

The Lao Matri-System, Empowerment, and Globalisation

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There is a vital need for research and investigation of gender roles among the various ethnic groups that is based upon solid anthropological investigation and the provision of good ethnographic description. This would in turn provide a foundation for gender studies and action plans in the multicultural context.

- Participatory Poverty Assessment Lao PDR, 2001¹

Abstract

The spotlight in this article is on the strength and vitality of the Lao matri-system and its institutions, dynamics, and capacity to counteract the negative gender impact of the processes that attend globalisation. It will be shown that the world-wide historical trend to displace or to defeat matrilineal and matrilineal societies has not yet undermined the Lao matri-system and cultural heritage upholding the relatively high value and status of Lao women and girls.

The main findings of a small snowball study, conducted in 2009 in Vientiane, will be presented in an effort to discover the impact of globalisation on the matrilineal heritage. Case studies will be described that show the impact globalisation had on ethnic minority women from communities with a firm patriarchal tradition. The adoption of aspects of the matri-system seems to be attractive to them. Attention will be paid to the unique and precious value of the matrilineal marriage as a means of protection for girls and women in the broader context of imbalanced sex-ratios in China and domestic violence in Laos. A brief conclusion is drawn and offers suggestions to highlight the importance of the social matri-system as a precious cultural heritage, not only for Laos, but also as an example for the worrying number of societies that are characterized by son-preference and far too many “missing” girls.

1. Introduction

Laos is one of the very few countries left in the world in which matrilineal residence, matrilineal inheritance, and bilineal descent and kinship still exist for a large group of Lao women.² Eminent women anthropologists such as Kathleen Gough, Mona Etienne and Eleanor Leacock and Bina Agarwal have claimed that matrilineal and bilateral societies all over the world have disintegrated due to the undermining

¹ Asian Development Bank (ADB), State Planning Committee, National Statistic Centre. *Participatory Poverty Assessment Lao PDR*, (2001): 120.

² Harriet Evans, *The Subject of Gender: Daughters and Mothers in Urban China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 124-25; Carol Ireson-Doolittle and Geraldine Moreno-Black, *The Lao: Gender, Power, and Livelihood*, Westview Case Studies in Anthropology (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004), 56; Asian Development Bank (ADB), Country Gender Strategy, *Lao PDR, Gender, Poverty and the Millennium Development Goals* (Mekong Department and Regional and Sustainable Development Department, 2004), 6; Arne Kislenko, *Culture and Customs of Laos* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009), 132.

intrusion of patriarchal ideologies and practices, and as a consequence of colonization, modernisation, liberalisation and globalisation.³ What is the situation in Laos?

Since the implementation of the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) policy in 1986, globalisation has accelerated processes of profound change with obvious negative gender consequences. In studies we conducted in Laos in 1995 and 1998, we found a gradual undermining of the matrilineal Lao Lum tradition,⁴ in particular as a result of land legislation and the male dominated adjudication of land titling.⁵ We envisaged that Lao Lum women could stand to lose one of the most basic and vital power resources at their disposal: the land they have inherited from their parents.⁶

Can we trace the continuous, on-going erosion and undermining of the matrilineal and matrilineal social system over the past years?⁷ In a small snowball study, conducted in Vientiane in 2009, I had discussions with old Lao friends – women (mostly) and men – with whom I had worked as a gender specialist in various development cooperation projects over a time span of almost twenty years. The focus was on their perception of the positive and negative impacts of globalisation on the matrilineal and matrilineal life in which they had been raised. It will be argued in this article that for Lao Lum women who belong to the urban elite and middle class in Vientiane, the very reverse of a process of erosion and undermining of the matri-system seems to happen. It would appear that the matri-tradition has transformed itself into a modern, attractive, strong and booming lifestyle⁸. The enormous global and local economic and social transformation processes, particularly during the past ten years, have, in combination with the matri-system, greatly empowered and protected my friends in Vientiane.

Resettlement policies, forest land legislation, better roads and transportation facilities, smart phones and other means of communication have drastically increased the awareness of ethnic minority women and girls concerning lifestyles, customs, and habits different from the patrilineal tradition and patriarchal social environment in which they are embedded. Are they attracted by the matri-lifestyle?

³ Mona Etienne and Eleanor Leacock, eds., *Women and Colonization: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Praeger, 1980), passim; Bina Agarwal, *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*, Cambridge South Asian Studies 58 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 153-197; Also see in this respect the brilliant analysis of Gough. David M. Schneider and Kathleen Gough, *Matrilineal Kinship* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), 631-52.

⁴ The tripartite system of classifying ethnic groups according to Lao Lum, Lao Thung and Lao Sung was commonly used at that time. See Charles Zuckerman, 2010, for the critique on this classification. 13-17.

⁵ Loes Schenk-Sandbergen and Outhaki Chalamany-Khampoui, *Women in Rice Fields and Offices: Irrigation in Laos: Gender Specific Case Studies in Four Villages* (Heiloo: Empowerment, 1995), 20-21, 80, 100.; Loes Schenk-Sandbergen, *Gender, Culture and Land Rights in Rural Lao PDR*, Gender Studies, Monograph 7, Gender and Development Program, School of Environmental Resources and Development (Bangkok: Asian Institute of Technology, 1998), passim. The western concept of ownership of land is not applicable in Laos as the State remains the formal owner. Land-use rights have been allocated to the holders of land title documents.

⁶ Loes Schenk-Sandbergen, "Gender, Land Rights and Culture in Laos: A Study in Vientiane, Districts, Villages and Households," in *Contemporary Lao Studies: Research on Development, Language and Culture, and Traditional Medicine*, ed. Carol J. Compton, John Ferdinand Hartmann, and Vinya Sysamouth (San Francisco: Center for Lao Studies, 2009), 3-41.

⁷ In order to avoid boring repetition in this paper, I use the prefix matri- in words as matri-system, matri-culture, matri-women, matri-lifestyle, etc., referring to the three crucial aspects of the Lao-lum social organisation and tradition, namely: matrilineal post-marital residence system, matrilineal kinship, descent, and matrilineal customary inheritance patterns.

⁸ I use the concept matri-lifestyle to emphasize a more holistic view on the matri-system, including the way of dressing, looking good, soft talking, relaxing, merit making, attending life-cycle ceremonies, taste in home furniture, food, and many other aspects of the Lao way of living.

Illustrations will be given of Khamu and Hmong women who want to empower themselves by adopting aspects of the Lao Lum matri-lifestyle. The noticed growing trend of “matri-sation” points to the possibility of reducing poverty and gender inequality through the expansion of the influence of the matri-system. This also contradicts the predicted undermining of matrilineal social systems by the eminent anthropologists as mentioned in this paper.

Globalisation has accelerated a number of negative gender effects worldwide: sex-specific abortions, domestic violence, sex-trade, forced prostitution, illegal labour migration, HIV/Aids, and the trafficking of women and children. In neighbouring China son-preference is dominant. Sex ratios show dramatic imbalances mainly as a result of sex-specific abortions. To address this alarming gender inequality and discrimination against daughters, China has initiated a population policy – the Care for Girls Campaign (since 2003). One of the core elements in the campaign is to advocate the uxirolocal (matrilocal) marriage.⁹ In view of this, the gains and the protective capacity of the matrilocal marriage will be highlighted as a counter balance, addressing the tragic realities of “missing girls” in Asia and domestic violence in Laos. Recent NGO studies show a considerable increase in domestic violence in Laos despite its deeply rooted matrilocal marriage tradition. This violence seems to be almost endemic. The question is whether such a high incidence of domestic violence is likely to occur in matri-system environments.

Unfortunately, there are also immanently negative potentialities inherent to the matri-system, and they are brought forward by globalisation. Girls and women feel responsible for investment in the house and land of the maternal family. This sense of responsibility can easily result in their being lured to the sex-trade. There is a stunning lack of awareness in the methodology of NGO studies on this subject concerning the need to carefully collect disaggregated data about ethnic and social background of women and girls as will be shown in my paper in section 6.

The spotlight in this essay is on the strength and vitality of the Lao matri-system and its institutions, dynamics, and capacity to counteract the negative gender impact of the processes that attend globalisation. It will be shown that the worldwide historical trend to displace or to defeat “women-friendly” or “women-centred” societies has not yet undermined the Lao matri-system and cultural heritage upholding the relatively high value and status of Lao women and girls.

