

Differentiation of Sociocultures, Classification, and the Good Life in Laos

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Why should we study social inequality? One of the reasons is that some people seem to be in the position to lead a better life than others. This paper interprets inequality both as horizontal and vertical differentiation. It focuses on the unequal distribution of options to lead a life reckoned good by Lao society. Social differentiation of options to lead a life reckoned good by Lao standards has increased rapidly over the past twenty years. At the same time, standards of a good life themselves have become increasingly differentiated. The definition of social standards is dominated by the ruling party, but it is not its monopoly anymore, as social struggles and differentiation extend to the symbolic sphere. Against the background of a historical sketch of Lao social structure, this paper discusses present social and symbolic differentiation in order to understand the differentiation of standards and options of a good life in Laos.

Keywords: good life, inequality, Laos, social differentiation, social inequality, social standards, social structure, sociocultures, symbolic sphere

Conventional models of social structure tend to depict society as a stratification of social groups, mostly professions, within the borders of a nation state. Each person is supposed to have one single position in the division of labour (a profession), which is equivalent to his or her position in the social structure. As housewives, students, informal workers, and senior citizens do not formally carry out a profession, they are neglected by these models (Blasius/Winkler 1989). Transnational links, local structures, historical development, and the global division of labour are blind spots as well. Thereby, conventional models disregard the most relevant aspects of contemporary society.

Therefore, I have suggested an alternative model (Rehbein 2007). This model seeks to distinguish between division of labour and social structure which are confounded in conventional models derived from Durkheim and Marx. While the term division of labour refers to practices, the concept of social structure refers to the resources needed to perform or have access to these practices. This distinction has been made explicit by Amartya Sen (2006). Sen distinguishes “capabilities” and “functionings”, i.e., chances to live a socially valued life and the actually lived life as it is socially valued. “If we see development in terms of enhancement of human living and the freedom to live the kind of life that we have reason to value, then there is a strong case for focusing on ‘functionings’ and the ‘capability’ to function” (Sen 2006, p. 35). Capabilities according to Sen, however, are not only economic factors, such as the profession, but also good health and a decent education, while functionings are not limited to the division of labour either but refer to the performance of all socially available practices that are valued in a particular society, such as speaking in public or participating in the community.

Based on Sen’s reasoning, I would locate the division of labour within the wider division of (all) social practices. Hereby, I draw on Hannah Arendt’s (1958) concept of activity, which comprises not only labour but also political action and artistic work. Both Durkheim and Marx have pointed to the fact that *all* activities are socially organized, but they have restricted their theories to the capitalist division of labour (Arendt 1958, Chapter 2). If we exclude housework and studying from social science, we not only miss important aspects of society but we certainly do not understand inequality to the same degree as Sen’s model.

Just as Arendt has opened up our minds for a more complete picture of social practices, Bourdieu (1984) has developed a more complete concept of social structure as the distribution of socially relevant resources. Instead of conceiving inequality as an unequal distribution of income or wealth, he has included all types of

resources into his analysis, which Sen aimed at as well. However, Bourdieu interpreted the distribution of resources as *social structure* and not merely as a distribution of capabilities among individuals. Apart from economic capital, he elaborated the concepts of “cultural capital” (knowledge and possession of culturally relevant objects, symbols, and practices), “social capital” (socially relevant relations), and “symbolic capital” (symbolically codified superiority).

Bourdieu has also revived the philosophical term “habitus” to refer to embodied resources. The habitus is a tradition inscribed in a person. This implies that forms of action persist over a certain period of time as the habitus reiterates the tradition by acting on its basis. The habitus comprises tendencies to act that are acquired in the life course. As action is learned in a specific social environment, habitus are socially differentiated. While the British labourer blows his nose by mere ejection, the aristocrat has to faintly blow into an embroidered handkerchief — whether being observed or not.

