

# Spatial (re)organization and places of the Brao in southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia

Ian G. Baird

Department of Geography, The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

Correspondence: Ian G. Baird (email: [ianbaird@shaw.ca](mailto:ianbaird@shaw.ca))

Initiatives designed to bring about social and spatial change, whether implemented by governments, international agencies, nongovernment organizations or private companies, invariably have an impact on how people perceive 'places' – defined as spaces with particular meanings. In southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia the ethnic Brao peoples are facing rapid social and spatial changes as a result of a wide range of initiatives, many of which are associated with 'development'. Case studies on internal resettlement from the uplands to the lowlands, the redesigning of living spaces, and the implications of protected national park establishment and management are discussed in relation to a four-point typology of what is required to constitute place. The role of social and spatial (re)organization on place amongst the Brao is considered, including how peoples' conceptions of place are being altered and how the Brao are variously responding to efforts to (re)organize them and reconstitute their places.

**Keywords:** Cambodia, development, Laos, place, social organization, spatial organization

## Introduction

Initiatives designed to bring about social change are essentially and invariably aimed at promoting spatial (re)organization, which, if successful, necessarily engender changes in perceptions of 'place'. James Duncan (2000: 582) defines places as being 'bounded settings in which social relations and identity are constituted', with places being either officially recognized geographical entities or 'more informally organized sites of intersecting social relations, meanings and collective memory'. For me, places are socially constructed landscapes (or other spaces) that have been constituted with meaning by particular people at certain times and at various scales, and which are closely linked to identities (also see Agnew, 2002). Given that particular types of practices/spatial formations are considered appropriate in particular settings, place can also be said to have normative dimensions (Cresswell, 2004). What is considered 'in place' or 'out of place' in certain spaces? What broader discourses govern such evaluations? How are different institutional arrangements linked to particular ideas about place? How are cultural and ethnic divisions linked to the creation and maintenance of particular spatial norms? In this paper I consider efforts by others to spatially (re)organize the ethnic Brao people in northeastern Cambodia and southern Laos, and Brao responses to those efforts.

In addition, I assess a typology of necessary requirements for the (re)constitution of place, conditions that are equally important for understanding the deconstruction of place. I believe that four elements are crucial for producing and reproducing particular places. First, places are always socially constructed (Marston, 2000) and are thus particular to individuals and communities. Crucially for my theoretical positioning, spaces can exist without the social, but places cannot. As Tuan (1977: 6) puts it, '“Space” is more abstract than “place”'. What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we come to know it better and endow it with value'. Places take on new

meanings based on various factors including, but not limited to, culture, society, economics and politics. Crucially, the spatial dimensions of places can shift as easily as their meanings are transformed. Because they are socially constructed, places are never permanent; they are fundamentally intertwined with the social and thus change with it.

Second, places are given meaning through events that have transpired, or are believed to have occurred, in particular geographical spaces (Tuan, 1977). They are both 'lived' and 'conceived', following Henri Lefebvre's (1991) distinction. As Wolfgang Sachs (1992) points out, places are imbued with experiences, both from the distant and recent past. Therefore, places are fundamentally constituted through histories that are affected by politics and refracted through both individual and group memory: if there was no history or memory, there could not be places (Gordillo, 2002; 2004; Baird, 2007). Places may be established due to one or more events that transpired in a particular space, but the meanings and even the geographical limits of those places can be transformed by recent events, or past circumstances that have gained increased significance for whatever reasons. Therefore, places frequently become spaces of overlapping histories and contested meanings of particular occurrences and their relationships to other events and places.

Third, places can only have meaning in relation to other places. Sacred places are only meaningful when contrasted in peoples' minds with profane places. But places are not only defined by clear-cut dichotomies; they may be constituted by more relative differences, and it is possible to have strong places, weaker places, or even very weak places. The possibilities potentially reach the limits of our imagination.

Fourth, and following from the above, places cannot exist meaningfully without having boundaries in relation to other places. This indicates that places can exist at various scales (Tuan, 1977). Boundaries can be both physical and conceptual, as pointed out by Deborah Pellow (1996). Conceptual boundaries are constructed and maintained through all kinds of processes, and take on various forms. Some kinds of boundaries may be strong for one aspect, but porous for another. Just as there is not just one kind of place, there is not only one type of boundary. Furthermore, boundaries are often fuzzier, wider or wavier than lines on Cartesian maps and may vary between individuals such that one has a sense of gradually crossing the boundary, of moving from peripheral spaces towards their cores and, at a particular point, of having crossed a threshold, however tentative and conditional the boundary may be. However, as Benno Teschke (2003) has pointed out, sometimes boundaries are demarcated in association with particular kinds of social development such as in the case of capitalist property claims, immigration controls and so on, and are thus linked to certain types of territorialization.

This paper assesses the typology laid out above in the context of the ethnic Brao<sup>1</sup> peoples in southern Laos (where they include the Lun, Jree, Kavet, Hamong and Ka-nying subgroups) and in northeastern Cambodia (where they include the Kreung, Brao Umba, Brao Tanap, Lun and Kavet subgroups). In order to illustrate that conceptions of place are inevitably affected by social and spatial (re)organization. I have chosen to consider three examples, two from Laos and one from Cambodia.

This study is based on ethnographic investigations conducted in a large number of Brao villages in Laos and Cambodia between 1995 and 2008. (Fieldwork conducted between 2003 and 2008 was part of doctoral research.) Participant observation and individual and group interviews were the main field methods utilized. The interviews reported on here were conducted in Brao language (which I speak fluently).

