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## Landscapes of political memories: War legacies and land negotiations in Laos

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## A B S T R A C T

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Wars and their aftermaths frequently transform land use and ownership, reshaping 'post-conflict' landscapes through new boundaries, population movements, land reforms and conditions of access. Within a global context of controversial land concessions and farmland acquisitions, we bring to light the continued salience of historical memories of war in the ways land conflicts are being negotiated in Laos. Considering circumstances at different scales—from bilateral government relations to village-level claims—we find that political capital linked to memories of wartime affiliations have crucial spatial and place-based connections, and that they affect the ways investors, government officials and villagers negotiate over land concessions. Ethnographic evidence, spatial analysis and a survey of expatriate development workers engaged with land issues in Laos suggest that such 'political memories' are an important but often overlooked factor in shaping an uneven concessions landscape. We discuss implications for foreign development organizations that tend to privilege technical and legal aspects of land management over such political dimensions.

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## Introduction

Sitting at an outdoor café along the Mekong River, a young expatriate explains how his aid agency assists the Lao government in studying massive economic land concessions. Clearly knowledgeable about technical aspects and concerned by mismanagement, the aid worker seems less cognisant or even interested about the political dimensions of these land deals in this 'post-conflict' and 'still communist' country.<sup>1</sup> When prompted, he quickly dismisses the possibility that past political and military struggles would influence current arrangements, arguing instead that what matters is a good technical survey process to determine where land concessions are being granted.

The problems associated with large-scale economic land concessions in Laos are widely recognized, and foreign aid agencies have spent millions of dollars over the last decade to support land titling and land-use planning in both rural and urban areas (Baird, 2010a; Barney, 2009; Dwyer, 2007; Hall, Hirsch, & Li, 2011). Local and international civil society organizations, academics, journalists, and politicians, including the former Minister in charge of the National Land Management Authority, have all raised criticisms, prompting the previous Prime Minister, Bouasone Bouphavanh, to impose a somewhat ineffective moratorium on new large land

concessions in May 2007 (Baird, 2010a; Dwyer, 2007; Hanssen, 2007).<sup>2</sup> Yet few seem to stress the importance of Laos's recent history, and openly acknowledge that the past is not past when it comes to whose land is taken away, and how discussions and negotiations play out regarding land tenure issues.

Controversies over how vast tracks of land have been allocated through concessions or other forms of large-scale land acquisitions are not unique to Laos, and neither are the political legacies of troubled pasts. The global reach and consolidation of agribusinesses, the spectre of food scarcity, the 'foreignization' of farmlands, and the 'financialization' of food commodities are giving land issues a new geopolitical prominence (GRAIN, 2008; Zoomers, 2010). Some governments imposed further regulations or even moratoriums on farmland sales as many food staples doubled in price during 2007–2008 and media reports on 'foreign land grabs' increased (World Bank, 2010a). Concern over massive land deals is particularly acute for 'post-conflict' countries, where varying degrees of forced and voluntary population displacement, fledgling regulatory institutions and investment-thirsty authorities are creating a context prone to abuses (Unruh & Williams, 2012). Despite principled calls for politically-sensitive contextualization, the intricate character and consequences of historical memories remain major challenges.

Using the case of Laos (see Fig. 1) within a broader context of rising international farmlands acquisitions, we seek to demonstrate the importance of memories in 'post-conflict' land issues. We propose that memories are actualized through an embodiment of

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Fig. 1. Places in Laos mentioned in this article.

places of belonging that situate local identities within historicized national territory. Place-based identities are, for example, mobilized through the political currency of historicized 'national' heroism (see Evans, 1998; Pholsena, 2006; Tappe, 2011). This transcalar claim, between local and national historical narratives, involves spaces defining 'local' identities which are reinscribed within the 'national' territory and history for the purpose of resisting 'global' land-based economic projects. Memories are thus politically actualized by turning spaces, such as those of indigeneity, into birthplaces of national heroism to resist global capital. As such, we argue, memories of a war that supposedly ended in 1975, but actually continued on for many years after, are contributing to shaping contemporary rural landscapes in Laos. Hopefully this article will contribute to debates about 'post-conflict' land allocation and spur organizations and researchers working on land issues to address how politicized memories affect contemporary land and other resource allocation and use.

Organizing the article into two broad sections, we first survey studies on the international 'land grab' and 'post-conflict' land issues, before turning to the importance of political legacies and historical memories in land use and ownership. We then turn to Laos, first explaining our approach, and then using a series of short case studies to support our arguments. We explain why

international agencies have failed to consider the historical and political aspects linked to land issues in Laos, and then conclude on the significance of memories of conflicts and relative positionality in negotiations over land.

### Food crises, land grabs and 'post-conflict' contexts

Land issues have recently regained prominence, largely because of major farmland acquisitions occurring in a 'global food crisis' context that owed more to speculation and industry restructuring than actual food shortages (Cotula, Vermeulen, Leonard, & Keeley, 2009; McMichael, 2009; Van Der Ploeg, 2010; Zoomers, 2010). Most media represented these acquisitions as a massive new 'global land grab', an unsurprising term given the rapid speed, broad geographical range and vast areas covered by these deals (World Bank, 2010a). Many of these acquisitions have been taking place in poor and conflict-affected countries (see Table 1), yet where states are deemed 'strong enough' to ensure controversial tenure for investors, where land is supposedly 'available' in part due to conflict-related arrested development and population displacements, and agricultural yields are 'sub-optimal' and supposedly in need of external investment and even ownership transfer. Supporters see these agro-investments as a major opportunity for

**Table 1**  
Large-scale farmland acquisitions in select conflict-affected countries (2004–2009).

Country	Number projects	Total area (million ha)	Median size (ha)	Area of country (%)	Domestic share (% of area)
Cambodia	61	0.96	8985	5.3	70
Laos	1143	0.25	n.a.	1.1	n.a.
Liberia	17	1.6	59,374	14.4	7
Mozambique	405	2.67	2225	3.4	53
Sudan	132	3.96	7980	1.7	78
Ethiopia	406	1.19	700	1.1	49
Nigeria	115	0.79	1500	0.9	97

