Interactions with a Violent Past

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CHAPTER 6

A Social Reading of a Post-Conflict Landscape: Route 9 in Southern Laos

Vatthana Pholsena

Introduction

The road that is the focus of this article — Route 9 — is one of Laos’ most important national highways, as well as being a key component of the East-West Economic Corridor, linking the city of Mawlamyine in Southeastern Burma with the port of Đà Nẵng in Central Vietnam (Quảng Trị Province) via Northeast Thailand and Southern-Central Laos (Savannakhet Province). Route 9 runs for 324 kilometers across Quảng Trị and Savannakhet Provinces to the Thai border. Because of its strategic alignment and economic potential, the completion of the upgrading of Route 9 in the first half of the 2000s was duly fêted in Laos’ national newspapers. In fact, the restoration was closer to a revival: at the end of the Vietnam War, the road was in ruins, a war-ravaged landscape. Just a few years before turning into a conduit to “modernity” at the dawn of the 21st century, Route 9 was known among military planners and local inhabitants as the “death road” (Vietnam Museum of Ethnology 2009: 41).

As initially laid out, the covert route between North and South Vietnam that came to be called the Ho Chi Minh Trail followed the eastern slope of the Trường Sơn mountain range, crossing Route 9 just south of the demilitarized zone in South Vietnam. However, the route had to be changed early in 1960 after a stack of weapons left behind by North Vietnamese infiltrators on the Trail was discovered and reported to the ARVN (Army of the Republic of [South] Vietnam) (Prados 1998: 15). The 559th
Transportation Group (the North Vietnamese logistics unit in charge of building the Trail and carrying supplies across the DMZ demarcation line) reacted to the consequent intensification of patrolling by shifting the main infiltration route in early 1961 to the western side of the Trường Sơn mountain range. This new route ran through the panhandle of southern Laos via the vicinity of Sepon (also spelled Tchepone), in eastern Savannakhet Province on Route 9, an area that soon became a strategic center and logistics base area for the North Vietnamese Army and one of the most important nodes on the relocated Trail. In parallel, from 1964 onward, Washington’s first priority was to assist the military effort in the southern Republic of Vietnam. The US Air Force subsequently launched in mid-1964 its first air strikes against fixed targets and infiltration routes (particularly the Ho Chi Minh Trail) throughout Laos, which soon expanded in April 1965 to a day-and-night offensive air campaign in southeastern Laos in an attempt to stop supplies flowing into South Vietnam from the North. As the US bombing of the Trail grew in intensity, it led inevitably to a widening of the war into central and southern Laos.

Today, Route 9 runs through open, flat lands filled with rice-fields and vegetation, rising toward the Trường Sơn mountains as one gets nearer the Vietnamese border. Physical remnants of war, on or around the road, have all but disappeared (except for commemorative sites in Phine and Sepon Districts and in Ban Dong on Route 9, which I will discuss later). Sepon villagers are no longer confronted with a landscape in ruins on Route 9; the road is no longer scattered with wartime remnants — unexploded ordnance (UXO) and bomb casings, cracks and craters. But the absence of damage does not equate to an absence of memory. In Sepon District, where I conducted fieldwork between 2006 and 2012, Route 9 projects ambivalent images. To villagers in this impoverished rural area, the two-lane paved road both constitutes and represents economic development, but is also a place of darker times, of memories of violence and rift.

In post-socialist Laos (and other developing countries), road construction is a top priority for state economic planners as part of the effort to lift the rural population out of “backwardness” (both material and cultural) by integrating them with the modern, market-based economy. In general, the rural population in Sepon District has welcomed the arrival of a paved road running through or near their villages; they share with the country’s economic and political elites the view that roads symbolize — and can bring about — “progress” and “modernity.” Yet, to some local residents, Route 9 has come to embody over several decades different, sometimes
contradictory, connotations that more often than not are expressed in statements whose meaning is left implicit. Thus, there exists a salient contrast between today’s physical landscape around Route 9 and the villagers’ historical memory of the road. Several anthropologists and historians have stressed the importance of symbolic meanings and socio-psychological dimensions of roads in studying social impacts of roads among local communities (Colombijn 2002; Flower 2004; Rosman 1996; Thomas 2002; Nishizaki 2008; Weber 1976). By looking at different meanings attached to Route 9 during the war and its aftermath, I would like to open a window into people’s experiences of past conflicts and their postwar memories.

This chapter consists of two parts. The first part describes the origins of the road during the pre-colonial and French colonial periods, then shows the strategic meanings that were attached to Road 9 during the “American war” in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia (1961–75). In the second part, I discuss the socio-psychological dimensions of the road in the postwar official and, especially, private memories. In a landscape where there are few “vehicles of memory” such as museums, battleground sites, or commemorative monuments, I take an approach that focuses more on the experience of the war and the private (postwar) memories of events among Sepon villagers that lived through the Vietnam War and its aftermath. In other words, I am interested in exploring social — rather than cultural — representations of the war. Much as remembering is an individual act, as Halbwachs showed, each person is a member at various times of one, or several, social groups whose experiences and memories of past events are not identical to other groups (Halbwachs 1992: 53). To put it differently, we should not assume that memory expressions in the private sphere coalesce into a single collective, albeit unofficial, memory. In the second half of the chapter, I take into account the “multiform social experience of the war” (Lagrou 2000: 3) by looking at different social groups that coexist along Route 9 in Sepon District — war veterans, bystanders, former reeducation camp detainees — and interrogate how their divergent experiences of the conflict and its aftermath shape their postwar memories.

The choice of this methodology has also been prompted by the context of postwar Laos where a process of democratic transition has not taken place (unlike in former communist regimes in Eastern and Central Europe) and official representations of the past (and the war) leave little room for alternative voices in the public sphere. Thus, the Cold War-cum-civil war in Laos, pitting the Royal Lao Government against the Pathet Lao (as the Lao communist movement was widely known) and its immediate postwar
consequences (purges and reeducation camps) have been silenced in the public memory. I therefore concur with Alon Confino when he argues in his study of memory in postwar West Germany that “since some views about Nazism could not be made public, we should look for their expression in social practices and representations where they were not directly discernible but fairly unexpected. These kinds of sources, practices, and representations may ultimately reveal more about attitudes and beliefs” (Confino 2000: 100). Silences in the public sphere should not be translated too quickly into acts of forgetting — rather, they should also be considered in relation to memory expressions in everyday life and the private sphere.