## The Brao

Ethnic labelling and associated identity issues in mainland Southeast Asia are frequently complicated by identities being multiple, flexible and variable (Baird, 2008a). However, there are certain groups of people who identify themselves as 'Brao'<sup>2</sup> and generally speak one of a number of dialects of Brao, an Austroasiatic language in the Western Bahnaric branch of the Mon-Khmer family. There are approximately 60 000 self-identifying Brao worldwide, with fewer than half residing in Attapeu and Champasak provinces in southern Laos, and most of the rest living in Ratanakiri and Stung Treng provinces in northeastern Cambodia (Baird, 2008b) (Figure 1).

The Brao have long lived subsistence-oriented lifestyles, with rotational, multicrop swidden agriculture as their main occupation, along with fishing, hunting and the collection of various forest products (Baird & Dearden, 2003; Baird, 2008a; 2008b). More

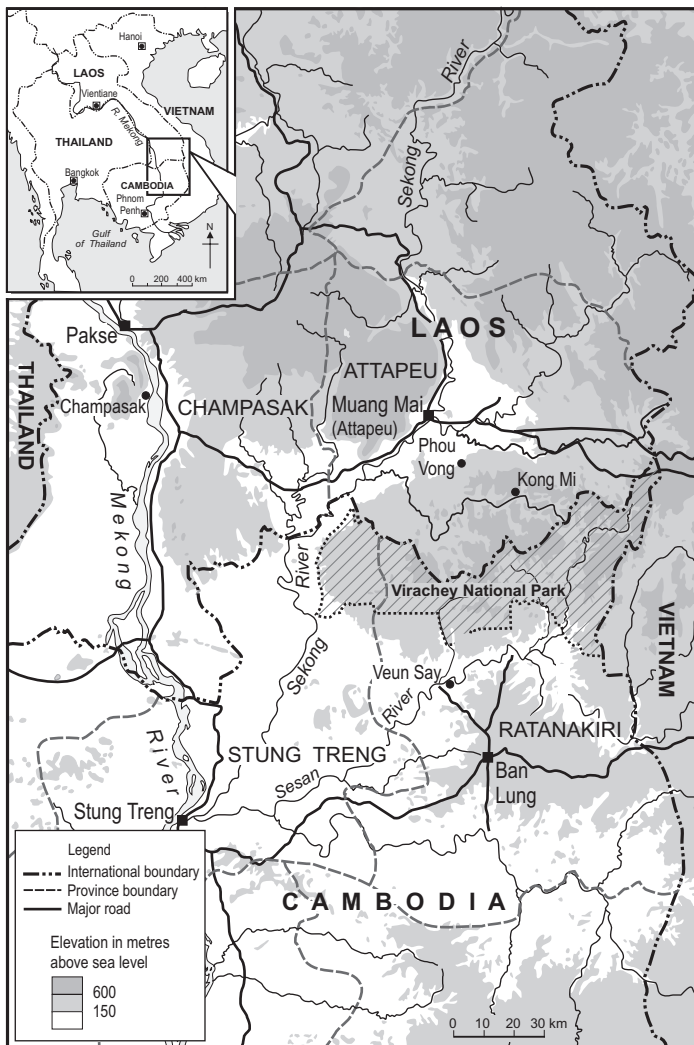


Figure 1. Location of the study areas in southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia, including sites of the key old and new 'places' of the Brao mentioned in the text.

recently many Brao have necessarily had to increase their involvement in lowland wet-rice agriculture, particularly in Laos. While there are still Brao who live in mountainous areas in Laos and Cambodia, in both countries most have been manipulated, coerced or simply forced into settling in lowland areas for various reasons. The historical events surrounding these movements and the memories relating to different landscapes are socially and spatially critical for the Brao and the creation of their places (Baird, 2008b).

People from the dominant ethnic groups in the region as well as many foreign aid workers and other agents of development routinely see the Brao as variously 'backwards', 'disadvantaged', 'vulnerable' and 'poor' (Baird, 2008b). During the French colonial period they were often compared to 'Red Indians' from North America (Taupin, 1888; Baudenne, 1913), and the French considered that their social and spatial organization needed to be changed so as to 'civilize' them. More recently the Brao have frequently been labelled 'underdeveloped'. Phou Vong District in Attapeu Province, southern Laos, which is predominantly Brao, is ranked among the country's 47 poorest districts (Chamberlain, 2001), and Ratanakiri Province where most of the Brao in Cambodia live, is considered to be amongst the most 'undeveloped' parts of the country (Bourdier, 2006). By defining the Brao and other Austroasiatic language-speaking peoples and their landscapes as 'poor' and 'lacking development', both governments and international aid agencies are able to discursively justify their efforts to 'develop' or change them. The government of Laos, for example, frequently blames the low level of overall development of the nation on the backwardness of Austroasiatic peoples in the country (Baird & Shoemaker, 2008).

### **Internal resettlement in Phou Vong District, Attapeu Province, Laos**

This first example of how perceptions of place have been affected by initiatives ostensibly designed to bring about 'social improvement' relates to the resettlement of whole Brao villages from the mountains to the lowlands in Phou Vong District in the south-eastern part of Attapeu Province, southern Laos.