The data for Sudan is only for the nine northern or central states out of twenty-five in total. Applications made between January 2005 and December 2009 (or 2004–2009) except for Cambodia and Nigeria (1990–2006). The World Bank did not inventory Laos due to deficient government upstream reporting and accountability. Sources: national and regional authorities, compiled in [World Bank \(2010a\)](#).

economic recovery and improved food security, while critics denounce farmland acquisitions as authoritarian dispossession of local communities and agro-investments as ‘disaster capitalism’ abetted by donor agencies and instrumented by opportunistic domestic elites ([Cotula et al., 2009](#); [GRAIN, 2008](#); [Klein, 2007](#); [Pugh, 2005](#)). Framed by neoliberal ideology calling for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) to bring about reconstruction and development, such land deals often undermine pre-existing land claims, and foster land speculation rather than productive investments with equitable returns ([Gould, Carter, & Shrestha, 2006](#)), ultimately bringing about a violent dispossession, exacerbating inequalities and mostly benefiting transnationals ([Ybarra, 2009](#))—risks that even the [World Bank \(2010a\)](#) is stressing.

Such criticisms have been raised most prominently for land deals in Cambodia, Madagascar, Mozambique, Sudan and more recently Burma/Myanmar ([Andrianirina-Ratsialonana, Ramarojohn, Burnod, & Teyssier, 2011](#); [Cotula et al., 2009](#); [FIAN, 2010](#); [Global Witness, 2009](#); [Woods, 2011](#)). Laos also figures among the countries where more than one percent of the land has been controversially allocated to large-scale agricultural concessions (and an estimated ten percent when considering all concessions, including timber and mining, see, [Schoenweger & Ullenberg, 2009](#)) (see [Table 1](#)).

Large-scale land acquisitions in post-conflict countries have coincided with renewed concern for land issues and their relations with armed conflicts ([Daudelin, 2003](#); [Fitzpatrick, 2001](#); [Unruh, 2002](#); [Woods, 2003, 2011](#)). During the 1960s to 1980s, land issues and armed conflicts were mostly interpreted as rebellions seeking improved access to land for the masses ([Russett, 1964](#)). Following on wars of independence seeking to reclaim ‘national territory’ from the grip of colonial powers, these ‘peasant wars’ demonstrated a high degree of complexity that could thus not simply be reduced to armed struggles for land redistribution ([Wolf, 1969](#)). Concerns in the 1990s turned to environmental scarcity, with an emphasis on land degradation and overpopulation rather than land distribution ([Homer-Dixon, 1999](#)). Post-conflict land access is now pointing at tensions between large-scale land-based economic schemes, the promotion of sustainable rural livelihoods, and the concerns of rural communities.

### War legacies and land issues

Wars and their consequences alter land tenure and uses, often in dramatic ways ([Unruh, 2002](#)). People are displaced because of hostilities, sometimes durably when a de facto annexation takes place as in some ‘Israeli’ territories. Dislocation can totally disrupt land tenure, with a greater risk of definitive loss when claims rest on “actual occupation” of the land, or a “social position” within a destroyed community ([Unruh, undated: 4](#)). Lands are also made inaccessible by hostilities, sometimes over long periods due to land mines and unexploded ordnance ([Andersson, da Sousa, & Paredes,](#)

[1995](#); [Unruh, Heynen, & Hossler, 2003](#)). As people resettle elsewhere, conflicts sometimes emerge between ‘uprooted’ and ‘indigenous’ populations ([Duncan, 2005](#)). For example, land issues stalled demobilization in El Salvador and Nicaragua, threatening a tenuous peace ([Unruh, undated: 4](#)).

If renewed armed conflict remains a major concern and motivation for aid agencies ([USAID, 2005](#); [Unruh, 2009](#)), broader understandings of conflicts and forms of violence, such as those related to intra-household gender-related land issues, are needed (see for example [UN-Habitat, 2007](#)). Some foreign aid policy documents relating to land issues recognize the importance of power dimensions and political character. A report to the World Bank stresses that, “[I]and policy is a political issue. It is not possible to disentangle its determinants and impacts from the material and political interests of the individuals and groups involved. Politics needs to be factored in from the start” ([Daudelin, 2003: 26](#)). A USAID ‘tool kit’ on conflict and land issues states that “competition over access to land is often, at its core, about power, both socio-economic and political”, noting that “attempts to settle ‘old scores’ ... can precipitate land disputes” ([USAID, 2005: 6](#)). The tool kit emphasizes that the “complex and politically-sensitive nature of land conflict requires a strategic, creative and flexible approach to programmatic intervention”, calls for “a careful balance of political sensitivity and substantive land expertise”, and stresses the importance of sustaining the “political will” of local authorities in support of reforms and the need for “political inclusion” to increase the viability of interventions ([USAID, 2005: 6](#)). So how important are memories of ‘past’ conflicts in shaping the politics of land allocation and power relations? Several studies have examined this question, especially in relation to indigenous struggles, land reforms, and cultural conceptions of landscapes in conflict-affected Latin American countries ([Curtoni, Lazzari, & Lazzari, 2003](#); [Gordillo, 2004](#); [Gordon, Guardian, & Hale, 2003](#); [Lindo-Fuentes, Kristofer Ching, & Lara Martínez, 2007](#); [Wood, 2003](#)).

### *Identities, memories and political capital*

Identities are frequently key to post-conflict entitlements. Whether linked to nationality, ethnicity, political convictions, kinship, or interpersonal relations, identities are based in part on historical memories ([Baird, 2007](#); [Edensor, 1997](#); [Smith, 1993](#)). In turn, the memories (and memorial elements) of cultural landscapes have an important place in the politics of identity ([Moore & Whelan, 2007](#)). Post-war resettlement and land reforms in Zimbabwe provide interesting examples. The first generation of land allocation and resettlement in post-civil war Zimbabwe during the 1980s contributed to reducing inequalities. Key to this was the relatively small size of plots allocated, which created opportunities for the disadvantaged as “those who were already well off had no interest in working up a sweat tilling the five hectares to be given to each family” ([Kinsey, 2004: 1689](#)). A second more negative aspect is

that resettlement was sometimes forced upon families by former communal area neighbours selecting, apparently primarily due to their “various forms of “anti-social” behaviour (thievery, drunkenness and witchcraft) and perhaps secondarily due to membership in the wrong political party at the time of independence” (Kinsey, 2004: 1677). Memories thus informed who could stay and who had to resettle. In the 2000s, land ownership security for individual producers “lie[d] not in the legalities surrounding the tenurial system but with perceived political loyalties” (Kinsey, 2004: 1672). Perceived loyalties relate notably to political affiliations during the civil war (Hammar & Raftopoulos, 2003: 23).

