

From Peasants to Lords: The Intellectual Evolution of Grant Evans

Christopher Hutton¹ and Dominic Blaettler²

Abstract

This paper reviews Grant Evans' writings on peasants, focusing on the theoretical frameworks within which he operated. Evans' career is marked by a turn away from the ideological beliefs of his youth and early academic career, and in tandem with this, his work shifted from the socio-economic anthropology of rural Laos to a broader concern with Lao society, religion, culture and history. Evans became increasingly concerned that Lao history should be written outside the framework of post-1975 communist nationalism, and the logical culmination of this was his project to document the modern history of the Lao monarchy. His critique of central planning and social engineering was extended to the assumptions of (many) aid interventions, especially those that brought a prepackaged ideological agenda to the complex social, economic and moral economy of rural Laos. While by the end of the 1990s peasants were no longer the main focus of his work, he continued to insist on the continuing relevance of the category and the importance of a proper, anthropologically informed understanding of the rural economy and of Lao peasant society.

Introduction

In his early and mid-career, Grant Evans' most important anthropological writing concerned peasants. He published a series of articles on this topic in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Evans 1986, 1987, 1988b,c, 1990a), and two books *Agrarian Change in Communist Laos* (1988a) and *Lao Peasants under Socialism* (1990b). For Evans, the events of 1989, in particular the collapse of the Soviet Union, marked an intellectual watershed, after which an entire field of academic enquiry with its common points of reference and framework of assumptions, almost instantly came to a halt. While Evans was intensely critical of the political systems he found in Southeast Asia (and by extension in other communist societies), he had been very much formed by the surrounding intellectual and ideological debates. While he continued to publish on peasants, his primary focus gradually shifted to more general historical and cultural themes, notably the abiding significance and pervasive social presence of Lao Buddhism. This led him ultimately to research on the Lao royal family (Evans 2009).

Simplistically, one might say Evans moved from fieldwork with peasants to studying aristocrats. These are, perhaps not coincidentally, the two categories that appear in the subtitle of Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (1966), a work that Evans greatly admired. In this paper we present a brief survey of Grant Evans' writing on peasants and agrarian policy, and then move on to a discussion of the continuities and discontinuities in his thinking, taking into account the overall trajectory of his work.

¹ Professor, School of English, The University of Hong Kong; chutton@hku.hk

² Professor, Bern University of Applied Sciences, Switzerland; dominic.blaettler@bfh.ch

1. Debates and controversies in the late 1980s

Evans began his university studies in 1968 as a member of a generation of students radicalized by the Vietnam War, becoming part of what he termed the 'New Left' in Australia (Rehbein 2011: 99, and Rowley, this volume). Not surprisingly, Evans' work on peasants was written in dialogue with Western Marxist and pro-communist writings, against the backdrop of the post-1975 fall-out from the Indo-China conflict. His first substantial experience of Southeast Asia began in 1979 with the research for *Red Brotherhood at War* (Evans and Rowley 1984). He subsequently carried out fieldwork in Laos between 1979 and 1987. Unlike in other communist states in Southeast and East Asia, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), which came to power in 1975, largely backed down from its initial plan for radical reform in the countryside. New taxes imposed on the countryside in 1976 triggered widespread resistance, and the collectivization drive of 1978-79 faltered in the face of a potential exodus of lowland farmers to neighbouring Thailand (Evans 1988a, b, Dommen 1989). In a survey of writings on 'peasant consciousness' (1987) Evans examined critically the work of radical Western scholars, notably James Scott's *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1976). Scott's views are seen as shaped by an ideological project, namely the search for 'the social bases of a radical historical subject other than the proletariat'. For this reason, Scott presented the village as relatively autonomous economically, as opposed to the proletariat which is tied to the capitalist class through industrial production (Evans 1987: 197). For Scott, the cultural autonomy of the village pre-existed the rise of urban societies and remains the basis for its potential as a site of resistance (Evans 1987: 197, Scott 1976). On this view, there is a latent rebellion, a 'cognitive structure of revolt' in peasant society and folk culture. The peasant world is by and large free of the impact of hegemonic institutions. The primary exception to this is religion, which is however subject to 'slippages' in meaning as it travels down the hierarchy (Evans 1987: 196).