**Route 9: From an Instrument of Empire to a Cold War Front Line**

*A Road to El Dorado*

French colonial planners initially believed that the Mekong River would serve as the natural pathway for France’s penetration into the hinterlands of the Indochinese Peninsula.\(^5\) Despite their energetic efforts and dedication, the early attempts and repeated failures by French explorers to overcome the rapids in southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia gradually dissipated any hopes of building a commercial artery linking southern Laos with Annam and Cochinchina (present-day central and southern Vietnam, respectively) via the Mekong River’s tributaries.\(^6\) Soon, these explorations were replaced by equally enduring enterprises to “discover” land routes that would physically connect the coastal region of Central Vietnam to the Mekong valley on the other side of the Annamite Chain. The colonial ventures eventually led in 1912 to the construction of a road — a segment of today’s Route 9 — from Đông Hà in Quảng Trị Province, running through Savannakhet Province, to the left bank of the Mekong River, though it was not until 1930 that an all-weather road would be completed.

In truth, the path through the *Ai Lao* mountain pass\(^7\) in the Annamite Chain — that is, the “ancestor” of *La Route Coloniale* No. 9 — “discovered” in 1877 by Jules Harmand, one of the pioneering explorers of the French Indochinese space, had long been known to the hill populations and the ethnic Việt.\(^8\) A major study undertaken by Lê Quy Đôn, a high-ranking mandarin under the Trịnh rule, entitled *Phủ biên Tạp lục* and written in 1776, takes the form of a compilation of miscellaneous records on the peripheral lands of Thuan Hóa and Quảng Nam.\(^9\) This document provides invaluable information on the ethnic Việt’s penetration and nascent
colonization of the hinterlands of Central Vietnam, including the region of Khê Sanh-Ai Lao, at least one century before the arrival of the French. The construction of a military post and the administrative organization of the area denote the establishment of a bureaucratic presence of the Việt Empire in these recently annexed highland provinces, though efforts to implement effective control bore little fruit (Lemire 1894: 14–6). Beyond the military and political aspects, hill peoples and lowland ethnic Việt are shown to be interacting daily on the ground; Lê Quý Đôn thus notes patterns of exchanges involving upland agricultural and forest products (rice, chickens, buffaloes, bamboo shoots, textiles, etc.), on the one hand, and lowland items (salt, dried fish, nước mắm, iron and copper objects, silver jewelry, etc.), on the other. The mandarin also mentions trade roads linking the coastal region in Central Vietnam with the Mekong plains, traversing the present-day northeastern province of Thailand, and also extending all the way to Vientiane (Li 2002: 121–2).

In late 19th-century France, a road network that had earlier facilitated the diffusion of state power to a limited extent was enormously expanded, for the first time creating something approaching national unity and a high degree of political and economic integration (Weber 1976: 195–220). This instrumental approach to communications was shared by colonial administrators in Indochina who used roads (and railways) as technologies of empire (Del Testa 2001: 28). The French colonial project to create a unified geographical space on political, economic and commercial levels (chiefly at the expense of trade with Siam) (Goscha 2012), and the disappointments brought about by the Mekong’s indomitable nature, explain France’s determination to conceive and proceed with the construction of roads between their Lao and Vietnamese colonies. Every male aged between 18 and 45 in these territories was forced to serve as corvée labor annually, the work generally involving the construction of colonial infrastructure (mostly roads, bridges, and railways). In Sepon, the few men still alive who participated in the corvée to build sections of Route 9 certainly remembered it. “We were forced to work as coolies [in French] on a 15-day shift and then the French would select another batch of men from the village. We even had to bring our own food,” one old man recalled. Though those colonial roads and paths aimed to serve as conduits for the diffusion of colonial power, commercial opportunities and fruitful investments in the country were to remain part of the myth of a Lao “El Dorado”: the country neither met its own administration’s expenses nor benefited France. Although the road was for some a site of memories of the colonial past, for most people I spoke with the road more often evoked recollections of the “American
Accordingly, I turned my attention away from the period of the road’s construction and toward its wartime and post-conflict significance.

A Cold War Front Line

Laos became engulfed in the turmoil of the Cold War in Asia in the early 1960s when its internal politics became internationalized. Elusive aspirations to a neutral position were crushed by the rivalry among Lao political factions that were heavily sponsored by foreign allies: on the one hand, the Pathet Lao was backed by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and the Communist Bloc (headed in Asia by China); on the other hand, the United States and its allies in Southeast Asia, notably Thailand, threw their weight behind anti-communist Lao groups. The degree of external pressure on the civil war in Laos was such that a resolution of the conflict progressively eluded its political leaders, in spite of their attempts to form coalition governments (in 1957–58, and again, in 1962–63). In mid-1961, the North Vietnamese-Pathet Lao forces captured the districts of Sepon, Phine, and Phalane in the east of Savannakhet Province and gained control of Route 9 in these areas. The road embodied on the ground the Cold War-induced Lao civil war: to the west of Muang Phalane on Route 9 lay the “US-controlled puppet/enemy zone” (*khêt sattu*), while the eastern region formed the “liberated zone” (*khêt potpôï/khet issala*), as villagers in Sepon recalled the divided territories. Key locations on Route 9 constituted the shifting front line. “We conducted our missions in the rear zone (*neo lang*), spying (*seup lap*) and mobilizing (*ladom*) in the enemy districts of Atsaphanthong and Atsaphorn [situated to the west of Muang Phalane]. We entered villages at night and explained to their inhabitants the revolutionary system (*labob pativat*) as opposed to what was the Vientiane regime,” a former Pathet Lao agent, who lives in Ban Thakhong (located about five kilometers east of Sepon town), recollected in words still reflecting wartime mental boundaries.

Members of families often remained separated for the duration of the war, unable to travel either eastward or westward, living on either side of what may be called an “internal border.” “I left for Savannakhet town in 1959 with my younger sister. Road No. 9 was blocked in 1960 and we could no longer go back to our village, not until 1977 after the Liberation,” an elderly woman from Ban Natheuy in Vilabuly district located to the northwest of Sepon district remembered. Some — such as soldiers and
personnel of the Royal Lao Army and Government, as well as petty traders (most of whom were Vietnamese and Chinese migrants) — never returned, having fled upon the advance of the communist troops. “When Thakhong [where a small French-supported RLA post was set up] fell in 1960, my father [a former Kuomintang soldier] fled to Savannakhet. He left alone without his wife and children. He didn’t come back after the war,” recounted a woman who still lived in Ban Thakhong. To combatants and civilians alike, the space enveloping Route 9 figured as a fractured landscape, the road having lost its primary function — as a technology of mobility and communication — and turned instead into something approaching the metaphor of an “iron curtain.”