This article comprises seven sections. It begins with an introductory section and is followed by a section that sketches the background and some of the characteristics of the Lao social matri-system. The third section presents the main findings of the small snowball study that I conducted in 2009 in Vientiane in an effort to discover the impact of globalisation on the matri- cultural heritage. Section four

⁹ Lisa Eklund, “‘Good citizens prefer daughters’: Gender, Rurality and the Care for Girls Campaign,” in *Women, Gender and Rural Development in China*, ed. Jacka Tamara and Sally Sargeson (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, Inc., 2011), 124. As Lisa Eklund states in her thesis, “[W]hereas patrilocal refers to the fact that the husband’s family constitutes a lineage, virilocal implies that there is no lineage to consider. The corresponding terms, to denote that residence after marriage is in or close by the home of the wife’s parents, are matrilocal and uxirilocal, where matrilocal indicates a lineage and uxirilocal the absence of a lineage. Another form of residence after marriage is neolocality, which denotes that the newlywed couple settles in a place different from both the bride’s and the groom’s family.” In my essay I will use the term matrilocal and uxirilocal as they both underline daughter preference even though uxirilocal may be more correct in the Lao situation as the belonging to a lineage is not relevant.” Lisa Eklund, *Rethinking Son Preference* (Lund dissertation, 2011), 38, n16.

describes case studies that show the impact globalisation has had on ethnic minority women from communities with a firm patriarchal tradition. The adoption of aspects of the matri-system seems to be attractive to them. Section five pays attention to the unique and precious value of the matrilineal marriage as a means of protection for girls and women in the broader context of imbalanced sex-ratios and domestic violence. Section six deals with the immanently negative potentialities that are inherent to the matri-system and might easily attract Lao girls and young women to become victims of sexual exploitation. The seventh and final section draws a brief conclusion and offers suggestions to highlight the importance of the social matri-system as a precious cultural heritage, not only for Laos, but also as an example for the worrying number of societies that are characterized by son-preference and far too many “missing” girls.

2. Background of the Lao Matri-Tradition: Characteristics and Causes

Laos is a country where we find a matrilineal and a patrilineal social organization and many bilateral shades (bilateral means that the family name and property can be transferred through the father to the son, or the mother to the daughter) in between.¹⁰ Gender ideology and relations are more equal in matri- and bi- than in patri social systems.¹¹ The matrilineal residence and matrilineal kinship pattern is characteristic of the Tai-Kadai in particular of the Lao¹² ethnic majority living mainly in Vientiane and along the Mekong. Although many ethnic minorities living in hilly and mountainous areas follow patri-social kinship patterns, some ethnic minorities also follow a matri-system. Such matri-social minorities include the Brao or Lavé, Ta Oi (Oy), Kathang, Ong, Suay,¹³ and Sou¹⁴ in the south; and the Nyouane, Lahu¹⁵ and Pray in the north of Laos.¹⁶

I want to point to the excellent study of GTZ, a German NGO, by Elisabeth Mann and Ny Luangkhot,¹⁷ which shows that nowadays social systems are changing in line with the context, and that the categorization of ethnic minority groups as either matri- or patri- or bilocal and bilineal has become more and more complicated, in particular as a result of resettlement policies.¹⁸ Mann and Luangkhot show that the

¹⁰ Grant Evans, *Lao Peasants under Socialism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Carol J. Ireson, *Field, Forest, and Family: Women's Work and Power in Rural Laos* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996); Carol Ireson-Doolittle, “Gender and Changing Property Rights in Laos,” in *Women's Rights to House and Land: China, Laos, Vietnam*, ed. Irene Tinker and Gale Summerfield (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999), 145-52.

¹¹ Du Shanshan, *Chopsticks Only Work in Pairs: Gender Unity and Gender Equality among the Lahu of Southwest China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Peggy Reeves Sanday, “Matriarchy as a Sociocultural Form: An Old Debate in a New Light” (Paper presented at the 16th Congress of the Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association, Melaka, Malaysia, July 1-7, 1998); Peggy Reeves Sanday, *Women at the Center: Life in a Modern Matriarchy* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2002); W. J. Karim, *Male and Female in Developing Southeast Asia* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1995).

¹² This includes some Lue and Phu-Thai communities. Other subgroups of the Lao-Kadai, such as the Tai Dam and Tai Deng, are predominantly patrilocal and patrilineal.

¹³ Elisabeth Mann and Ny Luangkhot, *Study on Women's Land and Property Rights under Customary or Traditional Tenure Systems in Five Ethnic Groups in Lao PDR*, May 2008; Schenk-Sandbergen, *Gender, Culture and Land Rights in Rural Lao PDR*.

¹⁴ ADB 2001, p.122

¹⁵ Du Shanshan has documented the remarkably egalitarian gender ideology among the Lahu community in Southwestern China. Du Shanshan, *Chopsticks only Work in Pairs*.

¹⁶ See: Laurent Chazée, *Atlas des Ethnies et des sous- Ethnies du Laos* (1995), 40, 199.

¹⁷ Mann and Luangkhot, *Study on Women's Land and Property Rights*.

¹⁸ Even in the Atlas of Laos (2000) the data processed are based on approximately thirty variables

Brao are bilocal and bilinear in their traditional villages, but are matrilocal and matrilineal in resettled villages, and again bilocal and bilinear in merged villages.¹⁹ Also, in the Trieng ethnic community, there is a shift from bilocal and bilinear in the traditional village to patrilineal and bilocal in the resettled villages. The study shows that the Hmong Khao and Tai Dam are consistently remain patrilocal and patrilineal in traditional, resettled, and merged villages. The Khmu Lue and Rok community shows also a consistent pattern of patrilocal and bilinear patterns.

There are no real anthropological studies with a “thick description” of the matri-system in Laos,²⁰ let alone an academic study of the rapid changes in the matri-system due to the effects of globalisation over the past twenty years.²¹ Carol Ireson-Doolittle and Geraldine Moreno-Black’s book is the only one to come close to my subject, as it makes an effort to tell the unknown and unique story of the changes in social relations (with a historical perspective) as well as the changes on what the authors call “patterned gender inequalities.”²² They examine how the power of women (relative to that of men) and the resulting inequalities between women and men have changed due to alterations in the social institutions and culture. The authors focus on the twenty-year period stretching from 1975 to 1995. In almost each chapter they describe the pre-1975 conditions in order to better provide an historical context, and they follow this up with a study of the changes made during the period of socialism and socialist reorganization (1975-1988) and the period of early economic liberalization (1988-1995). However, the study does not explicitly address changes in the Lao matri-system.

Grant Evans has described the typical domestic cycle of a Lao peasant family in the past.²³ The daughters remain living in (or near) their mothers’ (parents’) house until the youngest settles there permanently with her husband. Sons usually marry out and live with their in-laws. Nowadays, we might expect changes in this system given the smaller size of families and increased migration and education.

In the matrilocal system, where the husband moves in with the wife’s family after marriage, the relatively high status of women is derived from the fact that the house, land, homestead, and paddy fields belong to her family, and she knows the networks and context. The daughter who lives with and takes care of the aging parents and, thus, inherits or receives the house and the land from her parents is typically the youngest daughter (ultimogeniture). The remaining siblings will also inherit.²⁴ Therefore, such a family welcomes the birth of female children, for those children will likely serve as the successors who own, care for, and manage the family property.

Lao matrilocal marriage means permanent matrilocal residence. After the marriage, the groom will live in the bride’s parents’ home until he dies. That is the

extracted from the population and housing census from 1995, but there are no maps to show the specific cultural tradition of matrilineal descent and inheritance, or matrilocal residence patterns which would have contributed to a better understanding of the unique characteristics of the country.

¹⁹ Mann and Luangkhot, , *Study on Women’s Land and Property Rights*, 22, table 4.

²⁰ Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture” in *The Interpretations of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

²¹ ADB, *Lao PDR: Gender, Poverty and the Millennium Development Goals*, 9.

²² Carol Ireson-Doolittle and Geraldine Moreno-Black, *The Lao: Gender, Power, and Livelihood*, Westview Case Studies in Anthropology (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004).

²³ Evans, *Lao Peasants under Socialism*, 124.