Much has been written about the internal resettlement of ethnic minorities in Laos from the highlands to the lowlands or to areas adjacent to major roads, and it is widely recognized that this has frequently been associated with serious social, cultural, health, environmental, and livelihood-oriented problems (see for example Chamberlain, 2001; Vandergeest, 2003; Evrard & Goudineau, 2004) – although Rigg (2005) has illustrated that resettlement can have varying results, and Petit (2008) has shown that micro-level analysis can be useful for understanding the differential effects of resettlement. Baird & Shoemaker (2007) have pointed out the complicity of many foreign donors in supporting problematic internal resettlement.

The Brao in Phou Vong District have experienced a considerable amount of internal resettlement in the past half-century. During the Second Indochina War (1964–73) a large number of Brao villages were displaced as a result of covert US aerial bombardment campaigns along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and its southern extension, the Sihanouk Trail. Some Brao people were moved into Kong Mi – a US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) supported stronghold in the 1960s and early 1970s for Brao paramilitary forces used mainly for watching Vietnamese communist supply movements along the Sihanouk Trail (Conboy, 1995; Baird, 2008b). After the Pathet Lao succeeded in taking full control of the country in 1975, throughout Attapeu Province, some 11 000 people were resettled from the mountains to lowland areas in 1975–76, most of whom were Brao (Lucas, 1997).

They not only were moved from their traditional habitat of relatively small villages (often including 10–20 closely related families) to large agricultural cooperatives in the lowlands (encompassing 100 or more families), but also expected to abandon swidden agriculture and adopt wet-rice farming like their ethnic Lao compatriots. This move was planned without adequate consideration of cultural, social and livelihood issues and the Brao did not adapt well (Lucas, 1997). The government did not have the resources to solve the peoples' fundamental food security problems and were eventually forced to recognize that resettlement and associated agricultural collectivization had failed (see Evans, 1990). Thus, by the late 1970s and early 1980s a large number were able to return to the mountains, where they resumed conducting swidden agriculture (Baird, 2008b).

However, soon after Phou Vong District was created as an almost fully Brao district in 1991, the government in 1992 again decided that it would be better to resettle the Brao in the mountains (Lucas, 1997); over the last 17 years almost all of the Brao villages in Phou Vong have been relocated either to the lowlands or along major roads in the uplands.

In ways which resonate with Michel Foucault's ideas about power and 'governmentality' (1991), the Lao state has set up a series of agencies and instruments, mechanisms of monitoring and control for intervening into people's lives, today frequently in the name of 'development' and 'poverty alleviation'. (Re)organizing spaces in the name of 'improvement' is the main justification for internal resettlement in Laos, as it frequently is for resettlement schemes around the world (see Li, 2007; Moore, 2000; Scott, 1998). Since the early 1990s, internal resettlement in southern Laos has mainly been justified by government efforts to eradicate upland swidden practices (which is discursively linked to poverty and underdevelopment), the corollary of which is promoting lowland wet-rice cultivation. Therefore, the Brao have mainly been moved so that they are geographically in close proximity with lowland areas deemed suitable for wet-rice cultivation. In addition, their resettlement is believed important to discourage the periodic and customary movement of Brao villages, the idea being to increase their interaction with markets and make it easier for them to access government services (and vice versa) such as health and education. Finally, the larger framing of the government's motivation for resettling the Brao is to facilitate their assimilation into the national, or Lao, society (Baird & Shoemaker, 2007): despite the rhetoric coming from some branches of the government about the value of all ethnic groups and their cultures (LFNC, 2005), adopting (ethnic) Lao livelihoods and ways of living are seen as desirable.

The Brao have often directly and indirectly resisted attempts to socially and spatially (re)organize them. Many of these forms of resistance are subtle, careful and concealed, much like what Scott (1985) found in rural Malaysia, where peasant farmers were unwilling to take the high risks associated with revolution, but found it safe to resist in less risky ways such as foot-dragging, pilfering or slandering. In some cases, Brao people only partially obey government orders. In other cases, however, resistance is more evident. For example, some Brao people originally from Cambodia but living at Kong Mi from the late 1960s decided to return to Cambodia in 1975 in an attempt to avoid being resettled to the lowlands in Laos; once in Cambodia, however, the Khmer Rouge forced them to move to the lowlands.

In Laos, many of those who were resettled after 1975 later resisted with their feet and returned to their mountain homelands. Presently, there are still Brao families living in the mountains of Phou Vong despite years of government efforts to get them to move to the lowlands. In some instances Brao families living in the lowlands continue to spend prolonged periods in the uplands, with some secretly engaging in swidden

agriculture. Others, however, have not tried to flee from resettlement, but sometimes do swidden agriculture in out of the way places so as to avoid detection. In many ways, the Brao in Laos are finding ways to subvert government efforts to change them.

However, it would be an oversimplification to assert that all resettled Brao are resisting their move to the lowlands. Moreover, other forms of power associated with authoritarian and coercive policies require that we look beyond overt resistance. Many have tried to make the transition, including producing new 'places'. It is especially complicated for Brao government officials, who are often torn between observing the suffering caused by resettlement and government policy, which they feel obliged to uphold: 'There are a lot of problems with resettlement, but the Brao have been poor living in the mountains for generations. When will they ever get rich if they continue to live there? If they come down to the lowlands they can become developed' (Brao government official, interview, April 2005, Phou Vong district centre).

To illustrate the complex nature of ongoing resettlement and its important social and spatial dimensions, it is useful to present the following part of my discussion in 2005 with the Brao Hamong headman of Tra-oum village, which was resettled in 2003 to the vicinity of Phou Vong (district centre):

Ian: How are the people from your village adjusting to the lowlands?