To villagers who stayed in “the front zone” (neo naa), Route 9 was transformed into a field of violence, a road “to flee and to hide from” (lee phay) when US bombing raids picked up in the mid-1960s. As the US interdiction campaign intensified, villagers dwelling in the vicinity of the road were forced to abandon villages, houses, rice fields and cattle, and flee to the nearest mountain slopes or caves where their “refugee lives in the forest” (sivit opanyob yu paa) began and were to last for a decade. These predominantly lowland wet rice farmers switched entirely to upland shifting cultivation — an ancient farming technique characterized by the clearing and burning of a plot in the forest, which is then farmed for a year or two before moving on to another location. This form of agriculture to a great extent saved the villagers’ lives by providing a more flexible and mobile technique of rice cultivation (in contrast to sedentary paddy field cultivation), which helped people flee the bombing. Their constant and deepest fear was to be spotted by US planes that regularly flew over the mountain areas. They shed their pre-war clothing and dressed themselves instead with pieces of clothing collected and recycled from sandbags left by the “enemy” in abandoned military campsites, Vietnamese military uniforms (obtained through bartering) and even American parachutes. In a villager’s words, they gradually turned into some “un-human figures” (bor khü khon). More than 30 years have passed since the end of the conflict, and the old men and women of Sepon may not remember dates and locations exactly; on the other hand, they vividly recall the glaring lights of the planes “that wheeled like a cloud of insects” and an overwhelming sense of dispossession: “we were no longer human beings,” declared one elder. “During the “struggle against the French” (samay tor tan falang), we hid for a few days in the forest, then could return to the village. We could light a fire. But during the “American War” (samay songkharm amelica),
we stayed for years in the forest, living in darkness (yu baep müi). We’d become like animals (khū sat)” (Pholsena 2010: 276). To local residents, the region of Route 9 became an interdicted place, from which they were expelled, literally and figuratively, to the outer confines of civilization over that decade of bombing.

The bombing finally stopped in 1973 following the ceasefire signed between the Neo Lao Hak Xat (the political organization of the Lao communist movement) and the Royal Lao Government in February of that year. The period of transition before complete takeover by the NLHX lasted less than two years. Unlike the revolutions in South Vietnam and Cambodia, the final step in the conquest of power by the Lao communists involved relatively little violence. A coalition government was formed on April 5, 1974. The NLHX gradually built up its influence in urban areas, attracting the support of students and some members of the elite, as well as to some extent that of a population weary of war and unhappy with the rising cost of living (mainly due to the embargo imposed by neighboring Thailand on the import of consumer goods and oil). The Communists also benefitted from the weakening of the right-wing camp, which was deprived of Washington’s finances and military aid and undermined by its own internal divisions. Anti-American and anti-capitalist protests intensified in Vientiane, Thakhek, Savannakhet, and Pakse. The entry of the Khmer Rouge and North Vietnamese troops into Phnom Penh and Saigon on 17 and 30 April 1975 respectively, hastened the end of the regime. In May of that year, the NLHX called for an open insurrection throughout the country. On 26 August, troops of the Lao People’s Army entered Vientiane and the major provincial cities, including Savannakhet.

A revolutionary cadre recalled walking with his companions on the Trail from the Vietnamese border, stopping first in “Muang Phine” (where the Lao communist headquarters was then located) for a few days to “prepare the take-over of Savannakhet town” before marching on to the provincial capital along the track of Route 9. “We were instructed on how to talk, behave, eat properly … and even how to use toilets! We’d been living in the forest and had no clue about urban life. We were countrymen (khon baan nork), entering the city (khaw müang),” the war veteran explained. During those historic days and weeks, the road reverted — briefly — to its role of connecting urban and rural areas, and (more significantly) blurred the dyadic relation of “core” and “periphery” by bringing the “peasant” revolution to town. But to villagers who gradually came down from the mountains and out of the caves after the ceasefire, Route 9 looked like anything but a “victory road,” as discussed in the next section.
The repairing of the road in the immediate postwar period involved the participation not only of soldiers from Vietnam’s People’s Army (see Christina Schwenkel’s chapter), but also hundreds of prisoners from the defunct Royal Lao Army who had to contend with the hazard of UXO in addition to the hardships of imprisonment (topics to which I shall shortly return). An estimated 20,000 Vientiane-side military personnel, police officers and civil servants involved with the “old regime” (labob kaw) were sent to “reeducation camps” (euphemistically translated from sun samana in Lao, which can be translated literally as “seminar centers”) set up in remote areas throughout the country after 1975. Several of these camps were established along Route 9 and in the uplands nearer the Vietnamese border (see map below). In fact, the eastern section of Route 9 is scattered with villages that were former sites of reeducation camps, including Ban Setthamouak, Ban Phonmouang, Ban Kheng Khan (on Route 28A) and Ban Dong. 30 years later, little evidence remains of the brutality of the war on Route 9 and the painful reconstruction process that followed, except for the presence of scrap metal (becoming increasingly scarce due to villagers collecting and selling it), bomb craters too large to be filled up and government/international agency posters that warn residents of unexploded munitions (see below).

The task of reading post-conflict landscape “text” is even more challenging in post-conflict countries where wars subsided only recently or the rule of the victors prevent any reconciliatory representations of the past (Steinberg and Taylor 2003). In the East of Savannakhet Province, the landscape of Route 9 is dotted with a few war monuments and postwar infrastructure (mainly bridges) that stand as reminders of the “socialist friendship” era when the country was in a dire economic situation and received the help of other communist states (the former Soviet Union, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, and Vietnam) (Vietnam Museum of Ethnology 2009: 44). Three sites on Route 9 can be read as officially-sanctioned lieux de mémoire, “sites of memory,” through which are channeled representations of the past in a freeze-frame to capture a particular historical moment in collective memory (Nora 1989). Two of them are located in the district towns of Phine and Sepon, and the third is situated in Ban Dong, some 15 kilometers from the Lao-Vietnamese border. The monument in Muang Phine is composed of a wide horizontal fresco carved in stone, in front of which has been erected a statue of
Plate 6.1 “You should not allow your children to go and collect scrap metal or to use metal detectors,” warns this poster in Sepon District, Lao PDR.
two soldiers (one supposedly Vietnamese, the other Lao), both carrying a Kalashnikov rifle and one holding the Lao flag. More interestingly, the fresco shows combatants and civilians (husbands and wives, mothers and children) united in the “anti-imperialist struggle,” conveying “narratives of suffering, sacrifice, indebtedness, and citizenship” (Schwenkel 2009: 108). This monument is a memorial through which the Lao state is able to
display its gratitude and appreciation for those who suffered for the “just cause.” However, this “memoryscape” overlooks the reality of the conflict as a civil war in Laos, as only the victors’ account is being displayed.