²⁴ Gender Resource Information and Development (GRID) Center, *Lao PDR Gender Profile* (The Gender Resource Information and Development Center of the Lao Women’s Union, in collaboration with the World Bank, Washington DC, 2005), 20.

standard practice. Matrilocal marriage is certainly not considered a temporary solution, lasting only one generation, in the event that a family only produces daughters and needs a son for heavy labour, or requires a male heir for the continuation of the clan/lineage (as may occur in China or Vietnam).²⁵

“Why should daughters stay with their mother and father?”²⁶ When asking this question in the villages during my field visits in 1995, people looked at me with a compassionate gaze. Then, they said laughingly, “Do you not realize that women are more at risk than men because they give birth?” In the past, prior to the use of professional mid-wife assistance, it was tacitly understood that it was the mother of the pregnant daughter who could best care and look after her, especially during delivery.²⁷ There is a strong opinion in the Lao Lum community that women should have their own kin and “blood” relatives around in times of crises such as illness, death, and problems related to food because it is believed that the close proximity of family members guarantees greater protection and concern. This is believed to be especially true during pregnancy, deliveries, and, in particular, the period after giving birth.²⁸ The second argument is that women see “small things”, *magnic ma guoy*, “very, very small things,” and that can create tension in the case of mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relations. Between mother and daughter, these problems do not occur, for the daughter knows the daily ritual in the house. The third argument is that it is known that mothers-in-law are often jealous of the attention the son gives to his wife, and this exacerbates and accelerates the phenomenon of seeing “small, small things.” It is better to avoid this tension. The last reason given is, not surprisingly, that daughters will look after their aging biological parents with more affection and love than “outside daughters.”

Lao tradition recognises the role of the carer, and that role is more often taken by the daughter. The division of labour between men and women – seeing women as the carers – works to women's advantage in traditional Lao customs. The daughter looks after the aging parents, the mother looks after the children, and the mother provides care when her daughter is in the process of giving birth. These roles are not neglected or ignored; rather, they are acknowledged and given prominence in the

²⁵ Li, Feldman et al discuss uxori-local marriage patterns and suggest that there are two different types: the “contingent type” caused by demographic factors, e.g. that there is no son in the family to form a virilocal marriage, and the “institutional type” caused by practical economic factors. See: S. Li, Marcus W. Feldman, and N. Li, “Acceptance of Two Types of Uxorilocal Marriage in Contemporary Rural China: The Case of Lueyang.” *Journal of Family History* 28, no. 2 (2003): 314-33.

²⁶ R. J. Chadwick, “Matrilineal Inheritance and Migration in a Minangkabau Community,” *Indonesia* 51 (1991): 70n26. Chadwick elaborates on the causes and background of matrilocality in anthropological theory. He shows that the division of labour by gender, and the relation between contribution to subsistence and residence, seems to be an important determinant to explain why societies are matri or patri oriented. Other authors could not confirm the predicted relationship in cross-cultural anthropological research and suggested that the patri- or matri marriage dominance depends on the internal- or external warfare of communities. Gough states that, “matrilocality is characteristic of societies in which women’s work, of whatever kind, is done in or near the home, while men’s pursuits periodically take them far from home.” Schneider and Gough, *Matrilineal Kinship*, 553. Gough continues: “While men are hunting, fishing, trading or migrant labourers, it is ‘congenial’ for women to reside uxori-locally rather than with affines.” Schneider and Gough, *Matrilineal Kinship*, 556.

²⁷ Claire Escoffier-Fauveau, Kopkeo Souphanthong, and Phonethep Pholsena, *Women and Reproductive Health in the Lao PDR: An Anthropological Study of Reproduction and Contraception in Four Provinces* (Mother and Child Health Institute, Save the Children Fund/UK, UNDP, Vientiane, Lao PDR, 1994).

²⁸ The same reasons for the strong mother-daughter relations are also mentioned for Cambodia in the article by Annuska Derks, “Over Perfecte Vrouwen en willige Olifanten- Gender in Cambodja.” *Derde Wereld* 16, no. 2 (1997): 155-64.

customary land use rights of women.²⁹ In the traditional system the women who remain in the family home to look after their elderly parents are usually rewarded by being given the land and property by their parents. Entitlement to land is contingent on the daughter's fulfilment of her care-giving role. It is the common perception that when the son functions as the primary care-giver of the aging parents, he is the one who should inherit the house and the land. However, in practice, daughters fill the role of care-giver far more often than sons.

It is likely that, with the intrusion of the market economy, the value of caring might quickly erode, as it is hard to express the value of caring in monetary terms. Cases are reported in which daughters living abroad have sent money to their parents. They then return to Laos to claim a share of the parental land as remuneration for their economic contribution. This makes the economic and psychological position of the caring daughter uncertain. She is not sure any more if she will inherit the land or if other family members will claim it. Therefore, there is a danger that the application of the State Inheritance Law – stipulating equal division of land use rights among brothers and sisters – might undermine and erode the traditional value placed on the act of caring for the aging parents. This might eclipse the visibility of caring, resulting in a number of social and economic consequences for society in the future, such as investments in nursing and rest homes and the increase of psychological problems among isolated elderly people.

A slight cynical tendency resounds in literature on matrilineity insofar as belittling the meaning of matriarchy is concerned.³⁰ This might be the result of the general assumption that, ultimately, males (husbands, village male authorities, mothers' brothers) always have the decision making power "behind closed doors," and while that may be true in India (Kerala) and Indonesia (Minangkabau), it is hardly true in Laos.³¹ The Lao matri-system can be characterised as "women-centered."³² However, the position of sons, fathers, and in-marrying husbands is not considered peripheral in any way, nor does it cause stress that compels them to out-migrate and detach from their natal environment. In the past, rural women's economic contribution was substantially supplemented by the hunting and fishing activities of men. The Lao matri-system gives authority and leadership to men. Therefore, it is not a matriarchal system in the sense that women dominate men.³³ In interviews during field visits, men often identified themselves as an "assistant" to their wife. The gender relations can be characterised by partnership and complementary roles.

²⁹ A survey of the Lao Women's Union (LWU) of April 2008 shows that 37% of land titles have been issued in women's names, 23% in men's names, and 26% in the names of the husband and wife. The remaining land is classified as community, state, and collective land. The figures show the strengthening of the matri-system by the mechanism of the land titling process. These data are shown in a graph on p.40 in a small Lao language booklet which is used as the 'Land right Manual of the Lao Women's Union', 2007.

³⁰ Judy L. Ledgerwood, "Khmer Kinship: The Matriline/Matriarchy Myth," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 51 (1995) p. 247; Sanday, "Matriarchy as a Sociocultural Form, an Old Debate in a New Light", 1998.

³¹ The Lao matrilineal system is also not clan- or lineage-centred like, for instance, the matrilineal Minangkabau society in west Sumatra in Indonesia.

³² Chadwick, "Matrilineal Inheritance," 72.

³³ Sanday retains the term "matriarchy" out of respect and courtesy for the Minangkabau usage. See: Sanday, *Women at the Center: Life in a Modern Matriarchy*. (2002), preface, xi.

3. Blooming Matri-Lifestyles in Vientiane: Almost Twenty Years Later

In the past twenty years, globalisation³⁴ has accelerated processes of profound change that are very visible in Vientiane³⁵ (e.g., the influx of boutiques, bakeries, pizzerias, bookshops, internet cafés, new shopping areas, evening markets, massage and beauty parlours, beer gardens, restaurants, foreign banks, hotels, travel agencies, yellow taxis, city buses, etc.) The city's "facelift" (with the fountain at Patu Xay and the "light-and-sound" show in the evening) and the surroundings of That Luang are some of the recent attractions for tourists. The polarisation between poor and rich has become quite visible; at the same time, the shadowy side of globalization – forced labour migration, sexual and economic exploitation, and the trafficking of women and children – has remained hidden.

I spoke with some women, whom I had met during my first irrigation project in Laos in 1994, concerning their matri experience over the past twenty years. In 1994, they already belonged to the elite of Vientiane, functioning as office workers in a government department but earning very low salaries.³⁶ They were poor and did all kinds of side-jobs in addition to their government work in order to survive – sewing, weaving, and raising turkeys and chickens were popular ways of making a living. Because it is the responsibility of the women in a matri-culture to provide for the daily needs of the household, they were very ambitious and motivated to develop themselves and better their families. A new world of development opened up for them with the influx of foreign donors, foreign counterparts, TORS, manuals, checklists, log-frames, DSA, gender workshops, gender mainstreaming and study-tours. I admired the capacity of my Lao women colleagues and friends to learn English and acquire computer, translation, and other social and professional skills. They embraced every opportunity and chance of obtaining academic degrees abroad. But what is their situation nearly 20 years later? First, it is necessary to provide a brief profile of my respondents.

The urban matri-women in Vientiane that I talked with in 2009 are now in the age-group of forty to seventy-five-plus years. All are married and have a husband and children. Most have small families. They have very busy lives, combining long working hours in the offices with care for their children and grand-children, family duties, and the fulfilment of numerous social and religious obligations. Others have a fulltime job in managing the family land and houses, fulfilling their traditional social and spiritual obligations, and attending life-cycle ceremonies as part of their Lao identity.