Headman: It is difficult. People don't have enough rice to eat, or enough lowland paddy land to cultivate. They also are not familiar with lowland rice cultivation methods, and so harvests are not good. Agriculture is more difficult in the lowlands compared to the uplands, and there are more forest products in the uplands.

Ian: Do the people want to return to the mountains where they used to live?

Headman: They can't go. The government would not allow them to return.

Ian: I know, but if they were able to decide on their own, would they choose to return?

Headman: Yes, I think that almost all of them would return if they were given the choice, but returning is not an option.

Ian: I have noticed that many of the houses in the new village appear to be abandoned. Has anybody returned to the mountains?

Headman: No, nobody has returned. People have just moved to nearby places to live near their lowland wet-rice fields.

Ian: But doesn't the government want people to live in the village?

Headman: Yes, they want them to live in the village at least part of the year, but many families are living near their fields all year round. They are not too far away, so we can call them to village meetings if we need to.

[some hours later]

Ian: I noticed that last year, when you first came to the lowlands, you constructed a *vieng* (spirit gate in Brao Hamong) and did the traditional rituals associated with that, but I can see that this year you have not done that.

Headman: No, this year we decided not to make a spirit gate. We have stopped doing many rituals that we used to do. We are no longer living in Brao. We are now in Lao. Therefore, we need to change our ways of doing things to adapt to our new circumstances.

Crucially, in relation to Brao conceptions of place, a dichotomy is frequently constructed that divides Lao spaces from Brao ones, or the uplands from the lowlands, which connects their ethnic identities directly with upland spaces – with places they no longer live in.

The Brao from Tra-oum are generally adjusting poorly to resettlement, but their responses do not constitute either full acceptance or absolute resistance. People recognize that they would, in many ways, be better off in the mountains, but government restrictions specifically prohibit moving back to the mountains or other former places. So they try to adjust, and even adopt the discourses and conceptions of place of those attem-

pting to change them. There are also generational issues, with elders preferring to live attached to their familiar places and livelihoods in the mountains, but not children. For example, a Brao teenager resettled for a number of years told me, 'I do not want to return to the mountains. I can't ride my bicycle there' (interview, April 2006, Tra-oum village).

Even though Brao people often appear to accept their new circumstances, such acceptance is influenced by individual human agency, history and social memories. Many are opposed to the government's idea for them to inhabit the specially created resettlement villages even for part of the year, as the government is not forcing them to do so when they settle near their fields. Living in their lowland fields is more like life in the mountains than the more densely organized residing space in the new villages. Perceptions of place are important, as while villages may be meaningful places for most ethnic Lao people, the Brao customarily only spent a month or two in their traditional mountain villages, residing for most of the year in their swidden fields. Swiddens are thus more important places for many Brao.

Some resettled Brao are trying to adjust to their new circumstances in the lowlands by abandoning certain animist practices that they see as being associated with their lives in the mountains. This includes particular concepts of sacred place. As Escobar (2001) has pointed out, struggles related to senses of place involve critical identity issues. Trying to abandon the spirit gate rituals of the village is apparently an attempt to adjust to their new circumstances in the lowlands. Now that they are living in 'Lao', they feel that it is inappropriate or 'out of place' to maintain all their ritual practices. Government officials also subtly and not so subtly encourage leaders to give up as many of the practices of the 'past' as they can. The social construction such 'Lao places', as compared to their 'Brao places' in the mountains, significantly affects their practices in the lowlands.

The year after my discussion with the Tra-oum village headman, I returned to the community and noticed that the Brao had once again made a spirit gate. The headman said that people had been sick, and that it was needed to protect the village social space. His community was struggling to adapt to their new social and spatial circumstances, resulting in complex and confusing contradictions in relation to leaving old places and making new spaces in the lowlands. For example, so-called development workers in the resettlement areas claimed that modern medicine is needed to cure sickness, but the understanding in traditional knowledge from 'old places' was that spirits are frequently the cause of illness.

### **House design and spatial change in Phou Vong District, Attapeu Province, Laos**

This second Lao case study demonstrates how governmentality is recognized through the manipulation of 'intimate' spaces, in this instance at the scale of private dwellings.

It is well documented that Brao people have historically had distinctive types of houses (Matras-Troubetzkoy, 1975; Matras-Guin, 1992), although the designs and social and spatial uses of different parts of their houses vary among different groups. As Bourdieu (1979) described for the Kabyle people in Algeria in the 1960s, the Brao have tended to spatially organize their dwellings in ways that are closely linked to social practices and, thus, to conceptions of place.

The way that housing in resettlement villages has been addressed provides a clear indication of the importance that the Lao government puts on (re)organizing Brao domestic 'places'. In order to instigate social change and support Brao integration into mainstream Lao society they want new domestic spaces that are more amenable for accommodating ideas about 'place' linked with lowland lifestyles and the Lao nation.

The discourses surrounding housing in Laos are crucial. Lao government officials frequently comment on the small-sizes and poor condition or inappropriate designs of Brao houses. Lao people refer to them as ‘chicken coops’, as a sort of joke implying that some houses are inappropriate for human habitation, rarely pausing to consider why many Brao put much less material value on houses compared to the Lao or how their value systems differ. Because they are historically swidden cultivators, the Brao have never built houses with the purpose of inhabiting them for many years. While the Lao often heavily invest in their houses, the Brao have traditionally kept their wealth in the form of mobile items, such as rice beer jars, musical gongs and water buffaloes.