We can observe that the division of practices (or functionings), which I will refer to as division of work, and social structure (or division of capabilities) in any society are not random creations of contemporary agents but products of a long historical evolution. We can also observe that older historical forms tend to persist for some time and to a certain degree (Marx 2002). In fact we could conceive of society as a bundle of layers that comprise social structures and divisions of work from different historical times. I call these layers “sociocultures” (Rehbein 2007). Practices in any given society have originated in different sociocultures and are organized according to them. For example, in European societies many industries are organized by guilds or according to the guild-model even though guilds are supposed to have vanished with feudalism. Resources are valued in the framework of a specific socioculture, such as that of a guild, and not on an abstract, homogeneous contemporary scale. Any analysis of inequality therefore has to start by studying the history of sociocultures.

Apart from determining the value of resources, sociocultures also play an important role in the development of habitus. People are not educated in one abstract, homogeneous nation state but acquire their capabilities in a specific social environment, which is at least partly a persisting socioculture. Education in the framework of a guild, for example, differs from that in an industrial setting. As each socioculture is socially differentiated, habitus acquired within one socioculture are differentiated as well. There is hierarchy and division of labour within a guild just as in an industrial society.

Persisting sociocultures and contemporary social structure determine the (horizontal and vertical) differentiation of resources and habitus in a given society. On the basis of similarities between habitus and resources, the social scientist is able to distinguish social groups from each other. Drawing on Bourdieu, Michael Vester et al. (2001) have interpreted habitus groups as “milieux”. A milieu is a group of people sharing similar habitus and resources — in a particular configuration of sociocultures, social structure, and division of work.

Within this configuration I propose to study milieux in contemporary Laos, some of which extend beyond the nation state. The study serves to determine the different options members of different milieux have to lead a life considered good by Lao standards. However, these standards are differentiated as well. Each socioculture has its own standards, the national standard is subject to struggles between the state and several milieux, and globalization introduces new (global and transnational) standards. Therefore, the symbolic universe has to be analysed separately.

The paper first delivers a historical sketch of Lao social structure, followed by an overview of contemporary trends. The third section offers a discussion of the symbolic universe. The paper closes with an overview of the social differentiation of options to lead a life considered good. I will distinguish between three historical layers of sociocultures, namely *baan-muang*, (Lao) socialism, and (Lao) capitalism. They are reconfigured by the contemporary forces of the nation state, transnational links, and global capitalism.

The argument is based mainly on fieldwork conducted by the author with teachers of the National University of Laos (Evans et al. 2006) and partly on fieldwork conducted by the author between 2002 and 2010. It was carried out in rural areas of Bolikhamsay, the city of Vientiane, and several villages in the vicinity of Vientiane, namely Ban Thatluang (4 km from the city centre), Ban Pha Khao (8 km), and Ban Saphang Meuk (10 km). At each location, 100 to 200 structured interviews, several life-course interviews, and a few expert interviews were collected. I conducted and interpreted the life-course interviews according to Vester et al. (2001), who geared their methodology to the determination of milieux as habitus groups. The structured interviews focused on specific aspects of resources, practices, and habitus.¹

History of Sociocultures

Southeast Asia presents a complex mosaic of ethnic groups, forms of life, environmental conditions, and power relations. Any generalizing statement on the relation of these is bound to be inadequate. A dominant ethnic group in one area or nation state will be dominated in the next, a group dwelling in the mountains here will dwell in the valleys there, wet rice cultivation here will be replaced by slash and burn according to the prevailing conditions. The mosaic evolved historically through migration and adaptation (e.g., Higham 1989). To understand any given configuration one has to trace its history and that of its components. I apply a procedure reminiscent of Foucault's "genealogy" by tracing origins of contemporary social realities rather than rendering an accurate historical account of events (cf. Foucault 1991, Chapter 1). The difference between the procedure chosen here and the genealogy consists in the appreciation of the historical material. While a historical critique does not really affect the genealogical construction, I would claim historical accuracy.