We use the term ‘political memories’ to stress the political origin and present-day relevance of these memories, as seen as crucial to both the state and villagers at the local level; the politicized circumstances in which these memories are called upon both come from the top down and from the ground up; and the political influence that such memories can have on decision-making processes supposedly driven by economic and environmental factors should not be underestimated. These processes, we argue, are informed by social capital and their politicized expression—political capital. In his re-examination of social space (*espace social*), Bourdieu (1980: 2) extends the notion of capital from economic to cultural and social, defining social capital as “the set of actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relations of acquaintanceship and mutual-recognition”. Social capital is thus both identifying and enabling: identifying network belonging, and enabling economic, cultural and symbolic capital mobilization. Social capital is not fixed or given, but fluid and in constant need of knowledge maintenance (*re-connaissance*). Part of this fluidity and maintenance relates to the elusiveness and (re)construction of memories, and their importance for the durability of networks. For Bourdieu, membership profitability was the foundation of solidarity, making groups possible. This was not to say that groups were only and purposely organized for and sustained through profits, but that the concept of social capital implied a necessary utility within relationships. As we discuss below, the temporal and spatial question of utility is central to the concept of spatialized political memory.

Political scientist Robert Putnam and his colleagues (Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti, 1992) offer a less actor-centred perspective, arguing that social capital is a public good consisting of dense networks of social groups facilitating cooperation. This aggregate view suggests that political mobilization is unlikely in the absence of pre-existing social capital, hence the importance of social capital to the vitality of democracy. If social capital is the “fossil record of successful past efforts to institutionalize ongoing cooperation” (Unger, 1998: 14), it is also—as we suggest here—the spatial record of past contributions to cooperative ventures. While Bourdieu (1980: 2) stresses that social capital links “are irreducible to objective relations of proximity in physical space (geographic)”, social capital both derives and contributes to notions of proximity in social space. In turn, social capital becomes political capital as it both contributes to collective decision-making processes and is itself informed by such processes—in our case the perceived contribution to the outcome of a war through memorized alliances and support. If social capital is often mobilized and turned into political capital, for example through public protests creating a public space of resistance ‘in the present’, the form of social capital we are interested in here, in contrast, brings a politicized public space such as a ‘safe village’ for the communist insurgents ‘from the past’ into the present.

#### Alternative explanations

Political memories are not the only factor shaping the landscape in Laos, and are frequently not the most important. Land-

dispossessing concessions are not simply imposed by the regime upon its (former) enemies, and as Hall et al. (2011) have pointed out, exclusion from land can occur in many different ways, including from below, and should not be considered to be inherently bad. We identify in Table 2 three sets of environmental, economic and social factors. Official policy at least partially dictates the factors that should be taken into consideration, including policies promoting land concessions and, in the case of Laos, state capitalism more generally (see Baird, 2011). Investors also bring their own, more economic, but also frequently political, criteria such as access to markets, availability of transport and energy infrastructure, soil and water availability (Baird, 2010a). We assess below the relative importance of such criteria in Laos.

Among alternative explanations, one must also remember that land concessions are not uniformly considered as ‘punishing’ by state officials, aid workers, and villagers. Many hold the hope that large-scale concessions will improve not only global food availability and the domestic export economy, but also the lives of local communities through job opportunities and better services. There is much controversy about the compatibility and achievability of such goals (Baird, 2011). The World Bank (2010a,b), among others such as the FAO (2008), have set principles and guidelines for ‘responsible agro-investments’, including: recognition and respect of existing land and resource rights; promotion of food security; consultation and participation of local communities; technical, legal, and economic viability; transparent, monitored and accountable process; and social and environmental sustainability. Yet the overall message coming out of its landmark report “Rising Global Interest in Farmland” relates to the agricultural potential of underutilized farmland. Those countries with the highest potential include large conflict-affected (and ‘farmland rich’) Sub-Saharan African countries, such as Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique, Sudan, and Zimbabwe.

#### Spatial dimensions of political memories

Much of the work conducted by geographers on space and memory has focused on trauma, memorialization, and nationalism (Edensor, 1997; Purvis & Atkinson, 2009; Steinberg & Taylor, 2003), post-conflict development in urban settings (Nagel, 2002), and more rarely on non-trauma related memories in non-western traditions (Legg, 2007). The importance of memory in commercial projects has been more rarely considered (on the branding of heritage site aesthetics see, Atkinson, 2007). Specific studies of memories mobilization in farmland politics include, for example, peasant struggles over land property and access in Zimbabwe (Fortmann, 1995; Moore, 1993), post-war ecological nostalgia and state-driven resettlement in Eritrea (Boerma, 2004; Poole, 2009), and the search for alternatives to ‘agro-development’ on indigenous territories (Larsen, 2006).

Two issues are of particular concern to our case study. The first is at what ‘scale’ are memories embodied and spatialized (Boyarin, 1995), as well as inserted into contemporary politics. Individual kinship relations with war heroes, village-level claims of political

**Table 2**  
Criteria influencing land concession allocation.

Environmental factors	Soil quality, moisture, crop suitability and impact
Economic factors	Crop prices, land value, taxation regime, labour costs, infrastructure, access to markets
Social factors	Current land use and tenure, bilateral relations between investors and host authorities, social licence to operate, relations between authorities and local communities, cultural value of land

support, and ethnic association with one side in the conflict constitute some of these scales. The second issue of concern is that of ‘generational’ embodiment. For how long is a society in a ‘post-conflict’ context, and how does one conceive of embodied war memories when the ‘veteran generation’ (those who lived through the war) is gone, or at least no longer at the reins of power? We suggest that spatialized memories are not only embodied through the veteran generation—actualized into so-called ‘veteran claims’—but also embodied through places of belonging associated with veterans and community support or opposition to different sides of Lao conflicts.