Describing the intellectual debate between Scott's 'moral peasant' as opposed to Samuel Popkin's 'rational peasant' (Popkin 1979) as 'sterile', and finding more of substance in Scott's argument, Evans nonetheless pointed to Popkin's attention to political organization among peasants as a positive feature missing in Scott's account. Scott wrote 'as if the modern state has hardly penetrated the country-side of South-east Asia' (1987: 197). Evans was skeptical of Scott's account of hegemony and his application of the concept to peasant societies, noting that for Gramsci the issue at hand was 'party-building and the creation of working-class political institutions' (1987: 208). The search for an understanding of 'what peasants think' was, Evans concluded, a response to 'fading hopes for a peasant revolution' (1987: 210).

Evans rejected autonomous readings of peasant society, in particular the understanding of it as somehow set apart from politics and the impact of the state. In particular, he criticized Marxist-inspired research for its neglect of 'formal political institutions among the peasantry' (1987: 211). There was a clear dilemma in relation to accounts of 'peasant consciousness'. Do we take an external view and imply the presence of exploitation from the underlying social and economic inequalities? Or do we need to draw on direct ideological statements from the peasants themselves, in which case what might be termed resistance was hard to distinguish from the everyday grumbling and grievances that are a mundane feature of village life? Attempts to frame peasant society in terms of exploitation, on the basis that peasants were surplus givers in a wider society of surplus takers, were simplistic (Evans

1988b). Stratification and inequality involved both exploitation and a web of 'reciprocal rights and duties', and it was extremely hard to find a point of view, either 'emic' or 'etic', to distinguish neatly between the two (1988b: 232).

In *Agrarian Change in Communist Laos* (1988a) Evans showed considerable sympathy for the magnitude of the task faced by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party on assuming power. The new administration, he wrote, 'was bequeathed a particularly weak administrative structure by the former Royal Lao Government', especially given that the majority of the state's budget came from external aid. The Royal Lao Government (RLG) was so dominated by the United States that the US ambassador was known as the 'second Prime Minister' (Evans 1988a: 4). The LPRP's approach to collectivization was beset by natural disasters as well as logistical problems. The government was faced with a potential mass exodus of lowland Lao peasants into Thailand (1988a: 46); it needed to be flexible and was able to moderate its policies according to experience. There was 'general confusion rather than general coercion' (1988a: 43). The regime's problems were not unique to communism but were those 'faced by a modernizing elite and its state apparatus trying to gain control of a refractory economy and bend it to its aims' (1988a: 13). The party was 'a peasant-based party' and was 'sensitive to issues raised by its rural cadres and allows criticism of its policies' (1988a: 45). In a speech held in Vientiane on December 26, 1979 Kaysone Phomvihane, faced with a severe contraction of the Lao economy between 1975 and the end of 1977, set out criticisms of the command economy model and 'excessive centralism' (1988a: 53). Evans concluded that 'a basic commitment to decentralized socialism seems entrenched in Laos' (1988a: 87). The new policy launched in 1979 was not a retreat from socialist objectives in the form of 'economic liberalization', but rather 'a radical re-thinking of economic policy and a modification of the role of agriculture and the peasantry within it' (1988a: 2).

2. Lao Peasants under Socialism

Lao Peasants (1990b), the most influential work of Evans' early academic career, represents a significant shift from *Agrarian Change*. There Evans applied an anthropological perspective to debates about planning, collectivization, resistance and social control, using Laos as a basis for comparative study, but its analysis reflected considerable alienation from the rhetoric and political goals of the regime. The field work was carried out on cooperatives in the Vientiane Plain, and while this was in one sense a limitation, it was also an advantage since these cooperatives were in the best position to receive 'support and backup' from the government, and this therefore made them a test case for the policy as a whole. In any case it was extremely difficult at that time to get permission to do any kind of field work at all: 'by pure accident, this book [*Lao Peasants*] now stands as a unique document of the Lao peasantry at the time of high socialism in Laos' (1995: xxv).