To the government, the construction of what are called *heuan thavone* (‘permanent houses’ in Lao) is indicative of a number of other desired social and spatial changes, all linked to producing new conceptions of place. First, if the Brao have such permanent houses it implies that they must have taken up Lao *asip khong thi* (‘fixed occupations’) – essentially either wet-rice agriculture or some type of perennial plantation-oriented agriculture. Second, the investment in a solid wooden house is high enough that it is unlikely to be easily abandoned; this gives the government confidence that the Brao are being ‘tamed’. Third, having a permanent house is, to the Lao, an important symbol of *kan phatthana* or ‘development’ and indicates that the Brao are becoming integrated into ‘Lao society’, with senses of place that are more in line with those of the ethnic Lao. (Such Lao development discourses are certainly influenced by global development discourses, flavoured with their own combination of cultural and historical factors.)

In Phou Vong District, the government has introduced a number of tangible incentives to change Brao housing, in addition to deploying the development discourses like the ones described above. All Brao families are encouraged to cut and saw up to five cubic metres of wood per year to construct permanent houses. Government officials in Phou Vong, including Brao officials who have clearly internalized many of the government’s ideas about development and houses, continue to berate the many other Brao who have not responded to this opportunity and still live in what the Lao call *heuan soua khao* (‘temporary houses’). Although these families are often called ‘lazy’, the reality is that many Brao do not know how to saw wood, nor do they have saws, given that they had not used sawn wood to fashion their houses in the past.

The government has reinforced the importance of permanent housing by offering zinc roofing sheets as part of the ‘resettlement package’ to those resettled from mountainous areas. Having zinc roofing in Laos is iconic of ‘development’ and often used by governmental and international aid agencies alike as a key indicator that people are no longer ‘poor’. Even though those living under zinc roofs may complain of it being stifling in the hot season, most Brao in Phou Vong still want them as, in their minds, this helps transform ‘poor places’ into ‘rich places’.

Most significantly, the Attapeu provincial government has even gone as far as organizing a project to teach recently resettled Brao people in Phou Vong how to construct permanent Lao-like houses. The Social Welfare Division of Attapeu Province was responsible for implementing this initiative in 2004–5 in two recently resettled Brao villages: Vieng Xay and Tra-oum.

In both resettled villages ethnic Lao people were hired to build ‘model houses’ (*heuan toua bep*); the sawn wood and other materials were paid for by the project and Brao men in both villages were expected to work with the Lao builders so as to learn how to make permanent houses. There was never any thought to the sociocultural



values of old Brao house designs. For instance, young Brao women often sleep in special rooms built near the front doors of their houses, in order to make it convenient for them to receive young men who come to court them at night when others are asleep. There are many other possible examples. Each of the model houses was built raised high off the ground, as is typical for Lao houses, and made entirely of sawn wood nailed together. The roofing was, of course, zinc. Once the houses were completed, they were left in the villages as alters of progress, examples of what people should be striving for: symbols of new 'Lao domestic places'.

Despite important fiscal constraints, the Attapeu provincial government, in directly promoting the construction of 'Lao houses', has spent considerable funds in attempting to spatially (re)organize Brao housing. The government sees the organization of Brao housing spaces as concomitant with the social organization of the Brao, their integration into Lao society and their adoption of new places with Lao meanings.

There are still a large number of so-called temporary houses in Phou Vong, which indicates that many Brao have not yet adopted Lao housing patterns. However, it would be misleading to suggest that this is a form of resistance, although it might be a subtle one in some cases. Instead, the poverty caused by internal resettlement is the main reason why more Brao people have not adopted Lao houses. None of the Brao I had talked with in Phou Vong bemoaned the change in housing patterns being promoted by the government, but they certainly did see this change in spatial terms. As one Brao man there commented in 2005, 'When we lived in Brao we made Brao houses; now we live in Lao so we want to make Lao houses'. Thus, it made perfect sense for many to abandon Brao forms of social and spatial organization in favour of being 'in place' in their new Lao lowland spaces. Ultimately, this sort of justification in the minds of many Brao is important in encouraging them to conceptualize places as the Lao do.

### **Virachey National Park and the Brao in northeastern Cambodia**

The third case study demonstrates the international dimension of development (and conservation) and the incorporation of territory into spaces of governance and new placemaking in relation to the Brao. It is about spatial (re)organization at a different spatial scale from the two Lao examples.

Protected area management is a modern way of organizing space that is considered by many to be a form of 'development', one that is, in fact, promoted by many so-called development organizations. Yet it is frequently coercive, despite being presented in a different light (Peluso, 1993; Li, 2007). This example deals with the Brao and Virachey National Park, one of Cambodia's largest protected areas. Created through royal decree in 1993, the park covers 332 500 ha in the northern parts of the northeastern provinces of Ratanakiri and Stung Treng (Figure 1). Brao peoples once inhabited most of the highland territory enclosed by the park but in the early 1960s most of them were forced to move to lowland areas situated along the Sesan and Sekong rivers (Baird, 2009).

Subsequently, many Brao became dissatisfied with the insensitive Khmerization programme initiated by Norodom Sihanouk's nationalist Sangkum government in 1953–4 soon after obtaining independence from the French, which included the development of large rubber plantations using lands confiscated from local Brao people in the late 1950s (Meyer, 1979). By the late 1960s most Brao had joined the Khmer Rouge revolution and their Brao spaces had become incorporated into liberated Khmer Rouge areas (Baird, 2008b). By 1975, there were virtually no Brao remaining in the area of present-day Virachey National Park. They had either fled to Kong Mi (the earlier

mentioned CIA-supported Brao stronghold for watching the activities along the Sihanouk Trail) in southeastern Laos, or to Vietnam and Laos in order to escape from the radical policies and deadly purges of the Khmer Rouge; or they had been relocated to the lowlands of northeastern Cambodia as part of Pol Pot's radical plan to collectivize rural Cambodia, emphasizing wet-rice agriculture.