#### *Researching spatialized political legacies*

How does one account for the influence of a politicized past? Work on memories faces numerous methodological challenges, including recall problems, the selective character and biases of individual recollections and collectively memorialized narratives, and the ethical dimensions of requesting to recall painful events (Conway, 2010). These challenges are exacerbated for research on political memories influencing controversial issues, and are further compounded by broader research contexts of closed political systems characterized by a general distrust and suspicion towards foreign researchers (Woods, 2003). The political character of the memories and their influence makes it challenging to detect and address all the nuances using official documentation or government statistics. The Lao government strongly discourages foreign organizations from becoming involved in ‘politics’, which is considered to be a strictly internal affair. Even asking about Lao politics is discouraged. For example, Party members are explicitly prohibited from telling foreigners that they are Party members. The Lao government wants aid agencies to provide technical assistance, but desires that development support be completely separated from politics. Thus, aid agencies highlight technical aspects of their work while suppressing anything political. While this ‘rendering technical’ process, as Tania Murray Li (2007) calls it, occurs in relatively open political systems; the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) remains a closed one-Party state, where the press is under control and direct political criticism or calls for multi-party democracy are not tolerated.

As a result, research had to be conducted through trust-based networks and the empirical material took the form of ethnographic accounts. Most of these observations came from southern Laos, the long-term research area of the first author, specifically in Champasak Province.<sup>3</sup> These interactions do not provide a comprehensive picture of the impact of political memories in land negotiations, nor do they allow for an assessment of the relative importance of political memories compared to other factors. They are, nevertheless, valuable for understanding complex relationships, an argument supported by other geographers who do ethnography (see, Crang & Cook, 2007), especially if working in politically or otherwise sensitive situations (Gould, 2010; Nordstrom & Robben, 1995). We complemented this approach by reviewing opportunities for a spatial analysis of ethno-political affiliations and land concessions but found such analysis problematic due to both low quality data and ethical considerations. We also conducted an opinion survey among foreign land management experts and present the results below. This was a group of people who are believed to have been relatively willing to be frank for our anonymous survey. They all had substantial experience working on land issues in Laos, and most live there at present. Thus, their views can generally be considered to represent the more experienced in land issues of those in the expatriate development community in Laos.

#### **Political memories and large-scale economic land concessions in Laos**

Geography is important for understanding the circumstances of the intense political and military conflicts that affected Laos for much of the second half of the 20th century (Kittikhoun, 2009). The First (1947–1954) and Second (1959–1973) Indochina Wars greatly disrupted life throughout the country. Low level insurgency continued throughout much of the country, especially areas near the border with Thailand, after the Pathet Lao<sup>4</sup> communists took control in 1975. Conflict continued throughout the 1980s, and in parts of central and northern Laos well into the 1990s and even the 2000s.<sup>5</sup> While current hostilities remain circumscribed to a few isolated areas in the north, memories of the struggles and political differences associated with conflict remain stark among people in Laos, but they are rarely communicated to, or recognized by, outsiders. The Lao government itself frequently distorts the nature of post-1975 hostilities, refers to insurgents as ‘bandits’, and prohibits foreigners from accessing conflict areas. Unsurprisingly, most foreign donors consider that hostilities ended more than three decades ago, and few recognize Laos to presently be in a ‘post-conflict’ situation.

Unsurprisingly, then, aid agencies do not generally associate the land concessions boom of the 2000s with ‘post-conflict’ dynamics. Rather, they see it as the result of neoliberal reforms ‘opening’ up land in a context of rising commodity prices, especially rubber since 2004, and the active promotion of FDI by a Lao government seeking to generate revenue and develop infrastructure, but also eradicate shifting cultivation and ‘civilize’ ethnic minorities through agro-investments and alternative land uses (Baird, 2010a; Dwyer, 2007; Hanssen, 2007; Pongkhao, 2010). Unlike other parts of former Indochina, large plantation concessions do not have a long history in Laos. Fast-growing tree plantations were first awarded in the 1990s, and despite criticisms in the late 1990s and early 2000s regarding their negative environmental and local livelihoods impacts, the pace of land reallocation has accelerated. A “discourse of Laos as a ‘last frontier’ is being deployed in an imaging of the Lao uplands as an empty, available site for transnational resource sector investment” (Barney, 2009: 156; Lang 2006; Shoemaker, Baird, & Baird, 2001). Agro-investments sharply increased from the mid-2000s (see Fig. 2), and by early 2011 Lao authorities had approved about 300 domestic and foreign industrial plantation projects worth \$1.5 billion, with further projects being considered for a total of 430,000 ha (Vientiane Times, 2011; World Bank, 2010b).

Several official policies define criteria for these large-scale land concessions. The first is that only the central government is entitled to issue concessions over 100 ha. Yet, the official Lao Agricultural

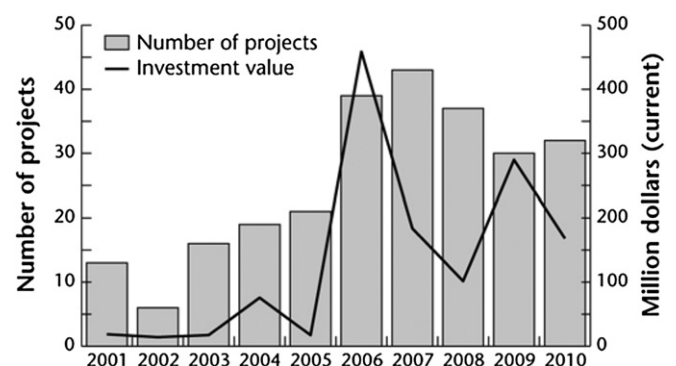


Fig. 2. Foreign investment in agriculture projects in Laos. Source: Lao Statistic Bureau (<http://www.nsc.gov.la/> accessed 21 January 2011).