Most of them belong to the elite families of Vientiane and have very good assignments in donor projects, working as consultants in ADB, UNDP, and UNIFEM, mining companies, NGO's and AusAid projects. Others work as financial experts in the offices of the Lao government (e.g., the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), or they work for private companies and banks. Some are restaurant owners, managers, or entrepreneurs. In 1995, I made an irrigation study tour to Khamouan with some of them. It was the first time that they had travelled outside Vientiane. These days,

³⁴ For the context and impact of globalisation in Laos, see: Jonathan Rigg, *Living with Transition in Laos: Market Integration in Southeast Asia* (London: Routledge, 2005); Boike Rehbein, *Globalization, Culture and Society in Laos* (London: Routledge, 2007)

³⁵ For a description of Vientiane in 1959, see: Joel M. Halpern, *Economy and Society of Laos: A Brief Survey*, Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, Monograph Series, vol. 5 (New Haven: Yale University, 1964).

³⁶ Salaries of only 15.000 to 25.000 kip were mentioned in 1994/1995.

however, they are very mobile and frequently travel throughout Lao PDR on project-related field visits, or to conduct training or workshops in other provinces. They also visit family in France and the USA and take holidays in Paris and at seaside resorts in Thailand. They have replaced their bicycles and motor cycles with new cars and big SUVs and Chinese BYDs (Buy Your Dream limousines). They are keen to “look good” and proud of their identity, a fact that is reflected in their frequent wearing of beautiful and costly Lao Sins in public places – even at Phimphone Market and JoMa in Setthathirath Road.

Some of my older friends were educated at the Lycée Pavie in Vientiane and spoke French fluently. One friend told me that, as a child, she was educated in France. Her family owned a house there, and she and the other children were sent there, in rotation, in order to study. No discriminatory distinction was made between sons and daughters. Other friends obtained degrees in medicine and engineering in Vietnam, Ukraine, Eastern Germany and other eastern European countries in the sixties and seventies. One woman emphasized that she was raised and brought up with the view that you had to study as much as possible. She told me in 2009 that she was totally unaware as a girl and young woman that she would inherit land and houses. Education for girls is, and was, a crucial aspect of the matri-lifestyle. It was only at the time of her marriage, when she received land and a beautiful house from her parents and grandmother as a wedding gift, that she became aware of her strong economic position as the youngest daughter in a well-to-do matri-family. For two respondents, a Master’s degree in Gender and Development from the Asian Institute of Technology in Bangkok paved the way to good positions in NGOs and multilateral agencies. One of my good friends expressed it as follows: “Knowledge with some economic help is power.”

Globalisation: Does the bridegroom still come to the house of the bride?

What about the keystone of the matri-system, namely the matrilocal post-marriage residence? Is the bridegroom still coming to the house of the bride like he did in the past? In 2009, the majority of the women stated that their husband relocated to their family house, especially when they were the youngest daughter in the family.³⁷ However, there have been some changes. A young couple reported the following: “There is a tendency among modern, young people like us to follow a “modern” lifestyle. We prefer to construct our own house, not in the wife’s parents’ compound, but somewhere else, and live there immediately after the marriage.” They have friends who, like them, chose to live in their own house due to the fact that, as the eldest children, they knew they would have to move out anyway. Here we can see that position in sibling birth order is important when it comes to changes in the traditional matrilocal pattern. The man of the young couple is working in a new bank while the woman is working for a foreign NGO; they have a good income. The young couple’s decision to construct their own house and buy garden land in a village near Vientiane is interesting. They have a plan to build a big house along the

³⁷ Schenk-Sandbergen, *Gender, Culture and Land Rights in Rural Lao PDR*. In our land right study we collected data on the dominant residence pattern of 128 women informants. Of the 128 women 43 (34%) said that they went to their husband's house after marriage, but 84 women (66%) have stated that their husband came to their house. The data from the women's focus groups showed that, in ten villages of the total twenty investigated, there is a matrilocal tradition, and in the other ten, a patrilocal tradition. 53-54.

river as a nursing home for old people, for they anticipate that children, younger daughters in particular, are no longer willing to care for their parents. They stated that in the past “the not so smart kid generally looked after the parents.” It was their opinion that the incompatibility of pursuing a career with caring for parents is increasing nowadays for younger, intelligent daughters. I asked the couple: “What will you do when you are old? Will you stay in your own nursing home?” She would prefer her son to look after them, but he would like his daughter to take care of them, although he plans to construct a nursing house for old people. “The matrilocal tradition is very strong,” he said with a big smile. This case seems to be more the exception than the rule, but it shows that the tradition of matrilocal residence remains strong despite some exceptions.

A recently married couple’s choice of place of residence also depends, of course, on economic conditions. The perception of one woman respondent was as follows: “When the wealth of the families is the same, the husband comes to the wife’s house; if the family of the girl is poorer, then she goes to the bridegroom’s house.” In three cases, Lao women married foreigners. These husbands stayed in Laos and either lived in the house of their parents-in-law or in a house of their own.

Of course, there were also a few cases of women who, after marriage, relocated to the husband’s house. One woman told me that her parents-in-law asked her to live with them because there were no young adult women in the house. In her house, her mother had died when she was 16 and her father had remarried. She herself has three daughters and one son. The husband of her youngest daughter came to live with them again according to the matrilocal tradition. But, her son’s wife also lives in her house because, at the time her son married, they were abroad and nobody took care of the house. She also told me that her husband was kind enough to transfer the property rights of the big house, homestead land, and paddy fields to her while he was still alive so as to avoid paper work after his death.

The above findings pertaining to the continuation of the matrilocal marriage tradition are confirmed by a survey on “Marriage and Family in the Lao PDR” conducted in 1998.³⁸ In 2399 matri-households (Lao, Phu Tai and Leu), the most common pattern is that the husband moves in with the wife’s family.³⁹ The analysis shows that over a time span of forty years, the residence pattern has stayed basically the same. The study even shows that matrilocal patterns are slightly stronger in the current younger generation (15-24 years).⁴⁰

Globalisation: From rice field to economic commodity

In earlier studies, in 1998, we found, that kinship and descent are mainly bilateral, with a firm tendency to give the surname of the father to the children. It was asked whether this might predict a more patrilineal kinship pattern in the future. We are not sure, as we are missing base-line data from some years ago. But what is known from the literature is that the data seem to reflect the continuance of the overall existing trends of the past. The hypothesis was put forth that residence patterns are

³⁸ Lao Women’s Union, GRID Center, *Marriage and Family in the Lao PDR: Data from the Pilot Survey on the Situation of Lao Women (Vientiane Municipality, Sayaboury, Xieng Khouang, Savannakhet)* (Vientiane: Lao Women’s Union, GRID Center, 2000).

³⁹ A very interesting point in the study was that in Xieng Khouang all ethnic groups, including the Lao, live at their husband’s house after marriage.

⁴⁰ Lao Women’s Union, GRID, *Marriage and Family in the Lao PDR*, 19.

less bilineal and more matri-oriented than descent lines. Moreover, we can justifiably hypothesize that, in practice, post-marriage residence patterns are more crucial and important for the maintenance of the power basis of women in inheriting land and house than descent or kinship.⁴¹ My snowball study of 2009 does not reveal that there was a disintegration of matrilineal descent groups. Some women in my small snowball study decided to keep their own surname, particularly when they married a foreigner, but others stated that “men like it when women take their surname.” Most women have frequent contact with their relatives, especially their brothers and sisters. The networks are continuously strengthened by attending life cycle ceremonies and other social and religious gatherings. In social networking, the mobile phone, Facebook, internet, and email are all very powerful tools that facilitate contact and help maintain the kin-networks – especially with sisters living abroad in Vancouver, New York and Paris.

Perhaps one of the more striking discoveries I made in 2009 was that my formerly poor counterparts of 1994 had become very rich. I was very impressed by their big, beautiful houses, large gardens, and beautiful interiors with wooden floors and furniture, and modern, comfortable bathrooms and kitchens. Almost all of them had maids and nannies from other communities, or a poorer relative to look after the daily domestic chores (e.g., cooking, shopping, cleaning, washing, and ironing). How did they become so rich? Naturally, they earned high incomes from their employment, or by marrying either prominent Lao men with good professions or foreign men who earned according to international salary scales. But the main cause for their riches has much less to do with their husbands and is more directly related to their inheritance of land and property from their grandmother, parents, or parents-in-law. Indeed, the land titling documents of the homestead and paddy land have their names on them. The adjudication of the land rights gives them tremendous security and wealth. Almost every one of them told me that they inherited houses from their mother, grandmother or parents, and that they either live in them or collect a good income from renting them out. It seemed a kind of obligation for parents of the past generation to construct houses for their daughters – even before marriage. One good friend told me:

My parents built five houses, one for each daughter, even before we were married, and still at school. Not for the sons. They have to find their own way. They are strong and have to find their own livelihood in life. But girls need assistance. Only my eldest sister lives with her husband in the house built by my parents. The others are not settled yet. They have rented out their houses. (*Field notes: snowball study Vientiane, 2009*)

In some rich families, the daughters not Lao only got houses, they also received cars. All thirteen children in the family got a car from their parents. No distinction was made between boys and girls. It was self-evident that girls should also learn to drive.