The aim of the work was to describe 'the confrontation between a modernizing regime and the social and economic world of its rural population, which remains embedded in a natural economy' (1990b: xii). The use of the word 'confrontation' is indicative of how the tone had shifted from the more sympathetic account offered in *Agrarian Change*. The opening pages of *Lao Peasants* take a skeptical look at the notion of 'primitive communism', which drew on Lewis H. Morgan's anthropological classic *Ancient Society* (1877). The idea of prestate societies as egalitarian and lacking a division of labour, although partially discredited, continued to influence both the

official anthropology of the Soviet bloc and Western Marxist understandings of precapitalist and postcapitalist societies (1990b: 9). However, following Lenin, there was strong suspicion of independent peasants as incipient or spontaneous capitalists (Evans 1988c: 75). Evans cited the work of the Soviet agronomist A.V. Chayanov (1888-1937), who rejected this idea and opposed large-scale collectivization (1990b: 23-26). The basic unit of the peasant economy was the household, both as producer and consumer, in a largely subsistence-based economy, and this represented a substantial barrier to collectivization. Chayanov was executed in 1937, but his ideas became current in the West during the 1960s. Chayanov also emphasized the dynamic nature of peasant society, rather than its division into rigidly defined strata, with families rising and falling, migrating, and dividing. While this model might not apply to societies which had more developed economies, it remained relevant to Laos where the natural economy remained largely intact, in spite of the radical political changes involved in the transitions from French colonialism to the Royal Lao Government and then the 1975 founding of the Lao PDR (1990b: 26). In this sense there was no fixed long-term inequality in Lao villages, as family fortunes constantly fluctuated. A newly married couple with young children was inevitably struggling with a lack of resources but would subsequently benefit from their children's labour and might inherit substantial land and resources later, whereas a well-off family might be diminished through inheritance. Given the rise and fall of individual and family fortunes within the village it made better sense to study poverty primarily at the village level (see further discussion below).

Lao Peasants stressed individuality 'both biologically and psychologically' (1990b: 211), and the contingency of the dialectic played out 'between the irreducibly social and individual nature of humans' (1990b: 211). Evans rejected the notion of a cross-culturally 'invariant human and social property called cooperation' (1990b: 210), and with it the idea that individualism and communism are to be understood as antithetical (1990b: 211). Given that 'spontaneous human cooperation is very sensitive to scale' (1990b: 211), and there are 'no clear economies of scale, especially in rice agriculture' (1990b: 220), attempts to engineer more efficient production and impose cooperative modes were doomed to failure (1990b: 167ff.). The 'microeconomic rationality' of the peasant should not be disregarded in the name of top-down social engineering and macroeconomic planning (1990b: 22). Collectivization was, as a general strategy, 'economically inefficient' (1990b: 172). The attempt 'to implement an orthodox communist model in the context of a peasant society has the paradoxical result of reinforcing many features of the natural economy that socialists claim they want to transform'. There was a failure to recognize that 'socialism has more in common with advanced capitalism than it does with the natural economy' (1990b: 230). There was no pure 'capitalist man', just as there was no 'socialist man', and socialism was not the dialectical opposite of capitalism (Mauss [1924-5] 1984, Evans 1990b: 231). This policy failure had in some cases led to an escalation of state coercion, fuelled by an evolutionary concept of social progress which stipulated a particular historical path. While communist land reforms directed against 'a clearly identifiable landlord class' often degenerated into 'violent attacks on all inequalities', Lao peasants had been fortunate in being 'spared such ill-advised social engineering' (1988b: 248). In addition to the general point about the inefficiency of state planning, one factor in the failure of cooperatives was resistance by women who had no desire to hand over control of land to male-dominated

cooperatives, nor later to the male-dominated trading cooperatives (1990b: 129-133).