Development Strategy makes room for local dimensions, stating that “area-based dimension ... will allow local players to define an agriculture development strategy based on the area’s particular circumstances...[and] adapted to the local conditions and needs” and that investments will not only be channelled using “conventional” bi-annual and five year plans, but also “new forms of bottom-up planning processes ... by which the local population will express their specific needs” (MAF, 2010: 40). A second set of criteria concerns the various concession uses, including for agriculture and forest plantations, logging, mining, and hydropower. Yet, there is much evidence that official policies are rarely strictly implemented, both in terms of criteria selection and project operationalization. Statistics on concession sizes and uses remain inaccurate and in need of clarification; a recent report noting for example that perhaps two million hectares of agricultural and forestry concessions could have already been granted but not comprehensively and centrally registered – eight percent of total land area (Sipaseuth & Hunt, 2009). One of the most thorough surveys of implementation, in Oudomxay Province, found that only 13 percent of plantation projects approved between 2003 and 2007 had actually been developed (Thongmanivong, Phengsopha, Hounghphet, Dwyer, & Oberndorf, 2009). Causes include land speculation, under-capitalized investors, lagging infrastructural investments, adverse market conditions, bureaucratic ‘red tape’, political instability, and community resistance.

The vast majority of the population of Laos are rural farmers, even if non-farming occupations are becoming increasingly significant (see Rigg, 2005). These villages are scattered, with the population being generally dispersed across the landscape so that farmers are near their farmland. This extensive geographic distribution of rural settlements and fields makes it difficult to establish land concessions without intruding on somebody’s farmland or common lands. These settlements not only reflect the population displacement impacts of recent armed conflicts. Before 1973 the Royal Lao Government (RLG) frequently relocated sympathizers into areas they controlled. In addition, almost everyone living in communist controlled areas had to flee aerial bombing and other military operations. Most recently, over the last couple of decades, many have returned to lands that they fled. Others, however, have been prevented from doing so for various reasons. In recent years, some people, particularly the Hmong, but also those from other ethnic groups, have been resettled away from remote areas due to security concerns, in much the same way as those suspected of supporting the communists were resettled by the RLG prior to 1973. The situation has been further complicated as a result of new resettlement programmes designed to reduce or eradicate swidden agriculture, stop opium production, bring services to villages, and integrate people into the nation state (see Baird & Shoemaker, 2007).

The movements of people over the past five decades have thus been very complex, with many communities relocating multiple times and frequently because of conflict-related factors. Yet, as Barney (2009: 156) notes, “the inter-connectedness and historical complexity of local social-natures and local livelihoods have often been lacking in accounts of the ‘impacts’ of particular resource sector development interventions in Laos”. In particular, the influence of political memories of war seems not to rank high in considerations of land allocation factors and their impact on new land dispossession and population movements. To assess this, we conducted a survey of perception of the relative importance of 13 potential factors in land allocation (see Table 3) among 28 foreign Lao land issue specialists. We found that “past wartime political or military affiliations of local communities” ranked well below other social and economic factors, such as corruption and land clearing opportunities, but above environmental factors in perceived

**Table 3**  
Perception of criteria importance for land concession allocation in Laos.

Rank	Factors
1	Financial self-interest of authorities
2	Bilateral relations between the governments of foreign investors and national authorities
3	Profitability of land clearing (e.g. logging)
4	Domestic patronage/clientelism relations with local communities
5	Land tenure and land use (e.g. land officially considered as state property and unused)
6	Availability of infrastructure near land (e.g. roads, irrigation)
7	International resource prices and investment cycles
8	Proximity to markets (e.g. border areas, main cities)
9	Past wartime political or military affiliations of local communities
10	Quality of the soil
11	Reputation of the foreign or local investing company
12	Suitability of climate and topography
13	Ethnic identity of local communities

Source: survey by authors administered in December 2010.

importance. Yet, as documented by the series of examples discussed below, political memories of affiliations can be involved in a great variety of ways in land concession decision-making processes.

### From the top down

National histories are particularly important for state-making (Evans, 1998), and it should thus be of little surprise that political memories are quite crucial in processes of territorialization, and land allocation by states. Lao government officials and some foreign companies use political memories to influence decision-making processes over land concessions.

#### *Concessions as war reparations – Vietnam*

Political memories of alliances between the North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao during past conflicts are frequently called upon and greatly affect today’s land issues in Laos. More specifically, political memories of Vietnamese sacrifices made during the Indochina wars and counter-insurgency support since the ‘special friendship’ treaty was signed between the two countries in 1977, are often evoked by Vietnamese companies and authorities. Such relationships to ‘past’ sacrifices are made easier by the close connections that many Vietnamese company employees have with Vietnamese authorities and military units. Laotian officials, especially those with strong ties to the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party, are thus made to feel as if a refusal for land is akin to betraying the revolution and those who sacrificed for it (Baird, 2010a).

In December 2009 Laos hosted the Southeast Asian Games. Prior to the Games, a Vietnamese company, Hoang Anh Gia Lai Joint Stock Co. (HAGL), announced that it would fund the building of the Athletes’ Village for the Games in Vientiane (see Fig. 1). Initially, it appeared that HAGL was providing this support for free, but since then it has become evident that the Lao government was expected to pay back the US\$15 million with rights to 300,000 m<sup>3</sup> of timber from Laos (Than Nien News, 2009). In addition, less than two weeks after the support for the Athlete’s Village was announced, HAGL requested a 10,000-ha land concession for growing rubber in southern Laos (see Kenney-Lazar, 2010 for more information). The two were not officially linked, but one retired Lao civil servant closely connected to senior Lao government officials has no doubt that they were. Lao senior officials apparently felt obliged to approve the request, not only because of the support HAGL had provided to the Games, but

also due to the historic relationship between Laos and Vietnam. All Lao officials spoken with believe that Vietnamese proposals are vetted in a preferential way. This example indicates how political capital based on political memories is involved in present-day favours and positioning by the Vietnamese to gain control over land and other resources. Political memories are not the only factor, but they are significant.