The monument’s distinctive socialist iconographic style and the vivid scenes represented on the stone wall sharply contrast with the bland “victory” site (anusavaly) in Sepon town, furthermore obscured by unkempt vegetation, at the center of which stands a derelict Buddhist stupa, overlooking Route 9. An explanation for the more flamboyant commemorative monument in the district town of Phine may be related to the location of the revolutionary headquarters in that area during the war.

The third and last commemoration site is located by Route 9 in Ban Dong. The old settlement of Ban Dong (Ban Dong Kaw) is better known among historians of the Vietnam War as the site of one of the most fiercely fought battles of the Second Indochina War. Between 8 February and 25 March 1971, the armed forces of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)
launched an offensive campaign in the border area straddling Savannakhet and Quảng Trị Provinces with the objective of disrupting the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The limited offensive campaign aimed to attack westward from Khe Sanh (Quảng Trị Province) along Route 9, seize the storage depots and destroy the supplies stockpiled around Sepon, and withdraw back to South Vietnam. The campaign, famously known as Operation Lam Sơn 719, was a disaster for the ARVN and led to much bloodshed on both sides. In this ferocious battle, some 45 percent of the 17,000-man invasion forces were killed, wounded, or left missing in action, while North Vietnamese casualties totalled an estimated 13,000 (Nalty 2005: 151). On the communist side, the battle is today included in the pantheon of renowned victories over “the imperialists and their puppets” by the “revolutionary armed forces” (Pathet Lao Daily 2005: 47). To this end, an exhibition center (horng vangsadeng) was built on Road 9 in the large area where reeducation camps and dormitories for prisoners used to be located in the New Ban Đông (Ban Đông Mai). The new village was set up along Road 9 after 1975, and about one kilometer from the old settlement located further from the road (Mithouna 2001: 88). According to the main entrance’s inscription, the site specifically aims to celebrate “the Lao-Vietnamese common battlefield in the region of Road 9.”

I first visited the site in October 2008 (having passed through it on numerous occasions in previous years). The building of the exhibition center was still at an early stage, though battlefield remains (supposedly from Operation Lam Sơn 719) had already been moved to the area surrounded by high fences. Lying on unkempt grass in corners of the field were bomb casings, artillery pieces, anti-aircraft guns, vehicle and plane wreckage, including that of a tank, and various unidentifiable pieces of scrap metal (see pictures below). They looked less like (soon-to-be) museum exhibits than abandoned remnants. In any case, the villagers did not need these objects to remember wartime years: large bomb craters had become an integral part of the natural landscape of the Old Ban Đông village.

When I returned to the area in February 2010, the construction of the exhibition center was finished. But the interiors of the edifice remained empty and the wartime wreckage was still lying in the same spot. The caretaker told me that nobody knew when the center would be open to the public: “the building is still empty. I heard that there were plans to bring some exhibits from the countryside and Vietnam.” Then the man turned to his neighbor and chuckled: “Well, if there’s anything left to collect around here!” The construction of housing for war veterans to be located behind
the center — where labor camps used to be, according to the caretaker — had not begun. The head of the Provincial Department of Information and Culture in Savannakhet, who oversaw the exhibition center project, lamented that “there was not enough money to finish the project” even though the commemoration site has had the attention of the authorities at the highest level: the Lao PDR’s President and Party Secretary-General, Choummaly Sayasone, visited the place twice to check on the progress being made. He “arrived by helicopter and stayed maybe half an hour,” recalled the caretaker. I most recently visited Ban Dong in June 2012. The exhibition center was by then open, and I was able to wander inside the building this time. A huge painting depicting a battlefield (presumably, the famous Operation Lam Son 719) covered the entire wall facing the entrance door. The (few) exhibits (mainly, bomb and rocket remains) were laid out in a circular fashion, along with black-and-white pictures of battles fought in the area of Route 9 during the Second Indochina Conflict. In the last exhibition room, a large map of the Ho Chi Minh Trail straddling the borders of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia was hung on the wall, its legend written in three languages: Vietnamese, Lao, and English. Outside the center, a new larger than life sculpture of two soldiers, one Vietnamese and the other Lao, was standing in front of the edifice. The day I was there, an excavator was removing wartime wreckage to create an open space in front of the museum building; as a staff member of the memorial site explained to me, “everything has to be ready for the official inauguration on December 12, 2012.” The New Ban Dong exhibition center was indeed officially opened on that day in the presence of top-ranking Party officials from Laos and Vietnam to finally fulfill its dual role as the medium of public memory of a triumphant victory on the one hand, and vector of official amnesia of the more recent ambivalent past on the other. In the next and final part of the chapter, I would like to elucidate the more subtle traces of the war and its aftermath in Sepon in its inhabitants’ every day, private memories.

“A Beautiful Road”

Today Route 9 runs out from Savannakhet Province’s capital at the city’s largest market and bus depot. The two-lane paved road connects the provincial capital with a few small district towns along its length, transporting local travelers, traders, villagers, and students alike on minibuses and songthaew18 that leave the bustling market each hour. Passengers ranging further afield may take the international bus that departs once a day for
Quảng Trị Province in Central Vietnam or any one of a number of buses across the bridge that spans the Mekong River, linking Savannakhet with Mukdahan in northeastern Thailand. When one travels through Savannakhet Province’s former conflict zones, it is hard to match the present-day scenery with this graphic description of the road in the aftermath of the fighting: “Route 9 was like a cemetery. The bodies of dead enemy soldiers, damaged tanks, cannons and military vehicles were scattered along the road. Unexploded land mines and bombs continued to create carnage long after the battles had ended” (Vietnam Museum of Ethnology 2009: 41). It took exactly 30 years for the road to revert to its status of “motor of modernity.” Those inhabitants in Sepon old enough to remember had been keeping close track of the road’s rehabilitation process.

‘In 1983, Route 9 was a dirt road, in terrible condition, with holes and cracks. In some places, you even had to bend to go through; otherwise your face would get scratched by brushwood,’ recalled a customs officer at the border check-point in Densavanh on the Lao-Vietnamese border. ‘It’d take 3 days and 3 nights to reach Savannakhet town from the [Lao-Vietnamese] border: one night in Sepon village, a second night in Setthamouak, and a third night in Seno or Donghen. In 1985,
the Vietnamese [soldiers] came to help repairing the road, after that
the travelling time came down from three nights to one night only. In
1994, it was possible to cover the distance in one day, from 6 am to
6 pm. In 2005, we had the road as it is today: 4 hours by bus or less
than 2 hours by car.’