A further critical voice from the Soviet tradition was that of Nikolay Bukharin (1888-1938), who like Chayanov had been a critic of Stalinist economics. Bukharin had argued that it was through the market that the peasants would come to socialism. In *Agrarian Change in Communist Laos*, Evans had referred to the choice between Soviet central planning as against the (relatively) decentralized Yugoslav or Hungarian model (1988a: 25). He presented the decentralized model of socialist planning as a desirable option. The final pages of *Lao Peasants* make the case for the possible role of the market in a socialist system, in particular the 'vertical integration' of peasant production into the wider economy. This could be initiated either from above or below (1990b: 223ff). In retrospect these closing pages seem particularly prescient, in their imaginings of how a system dedicated to socialist goals might nonetheless incorporate flexibly various economic modes, including forms of non-coercive cooperation. However, though the back flap of *Lao Peasants* even presented the book as making the case for 'market socialism', this trope is absent from Evans' later work. In the second edition he focused on the question of how capitalism might be mitigated by the 'moral economy' (see below). His work moved away from any explicitly ideological themes and from any sustained intellectual engagement with socialism.

3. Post-socialism and the Lao peasantry

Lao Peasants was reissued in 1995 with an additional chapter on 'post-socialism', and in a piece published in 2008 Evans offered a survey and a retrospective analysis. As he noted there, the study of peasants had undergone a 'precipitous decline', after a thirty-year boom beginning in the 1960s (2008: 507). In the chapter added in the second edition (1995: xi-xxxviii), Evans analyzed the transition from socialism to what he termed 'post-socialism', placing the social changes in Laos in the context of the collapse of the Soviet Union. In Laos socialism lasted 'barely fifteen years', it had shallow roots which 'were easily uprooted' (1995: xi), and subsequently 'traditional Lao peasant society 'had reasserted itself' (1995: xxi). But the 'political form' survived the transition, unlike in Eastern Europe. This was in part because of market reforms in the mid 1980s, but, more significantly, because Laos remained a largely rural, peasant society, whereas the regimes in Eastern Europe 'presided over industrial societies with highly urbanized and educated populations' (1995: xii). The transition to an industrial society had simply not progressed very far, and had benefited from recognition of the defects of Stalinist economic management. Peasant societies were less vulnerable to disruption than those with a high division of labour, because of the 'interdependence of the whole system' in industrial societies. Compared with China and Vietnam, Laos had experienced the least disruption, given that it had 'tiny urban centres, a tiny industrial workforce and no intelligentsia' (1995: xii-xiii). To this one should add a remark made in the original addition, to the effect that only 'extreme coercion, such as that seen in Pol Pot's Cambodia' could 'fully suppress peasant markets and impose state regulation of exchange' (1990b: 15). While some efforts had taken place in the direction of agribusiness, the end of socialism 'also saw the collapse of a coherent agrarian policy' (1995: xxii). One way in which Lao peasant society had remerged was in the form of increased freedom for 'the flexibility of the family farm' to reassert itself (1995: xxiii). Evans took issue with

the idea that the transition had significantly increased social stratification in the country-side (Trankell 1993), and re-emphasized the point made in the original edition against 'schematic arguments concerning peasant social differentiation' (1995: xxiv).

One argument running through *Lao Peasants* had been an emphasis on the 'distinct logics of the peasant economy, the socialist economy and the capitalist economy'. While the socialist economy had collapsed, the original critique of 'false assumptions' about peasant economics retained its force, now that Soviet or Vietnamese advisors had been replaced by international aid organizations and the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, etc. Just as the communists assumed that peasants were incipient capitalists and therefore pushed to collectivize them, so many mainstream economists 'also assume that peasants are mini-capitalists', though now this is to be celebrated rather than eradicated: 'They are also wrong, and no doubt this is the basis for the failure of many major agricultural development projects in Laos sponsored by them' (1995: xxv). NGOs working at the village level should not base their interventions on the notion that peasants were 'spontaneously cooperative', and needed 'to take account of context social, cultural, ecological when considering the nature of peasant economic cooperation' (1995: xxv). Thus Ireson (1992) had shown that cooperation among lowland Lao took a different form in the south to that in the north, a contrast between 'generalized reciprocity across the whole village' and 'strict reciprocity' within the narrower group. Ireson attributes this difference to different modes of cultivation, though Evans also wondered whether the background of refugee migration might also be a factor (1995: xxvi). This small discussion illustrates Evans' turn to history rather than to purely synchronic or functional explanations for social patterns.