#### *Political capital against land concessions*

Some people in Laos with strong political connections to the Lao government use their political capital to oppose land concessions. This political capital is frequently founded on memories of past contributions to the revolution, especially during the Second Indochina War. Political memories thus come to influence access to high-level Lao government decision-makers, for example to protest against particular land concessions. Houmphanh Latthanavong, a former Pathet Lao revolutionary leader now retired from government service, heads a non-profit association (NPA) called the Lao Biodiversity Association (LBA). In 2008, LBA conducted a study of Vietnamese rubber plantation development in Xekong Province, and found serious social and environmental impacts. Most NPAs would have not dared to stand up against a Vietnamese rubber company, in part because of their political capital mentioned above. Yet, Houmphanh was confident in his own political capital—being a friend and long-time colleague with many present-day Ministers in the Lao government. Writing a strongly worded Lao language report that he widely distributed in Xekong Province, Houmphanh was able to influence the deputy governor to announce that Xekong Province would stop approving new rubber plantations, also recognizing that land-use conflicts that had developed with villagers justified a moratorium (*Vientiane Times*, 2008). Political memories gave Houmphanh the confidence he needed, and the credentials he required, to write a critical report and get it to crucial decision-makers, who took it seriously.

#### **From the bottom up**

Villagers sometimes use political capital associated with their historical relationships with the communist revolution and the Pathet Lao to protect land from being lost to concessions.

#### *Political connections and land protection*

Villagers sometimes explicitly rely on present-day political connections with high-level politicians and Lao government officials, who themselves became prominent during and after the Second Indochina War. When doing so, villagers often evoke war related political memories. For example, a villager from Nong Sim Village in Bachiengchaleunsouk District, Champasak Province, used his kinship relation to Choumaly Sayasone, the current President of Laos and Secretary General of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, to protect his land from being taken by a Vietnamese rubber company that had co-opted if not corrupted the village headman. Most villagers were coerced into selling their land, fearing that they would lose it anyway if they refused. But the well-connected villager resisted, not initially mentioning that he was Choumaly's relative, but certainly empowered to resist by his knowledge that he had someone to cover his back if necessary. The village headman continued to apply pressure on him, even claiming that the villager was opposing 'development' if he refused to give up his land. Finally, the villager informed the headman that Choumaly is his relative, after he had phoned Choumaly for advice, and received an encouraging response and the implicit green light to evoke his

name. Crucially, when he did this, the villager evoked his uncle's contribution to winning the revolutionary war rather than his current government position—thereby casting his protection within the realm of contributions to the revolution, rather than simply political patronage. When the village headman became aware of the situation he abruptly backed off. The Vietnamese ended up abandoning that particular piece of land. The village headman was later removed from his position by senior district-level politicians.

#### *Heroic birthplaces and memorable passages*

The ethnic Brao<sup>6</sup> village of Houay Ko in Pathoumphone District, Champasak Province is the birth-village of General Somsak Saisongkham, a military hero of the revolution<sup>7</sup> and former Deputy Ministry of Defence and Central Committee Member. Somsak died many years ago, but Houay Ko's leadership frequently evoke the war hero's name when engaging in important discussions regarding the village. Representatives of various companies have come to try to negotiate land concessions for growing crops. The village leaders, who were afraid of losing control of their lands, successfully refused many requests. When Lao government officials tried to pressure them into giving land away, Somsak's name was always mentioned, with the villagers implying that the service he gave to the country makes them deserving of special consideration. This can be unsettling to officials, causing them to become less decisive in coercing villagers into giving up land. Furthermore, it empowers the village headman and others in the community who are under the impression that the memory of Somsak Saisongkham provides them with protection. Crucially, nobody can challenge the motives of the community, as they have a strong history of supporting the Pathet Lao both during and following the war.

A few years ago, Km 16 Village in Bachiengchaleunsouk District, Champasak Province was able to negotiate with government officials to prevent any community land allocation to a Vietnamese rubber company, despite two adjoining communities having already lost land. Political memories of wartime played a significant role in this outcome. Like neighbouring villages, Km 16 is home to a number of pro-communist veterans from the Second Indochina War. But during the war, such Pathet Lao 'political giants' as the one-time politburo member Khamphoui Keoboulapha spent time in the community, thus further empowering locals. In addition, the village headman at the time of the struggle for land confirmed to the first author that the revolutionary status of the village was crucial in negotiations. It was mentioned during the time of negotiations, but it did not need to be elaborated on as both villagers and officials had a clear understanding of the background of the village and its significance. Such micro-geographies of revolutionary history suggest that even the memory of a hero having passed through the area is sometimes sufficient to provide a community with political capital.

These cases illustrate ways in which political capital associated with memories is being deployed, albeit unevenly and incompletely, to increase the confidence of villagers as well as increase their political capital to resist land concessions, and is also serving to make government officials and others wary to pressure those with political capital to give up their land. Yet, political connections and wartime alliances can also, at times, reduce the chances of resistance to land concessions by those who feel so loyal to the Lao government that they choose to not use their political capital to resist land concessions. Sometimes these people even work to convince others not to object. In this way, political capital, notably that of war veterans, is actually utilized to suppress the rights of locals, rather than empower them.

### The other side

The Lao government states that discrimination based on previous political alliances should not occur, but one's political history is actually crucial. The lack of political capital can be disempowering, and can impact on a community's ability to protect land. Political memories can be based on individuals in the community, whole villages, and even ethnic groups (Baird, 2010d), thus deploying certain historical places and associated identities. Security concerns, for example, play out in current internal resettlement of villages from the uplands to the lowlands. While this is particularly significant for ethnic Hmong anti-government insurgents, some ethnic Brao in Attapeu Province who were previously aligned with the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the 1960s and early 1970s have not been allowed to live on their traditional lands at least partially due to concerns about their past political allegiances (Baird, 2010b,c; Baird & Shoemaker, 2007).

Such negative political capital also characterizes individuals who were previously sent away for political 're-education' after 1975 (see Bouphanouvong, 2003; Kremmer, 2003), and while they may have reintegrated into society, political memories of incarceration can work against them. This is why many fled the country, as good opportunities for them and their children were often closed. The same factors can come into play when conducting land negotiations. Whispers between officials about somebody's past history can make a big difference when it comes to the tone of negotiations, or the willingness of officials to sign a crucial document, or simply provide basic assistance. Those with 'bad histories' (*phavat bo dy* in Lao) are also often victims of self-censorship, with 'negative' political memories seriously eroding confidence and leading to inertia. Furthermore, someone with a bad history openly complaining about a land deal is more likely of being accused of opposing Lao government policies—due to political memories—a charge with potentially serious political and everyday life ramifications.