The precise account of this man who was born in Sepon district and
fought in the Pathet Lao army during the war resembles the discourse of
government plans for economic development in that it portrays the reno-
vation of the road as a crucial factor in the recovery of the district. In
post-socialist Laos, one of the resonant symbols of “modernity” as opposed
to “backwardness” is the existence of paved roads linking villagers to
markets, and thus to economic “progress.” The completion of the up-
grading of a 71-kilometer section of the road in late 2002 prompted this
buoyant comment in the English-language national newspaper, the Vientiane
Times: “Road 9 is an important national road linking Road 13 South to
Vietnam. It is considered by the Government as a strategic route for the
overall socioeconomic development of the country and more specifically
for the people and ethnic groups who will use this road to access, trade
and transport their products to the urban markets.”

Laos lies in the center of the Greater Mekong Sub-region (better known as the GMS), an area
that has received substantial investment from the Asian Development Bank
(ADB) and other institutions with the aim of further integrating the GMS member states’ economies.
The planned road grid in the GMS is expected to place Laos at the center of the regional transport network and thus to
propel the country out of its geographic and economic isolation — one of
the chief causes (in the view of political and economic decision-makers)
of its structural vulnerability — and Route 9 plays a key role in reaching
this objective.

Nevertheless, I argue that to villagers of Sepon, these ideologically
loaded terms such as “progress,” “civilization” and “development” have not
been simply passed down by outside authorities, but in large part have
been shaped by villagers’ very own wartime experiences. Unlike plans
and reports authored by state agents and international aid agency experts
insisting on the road as an example of modern advancement, villagers
made it clear that they also situated their narration of the road restoration
process in a historical timetable that followed their own recovery from the
war. “After the war, the road was nothing like it is today. It was an area
covered by forest and vegetation, it was a dangerous road. To those who
weren’t living here it is very hard to imagine that,” a woman in her late
Plate 6.5  Road 9 in Sepon district, September 2008.
60s from the village of Nabor in Sepon district told me. “We never thought that we’d survive and live long enough to see Route 9 becoming a beautiful road,” elderly villagers would often repeat in my casual conversations with them. For some local residents, the road’s significance goes beyond the tangible benefits it brings in the form of economic benefits to encompass its nonmaterial, social-psychological dimension (Nishizaki 2008: 434). I would argue that these rural survivors saw the revival of the road as a metaphorical process that has lifted them out of war-born rift and violence and back to a civilized state. But their linear and positive narrative of the road rehabilitation may also perform as a means of putting their memories of a more recent and troubling past behind them.

A Field of Unfinished Histories

The history of labor camps in post-1975 Laos has yet to be written. What we know about them mainly comes from a few oral and written testimonies (published and unpublished) by former detainees who either managed to escape or were freed after years of imprisonment. Grant Evans, the noted anthropologist on Laos, made one of the rare comments on Lao reeducation camps in recent years in his review of the memoirs by Nakhonkham Bouphanouvong (Bouphanouvong 2003). He wrote in vivid terms: “The camps were designed to terrorize both those outside and those inside into submitting to the will of the new regime. Arbitrary justice was of its essence. Those who survived the experience were deeply scarred by it. Some committed suicide in the prisons, some returned home broken and withdrawn.” Those who wrote or spoke about their experiences in labor camps did so in their country of exile, in France, Australia or the United States. These testimonies are undoubtedly partial; they aim after all to denounce the “totalitarian” character of the present regime. They therefore do not pretend to be objective, which does not necessarily mean that their accounts ought to be dismissed. Those memoirs should be reviewed critically, but it is hard to refute that these detainees’ rights had been severely violated. These prisoners were sentenced to forced labor, though in fact they were condemned to “nothing,” as Todorov argued in regard to detainees in communist camps in Eastern Europe, since there had been no judgment or legal punishment (Todorov 1995: 121).

After the communist victory, the Eastern section of Route 9 (including the districts of Phine, Vilabuly and Sepon) was converted into an exclusionary site of exceptional state rule. The presence of the labor camps
amid the war-contaminated landscape condemned the region of Route 9 to remain for many years a place at the margins where the new regime could wield its “justice” upon the defeated. Prisoners were assigned to conduct repairs on Route 9 in an UXO-infested landscape. Accidental explosions occurred, injuring and killing detainees (Mithouna 2001: 147). In the then deeply hostile atmosphere charged by the scars of civil war and Cold War ideology, these deaths were considered by guards and commanders of the camps as just retribution for those “who served the Americans” (Mithouna 2001: 148). War vestiges in Sepon were thus not merely inert residue; deadly remains such as UXO also operated as instruments of punishment, though more often than not they mutilated and killed indiscriminately, prisoners and local villagers alike.

Once designated as the “cradle of the revolution,” places such as Sepon, Lako, Pha-Bang or Ban Dong (see Map 6.1) were selected because of their remoteness and difficulty of access so as to prevent (although not entirely successfully) detainees from escaping to Savannakhet town or across the Mekong to Thailand. There existed several types of reeducation camps (governed with varying degrees of severity), to which assigned were different categories of military personnel, policemen and government employees according to their rank and political importance. Thus, the highest-ranking officers were sent to more remote camps characterized by harsher conditions, situated in Houaphan province in the North (see Oliver Tappe’s contribution, this volume) or in the Eastern uplands in the South (including those set up in Lako and Pha-Bang in Sepon district). On the other hand, prisoners of lesser rank detained in camps such as Ban Phonmouang seemed to have received (relatively) less harsh treatment, being assigned to work in sawmills instead of on the highly hazardous rehabilitation of Road 9 or to perform hard physical labor in the more remote uplands.24 I would like to turn now in the final section to the landscape wherein people live, “the world as it is known to those who dwell therein, who inhabit its places and journey along the paths connecting them” (Ingold 1993: 156).

Today Route 9 in the east is a (relatively) smooth paved road with hardly any trace of wartime or postwar remnants; yet, the past has not been completely erased from the surface, in that one only needs to refocus the historical lens to glimpse “what is dominant but hard to see” (Stoler 2008: 211). As Steinberg and Taylor point out in their study of postwar Guatemala’s landscape, “often, [rural survivors’] remembering is an inconspicuous, everyday act […] These are intangible, yet palpable, memories of the mind, memories that have not left an obvious, permanent mark on
I have taken the map from the published memoirs of a former prisoner who was detained in various reeducation camps along Road 9 until the mid-1980s (Mithouna 2001). This simple map indicates the location of these camps along the road; but, I argue, it is precisely its plainness and neatness which make it visually striking. This is a representation of a space through a politically-charged lens that prompts one to imagine oneself on an (arguably sinister) journey between two black dots — camps — on that central line that is Road 9.