Following a discussion of issues relating to highland Laos, Evans returned to his basic premise, that the administrative enforcement of common property regimes should build on existing 'common property resource management systems', such as that found in Black Tai communities in relation to paddy land, or local norms for the management of forest. Following Acheson (1989) Evans argued that the communities' own rules should be the starting point for regulation, though these are subject to potential disruption 'through a community's rising exposure to market forces, or because powerful corporations or states chose to override the priorities of the local community' (Evans 1995: xxviii, summarizing Acheson 1989). Forests as one of Laos' major economic resources were vulnerable to over exploitation. Finally Evans returned to the issue of socialism and the economy, noting that social political control over the economy not only fails economically but also undermines human freedom; on the other hand, capitalism must be constrained by politics, and even if socialism no longer operates as a grand ideology, the question of a 'moral economy' remains a pressing one (1995: xxx).

Of course once one begins to look at the category 'peasant' through the lens of micro-economics, geography and ecology, lineage structure, ethnicity, modes of cooperation in the 'natural economy', modes of production and exchange, economic integration with wider markets, relationship to or interactions with the state, relationships or interactions with religious institutions, and the socio-economic and cultural impact of globalization, including increasing access to mobile telephones, then one question is whether there is any meaningful essence to it. The irrelevance of the category to contemporary debates had been argued forcefully by Kearney (1996: 1, Evans 2008: 508). Evans however, while recognizing that the Lao peasantry was

now being transformed, perhaps out of existence (Elson 1997), insisted on its value as a historical category, and also its continued relevance whilst Laos remained predominantly a rural society: 'the decline of the peasantry globally has deleteriously affected studies of the peasantry in Laos' (2008: 508).

One theme that runs through Evans' discussion is his rejection of the idea that peasants should be seen as operating in a 'autarchic' or self-sufficient manner: 'peasants are part of larger political, cultural and economic networks, even though they operate to a considerable extent in a self-provisioning economy (Evans 2002: 514). No single economic theory could capture the specificities of particular peasant economies, not least because they display a range of anthropologically specific motives for acquiring wealth and trading objects. One cannot reduce the specific forms of value associated with exchanges around marriage or the acquisition of 'merit' to a general economic theory (2008: 515).

Evans' critique of pre-determined ideological, intellectual and policy frames widened from the original target of economic planning to embrace much of the consultancy literature on Laos, which, he argued, ignored the insights of peasant studies and was fixated on the alleviation of poverty. Determining who was poor and why and in what way was a far from simple matter (2008: 517). Drawing on the discussion in *Lao Peasants*, Evans rejected the applicability of terms used in consultant documents such as 'equity', 'equality' and 'inequality' to Lao peasant society. With their broadening horizons, peasants or villagers now had a stronger sense of their relative poverty, and the notion that they were poor was becoming part of their self-understanding. However, as far as policy was concerned, it made sense to measure poverty at the level of the village itself, rather than that of individual families or members (2008: 518). Evans' conclusion was that 'almost all consultant studies are based on an incorrect understanding of the dynamics of peasant society' (2008: 519), and poverty was often 'a direct outcome of outside intervention in the workings of these societies, in particular the government's policy of re-locating upland minorities in the lowlands' (2008: 519). The Lao government's insistence that upland swidden cultivation was 'ecologically destructive' ignored the differences between viable and non-viable systems. Restrictions on viable systems often made them unviable (2008: 519-520). One study of the government land titling and allocation programme noted that the staff linked land allocation to a reduction of the area under swidden cultivation i.e. allocating land became a way to reduce the amount available to villagers (2008: 520).