It seemed that the better-off families who formerly, in the fifties, lived in the core of the city around Vat Inpeng, Ong Teu and Mi Xai pagoda, bought rice fields in the (then) rural surrounding of Ban Paleb or That Luang. Already at that time, land documents were written in the name of mothers and grandmothers. One woman told

⁴¹ Schenk-Sandbergen, *Gender, Culture and Land Rights in Rural Lao PDR*, 77.

me that she inherited, together with two other siblings, ten hectares of rice land from her father's mother. Now she gets so many bags of rice from the land that all the families have enough throughout the year, and they sell numerous bags, which nets a high income. The value of these former rice fields has skyrocketed, with investors and estate developers eager to buy the land. Prices of \$500 for one square meter were mentioned – very close to Western prices for land. Former gardeners and servants who received a piece of land in compensation for their services to a family are now growing very rich from selling their plots of land.

My formerly poor girlfriends, who were so sad when their chickens were stolen (yet again) in 1994, have become very wealthy. Thanks to the Lao parents' perpetuation of the crucial pillars of the matri-system, the sources of power for Lao daughters have very much supported and empowered them over the past twenty years. All my respondents said that they would perpetuate the matri-values of their parents; there was a clear preference that their daughters inherit their land and real-estate property in the future.

Globalization, changing role of the son-in-law

How do the husbands feel about their wife's success? Some stories indicated that the women have become workaholics and hardly ever see their husband and children, who feel lonely and neglected. In some cases, a divorce could be avoided by reducing the aspirations and ambitions of the wife and finding a useful way for the husband to spend his time. However, there are traces of curtailment of the autonomy and decision-making power of the women in matters related to land, as is reflected in the following story: A Lao woman needed money and thought about selling some of her land. She inherited the land from her mother, and the land-title was in her name. However, her husband said, "No, I don't agree to sell the land." As a consequence, she decided not to sell it, for "disharmony with her husband is against the culture." Also illustrative of this tendency is the following change in the process of making decisions. It used to be the case that inheritance land matters were discussed in family meetings with only the parents and their children. The in-laws did not attend. The principle of "limits of the need" was an important criterion in the division of the land. Nowadays, however, women marry well-educated men who also want to participate in family meetings regarding the land matters of their in-law family. According to my respondents, "the more education the husbands have, the greedier they are, and the more family problems they create."

4. Ethnic Minority, Patri-Women, and Empowerment: Matri-sation?

Women of patrilocal and patrilineal ethnic minorities living in remote mountainous areas in the north of Laos suffer the brunt of gender inequality and poverty. The social organization of the two largest ethnic minorities – the Lao Sung and Lao Thung – is based on male dominance through the ownership of the means of production, patrilocal residence patterns, and patrilineal descent and inheritance patterns. Polygyny is practiced among some of the Hmong (in the villages we visited only 10 to 15 per cent of Hmong men had more than one wife). Women of those groups have less access to economic resources but have to do almost all the productive and household labour.

Nevertheless, we found in earlier studies in 1995 that, despite the dominance

of patriarchal relations, the social atmosphere of these patrilineal ethnic groups was coloured by what we might call a “women's sense of solidarity.” The social structure may offer men the position of authority, but the women's sense of solidarity and their socio-economic power often counteract socially-sanctioned male domination. These power bases spring from a collective spirit among women and from the options available to them for economic autonomy, both based on accepted Lao values concerning women's economic role and identity. We found that being a woman in a patriarchal context in Laos implies a potential for economic autonomy and self-reliance because crucial economic sectors and activities are monopolised by women due to the acceptance of the gender division of labour.

Since we made our observations in 1995, we have found more preliminary evidence that suggests that some women in patri-ethnic minorities are adopting aspects of the matri- lifestyle of the Lao women in order to empower themselves. Resettlement policies, better roads, and increased means of transportation have drastically increased the opportunities for ethnic minority women and girls to move around, allowing them to become aware of other lifestyles, customs and habits. The 2004 ADB Country Gender Strategy Report states that ethnic minority societies in Lao PDR are dynamic and constantly changing. Rapid social change is especially evident in upland villages that are relocated closer to roads and markets or are being merged with other villages that include other ethnic groups. The report states:

A recent study of relocated ethnic minority villages in Luang Namtha and Sekong found numerous changes in cultural patterns, including the adoption of lowland-style housing, dress, marriage practices, and technologies. However, the gender division of labour in resettled households remains essentially unchanged, with women and girls continuing to carry out most of the household work in addition to livelihood activities. Traditional norms and practices are also changing quickly as young people of ethnic minorities migrate to urban centres, and to Thailand, to work part of the year.⁴²

In what follows, I will give two examples of my experience with ethnic minority women who have adopted aspects of matri-lifestyles in an effort to increase their quality of life and to empower themselves.⁴³

Case 1: During my visit to Champasak for an evaluation of a UNICEF project, I came across a group of Lao Theung women. An overwhelming majority stated that the bridegroom comes to live with the bride. This was surprising since, by tradition, they were mainly patrilocal. It seemed that the women had good reasons for resisting patrilocal residence. They told me that they no longer accept the custom that, in the event of their husband's death, they have to marry their father-in-law or brother-in-law. It is a known fact that in some Lao Theung communities, as with the Khamu (who are generally poor), the men stay in the house of their wife for a few years following the marriage so that they can pay off the high bride-price with labour. Therefore, I searched for more evidence to see if the matrilocality trend could be found in other villages in Champassak. The data showed an overwhelming matrilocality pattern of men

⁴² ADB, *Lao PDR: Gender, Poverty and the Millenium Development Goals*, 7.

⁴³ In *Gender, Culture and Land Rights in Rural Lao PDR* (1998), I call this process “Lao Lumisation.” However, this terminology is no longer correct, for the Lao PDR has officially recognized 49 ethnic groups, classified in four ethno-linguistic families, since 2000. Therefore, we might call the process “Lao matri-sation.”

of all ages and not the just married ones. In Ban Mag Ngeo, families of Lao Lum, Ong, and Phu Tai communities were matrilineal and matrilocal with the exception of a few cases in which the wife lived with the parents of the husband because they had no daughter of their own at home. They told me that they follow the Lao Lum customs because girls have to be protected.⁴⁴ In Ban Hovay Pheun, the majority of the villagers belonged to the Laven, a sub-group of the Lao Theung. But there are also Ong, Souy, Alak, and Lao Lum families. In this village as well all the families were matrilocal. Even one Lao Sung man from the patri Hmong community had come to the house of his Laven bride to live with her parents.

Case 2: My experience in a livestock project in Houaphanh provides other examples of the impact of the matri-lifestyle on ethnic minority women. In view of the critical “new poverty” debate, which is seen as a consequence of resettlement and allocation of land and forest policies,⁴⁵ we spoke in 2005 with several Hmong women in Baan Nakhao (a resettled village since 1996), and later with Khmu women, in Viengphan village (resettled since 1987), to learn of their experiences with, and opinions of, the impact of resettlement on their livelihood, livestock situation, poverty level, needs, and interests. The Hmong members came from a village in a remote forest area in the southeast. We found that the women in particular were insistent on moving, even though they were aware that livestock diseases are more common along the roadside and near markets. It seemed, in view of the division of labor, that ethnic minority women had more reasons to move than men. One of the more striking insights gleaned from our discussions was that women were fed up with doing the hard swidden labour. They also wanted a small garden and some paddy land and an easier life, much like the Lao women have. In Viengphan village, the Khmu women told us about their unbearable muscular and nerve pains due to the hard swidden labour. They cannot afford to buy medicines to relieve the pain. They simply do not want this kind of hardship any longer. They are also fed up with having to walk long distances – through difficult and dangerous forest terrain, with heavy baskets on their back while, on top of it all, often carrying a baby – just to reach the market. Hmong and Khmu women are traders, and they want good roads for transportation to nearby markets.