The problem with regard to Laos is that historical documents and historical research are scarce. One has to combine archaeological,

historical, and ethnographic research, a combination which proves methodologically problematic. With respect to my present argument, it concerns a structure which researchers largely seem to agree on and which was observed by some before the profound colonial transformations at the turn of the twentieth century (e.g., Bourlet 1906, p. 522). This structure is the *muang*, which is the principal organization of Tai polities. In the following paragraphs I will briefly explain its evolution, which is important because I argue that it still forms the underlying basis of any Tai polity today, i.e., a relevant socioculture.

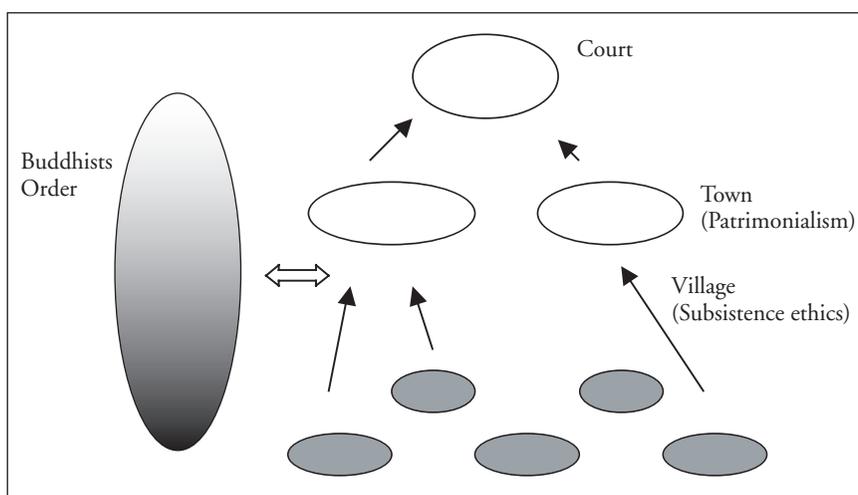
In mainland Southeast Asia the village has a fairly clear social structure, mainly determined by kinship. There seems to be a clear hierarchy according to age, sex, and specific abilities. Usually most of the villagers are relatives (Potter 1976, p. 52). Their respective social position and power is hardly disputed. One's father always remains one's father. As the relative social position is tied to a person, one could speak of a *personal social structure* based on kinship. Much of this is implied by the Lao term for "village", which is *baan*. The word aims more at the social organization than at the physical setting (cf. Evans 2008).

Village culture could be described as *subsistence ethics*, a term coined by James Scott (1976). Many of the characteristics he found still apply to peasant villages in much of Southeast Asia. Peasants' interests are focussed on having enough until the next harvest, not on having as much as possible. They achieve this by mutual aid (reciprocity), the reinforcement of family ties, and adhering to established traditions. They aim at survival and security, not at affluence and profit. I would include reciprocity, family orientation, and traditionalism in the broader term subsistence ethics to characterize mainland Southeast Asian village culture in general. Family orientation in some ethnolinguistic groups refers mainly to nuclear families (e.g., Tai), while in others (e.g., Hmong) it refers chiefly to extended families (cf. Sprenger 2006, p. 58).

In history the villages sometimes became part of a larger political structure, especially if they lay close to a princely court. These

principalities implied loyalties of minor entities to major entities, i.e., of villages to towns and of towns to a court — and sometimes of courts to a king or even an emperor. Oliver Wolters (1982) has adequately termed this structure a *mandala*. Even more appropriate is Raendchen's (1998) use of the indigenous Tai terms *baan-muang* (cf. Figure 1). In the *baan-muang* structure, the lesser entities — the *baan* — guarded some independence, especially if they were geographically remote from the centres — the *muang*. The main character of the relation was the exchange of tribute and manpower against security. Loyalties shifted frequently according to the ability of the centre to guarantee security and stability. The Buddhist order was to some degree integrated into the structure, while to some extent it formed a parallel structure. *Muang* structures were hierarchical and closely resembled family relations. In a *muang* most people were not really related; they were just loyal to one person who had a certain authority, like a father in the social structure of the village. This is a *stratified social structure*, which should more precisely and adequately be called *baan-muang*.