A similar set of concerns arose in relation to the use of the word 'community', given that the boundaries of the moral economy were determined by specific collective rituals or lineage practices, and forms of mutual aid and solidarity within those economies stop abruptly at this border. This was the conceptual error underlying the collectivization programme (1990b: 123-149, 2008: 520), and similar rhetoric in the present obscured the boundaries between distinct communities (2008: 521). These issues remained relevant for development questions, which needed to proceed with an awareness of pre-existing modes for the management of community resources (2008: 522-523). This critique extended to the use of terms like 'power' and 'equality' in relation to feminist analyses. Thus Ireson's *Field, Forest, and Family* (1999), for all its merits as a ground-breaking study of women across various communities, had as its 'unargued premise' the modern idea of equality 'by which the social relations of all other societies are measured and evaluated' (2008: 523). Most reports on rural Laos have an individualistic bias, whereas the 'prime cognitive unity

of rural men and women is their own family', and perceptions of gender are relational, i.e. understood through social roles, rather than individuated. As with the issue of social stratification, Evans argues that a careful look at anthropological reality shows social difference and complementarity rather than 'inequality'. Age was another factor which needed to be taken into account, especially the high status of older women (albeit through their sons) (2008: 524). Apart from Ireson's 'important study' there was little empirical work available, and documents produced by aid organizations simply reflected ideological 'clichés and verities' (2008: 525). Evans finishes with a plea for a combination of 'materialist' and 'culturalist' approaches, to be brought together with insights from 'a now neglected economic anthropology'. While the peasantry of Laos 'as a social formation may be entering its terminal phase', there was still much to be learned about the peasant's way of life' (2008: 526).

One tension that is apparent in Evans' work is the question of the autonomy of the village and peasant society. **On the one hand, he opposed any idealization of the village as actually or potentially a perfect model of selfless human cooperation, and rejected the notion that it was completely set apart economically and politically from wider social processes and the state. One clear example of its vertical integration, in the case of ethnic Lao rural society, was Buddhism. Yet he also saw the peasant economy as having its own complex and at least semi-autonomous level of efficiency, its own unplanned economies of scale and modes of cooperation. At the centre of the village economy was the 'flexibility of the family' or household (1990b: 219), with which it was counter-productive to interfere in the name of macro-economic planning or development.

As he remarked in an interview (Rehbein 2011: 101): 'Without all kinds of accompanying changes, collectivization just leads back to a sort of feudalism and that is what happened in Russia and China. So how do you get economies of scale in a peasant economy if nothing else changes? Why should you even get together? And the answer is that there is no point, because peasant agriculture is as efficient as it can be.'

The 'natural economy' in Laos was able to reassert itself once collectivization was abandoned, just as the latent Buddhism of its political structures and ritual mind-set remerged. To borrow from Louis Dumont on caste system, Evans seemed to believe that the social anthropologist must 'take the liberty of completing and systematizing the indigenous or orthogenic theory' (Dumont 1970: 37) and this understanding must feed any attempt at development aid. Yet at moments, as we have seen, he asserted a stronger form of outside interpretative authority, one radically at odds with insiders' self-understandings.

4. Evans' engagement with broader themes

Evans' 1989 appointment at the University of Hong Kong was a stimulus for wide reading on China and an engagement with Hong Kong society. His essay on 'Hierarchy and dominance' (Evans 1993) drew on that reading, with China at the centre of its comparative discussion. A further product of this was the collection *Hong Kong: The Anthropology of a Chinese Metropolis* (1997), co-edited with Maria Tam Siu-Mi. However Evans' attention remained primarily on Laos, though increasingly its history and the nature of historical memory. This gave rise to the publication of *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance* (1998) and *A Short History of Laos* (2002), two works which build on his observation of the complementary and contradictory

relationships that existed between Lao socialism, Marxism and Buddhism (1990b: 5). A concern with what Evans polemically characterized as ‘failed development plans and enforced communist isolation’ (2002: ix) gave way to a desire to rescue the history of Laos from its Leninist-nationalist simplifications and obfuscations.