### Former alliances and present enmities

During the Second Indochina War, the CIA recruited various ethnic minorities to fight against communism. Among these were the members of the Heuny (generally known as Nya Heun) people in Paksong District, Champasak Province, who were resettled in the late 1990s to make way for the Houay Ho and Xe Pian Xe Nam Noy hydropower dams.<sup>8</sup> Despite being negatively affected by resettlement, the Heuny have been surprisingly meek in standing up for their rights, due to memories of alignment with the RLG and the CIA: in the 1960s many became soldiers in Special Guerrilla Units (SGUs) that were paid, trained, armed and advised by the CIA (see Baird, 2012c; Briggs, 2009; Khamin, 2000, 2008). Again, political memories are causing villagers to not speak out due to fears of accusations of being 'counter-revolutionary' [*phatikan* in Lao], a label that can lead to serious consequences, including imprisonment. They either dare not draw attention to themselves, are unwilling to take risks in an unfavourable political environment, or believe that their pasts make it unlikely that they could ever be successful anyway.

Many Lahu people in northwestern Laos went on covert operations into China to act as spies for the Americans during the Second Indochina War (Conboy, 1995). Some of the CIA's most loyal followers in Laos were Lahu, and many Lahu have held onto memories of their association with the Americans during the war. For example, in late 2002 about 200 ethnic Lahu Aka people from Phousavang Village, in the Nam Nyou area of Bokeo Province, fled their village to follow a Lahu hermit messiah. He convinced them to go to clearing in the forest so American helicopters could land,

and planes could drop sacks of rice. The aircraft never arrived, and eventually Lao government soldiers forced the Lahu to return to their village. The hermit was arrested (Baird, 2004). This example demonstrates how the past has sometimes been actualized in the present. One can see how spatial dimensions are crucial, whether it be the creation of a particular space in the forest, or the desire of the government to spatially control the Lahu in official villages.

Indicative of the loyalty of many Lahu to insurgent groups, ethnic Khmu former insurgents led by Chanh Souk, who fought against the Lao government and their Vietnamese allies in the late 1970s and 1980s, remember that they received considerable villager support from Lahu people in Vieng Phoukha District, Luang Namtha Province. The Lahu frequently fed insurgents and warned them about Pathet Lao or Vietnamese troop movements. The Khmu insurgents felt the safest in Lahu villages.

Most recently, an international NGO tried to organize a land-use planning project in Lahu villages in Vieng Phoukha. Since there is little if any insurgent activity in the area now, NGO personnel did not expect that past conflicts would affect their plans. In fact, a development consultant hired by the NGO only wrote that the Lao government would not allow the establishment of a new large Lahu village, but without any mention of why they were opposed to the idea (Christian Reformed World Relief Committee, 2004). It took an extraordinary amount of time to receive approval from the Lao government to proceed with the project, and after almost two years the NGO finally decided to withdraw after not receiving approval. One interesting observation about the proposal approval process is that unlike most other NGO-supported projects in the country, this one was required to receive approval from the military, almost certainly because of political memories about the Lahu being involved in past anti-government activities. Thus, political and military alliances of the past are continuing to influence government policies and practices, even if the NGO was never explicitly told that this was the case. These influences go well beyond simply NGO projects, and can be expected to influence all types of development initiatives in the area.

On the other hand, some who have previously found themselves at odds with the Lao government, or have even fought against Pathet Lao soldiers during the Second Indochina War or other battles since 1975, may be predisposed to taking a critical view of the government. They may be inclined to believe the worst about the government and to resist state control. This may benefit some community efforts to analyze and resist land concessions. The circumstances of individuals, their families and their communities are likely to be important in determining what happens in each case.

### Aid agencies, land issues and shadows of memories

As indicated above, foreigners working on land issues should not expect to hear about these sorts of situations, as villagers with 'bad histories' are as likely to want to keep them secret from foreigners as Lao government officials. There are other reasons why expatriate development workers interested in Lao land issues have tended to ignore, deny or avoid considering the links between past political and military turmoil and present-day land disputes. For one, most international development agencies operate within a largely a-historical development framework. There is usually a fairly rapid turnover of expatriate workers in countries such as Laos, and these people often spend insufficient time in a single country to develop an historical perspective.<sup>9</sup> They come in not expecting to stay long, and so devote little time to studying history, or local languages. They are 'development experts' (Escobar, 1995; Goldman, 2005; Kothari, 2005; Mitchell, 2002).



Second, when development workers arrive in Laos, they are often attached to projects with specific time frames, and with pressures to meet targets. Therefore, workers usually need to ‘hit the ground running’. Little time is available to study the past, even when interested. A certain positioning is also commonly encountered within development agencies, one which is somewhat cynical about the need to study history, as doing so does not result in tangible benefits, or satisfy the demands of head offices, donors or host-government partners. As more broadly argued by Escobar (1995: 52), development professionals are not “seeing change as a process rooted in the interpretation of each society’s history and cultural tradition ... [rather they are seeking] to devise mechanisms and procedures to make societies fit a pre-existing model that embodied the structures and functions of modernity.” Such a perspective on land tenure implies that it is the here and now that needs to be studied.

The third reason can be usefully understood through the writings of authors who have studied institutions, including international development agencies, and their practices. The first is Foucault’s work on disciplinary knowledge and power, and the concept of governmentality, which is useful for understanding how certain discourses or narratives impact on how people view circumstances and recognize problems, including potential solutions (Foucault, 1977, 1991), and has helped inform the understandings of scholars regarding the ways institutions function. Ferguson’s (1990) classic book, *The Anti-politics Machine*, is particularly relevant for understanding how international development agencies operate. Using an example from Lesotho, Ferguson illustrates how development discourses act to depoliticize issues, and take the politics out of policies. More recently, Tania Murray Li (2007) has further advanced our understanding of how development discourses work on the ground in Indonesia, in her book *The Will to Improve*. She describes processes in which the politics is sucked out of development, and development is ultimately rendered a technical activity, rather than one wrapped up in socio-cultural, historical and political issues.