Figure 1
Baan-muang



As the town usually was the marketplace and hosted the court, vertical and horizontal differentiation primarily took place in the towns. There were factions inside the court and in the population, as well as an increasing division of labour (cf. Grabowsky 2004). Any superior tried to accumulate as many bonds of loyalty as possible to enhance his position, whereas inferiors tended to look for superiors who could guarantee security. Just as subsistence ethics largely characterized the culture of the *baan*, *patrimonialism* was the prevalent economic and political culture of the *muang*. Ernst Boesch (1970) and Norman Jacobs (1971) used Max Weber's term patrimonialism to characterize the relationship between inferior and superior in Thailand. We might continue the use of the term patrimonialism but it is culturally unspecific and therefore too general and flawed. A possible specification could be the Tai term *phu-yai* culture.

There have been trade relations and some specialization between villages on equal terms. However, there has always been an unequal relation between sedentary and nomadic groups (Higham 1989, p. 59) and there also emerged an inequality between valley and mountain peoples (cf. Leach 1970). Sedentary villages were usually founded at important nodes of communication and/or in places with valuable resources, such as salt, metal, or fish. These often lay in the valleys, which provided the added benefit of allowing for a more productive generation of food, especially wet-rice. The inequality between groups was partly ethnic in character. However, many villages and all *muang* were and are multiethnic (e.g., Itzikowitz 2001, p. 30). Which ethnic group was dominant and which was dominated depended on the local configuration, and inequality existed between valley/sedentary and mountain/nomadic, not between ethnic groups. This only changed with the installation of nation states. Not all villages were integrated into a *muang*: many were too difficult to reach; others constantly shifted allegiance or paid tribute to various overlords at the same time. The Akha, for example, seem to define themselves as not having and not being part of a *muang* (Tooker 1996, p. 329). *Muang* were loose configurations rather than closed territorial states.

State, Party, and Milieux

European colonialism transformed Southeast Asia in a very uneven manner. While parts of present-day Malaysia and Indonesia came under European rule in the sixteenth century, Laos became French only in 1893. However, even during the brief colonial period, Laos was profoundly transformed. More precisely, it only came into existence due to French intervention, with the colonial power joining various Tai *muang* into one colonial administrative unit with precise territorial borders and an integrated market economy. Colonialism also transformed patrimonial structures into bureaucracies and integrated the entire population of a delimited geographical area into one political and administrative structure.

As a consequence of colonialism, all societies have been transformed into nation states. Inequality is largely national — as conceived by prevailing models of inequality and social structure. However, even within nation states, older sociocultures persist. They neither comply with democracy and capitalism nor with the borders of the nation state. Furthermore, contemporary globalization enhances transnational ties and global integration. Any nation state has to be understood within the framework of globalization, which is characterized by a globalizing division of work and especially global capitalism (cf. Rehbein 2011).

Much of present-day Laos had belonged to Siamese *baan-muang* before the intervention of the French, who managed to move into Siamese territory but stopped short of integrating all Lao-speaking peoples into their colonial empire. They created a new colonial political entity, which they called Laos. They attempted to codify a standard language on the basis of the former *muang* languages, to define what was to be considered orthodox Buddhism, to introduce a bureaucratic administration, and to integrate the mountain dwellers against much resistance (Pholsena 2006). After World War II they lost control of their colonial empire in Southeast Asia and were superseded by the United States, which tried to stop the advance of communism — in vain. After decades of war Laos gained its final independence in 1975 as a socialist state under one-party rule.