Nationalism had been an important theme in Evans’ work from the beginning, notably in *Red Brotherhood at War* co-authored with Kelvin Rowley (1984, 1990). The central argument of the book was that nationalism had trumped communism in post-Vietnam war Southeast Asia: ‘at least in Asia, Communism has always been strongly nationalistic’ (1990b: xviii). In a world dominated by ‘nationalist passions’, the authors argued that there was much to be said for ‘the internationalist standpoint of classical liberalism and socialism’ (1990: xix), and much of the introduction and the first chapter is taken up with a polemic against the notion of the antiquity of nations and the effect of this both on history writing and on the self-understanding of modern states: ‘Arguments and interpretation based on “antiquity of nations” merely pander to the mythology of modern nationalism, the mythologies by which rulers of nation-states seek to gain legitimacy and mobilize popular support’ (1990: 5). In *Lao Peasants* the ideology of ‘fervent nationalism’ displayed by postrevolutionary states led to an obsession with self-sufficiency and internally generated surpluses (1990: 23). One key element of modern nationalism was the frame of reference and forms of knowledge created by the colonial state, yet in its representations of the past the communist state cannot acknowledge its dialectical dependence on colonialism (both as source of ideas and a focus of its revolutionary opposition), nor offer any nuanced or historically contextualized understanding of any previous national regime, for example the Royal Lao Government (1947-1975).

Rather than being directly concerned with peasants, themes of memory, Buddhism and the monarchy were dominant in *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance*. The book is first and foremost an attempt to bring awareness of the complexity of the past into a rapidly evolving society. The anthropologist as observer of social belief and public ritual is also the voice of history and memory in a dynamic yet confusing period of social change. The break-down of the Marxist-Leninist historical narrative following the events of 1989 led to the ‘re-traditionalizing of official narratives’, opening up a complex space where ‘legend and fact’ freely mixed (1998: 45). While Pathet Lao veterans had a view of the past shaped by propaganda about the ‘feudal’ or ‘neocolonial’ Royal Lao Government, younger urban Lao knew little about the RLG and aspired to the ‘dream work of modernity’ symbolized by Bangkok. Overseas, many Lao were engaged in a search for their roots, against an image of a ‘fantasy Laos’ (1998: 7-10). One key theme was the ritual gap left at the apex of the social order by the removal of the monarchy and the ambivalences surrounded the awkward and partial substitution of Kaysone Phomvihane for the king.

The *Short History* was likewise written with an eye to the future, for ‘young Lao’, both those ‘overseas who know little of their homeland, and for Lao inside Laos whose information on their past is limited’ (2002: x). A mature nationalism required the ability to look back on the past ‘in all its complexity’ and to ‘debate its meaning without restraint’ (2002: 236). In the final sentence Evans imagines the bones of the murdered King Sisivang Vatthana being returned to Luang Prabang and the chanting of monks ‘echoing through the temples of the ancient capital’ and thereby healing ‘the deep rift in the Lao nation caused by the revolution’ (2002: 236). This turn to history culminated in *The Last Century of Lao Royalty: A Documentary History* (2009). This

book reflected a concern with the loss of the material substance of personal and historical memory, notably the photograph, a concern articulated particularly strongly in *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance* (1998: 5ff.). The finished work was the product of extensive detective work in Laos and the Lao diaspora, a kind of rescue anthropology distinctive for its concern with a lost elite culture rather than that of a vanishing tribal society.

Conclusion: insider and outsider perspectives

Evans broke with the radical politics of his youth once he encountered the realities of communist Southeast Asia ('to experience full-on communism is a kind of shock actually', interview, Rehbein 2011: 99), and the seeds of the shift from the anthropology of peasants to the study of history and monarchy can be found in his writings from the late 1980s. There could be no grand unified theory of peasant society or of peasant economics, since history, migration, war, politics, religion, kinship structures and ethnicity all potentially impacted on the village. There is little trace in his work of postmodern anthropology and of reflexive post-colonial anxieties about the epistemological claims of anthropology, though he was acutely aware of the colonial origins of the discipline (Evans 2005). His work is as much sociological as it is anthropological, and it drew both on social theory and traditional ethnography. Often in Evans' work it is the 'etic' outsider who has the clearest view, especially once the frame is widened to include history, and ultimately 'emic' insiders are seen as operating according to a cultural, historical political logic that of necessity escapes their own grasp. The clearest statement of this point of view came in an essay on a Hong Kong rumour. This arose in relation to a television advertisement for the Kowloon-Canton railway featuring young children playing at being a train. This advertisement, replayed on home video recorders, became the subject of intense speculation about supernatural phenomena, in particular that one or more of the children were actually ghosts (Evans 1997). Evans linked the rumours to fears about Hong Kong's looming political transition from British colony to Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China. His concluding remarks stake an unapologetic claim to interpretative authority: it required an 'outsider to recognize the importance of studying Chinese cultural belief in ghost* in modern Hong Kong'. While 'all Chinese are only seeing ghosts then it is only a *gwailou* [foreigner] who can see the cultural structure of the apparition' (1997: 293). This dichotomy between the insider and the outsider underlay Evans' first book, *The Yellow Rainmakers* (1983), which set out to find out the facts underlying rumours of the use of chemical agents by the Soviet Union in 1981.