The visible landscape — at least to the outside observer” (Steinberg and Taylor 2003: 453). Local residents did not say much about the history of the reeducation camps in their area, but not because they were unaware of it: locations of reeducation camps and identities of former samana detainees who settled in the district were hardly a secret. (For example, Ban Sethamouak in Muang Phine is known by the local inhabitants as Ban Samana, as it first emerged as a reeducation camp and is still today populated by former detainees who never returned to their home province or district). Some families even temporarily hosted prisoners when the latter first arrived in the area as reeducation camps were yet to be built (by the detainees themselves). But individuals and families, who used to live on the opposite sides of the invisible, yet conspicuous, longitudinal
border that cut through the country during the civil war, have now to live together in close proximity.

Stanley Cohen suggests that whole societies may choose to forget uncomfortable knowledge and turn it into “open secrets” which are known by all, and knowingly not known (Cohen 2001: 138). He introduces the term “social amnesia,” which refers to “the mode of forgetting by which a whole society separates itself from its discreditable past record. This might happen at an organized, official, and conscious level — the deliberate cover up, the rewriting of history — or through the type of cultural slippage that occurs when information disappears” (Cohen 1995: 13). As shown above, the “rewriting of history” is being taken care of by war monuments erected on Route 9, with the same partial version of events — that of the victors — being narrated in the available official accounts of the war and revolution. The “cultural slippage,” by contrast, is more the result of conscious actions by individuals that have chosen the path of forgetting about unsettling events. But we need to further interrogate this will to forget lest we limit ourselves to a moral explanation — translated either into acts of atonement or guilty repression of a troubling past — of a collective attitude; to use the words of Confino, “the notion of repression as an explanatory device tends to obscure rather than reveal human motivations where silence and expression coexisted in ambiguous, multiple ways” (Confino 2004: 95). In line with Jay Winter’s elegant observation, we refuse “the commonplace view that silence is the space of forgetting and speech the realm of remembrance” (Winter 2010: 4).

I initially assumed that the reason why residents in Sepon did not talk about reeducation camps (at least spontaneously) was due to the sensitive nature of the issue. Yet, the topic of the samana camps was not taboo (I was introduced to former detainees by local residents without any request on my part). Only later on did it occur to me that it was partly because detainees and villagers, most of whom were bystanders at that time, had few exchanges during the conflict. During a casual conversation, a woman I often talked with in the evening recalled that her only contacts with samana prisoners occurred when some of them stopped by her house and asked for some water: “They were on their way to the camps, I think,” she vaguely remembered. Todorov suggested with regard to inhabitants who lived near communist camps in Eastern Europe that “it was much more prudent to mind one’s own business: you [were] less likely to be contaminated by the plague if you [steered] clear of its victims” (Todorov 1995: 125). This was confirmed by a conversation I had with a former detainee’s wife, who recalled that “any villagers who were seen talking to
prisoners were called upon by the authorities.” In the immediate postwar context in Laos, as the regime strove for survival, it was hardly surprising that the population, returning to their devastated villages and contaminated lands, would have stood by their leaders and considered that these prisoners who fought on the “Vientiane side” deserved their “sentence.”

It was evident that “amnesia” was a device used in official narratives of national memory. Private memories, based on everyday communication and informal situations, revealed more about attitudes and values. In Ban Thakhong, I met a woman who enlisted as a Pathet Lao agent and worked as a guard in a labor camp for women in Muang Phine in the 1980s.

“There were about a hundred of them,” she recalled as we were chatting on her veranda. “They were prostitutes (mae chang) [at the time of the war] from Savanh [Savannakhet town] who had to be reeducated [she used the ideologically loaded term, datsang, which can be translated literally as ‘(re)adjust and (re)build’].” She then mentioned that “these women pulled a plough, like buffaloes, when they worked in the rice field. It wasn’t a punishment, just to teach them. Anyway, there were several on each plough, so it wasn’t really forced labor.” These detainees would leave the camp after over a year: “the girls had learnt their lessons and didn’t misbehave again.” The former communist agent’s experiences of the war and its aftermath have shaped and crystallized her postwar memories into a moral attitude, legitimized further by the state’s narratives of indebtedness and citizenship (see above).

I turn now to members of a distinctive social group who live in the vicinity of Route 9 — former reeducation camp prisoners — and explore how their experiences of the war and its aftermath, but also the official memory of the conflict, shape their postwar private memories. The places represented on the map above are now villages that are indistinguishable from any other, at least to outside observers and first-time visitors (shacks and barracks that used to shelter detainees have long since disappeared). Until my first visit to Ban Phnomouang, located on Route 9 some 40 kilometers from the Lao-Vietnamese border, I did not know that this “new” village (it was created after 1975) used to be the site of a labor camp. Without scratching too hard at the surface, however, it soon became apparent in my conversations with its inhabitants that several of the residents were “Vientiane-side” (fay Vientiane) soldiers from “the North” (the provinces of Luang Prabang, Oudomxay, Luang Namtha, Sainyabuly), who got sent to samana camps in Sepon and, after their release, never returned to their home provinces. It was not uncommon for former prisoners to stay in places where they had been detained, especially northerners who
had completely lost contact with their relatives (who on their part might have fled to Thailand or a Western country) during their imprisonment and therefore had no one, and most often no land and no work as well, awaiting them in their village or district of origin. Some of them (re)married and started a new life, like the elderly man — a former RLA fighter and a native from Phongsaly (the northernmost province of Laos) — I met at the market in Sepon town where he and his wife (who was from Pakse, the provincial capital of the neighboring southern province, Champasak) run a small café-restaurant. The man barely mentioned his years fighting for the RLA, but said that he spent several years in Ban Phonmouang, first as a samana prisoner, then as a worker at a state-owned sawmill after completing his “sentence.” By then, he was earning some kind of salary (“200–300 kip a month, which was enough for a couple, but not to raise a family!”) and receiving 10 kilograms of rice each month. At this point in our conversation, the man used the distinctive phraseology that I heard wartime communist agents and revolutionary fighters utter time and again: “We lived with the support of the State, with the State (yu nam lat).” The man’s identification with a regime that had him punished for having served “the enemy” was remarkable, and yet, had a certain predictability under the current political circumstances: by stressing overtly his political allegiance, the former detainee showed his identity as a “reeducated” man. We should be constantly aware of the pitfalls of “psychologising interpretation” of postwar memory and history (Lagrou 2000: 17); but at the same time, it is important to understand why an individual would express sentiments and memories that differ in part with his experience of the war and its aftermath. In other words, the point is not to “guess” the reason(s) for an individual’s particular remembrance — or his “psychology” — but to explore the relations between changing cultural, political and social settings and people’s memories and mental views of the world they live in.

