chapter, which engages also explicitly with Evans's work (which is not the case for the other chapters, which were, of course, not written with this aim in mind), prepares the reader for the last chapter, again by Goudineau, in which he recalls his role in raising awareness for the need to study and take seriously the cultural diversity for which Lao is unique in this part of Southeast Asia, including also its consideration in policies. He also traces the development of the rather paradoxical situation of unprecedented public acknowledgment of cultural diversity and, also unprecedented, standardization of the same that has led to odd forms of visualizing the multiethnic heritage in Laos.

From Tribalism to Nationalism can be said to be a materialization of a piece of a recent history of Lao studies. This cohort of scholars has conducted research in Laos at a time that all readers may not easily be able to imagine—such as those like me, who only started working there after the 2010s. In fact, these colleagues have, like Evans, contributed to paving the way for future researchers. It appears as if this volume, or at least some contributions, were not only written to represent a new state of the art of the then expanding research on Laos (based on prolonged on-site fieldwork) but also to highlight potential future directions and persistent gaps of knowledge that, hopefully, an increasingly diverse range of researchers heading to stationary field research in Laos will continue to work on—most likely bringing up new questions in the process.

And, indeed, much has happened after and in the wake of the contributions published in *From Tribalism to Nationalism*, more than can be seen from this book. The community of scholars working on Laos continues to grow (rapidly) and diversify (less rapidly), which will be noticeable in print in the upcoming years when the dissertations of aspiring ethnographers of Laos will see the light of day in the form of books (at least they should).

What we also need, as especially the contribution of Goudineau shows, are efforts at fostering ties with Lao colleagues and institutions that will establish sustainable research partnerships. This volume bears testimony to the honorable commitment of the editors, Goudineau and Bouté, as well as that of NIAS Press, and especially the editor in chief, Gerald Jackson, to the study of Laos. Given its tragic closing, this volume can be remembered as the last volume on Laos published by NIAS Press. As a final comment, the choice and combination of chapters in this volume respond well to the words from Evans with which Goudineau closes his chapter (327): “Sensitivity to the complexities of ethnic identity and to the different levels which notions of identity or matters of cultural similarity or difference are salient must become the hallmark of future anthropological research in Laos and in the region generally” (Evans 1999, 186).

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