One important element in Evans' intellectual make-up was a lack of affinity for academic identity politics and purist arguments for 'indigeneity' (2005: 52). In this sense he remained true to his roots in internationalism and cosmopolitanism, and the rejection of nationalism both as a political form and as a way of organizing knowledge, culture and memory. Progressive politics in the late 20th century and beyond has to a large degree set aside economic and political theory and now draws on arguments based on culture, authenticity, and autonomy. This shift from traditional leftist politics to identity politics has its corollary in academic research, in a distrust of outsider accounts, a suspicion of colonial modernity and its modes of knowledge, and the valorization of authentic insider experience and categories. While he was no supporter of colonialism, for example pointing to the racism of colonial settler

regimes and of French governance in general (2002: 59), Evans was impatient with ideologically-driven accounts of its policies (see his remarks on Gunn 1990, Evans 2008: 512-514), just as he found the blanket dismissal of the Royal Lao Government objectionable. Discussing Vietnamese communist anthropology Evans noted that, arguably, 'a Vietnamese dominated state is as foreign to the highland minorities as, for example, a French dominated one' (1985: 142). Later Evans termed the interventions of the Vietnamese state in the Central Highlands of Vietnam 'internal colonialism' (Evans 1992), and paralleled state-communist anthropologists engaged in constructing 'minority' categories to anthropological advisors to colonial states (Evans 2005: 47).

One of the problems with academic writing driven by identity politics is however, paradoxically, its inevitable substitution in development contexts of outsider values for insider norms. This was Evans' argument against communist anthropology, and subsequently his objection to much of the progressive aid agenda which succeeded it. For Evans, anthropology and an anthropologically informed history were intended as a resource for insiders, and in the case of a nation ruled by a one-party state, it was of necessity an outsider who could assemble an alternative narrative. In its absence there could only be a largely fictional narrative which would inevitably undermine the nation's attempt to confront its inherited contradictions and obfuscations. Evans' outsider 'realist' perspective was tempered by a sense that the economic, social, cultural and eco-biological were intertwined, and any attempt to reform or improve needed to find a basis in already existing practices.

Anthropology could reveal this multilayered complexity, 'the social and historical contingency of human sociability and individuality' (1990b: 211) and the extent of human diversity (1990b: 233). It showed that 'contemporary social arrangements are not immutable' and provided 'a glimpse of the breadth of human potentialities'. But 'knowledge of the diversity of humankind also provides a sober understanding of the *limits* of human possibilities' (1990b: 233). This suggests not just the limits of social engineering and interventionism but also biological constraints on the human species.

Faced with anthropology's colonial roots and the continued domination of western institutions and models, many anthropologists of Evans' generation took a post-modern or indigenous turn. Evans, by contrast, argued that what was needed was 'an anthropology that is more self-consciously and sensitively internationalized' (2005: 53). In this context it is worth noting that one of his constant themes was that Asian research students should write their dissertations on aspects of the West or of other societies 'exotic' to them, rather than, as so frequently, writing a PhD at a European or North American university on their own, 'native', society (Evans 2005). In similar vein, Evans criticized the assumption among western anthropologists that they were writing exclusively for an academic audience of people like themselves (2005: 53). For Evans, the indigenous-communist anthropology and historiography of Laos failed to reflect the experiences and self-understandings of the Lao people. His own work aimed, directly or indirectly, to inform and enrich debates among the Lao themselves, not only about the past but, more crucially, about the future direction of their society.

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