I wondered afterward whether, had our conversation taken place in his house (or in a more private setting), the former prisoner would have expressed other memories that may have been silenced in the public — social — space of his café located in the center of the district’s market. Winter has defined silence as “a socially constructed space in which and about which subjects and words normally used in everyday life are not spoken” (Winter 2010: 4). This “circle of silence” is socially enforced by groups of people who have internalized at some point in time norms and codes that dictate what is sayable and what is unsayable. In Sepon District, I would argue that the contours of the social space of silence — the distinction between the spoken and the unspoken — were determined by
those who happened to be on the winning side of history, including war veterans, bystanders, and former reeducation camp guards. If a candid discussion on samana camps could not take place in a public space, then the focus should shift to exploring the private sphere. The opportunity arose one afternoon when after finishing an interview with a war veteran in Ban Thakhong, the villager, who was my guide in Sepon, pointed out a house at the base of the embankment of Route 9: “the husband used to be a samana detainee,” she told me. “If you want, I can introduce you to him and his wife.” I hesitated to reply for a few seconds, uncertain about her motive; however, I quickly sensed that her suggestion was casual and friendly. Only later on did I understand that, in her view, meeting former samana prisoners was not a sensitive issue (to the contrary of what I initially thought): these individuals no longer represented any threat, having been confined to the losing side of history. We went back the following morning. The couple’s wooden house on tilts was modest and hidden from the main road at the bottom of a slope. As she usually did, my guide let me conduct the interview alone and returned a couple of hours later. That tacit arrangement suited us both well.

After some rapid introduction, the former prisoner, a man now in his 60s, readily began the narration of his post-1975 life. He was born in Sainyabuly Province in North-Western Laos. He joined the RLA in 1960. Following the communist victory in 1975, he was first sent to a reeducation camp in Nam Bac in Luang Namtha Province (Northern Laos), where he and the other prisoners were assigned to work on upland rice fields (“But we never ate the rice we grew and never knew where it was sent to,” the informant noted). In 1978, he and other detainees were transferred to the South in Sepon District. They took a boat to Luang Prabang, and then were flown to Savannakhet town. From there, they traveled on Route 9 “by night because they [their guards] feared that we could remember the way back and be tempted to escape.” The man remembered that it was raining on the night they reached their final destination in October 1978. He evoked the “hardship of the first few years” when he and his fellow prisoners had “to start everything from scratch.” In the beginning, they made their own huts (tup) that could shelter one or two persons. The prisoners had been sent to work in the saw mill. When the site became operational, they were able to cut wooden planks and build “bigger and more durable accommodation.” Rice was supplied “by the State”; for the rest — other food staples — they “got by.” After some time, the detainees made a request to move to a village site located near a stream that had
earlier been abandoned by their inhabitants, “some Lao Theung,” following a devastating epidemic. Vangboun village since then had been known as cursed and inhabited by malevolent spirits. “But the phi (spirits) were powerless against Vientiane soldiers,” his wife interjected for the first time in our conversation. She had just come back from some errands and sat with us on the house veranda. I initially was unsure whether she was being ironical in making this remark, and then realized by the grave look on her face that she was not. She could not explain why exactly “Vientiane soldiers” were immune to the spirits’ malicious actions; in any case, the authorities agreed to the prisoners’ request and after some time wives and children of some detainees joined them.

The man’s slow return to a more normal life began from the mid-1980s after he got married in 1982 (with his present wife, a villager of Chinese and Phuthai descent from Ban Thakhong) and was released from the camp. Thanks to some savings, they bought a buffalo (“a good investment”) and gradually acquired some livestock and a plot of rice field in Ban Thakhong. They do not have children of their own and have adopted a child from a “Lao Theung family.” The couple’s recollection at times took unexpected turns. “We were often told by detainees from Setthamouak that we were very lucky to have been sent further east,” the husband said without further explaining. As recollections of my encounter with former prisoners from that village some years earlier quickly ran through my mind, I understood what he implied: he and his companions were “fortunate” for not being assigned the task of clearing Route 9 of unexploded ordnance, which maimed and killed a number of samana detainees in Setthamouak. On the other hand, his wife’s recollections were less restrained. After some 45 minutes of conversation, she appeared to relax and became more animated. In the first few months of their arrival, she told me, the higher-ranking military personnel were sent to live with local families, including hers, in groups of three to four people. Some households (like that of their current neighbors across the road, she claimed in an accusatory tone) “did not give the prisoners anything to eat. They ignored them as if they were dogs!” She added that the prisoners “were not allowed to gather in groups of more than five people” and “each had to sleep in his own corner of the house so that they could not plot together any escape plans.” Her husband meanwhile was nodding quietly in agreement with his wife. Camps were moved further east nearer the Lao-Vietnamese border, she further recollected; nonetheless, lots of prisoners escaped and “those who were caught were executed.” While widespread amnesia defines the
official memory in regard to the civil war and its immediate aftermath, unofficial sentiments in the private sphere reflect a more complex picture of postwar remembrances, many of which remain muted. I do not interpret the former prisoner’s incomplete recollection as a conscious action of selective memory; rather, I argue that his narration is a balancing act between reconstituting a meaningful life (reflected in a narrative of struggle, in which he eventually prevailed to become a farmer and an ordinary citizen in Ban Thakhong) and remembering darker experiences of his past (which also formed part of his social identity).

Conclusion

This chapter reflects on certain of the civil war’s legacies in Laos by means of a social reading of the landscape of Route 9. Residents of Sepon, one of the district towns on Route 9, welcome the potential for economic advancement the road represents and the higher mobility it offers. Nonetheless, to older residents, the cause for celebrating the restoration of the road in the early 2000s went beyond the renovation of an important piece of national infrastructure: they metaphorically see the revival of the road as a route back to civilization. Civilization here is defined in fundamental terms, that is, as a state of affairs counterpoised to the violence and savagery that residents experienced during the war (from bombing and land battles) as well as in its aftermath (from unexploded ordnance and “counter-revolutionary” attacks). Civilization in a more “advanced” sense is also being restored, in the form of the road’s ancient importance as a trading route. Therefore, for local residents, the road’s significance goes beyond the tangible benefits it brings in the form of access to services. For these people, the restoration of Route 9 represents a source of healing, with travel and trade resumed, craters filled in, and lingering memories of violence slowly dwindling.