After Vietnam invaded Cambodia in late 1978, the Khmer Rouge cooperatives were disbanded, but many of the Brao from the mountains north and east of the Sesan and Sekong rivers were not permitted to move back, as there were still 'Khmer Rouge' there (many were, in fact, Brao Kavet). By the early 1980s the Brao who had escaped to Laos and Vietnam in 1975 had returned to Cambodia, as had those Brao Kavet who fled to Laos after the 1978 Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia that overthrew the Khmer Rouge regime. However, because of the security situation in the mountains they too were forced to settle near the Sekong and Sesan rivers.

When the Khmer Rouge ceased to exist in 1998 and many Brao living along the Sesan and Sekong rivers could finally return to their special places, they were faced with a new obstacle – the establishment of Virachey National Park, incorporating their customary homelands, had been decreed without their knowledge (Baird, 2009).

As international organizations started to provide funding to support Virachey National Park, the Brao faced concerted attempts to change them in the name of biodiversity protection and were expected to give up those places that were being claimed as exclusive protected domains of the park. Although Virachey National Park funders such as the World Bank and the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) did not overtly oppose the claims of formerly resident Brao communities, even stating that they intended to treat them fairly, they did not take a stand in support of Brao land rights inside the park. Wildlife biologists, for example, considered it quite advantageous for the large mammals such as elephants and tigers to have such a large protected area with few human inhabitants, so many turned a blind eye to the plight of the Brao. The World Bank/GEF-supported project coordinators, both foreign and Khmer, were willing to rub out Brao senses of place, and replace them with ideas about the areas not being 'human places' but 'nature places', divorced from any vital historical significance in peoples' lives. Arguably, the central government was happy to gain more control over a marginal part of the country that they never really had control over in the past (Baird, 2009).

Donor money has been used to spatially (re)organize the Brao no longer permitted within the park, including teaching them the basics of lowland rice cultivation. After considerable delays, some communities have been allocated 'community protected areas'. The Brao are supposed to be allowed to fish and collect non-timber forest products in these new state-Brao created spaces, but since the conditions of their use have been determined in a top-down manner at the ministerial level, these new places too are no longer controlled by the Brao. In February 2007, Brao Kavet elders from Kok Lak Commune in Veun Say District, Ratanakiri Province told me that they had three major problems with the community protected areas: first, the borders were not to the liking of many Brao, who were not allowed to participate in their demarcation in the field; second, the Brao had to get permission from the park office in Veun Say district centre (a walk of several kilometres) every time they want to enter these protected areas, thus wasting a lot of time; third, and most importantly, the Brao are not allowed to conduct swidden agriculture – their traditional livelihood mainstay and the basis of their social and spatial organization – in their community protected areas. Furthermore, the Cambodian government, using funding provided by the World Bank and GEF, has quietly forced out the Brao who had managed to work their way back into the park in the late 1990s and early

2000s, even though this was not explicitly approved by the World Bank. This also contravened the bank's indigenous peoples and resettlement policies.

To make matters worse, in so far as external circumstances had prevented the Brao from living in their homelands since the 1960s and early 1970s, they found that they had no legal rights over their traditional lands because claims dating prior to 1979 are not legally valid (because of the extent of mass evacuations, resettlements and confusion caused by the obliteration of land ownership engendered under the Khmer Rouge). Thus, using an internationally funded governmental instrument of conservation, attempts are legitimized to erase Brao ideas of place and subsume them under new rules that separate the Brao from their old places.

As in Laos, the Khmers have similar ideas about the desirability of keeping the Brao in the lowlands and out of the mountains, and at least partially transforming and assimilating them into mainstream Khmer culture (Baird, 2008b) – much like Sihanouk wanted to in the 1960s (Meyer, 1979) and Pol Pot tried to in the 1970s (Colm, 1996).

The Brao have shown various signs of resistance and mistrust towards the rationale for Virachey National Park. Some have knocked down signs put up by park officials and openly complain about the park, though mainly behind the backs of officials, and there have been efforts to regain control and agency over former resource areas and Brao places in Siem Pang, Veun Say and Taveng districts adjacent to Virachey National Park. However, this does not mean that the Brao are totally against the idea of protecting places inside the park which they still regard as theirs, for example from commercial logging and other outsiders depleting or overexploiting its resources.

## Discussion

I now return to the four-point typology of the requirements of 'place' introduced at the outset, and assess it in relation to the three case studies presented above.

The first point identifies places as being socially constructed, and thus conceptions of place can be expected to change when peoples' lives are altered. Since all of the case studies show that Brao people have had their lives significantly socially and spatially (re)organized, often in the name of development or even conservation, perceptions of 'places' have certainly shifted, although human agency has prevented changes from going exactly as the powers that be hoped. In Laos, those resettled from their previous places in the uplands have been presented with new spaces that are officially labelled as being 'Lao' and appropriate for 'fixed occupations'. The reality is that the success of these projects is frequently only partial, influenced by various factors including age; conceptions of place have also changed for the Brao who have redesigned their houses. Similarly, Brao people in northeastern Cambodia who have been prevented from regaining access to their traditional lands within Virachey National Park have had their lives and concomitant senses of place changed, particularly the younger generation who no longer remember the places inside the park that have special meaning for older people.