Hmong and Khmu women perceived resettlement as an opportunity to change their hard and difficult life. Coming out of their isolated habitats and seeing how Lao Lum women live, they became aware of their suffering and began looking for alternatives. Thus, we can say that highland women were trying to empower themselves by creating more convenient conditions to carry out the many tasks allotted to them by their culture and society. It seemed that Khmu women, in particular, were eager to be resettled in villages with a Lao Lum population and learn how to improve their systems of livelihood. In several of these mixed villages, Khmu women started to learn weaving skills from the Lao Lum women.⁴⁶ And, of

⁴⁴ Schenk-Sandbergen, et al, 1997, *Children, food, Income and Empowerment*. UNICEF, unpublished manuscript.

⁴⁵ ADB, *Participatory Poverty Assessment*, 120- 131; Bruce P. Shoemaker and Ian G. Baird. “Aiding or Abetting? Internal Resettlement and International Donors in the Lao PDR” (Paper for the First International Conference on Lao Studies, Northern Illinois University, May 20-22, 2005), 1-25; Bernard Moizo, “Land Allocation and Titling in Laos: Origins, Problems and Impacts on Minority Groups,” in *Challenging the Limits, Indigenous Peoples of the Mekong Region*, ed. Leepreecha Prasit, Don McCaskill, and Kwanchewan Buadaeng (Chiang Mai: Mekong Press, 2008), 107.

⁴⁶For the meaning of weaving for Lao women, see: Kristin Vivian Lundberg, “Women Weaving Well-Being: The Social Reproduction of Health in Laos” (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2008).

course, mothers and fathers also wanted their children to be educated and have a better future. Many women we talked with went through the traumatic experience of losing one or more children and wanted ready and nearby access to medical assistance.

Another positive feature associated with matri-influences on the social organisation and cultural patterns of patrilocal groups is the acceptance of intermarriage between ethnic groups. For example, our visit to Muang Kham village revealed that four Lao Lum women married Khamu men; the other way round, Khamu men marrying Lao Lum women, there are also five to six cases, and the Khamu men followed the matrilocal custom of their brides, and went to their parents-in-law houses.

Moreover, the empowerment potential of equity in land legislation and land titling for women of ethnic patri-minorities appears to be important. The second phase of the land titling project has been mainly implemented so far in urban, peri-urban, and lowland situations dominated by the matrilocal Lao population. It will be much more difficult in the third phase of the land titling project to integrate gender equity in rural areas and among ethnic minorities.⁴⁷ The land titling process depends on inheritance rights, which hardly exist for women among most of Lao PDR's rural ethnic minorities.⁴⁸ In a very interesting discussion I had with the German team leader of the Land Management and Registration Project, he pointed to the fact that migration and compulsory resettlement sometimes affect women's rights to land and property positively and, at other times, negatively.⁴⁹ "New" land is considered outside inherited land and may be titled as conjugal. But others view it as an opportunity to reinforce patrilineal and patriarchal ownership rights. The author Moizo observes that the impact of the land reforms for ethnic minority women is that they have become marginalized in their access to land and "prostitutes have started appearing on the main road and in local shops."⁵⁰

It will be difficult for ethnic minority patri-women to obtain gender equity rights under the land titling project; however, during our snowball study in 2009, we noticed that the so-called "Radio Broadcasts and Training" of the Lao Women's Union (LWU), instructing that all land titles should be in the names of both husband and wife, had a positive impact. A very nice Hmong woman told us during our field visits that the land title was initially in her husband's name only. In the training from the LWU and from radio broadcasts,⁵¹ she learned that the land titling should be in both names. She told her husband that she wanted her name on the land title document. He said, "Okay, if you are happy, leave it, but, if you are not happy, we can change it and put both names on the document." She chose the latter option.

⁴⁷ Hermien Rodenburg, Loes Schenk-Sandbergen, and Chansamone Phenkhay, "Suggestions for Training, CRS and Decision Making in the Land Titling Project," in *Land, Gender, and Social Issues in Lao PDR: Towards Gender Sensitive Land Titling*, ed Loes Schenk-Sandbergen, Hermien Rodenburg and Chansamone Phenkhay (Vientiane: AusAid, 1997), 107-34. The "gender awareness training" of the Lao Women's Union in phase 2 of the land titling project was funded by the Worldbank, GTZ and AusAid, but the funds for the project have stopped already with the end of the second phase of the land right project (June 2009). To ensure the land rights of women in patri ethnic minority communities, the gender training will be a necessity in phase 3.

⁴⁸ Mann and Luangkhot, *Study on Women's Land and Property Rights*.

⁴⁹ I am very grateful to Mr Florian Rock of GTZ for sharing his experience on gender equity and land rights with me.

⁵⁰ Moizo, "Land Allocation and Titling in Laos," 110.

⁵¹ The LWU radio communication seems to make use of Hmong and Khamu media languages.

These cases are a confirmation of my earlier experience in Laos, and they suggest that the matri-system has a positive effect on the social environment of women living in a patri-, subordinated position. The trends described above imply an expansion of the matri-sphere of influence and serve to contradict the undermining of matrilineal social systems predicted by eminent anthropologists. The above findings demonstrate the vitality and strength of the matri-system.

5. Missing Girls in China, Matrilocal Marriage, and Domestic Violence

Ample evidence shows that discrimination and violence against women and girls in Asia has increased.⁵² This happened despite better and increasing education, smaller families, changing social attitudes, and rapid development. Millions of women are “missing” from the population totals of many Asian Countries.⁵³ Nowadays the term “gendercide” is used to characterise these gender-selective atrocities.⁵⁴ It is no secret that the countries with the “missing” women are the ones with “son-preference,” patrilocality, and patrilineal kinship and inheritance systems. In the past two decades, with the introduction of new ultra-sound technologies, it has become easy to avoid having daughters by aborting female fetuses. In this way, parents in China and India have replaced the old practices of neglecting the female child and female infanticide with sex-specific abortions of the female foetus.⁵⁵ Technological inventions are not the only causal factors in the increase in gender discrimination – demographic factors have also made significant contributions. Elisabeth Croll shows that the tragic result of the promotion of the one child family policy, or the small family, is that when the first child is a girl, the second or third female foetus is placed in real danger due to the couple’s quest for a son.⁵⁶

In the effort to enhance the value of girls and promote daughter preference, the matrilocal marriage has been identified by Chinese authorities as the fundamental institution capable of achieving the necessary changes in gender attitudes and relations. It is striking that, in China, matrilocal marriage has been encouraged by the government in an attempt to counter the problem of high sex ratios caused by female infanticide, sex-selective abortion, and the abandonment of infant girls. Because girls traditionally marry into patrilocal marriages, they have been seen as “mouths from another family” or a waste of resources.⁵⁷ The interesting point, in view of the main theme of this essay, is that, in China, birth control planners have assumed that uxorilocal marriage will improve women’s status, and that this improvement in status will ultimately help to reduce the

⁵² Elisabeth Croll, *Endangered Daughters: Discrimination and Development in Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2000), passim.; Laurel Bossen, *Chinese Women and Rural Development: Sixty Years of Change in Lu Village, Yunnan* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 303-305.; Karin Kapadia, ed., *The Violence of Development: The Politics of Identity, Gender and Social Inequalities in India* (London: ZED Books, 2002), 1-40, 182-291.

⁵³ Amartya Sen, “More Than 100 Million Women Are Missing,” *New York Times*, December 20, 1990; Leela Visaria, “Improving the Child Sex Ratio: Role of Policy and Advocacy,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 22, 2008. 34-37.

⁵⁴ See <http://www.gendercide.org/>

⁵⁵ Barbara Miller, *The Endangered Sex: Neglect of Female Children in Rural North India* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).

⁵⁶ Croll, *Endangered Daughters*, 182.

⁵⁷ M. Wolf, *Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), 196-98.

growing imbalance in the sex ratio at birth. The skewed sex ratio is believed “to increase violence against women, including sexual exploitation and the trafficking of women and girls, as well as the likelihood that tens of millions of men will be unable to find a marriage partner.”⁵⁸ Though the state began to promote uxorilocal marriages as early as the 1950s, these attempts became especially vigorous during political and family planning campaigns.⁵⁹ The Chinese authorities also legally affirmed uxorilocal marriage in the revised marriage law (1980) in order to enhance its social acceptability. Eklund mentions that in Anhui, for example, the local population policy regulations give preferential treatment to couples who marry matrilocally, entitling them to two children, regardless of whether the first-born is a boy or a girl.⁶⁰ However, if a family has two daughters, only one daughter can benefit from this rule. According to Eklund the “Care for Girls Campaign” launched in 2003 in China is the outcome of a political process responding to the one-child policy and the demographic imbalance in favour of new-born boys. According to her, the raising of awareness about the value of girls should challenge prevailing gender norms. One of the reasons why the Campaign was not very successful, according to Eklund, was the lack of a systematic approach that addressed the virilocal (patrilocal) marriage pattern as a factor contributing to son preference.⁶¹

Evidence from Laos suggests that women and girls living in a matri-environment are more protected and better equipped to resist these evils. In 2009, none of the matri-women in my small snowball study in Vientiane had ever heard of abortion of female fetuses, malnourishment of girls, rapes, dowries, bride burning, discrimination in the labour market, extreme female poverty, severe exploitation, wife beating, or domestic violence in their own Lao community. These evils were almost unknown in their Vientiane matri-lifestyle. They emphasized that girls are very welcome and that their tradition of matrilocality is protecting their daughter against the possible violence of their daughter’s husband.