The conversion of Route 9 into a paved road and the clearance of war debris have not translated into a complete erasure of the past, however. The post-conflict landscape through which the road runs is dotted with mnemonic sites that reflect a partial version of the past (the public sites of war commemoration in Phine and Sepon districts), as well as invisible traces — indiscernible legacies of former reeducation camps — that embody unofficial remembrances of the war and its consequences yet to be reconciled. Social amnesia — a conscious action to overlook an unsettling past — may define the state’s narratives of national memory, but in the private sphere expressions of unofficial sentiments reveal more about the
complex negotiations between forgetting and remembering. The choice of resorting to moral concerns to explain individual actions runs the risk of obscuring human motivations: silences should not be translated readily into acts of contrition or sentiments of shame or guilt. Some villagers in Sepon District who lived through and survived the war and its aftermath seldom evoked memories of detainees or reeducation camps because they were indifferent to, or were little aware of, the detainees’ conditions of imprisonment at that time — and remain so until today. Others spoke casually of these places and their prisoners. Some former detainees who never left the location of their captivity chose to express memories that emphasize their postwar recovery of a normal life, though others found in their memories and experience elements to reveal in the intimacy of the private sphere a more ambiguous past. The lack of democratization and the absence of a public space for Lao citizens to freely debate their country’s past further contribute to maintaining this arbitrary yet pregnant dividing line from the political center down to the village level between those who feel they have the right to speak about the violent past and those who are denied this privilege.

Notes

1. Route 9 is also commonly called Road No. 9 or Highway No. 9.
2. “Economic corridors” are a key element of the Asian Development Bank’s strategy of regional development and Laos is traversed by three of these: the Northern Economic Corridor (linking Northern Thailand with Southwest China via Northwest Laos), the North-East Corridor (linking Northern Vietnam with North-East Thailand via Vientiane and North-Eastern Laos), and the East-West Economic Corridor (linking Eastern Burma with the port of Đà Nẵng in Central Vietnam via Northeast Thailand and Savannakhet Province, Southern-Central Laos). Laos lies in the center of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), an area that has received substantial investment from the ADB and others with the aim of further integrating the GMS member states’ economies. The GMS includes Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, as well as two southern Chinese provinces, Yunnan and Guangxi.
3. The HCMT was, in reality, a maze of interlocking dirt roads that were gradually and partially upgraded to cobbled roads so that North Vietnamese trucks could move in an almost uninterrupted flow all year round.
4. From 1964 to 1973, American planes dropped 2,093,100 tons of ordnance in 580,344 bombing missions, which approximately equated to a bombing every eight minutes, 24 hours a day, for nine years. According to these statistics, Laos is the most heavily bombed country per capita in the world.
Attacks on the Trail intensified from 1968 onward; whereas 52,120 missions were carried out in 1967, this figure almost trebled in 1969, amounting to a total of 148,069 sorties flown in that year. The bombing finally halted in 1973. Bombs still continue maiming and killing scores of people in today’s Laos, however. At the end of the war, it was estimated that 78 million unexploded cluster bomblets had been left in the country’s rural areas. All figures are quoted from the very informative article by Channapha Khamvongsa and Elaine Russell (2009). A recent survey by the National Regulatory Authority (NRA) for the UXO/Mine Action sector in Laos reveals that more than 50,000 people were hurt or killed by UXO (unexploded ordnance) between 1964 and 2008, Vientiane Times, 06/02/10.

5. The political term *l’Indochine française* was formerly adopted in France in 1887. French Indochina was composed of five entities: Laos, Cambodia, Tonkin, Annam and Cochin-China (the last three composing present-day Vietnam), governed by diverse regimes of control and administration: directly-administered entities or colonies (Cochinchina, Central and Southern Laos) and indirectly-administered territories or protectorates (Tonkin, Luang Prabang, Cambodia, Annam).

6. For accounts of the French Mekong expeditions in the second half of the 19th century, see, for example, Francis Garnier 1985 (1873) and Milton Osborne (2000 [1975]).

7. Where the border town of Lao Bảo in Quang Trị province is now located.

8. This road through the Ai-Lao mountain pass was mentioned by Charles Lemire in his travel diary during his exploration of the region in Aug. and Sept. 1892. The French colonial officer also described another road located to the north of the “Route Coloniale N.9” that was laid out by the Kinh before the arrival of the French, which he referred as the “Route Mandarine,” traversing Central Vietnam and Southern Laos all the way to the Mekong River (Lemire 1894: 33).


10. According to Li Tana, it is “[t]he single most important account of the border region written on eighteenth-century Đăng Trọng, a miscellaneous account of the border region written by the high Trịnh official, Lê Quý Đôn” (Li 2002: 17).

11. On the “salt roads” connecting the uplands and the plains, and their inhabitants, in Indochina, see also Jean Le Pichon (1938: 364) and Tran Duc Sang (2004: 71–87).


13. *Corvée* road works were among other deeply unpopular demands (such as heavy taxes) imposed by the French administration upon the rural population in colonial Laos, especially in the highlands. In consequence, French rule had to face several insurrections led by upland groups. There were a series
of revolts beginning in 1896, reaching a peak between 1910 and 1916, and finally dying out in the 1930s, all of which expressed resistance to the French administration. These rebellions remained politically inconsequential until a unifying cause, that is, communist-led anti-colonial struggle during the First Indochina War (1946–54), succeeded in gathering their remaining participants into one larger movement.

14. The coalition government resigned on 28 Nov. A few days later, on 2 Dec. 1975, the founding of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (*Sathalanalat Pasathipatai Pasason Lao*) was proclaimed.

15. See reports by MacAlister Brown and Joseph J. Zasloff in *Asian Survey* between 1975 and 1979. Other sources give a higher number of prisoners, up to 50,000 (Viliam 2009).


17. Personal interview on 29 Apr. 2010, Savannakhet Capital.

18. Pick-up vehicles with two parallel benches in the back for passengers.


20. The GMS include Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, as well two southern Chinese provinces, Yunnan and Guangxi.

21. This subheading was inspired by the following reflection by Confino: “Some trips, to use a metaphor from the world of traveling, actually have a final stop. Historical understanding, a trip of unexpected consequences if ever I knew one, is not one of them” (Confino 2000: 93)

22. The few memoirs that have been published include Mithouna (2001); Nakhonkham (2003); and Bounsang (2006).


25. The state’s new prime minister and strongman, Kaysone Phomvihane, escaped at least one assassination attempt in 1976; rural areas were hit by severe drought in 1976, then severe flooding in 1977 and 1978; counter-revolutionary guerrillas were still rife in some areas in the northern and the southeastern regions until as late as the late 1980s.