The second point of the typology proposes that places are spaces that are given meaning through lived and conceived experiences. The case studies from Laos and Cambodia illustrate that the Brao are attached to particular places in the mountains including lands in Virachey National Park and their upland homes. But changes in place are occurring as the lived and imagined experiences of people are necessarily being altered due to new and transforming circumstances. Senses of former Brao places are becoming more conceived than lived, as people are physically removed from certain spaces.

The third point of the typology states that places only exist in relation to others. The case studies presented here illustrate this. For example, the first case study shows how

the Brao conceive Brao places (highlands) as compared to Lao places (lowlands). Brao places can only be conceived with Lao places or with the place of some 'others' in mind. This has caused many who have been resettled to emphasize the dichotomy. Similarly, Brao houses are conceived in contrast to Lao houses, both by the Lao and the Brao. New places are also being created in relation to Virachey National Park, places that are being contrasted with nonprotected area places.

The fourth point of the typology proposes that places must have boundaries to be separated from other places and spaces. As emphasized earlier, boundaries are not limited to physical or relatively fixed ones such as those encompassing Virachey National Park, but include social boundaries that are fuzzy, flexible and unevenly applied, including the ones that exist in peoples' minds and which separate Brao places from Lao places. In the case of houses, there are some boundaries that are physically created through design changes, but there are also social boundaries that are not immediately obvious but which can be even more impermeable than physical boundaries. For example, when spirit taboos are evoked for particular families, including their house space, a small taboo stick is sufficient to establish a strong barrier preventing access. Of course, the meanings of these boundaries change as peoples' lives are (re)organized, and perceptions of place are altered, but boundaries exist all the same.

## Conclusions

The three case studies presented here indicate different ways that statist spatial tools have been deployed to socially (re)organize the Brao of Laos and Cambodia, including reorienting their senses of place, even if Brao responses have been variable and are complex. History has often been important in mediating turbulent circumstances, as has group and individual human agency, which even the most powerful players can rarely completely rub out. That is, responses to power from above are rarely fully predictable. But what is telling in all the case studies is that those promoting change have found it useful to (re)organize places at different scales so as to consolidate power. The deconstruction of place has occurred to facilitate its (re)construction.

In highlighting the significance of social and spatial (re)organization in relation to changes in the conception of place, it is seen how political economy, normative discourses, ecology and history have all played important roles in mediating Brao responses to outside influences, as has human agency. The many influences lead to varying results and a wide range of often unpredictable responses. In this poststructural world, this should come as little surprise.

What I have tried to show here is that it can be useful to pull the spatial aspects of so-called development policies and projects apart. With the spatial dimension made more evident, it becomes easier to see the sometimes insidious, and subtle, aspects of development, and the role of place in its promotion or failures. As a heuristic tool, this sort of exercise can be useful in illustrating the role of place in social and spatial (re)organization. It is not that spatial organization is somehow privileged or an overpowering monolith that supersedes the social, or that conceptions of place can be changed at will, but the struggles surrounding space and place are a crucial part of development, something that is apparently frequently overlooked, despite its obvious importance.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to Philippe Le Billon for his useful comments on an earlier draft, and to the three anonymous *SJTG* reviewers, who all contributed to improving the paper. Eric Leinberger from the

Geography Department at UBC helped with the maps. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Second Lao Studies Conference, Arizona State University, Tempe, 3–6 May 2007.

### Endnotes

- 1 Some authors spell the word Brao as 'Brou', which can cause considerable confusion not only because there are quite separate ethnic groups in south-central Laos and the highlands of central Vietnam who are more appropriately called 'Brou', but also because 'Brao' is closer to their actual pronunciation of their name.
- 2 In Laos, the Brao are frequently identified as 'Lave' and sometimes generically grouped as '*Lao Theung*' (meaning 'upper Lao') while in Cambodia they are known generically as '*Khmer Leu*' (meaning 'upper Khmer'). While neither of these terms are derogatory, the Lao and the Khmer have historically dubbed Austroasiatic groups like the Brao with the pejoratives '*kha*' and '*phnong*' respectively. In that the Brao are a cross-border grouping, their historical places include upland regions straddling Laos and Cambodia (see Baird, forthcoming).