In view of the above, I was surprised to find many internet sites with NGO reports claiming that domestic violence is a significant problem in Laos, almost endemic. It seemed that the decision to open a shelter for women to seek refuge from domestic violence was made on the basis of field research conducted by the LWU and the Gender and Development Group (an affiliation of about 20 NGOs) in 2003. The project conducted a study of the prevalence, cause, and impact of domestic violence in the Lao PDR. According to the internet website, data were collected through interviews with almost 1,000 villagers from thirty-five communities, in five provinces of the Lao PDR: Bokeo, Luangprabang, Savannakhet,

⁵⁸ Eklund, ““Good citizens prefer daughters,”” 124.

⁵⁹ Weiguo Zhang, “State, Gender and Uxorilocal Marriage in Contemporary Rural North China,” *The China Journal* 60 (2008), 111. Patrilocal marriage predominates in rural China but uxorilocal marriage, in which the husband moves to live with his wife’s family following marriage, has a long history. Weiguo Zhang has analysed how the uxorilocal marriage has evolved in relation to state policies, particularly the birth control policy and the initiation of market reforms.

⁶⁰ Eklund, 2011, Good citizens prefer daughters, 135.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 141. It is remarkable that in India, a highly patriarchal society, an increase in uxorilocal (matrilocal) marriages has been reported as a result of globalisation. Shifting patterns of post-marital residence were found in villages where women weavers were employed by the multinational company IKEA. Men were willing to move to their wife’s family village. See: Geert de Neve, “Weaving for IKEA in South India: Subcontracting, Labour Markets and Gender Relations in a Global Value Chain,” in *Globalizing India: Perspectives from Below*, ed. Jackie Assayag and John Fuller (London: Anthem South Asian Studies, 2005), 110.

Salavan Provinces and Vientiane Prefecture.⁶² The report states: “In Lao PDR, culture and traditions are the mainstay of the Lao lifestyle.” A number of traditional sayings follow this claim: “Men are the net, women are the basket.” “The husband should lead, the wife should follow.” “The man is the boss and women are the labour.”⁶³ The writers of the report conclude that, “these views, and many others, reinforce gender inequality and create disparity between the sexes, allowing men to have culturally accepted control over women.”⁶⁴ The report states that it was hoped that the information gathered during this project would provide the evidence and support needed to urge the governmental and non-governmental organizations to contribute to the creation of services to address the problems related to gender-based violence.

Obviously, these findings in the report do not apply to the aforementioned women living in the modern, blooming matri-lifestyle in Vientiane. As I mentioned earlier, women told me in 2009 that the point of having the son-in-law live in the house of his in-laws is “to know the character of the man; to see if he is rude to her, speaks softly and works well.” They want to protect their daughter. This tradition and attitude is likely to be a protective asset which will possibly reduce the incidence of domestic violence. My findings indicate that domestic violence is not a major problem in the matri-communities. Is it possible that NGOs, which depend on western and international money, have to make domestic violence a problem?

Even the Report of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women mentions some surveys reporting domestic violence, but the context and origin of the victims cannot be identified.⁶⁵ The report states that, in research terms, the topics of domestic violence and rape were addressed nationally for the first time in a survey conducted by the Gender Resource Information and Development Centre in 1998. The results show that twenty-nine women out of the sample of 2,399 households had experienced sexual violence in the previous twelve months. Twenty-two of those reported incidents took place at home. The report states that, among the younger generation, the violent behaviour between spouses is perceived as fairly normal. The CEDAW also mentions a survey (Listening to the Voice of Young People, 1998) conducted among young people: 53.4% of the young people agreed with the following sentence: “It is all right for a man to hit his wife if she makes some mistakes.” The survey shows that stereotyping starts early since 63% of the girls agreed with this statement whereas “only” 45 percent of the boys agreed. Again no ethnic-specific or matri-/patri- specific data are provided in any of these surveys, so we are left to guess who these girls and boys are. The website of The Asia Foundation is a little more specific:

An assessment survey of violence against women conducted by the Lao Women’s Union (LWU) and The Asia Foundation recently revealed that due to a lack of knowledge about their rights, Lao women, *especially ethnic minorities*, suffer from high levels of violence in both domestic and public spheres. The same survey highlights a report by the civil court that spousal violence has become a major

⁶² <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/vaw/ngocontribute/CUSO.pdf>

⁶³ CUSO/GDG, *Report on Rural Domestic Violence and Gender Research: Lao PDR*, 1.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶⁵ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), *Report of the Combined Initial, Second, Third, Fourth and Fifth Periodic Reports of States Parties*, 2003.

cause of divorce. Domestic violence ranked third in the frequency of cases brought before the courts between 1996 and 2000. It moved up to second during 2001-2002. The criminal court, representing all provinces in Laos, reported that sexual violence offences rank fourth in the frequency of cases (the first, second and third being drug, robbery and road accident cases).⁶⁶

This information tends to support my assumption that the Lao matri-system is most likely protecting women against domestic violence. It is my belief that when data on Laos is carefully disaggregated, it will reveal that domestic violence is largely a factor in patri- societies or ethnic minorities with a patrilineal and patrilocal social organisation. I know that differentiation according to ethnic origin and type of social organization is a sensitive issue, but totally denying this basic fact will obstruct us from finding an effective way of reaching the target groups of victimized women who suffer the most.

6. Matri-culture, Globalisation, and Sexual Exploitation

In recent years, many studies on trafficking and sexual exploitation of women and children in Laos have been published on the internet.⁶⁷ There are numerous studies but, again, almost no information on the ethnic community or matri-/patri-social organization background of the women and girls involved. My point in this section is that, contrary to the reports about domestic violence in the preceding section, it might be possible that the exploited sex workers in Laos or Thailand most likely have a matri-, urban, or rural background. The matri-system instils a sense of responsibility in girls and young women, placing the burden on them, as inheritors, to invest in the land and house of the family. In reports and studies, there is a stunning lack of carefully disaggregated data on ethnicity and social organisation system with regard to sexual exploitation. Therefore, it is difficult to draw any evidence-based conclusion.⁶⁸ A few studies, however, provide some information to help substantiate my position.

A UNICEF study of child trafficking in Lao PDR, titled “Broken Promises, Shattered Dreams”⁶⁹ – based on interviews with 253 victims of human trafficking, the victims’ families, and key informants – shows that a significant proportion of victims *belong to non-Lao ethnic groups*. The UNICEF study states (p.18): “Fewer ethnic Lao victims of trafficking were identified than might have been expected on the basis of national population data (18% compared to 30% of total population).” However, Tai-Thay, Mon-Khmer and Tibeto-Burman are “considerably overrepresented and clearly at risk.” The most vulnerable group in the study are girls between the ages of 12 and 18, making up 60% of the surveyed cases. This study might indicate that Lao matri-women and girls are less involved in the trafficking.

⁶⁶ Website Give2Asia.org. *Safe Shelter Services for Women Victims of Violence and Trafficking in Laos A Give2Asia Project*, March 2004, 1.

http://citizenshift.org/blogs/mmlib/blog_BleuRouge/LaosSafeShelte.pdf

⁶⁷ See http://www.no-trafficking.org/content/Reading_Rooms/lao_pdr.htm

⁶⁸ Allan Beesey, “From Lao PDR to Thailand and Home Again: The Repatriation of Trafficking Victims and other Exploited Women and Girl Workers: A Study of 124 Cases” (Bangkok: International Organization for Migration, 2004).

⁶⁹ UNICEF 1. <http://www.unicef.org/media/files/BrokenPromisesFULLREPORT.pdf>.