Similarly, politics is often oddly extracted from land issues. In Laos, for example, those working on development projects linked to land are not able to engage in issues related to politics. For one, the Lao government does not allow it. Second, the donors do not want to get involved in politics, which is perceived to be the sovereign domain of national governments. It could also be risky, and result in projects being delayed or cancelled, stopping the flow of money. Third, those working on projects tend to bring certain techniques that are not linked to the political circumstances of particular places but are seen as capable of transcending political boundaries. Overall, while some aid agencies recognize some of the political dimensions of development projects related to land, few seem able to discern and are willing to challenge the politicized dimensions of identities shaping entitlements to land. Boundaries have been drawn, and everyone is expected to know where they are and abide by them.

## Conclusions

Land issues are eminently political. This is particularly so in ‘post-conflict’ contexts where vast population movements, major policy changes, and large-scale investments coalesce with exacerbated identities and disputed institutions to create dense political fields. Several international agencies recognize the multiple political dimensions involved in ‘post-conflict’ land management but, at least in the Lao case, some of these dimensions are not being directly addressed. While armed hostilities have largely ended in Laos, and most aid agencies do not even consider Laos to be in a ‘post-conflict’ state, people’s present-day positions in

government and society remain closely linked to their roles during past periods of conflict. High-level government officials were frequently war heroes, and government historiography is closely linked to ‘past’ conflict. Present-day politics continue to rely on the symbolism of wartime events to justify present-day power structures, even to the extent that some Lao government officials claim that the Lao nation did not truly exist until after 1975 because of western (neo)colonial domination. The war and its ending are thus seen as the beginning of the nation, and political memories are crucial for the social construction of nationalism.

While memories of past military and political conflicts are not the only or even most important factors influencing the ways land concessions are allocated in contemporary Laos, this article shows that their importance should not be underestimated. Power relations in negotiations over land concessions, we suggest, are partly linked to memories of political and military affiliations. But such memories can also play out in various and sometimes surprising ways. Often deployed in the form of political capital to resist land concessions, such memories can also work against resistance efforts when a community seeks to maintain its loyalty to the government and Party, or when a community’s ‘bad history’ of anti-government alignment pre-empts it from expressing its grievances and exercising its rights. Being on one side of political struggles or another does not always lead to the same results, but whatever the outcomes, the evidence presented here suggest that memories of past struggles can be crucial. The spatiality of past affiliations is also relevant, and again variegated. While ‘heroic birthplaces’ present an obvious example, memories of community support for revolutionary forces even during brief passages can also be successfully instrumented.

We do not propose a new all-encompassing theory regarding political and military struggle and the implications when such conflict collides with large economic land concessions, but rather suggest that these types of political links require careful consideration, especially given their diverse forms and variety of outcomes. As some of our examples suggest, the importance of historical political memories resides as much in the silences than in their direct evocation. This is more specifically the case for memories of ‘bad histories’ that lurk under the surface of social relations. Spoken of in the shadows these political memories continue to stigmatize and incapacitate those on the ‘wrong side’, including with regard to their land rights.

This specificity makes consideration of political memories for interventions into land issues important, yet challenging, and as discussed above this is not the only reason why aid agencies have tended to either ignore or downplay the significance of this factor to their own work. This is largely due to the current political context in which aid agencies and civil society organizations operate, but also the depoliticizing way of emphasizing technical aspects of land-use planning and titling in land management. If development projects thrive through ‘depoliticization’ and ‘technicalization’, then engaging with political memories offer a counter weight to depoliticizing processes. The continued salience of historical memories of war in shaping the ways in which conflicts over land are being negotiated deserve further attention in several countries in Southeast Asia, but also parts of Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. In this regard, comparative studies based on geo-referenced farmland acquisitions, conflict areas, and ethno-religious identities may yield interesting insights into the politics and impacts of ‘post-conflict’ land allocations.

Finally, this article can hopefully be useful to political geographers through generally illustrating how the notion of political memories is important when considering the nature of political capital within the context of natural resource struggles and more

generally territorial conflicts. Indeed, political capital is only as valuable as it is remembered by those with an ability to make a difference in either subtle or more definitive ways.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Although Laos has implemented various economic reforms since 1986, the state remains a one party state and hence, the party and the government that the party controls, signify the official apparatus of power in Laos.
- <sup>2</sup> Although the moratorium was rescinded in May 2009 and replaced with a Prime Minister's decree on state land leases and concessions, a second, albeit less stringent, moratorium was established in July 2009, apparently due to members of the National Assembly, following widespread complaints by angry villagers (Baird, 2010a; Sengdara, 2010).
- <sup>3</sup> This information was collected through ethnographic research with people the first author has known for many years, using local languages.
- <sup>4</sup> The Pathet Lao literally means 'Lao country', but the term is frequently applied to those aligned with the Lao People's Revolutionary Party and the Lao People's Army.
- <sup>5</sup> On the 1962–1973 'secret war', see Conboy (1995) and Briggs (2009). On post-1975 hostilities, see Gunn (1983), Lee (2005), and Baird (2012a,b).
- <sup>6</sup> The Brao are a Mon-Khmer language speaking ethnic group in southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia.
- <sup>7</sup> Somsak Saisongkham was the main Pathet Lao military leader during the Lam Son 719 attack at Xepon, Savannakhet Province in 1971, and later in the early 1980s when Laos and Thailand fought along the border in the north.
- <sup>8</sup> In fact, the Xe Pian Xe Nam Noy did not proceed as planned due to the financial crisis that occurred in the late 1990s.
- <sup>9</sup> This varies widely, but development agency staff are generally posted for one to three years. Annual turn-over can reach up to 60 percent, with effective mission time below five months (Loquerio, 2006; Turfe, 2007). A lack of historical knowledge among expatriates dealing with land issues in Southern Africa is, for example, noted by Palmer (2007).

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