### References

- Agnew J (2002) *Making Political Geography (Human Geography in the Making)*. Arnold, London.
- Baird IG (2007) Contested history, ethnicity, and remembering the past: the case of the Ay Sa Rebellion in southern Laos. *Crossroads* **18** (2), 119–59.
- Baird IG (2008a) The case of the Brao: revisiting physical borders, ethnic identities and spatial and social organisation in the hinterlands of southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia. In Goudineau Y, Lorrillard M (eds) *Recherches Nouvelles sur le Laos*, 595–630. Etudes thématiques 18, École française d'Extrême-Orient, Paris and Vientiane.
- Baird IG (2008b) Various Forms of Colonialism: The Social and Spatial Reorganisation of the Brao in Southern Laos and Northeastern Cambodia. PhD dissertation, Department of Geography, The University of British Columbia, Vancouver.
- Baird IG (2009) Controlling the margins: nature conservation and state power in northeastern Cambodia. In Bourdier F (ed) *Development and Dominion: Indigenous Peoples in Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos*, 215–48. White Lotus Press, Bangkok.
- Baird IG (forthcoming) Making space: the ethnic Brao and the international border between Laos and Cambodia. *Geoforum*.
- Baird IG & Dearden P (2003) Biodiversity conservation and resource tenure regimes – a case study from northeast Cambodia. *Environmental Management* **32** (5), 541–50.
- Baird IG & Shoemaker B (2007) Unsettling experiences: internal resettlement and international aid agencies in Laos. *Development and Change* **38** (5), 865–88.
- Baird IG & Shoemaker B (2008) *People, Livelihoods and Development in the Xekong River Basin of Laos*. White Lotus Press, Bangkok.
- Baudenne A (1913) Les Khas de la région d'Attopeu [The Khas of the region of Attopeu]. *Revue Indochinoise* **19** (8), 260–74.
- Bourdier F (2006) *The Mountain of Precious Stones. Ratanakiri, Cambodia. Essays in Social Anthropology*. The Centre for Khmer Studies, Phnom Penh.
- Bourdieu P (1979) The Kabyle house or the world reversed. In Bourdieu P *Algeria 1960, The Disenchantment of the World, The Sense of Honour, The Kabyle House or the World Reversed: Essays*, 131–53. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, London, New York and Melbourne.
- Chamberlain J (2001) *Participatory Poverty Assessment. Lao PDR*. Asian Development Bank, State Planning Committee and National Statistics Centre, Vientiane.
- Colm S (1996) *The Highland Minorities and the Khmer Rouge in Northeastern Cambodia 1968–1979*. Document Center of Cambodia, Phnom Penh.
- Conboy K (with Morrison J) (1995) *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos*. Paladin Press, Boulder.
- Cresswell T (2004) *Place: A Short Introduction*. Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford.
- Duncan J (2000) Place. In Johnston RJ, Gregory D, Pratt G, Watts M (eds) *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, fourth edition, 582–84. Blackwell, Oxford and Malden.

- Escobar A (2001) Culture sits in places. Reflections on globalism and subaltern strategies of localization. *Political Geography* **20**, 139–74.
- Evans G (1990) *Lao Peasants Under Socialism*. Yale University Press, New Haven.
- Evrard O, Goudineau Y (2004) Planned resettlement, unexpected migrations and cultural trauma in Laos. *Development and Change* **35** (5), 937–62.
- Foucault M (1991) Governmentality. In Burchell G, Gordon C, Miller P (eds) *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, second edition, 87–104. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Gordillo GR (2002) The dialectics of estrangement: memory and the production of places of wealth and poverty in the Argentinean Chaco. *Cultural Anthropology* **17** (1), 3–31.
- Gordillo GR (2004) *Landscapes of Devils. Tensions of Place and Memory in the Argentinean Chaco*. Duke University Press, Durham, NC and London.
- Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC) (2005) *The Ethnic Groups of Lao PDR*. Department of Ethnic Groups. LFNC, Vientiane.
- Lefebvre H (1991) *The Production of Space*, second edition. Blackwell, Oxford.
- Li TM (2007) *The Will to Improve. Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics*. Duke University Press, Durham, NC and London.
- Lucas S (1997) Attapeu. In Goudineau Y (ed) *Resettlement and Social Characteristics of New Villages. Basic Needs for Resettled Communities in the Lao PDR*, 115–59. An ORSTOM Survey Vol. 2, Provincial Reports. UNDP/UNESCO, Vientiane.
- Marston SA (2000) The social construction of scale. *Progress in Human Geography* **24** (2), 219–42.
- Matras-Guin J (1992) Le cercle du village: orientation et hiérarchisation de l' espace chez les Brou du Cambodge [The circular village: orientation and hierarchy of the space of the Brou of Cambodia]. In Matras-Guin J, Taillard C (eds) *Habitations et habitat d'Asie du Sud-Est Continentale*, 61–110. Edition L'Harmattan, Paris.
- Matras-Troubetzkoy J (1975) Eléments pour l' étude du village et de l'habitation Brou [Elements of the study of the village and the habitation of the Brou]. *Asie du Sud-est et Monde Insulindien* **6** (2–3), 201–28.
- Meyer C (1979) Les nouvelles provinces: Ratanakiri–Mondolkiri [The new provinces: Ratanakiri–Mondolkiri]. *Revue Monde en Développement* **28**, 682–90.
- Moore DS (2000) The crucible of cultural politics: reworking 'development' in Zimbabwe's eastern highlands. *American Ethnologist* **26** (3), 654–89.
- Pellow D (ed.) (1996) *Setting Boundaries. The Anthropology of Spatial and Social Organization*. Bergin & Garvey, Westport and London.
- Petit P (2008) Rethinking internal migrations in Lao PDR: the resettlement process under micro-analysis. *Anthropological Forum* **18** (2), 117–38.
- Peluso NL (1993) Coercing conservation? *Global Environmental Change* **3** (2), 199–217.
- Rigg J (2005) *Living with Transition in Laos. Market Integration in Southeast Asia*. Routledge, London and New York.
- Sachs W (1992) One world. In Sachs W (ed), *The Development Dictionary. A Guide to Knowledge as Power*, 109–112. Zed Books, New York and London.
- Scott JC (1985) *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. Yale University Press, New Haven.
- Scott JC (1998) *Seeing like a State. How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. Yale University Press, New Haven.
- Taupin J (1888) Huit jours au pays des Braous [Eight days in the land of the Braous]. *Bulletin de la Société des études Indochinoises* **1** (2), 47–64.
- Teschke B (2003) *The Myth of 1648. Class, Geopolitics and the Making of Modern International Relations*. Verso, New York.
- Tuan Y-F (1977) *Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Vanderveest P (2003) Land to some tillers: development-induced displacements in Laos. *International Social Science Journal* **55** (1), 47–56.