However, another UNICEF study on commercial sexual exploitation of children in Lao PDR gives information on the ethnic origin of the 133 victims interviewed. It was found that *68% of the survey respondents were Lao Lum, 26% Lao Theung and 6% Lao Sung*, which is in relative proportion to the ethnic breakdown of the general population.⁷⁰ These findings indicate that the matri-system has not prevented girls from getting involved in sex work. How can we explain this situation? Claire Escoffier-Fauveau notes that most of the Lao Lum women she interviewed thought that the power to control their family size was in their hands and that contraception was very much a woman's affair. She states that "the husbands interviewed said they agreed with their wife's decision, and seemed content to let their wife be the controller of their own fertility.... and their own sexuality."⁷¹

This suggests that Lao Lum women enjoy a certain autonomy which allows them to make personal decisions concerning their own fertility and sexuality. James Haughton in his undated study on the situational aspects of human trafficking in Laos writes:

[T]he matrilineal pattern of inheritance also means that the culture is less concerned with the control of female sexuality or the preservation of virginity than many others, as paternity is not an important aspect of inheritance; hence less stigma is attached to sex workers than is the case in other areas..... It is reasonable to assume that this cultural pattern, which also occurs in northern Thailand (Taylor 2005) occurs in southern Laos as well; however most anti-trafficking projects seem unaware of it, and often criticise migrants for "abandoning" Lao culture, or assume that women are more likely to send remittances due to some female universal quality of responsibility, without realising that migrants are in fact fulfilling Lao cultural imperatives.⁷²

Haughton is referring to the very interesting study of Lisa Rende Taylor. She states that daughters from matri-households in Thailand have an additional incentive to invest in better houses and goods. Because property is traditionally passed through the female line in ethnic Lao communities, and the house goes to the youngest daughter, daughters can expect that they will inherit a share of the improved property, while sons will migrate permanently from the village to live with their wife; hence, they have much less incentive to send remittances.⁷³ Taylor provides an analysis in her article "Dangerous Trade-Offs" that shows that poverty and low educational attainment, often cited as the key root causes of trafficking in women and girls, are not the characteristics of girls who are at risk of ending up in the sex industry.⁷⁴ Which girls, then, are at risk? Taylor conducted a fourteen-month study in two northern Thai villages, investigating parental investment and familial roles in

⁷⁰ UNICEF and Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, *How I got here: Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Lao PDR* (Vientiane: Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare and UNICEF, 2003), 11.

⁷¹ Escoffier-Fauveau et al, *Women and Reproductive Health in the Lao PDR*, 51.

⁷² James Haughton, "Situational Analysis of Human Trafficking in the Lao PDR, with Emphasis on Savannakhet: A Literature Based Study Undertaken for World Vision Lao PDR" (internet Word document), 16.

⁷³ Lisa Rende Taylor, "Dangerous Trade-Offs: The Behavioral Ecology of Child Labor and Prostitution in Rural Northern Thailand," *Current Anthropology* 46, no. 3 (2005): 411-31.

⁷⁴ Taylor, "Dangerous Trade-Offs."

relation to child labour, prostitution, and trafficking. The findings of her study show that birth position, parental marital instability, and educational attainment (which *increases* risk) were found to predict the odds of a girl's entrance into dangerous labour and the age at which this occurs. In particular, on the birth position of the daughters and the chances of becoming a sex worker, she presents interesting findings.⁷⁵ Her analyses suggest that first-born and middle-born daughters have the following roles in rural matri-families. First-borns act more as home helpers, and this important role reduces their risk of being exploited as child labour outside their home. Middle-born daughters act more as financial helpers, perhaps reflecting the tradition of using children to pay family debts. Middle-born daughters receive the least educational investment, start working the earliest, and migrate or work in the commercial sex market in the highest numbers. Last-borns, despite receiving high levels of investment and education, are entered into harmful labor situations at the youngest ages. It is noteworthy, according to Taylor, that after being in school up to the ninth or even twelfth grade, these girls do not know how to farm, and elder sisters, after investing so much in their younger sisters, do not want to see their younger sisters back on the farm or in the local market. The "at-risk" girls and young women happen to be the most educated in the rural villages, receiving more education than the older generation and even their brothers. Parental wealth was not a significant factor, revealing neither poverty nor lack of education as the driving forces behind the harmful labour and trafficking of northern Thai children. Taylor suggests that the hazardous labour may be driven by a concern for providing status assets for the matri-line and the compensation for the costs of education; some families expect high returns on their investment in daughters who have spent most of their childhood in school.

The above findings suggest that globalization instantiates negative possibilities inherent in the matrilineal and matrilineal culture and social system, increasing the chances of younger daughters to get involved in the sex-trade or become victims of sexual exploitation and trafficking. How far the aforementioned processes are profoundly changing by for instance demographic changes, which imply small families and less daughters to take responsibility for the matri-line status, needs further study.

7. Conclusions

Despite the warnings of eminent women anthropologists that matrilineal, matrilineal and bilateral societies all over the world will disintegrate and be undermined by patriarchal ideologies and practices as a result of liberalisation and globalisation, the reverse seems to have happened in Vientiane. My small snow-ball study of 2009 in Vientiane showed that globalisation has contributed greatly to a booming, strong, and modern matri-lifestyle for a group of elite urban Lao women. The "opening-up of the market," in combination with the matri-culture and social system, has generated many opportunities for these women to develop skills and talents, enabling them to obtain high positions and a sizable income in the "free market." In 1994 they were poor, but many have since become very rich, as the paddy fields they inherited from their parents and grandmothers under matrilineal customary inheritance rights have increased in value. City developers eagerly bought the paddy fields to convert them to commercial and estate areas. The trends

⁷⁵ Taylor, "Dangerous Trade-Offs," 417.

described above contradict the predictions made by eminent anthropologists about the undermining of matrilineal social systems. Moreover, there are indications that the matri-system is expanding its influence among women of ethnic minorities living traditionally in a patriarchal social system. A continuing process of adopting aspects of the matri-lifestyle – the matrilineal marriage in particular – by women of patri-, ethnic minority groups is noticed. We can refer to this trend as “matri-sation.” It might contribute to processes of empowerment, gender equality in land legislation and land right adjudication, and overall greater gender equality for certain groups of ethnic minority women.

The matri-system has shown itself to be an important protective system for daughters, particularly in the prevention of sex-specific abortions, female infanticide, neglect, and discrimination against daughters in times of propagating small families. The interesting point is that, in China, birth control planners are promoting matrilineal marriages in order to improve women’s status, assuming that this improvement in status will ultimately help reduce the growing imbalance in the sex ratio at birth. The Lao matri-system can be considered as a model for “son-preference” cultures, for it has demonstrated its ability to uphold the relatively high value and status of Lao women and girls. NGO studies show a dramatic increase of domestic violence in Laos despite its deeply-rooted matrilineal marriage tradition. This violence seems to be almost endemic. It is argued that it is not likely that the reported domestic violence will be much of a problem in matri-system environments. Globalisation has augmented the inherent negative potential of the matri-lifestyle, the results of which could end up endangering younger daughters of matri-families by placing them in positions that make them vulnerable to the lure of the sex trade. Potential inheritors of the maternal house and land, these younger daughters feel a responsibility to invest in the assets of the family. A stunning lack of awareness was noticed in the methodology of studies on domestic violence and sexual exploitation to disaggregate data according to gender, ethnicity, and matri-/patri-origin. For this reason, it was difficult to draw conclusions.

The Lao matri-system has proved to be strong, sustainable, and capable of counteracting the negative gender impact of globalisation. The world-wide historical trend to defeat “women-friendly” or “women-centred” societies is not yet undermined.

What suggestions can be made to support, protect and empower the Lao matri-system as a precious cultural heritage? My suggestion is to support the funding of the gender equity training in order to increase the gender awareness of land rights for women as developed in the pilot, first, and second phase of the land titling projects, and implemented by the Lao Women’s Union. Straight transfer of land will ignore both the inheritance and statutory rights of women. Moreover, the methodology of studies concerning domestic violence, the trafficking of women and children, and child labour should no longer ignore the ethnic community and the related matri- or patri- context of the social system of the respondents. Carefully disaggregated data are necessary to reach the right target groups. Another suggestion is to support income-generating activities and to initiate micro-credit projects for middle-born and youngest-born daughters of matri- households in rural and urban areas. They are most at risk to become victims of sexual exploitation.

A beautiful book, published by UNESCO, aims to generate awareness in order to preserve the cultural heritage (e.g., languages, literatures, weaving, music and architecture, etc.) of ethnic minorities, particularly the ones that rely on memory to

safeguard the ethnic identity and diversity.⁷⁶ My suggestion is to invite UNESCO, or any other organization, to initiate studies on the important meaning of the Lao matrilineal and matrilineal social system in order to safeguard the cultural heritage which empowers and protects so many women (and men) in this time of increasing globalisation.

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⁷⁶ Yves Goudineau, *Laos and Ethnic Minority Cultures: Promoting Heritage*, Memories of Peoples Series (Paris: UNESCO, 2003).

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