Due to the migration of about a third of the population, the physical impact of the war, and the massive amount of money pouring into the country, the social structure of the towns changed considerably during the Second Indochinese War. A large percentage of the population affected by this change left the country after the socialist takeover in 1975, and Laos for the most part reverted to a peasant economy. Attempts to build a socialist economy remained unsuccessful (Evans 1990). Most of the citizens of the socialist nation state Laos were subsistence farmers living in kinship structures controlled by an all-encompassing party organization that extended to practically every village. That is, Laos now was an integrated nation state with precolonial sociocultures and few economic and intellectual resources. Seemingly, the precolonial structure of an elite, a small group of city dwellers, and the peasantry along with the Buddhist order was reproduced. However, the top families of the original structure were gone, much of the *muang* population had left the country as well, and a lot of *baan* people had moved up into the elite through the communist party. And the old structure was complemented by the party, which is a specific, hierarchical structure in itself. At the same time, the party proclaimed an egalitarian discourse, while much of the population lived in the somewhat egalitarian subsistence setting. To the peasants and the lower party ranks, the egalitarian ideology proclaiming the eradication of social inequality must have been attractive.

Socialist Laos was part of the Soviet bloc that began to disintegrate in the mid-1980s. Along with other socialist states, the Lao leadership began to introduce a market economy in 1986 and slowly opened up to foreign capital, installed a standardized institutional framework for the market economy (aided by foreign advisors), and abolished direct state control of business. However, it did not introduce changes to the political system. While the economy follows the model of Western nation states, the political sphere still adheres to the model of the Soviet Union — which has since been replaced by China and Vietnam. Therefore, at least three historical layers coexist: *baan-muang*, socialism, and the market. They comprise various

Table 1
Sociocultures in Laos

Historical layer	<i>Baan-Muang</i>		Socialism	Market
Culture	Subsistence ethics	Patrimonialism (Phu-yai culture)	Egalitarianism	Capitalism

sociocultures, including subsistence ethics (*baan*), patrimonialism (*muang*), egalitarianism, and capitalism — possibly augmented by Buddhism as a separate socioculture (cf. Table 1). The nation state and capitalism have a greater historical depth, but the communist party and its culture reaches into every village. Socialism and egalitarianism have left no Lao untouched.

While the three layers of sociocultures correspond to different historical layers of society, they have to be distinguished from the contemporary division of work, which is increasingly transnational or even global, and the social structure, which is the distribution of socially relevant resources. Both are informed by sociocultures but are not identical to them. This distinction affects the concepts of social differentiation and stratification. We cannot clearly stratify the population of a nation state into classes or groups according to their capabilities or resources and relate it to a division of work, because both of them are unevenly interpreted according to different sociocultures. There is not *one* social structure and there is not *one* division of work. Rather, incoherent versions of social structure and division of work coexist. Even if we conceptualize them as being separated into neatly divided levels, we still observe that an identical agent performs his or her life on more than one level, often beyond the borders of a nation state.

We can, however, observe that people do not act randomly. Action bears a certain regularity, which is partly due to the fact that it is incorporated and partly due to the stability of the social and natural environment. Even though human beings have to learn most of their practices, these vary little because one tends to act the way one has learned to act. This is what Bourdieu's term *habitus* aims at.

A person's habitus is rooted in one socioculture more than in others, and people's social cohesion extends to those with a similar habitus much more than to others. They also bear similarities in the composition of their resources (capabilities) and therefore in the forms of life to which they have access (functionings). We may conceptualize the configuration of social groups as a space which is structured by sociocultures, contemporary division of work, and distribution of resources. People are placed in this space according to their habitus, i.e., according to the capabilities they have acquired during their life course. The distribution will show clusters due to similarities in habitus, and these clusters should be considered as social groups. It may be adequate to use the term milieu to denominate this kind of social group — rather than stratum, class, income group, or profession (cf. Vester et al. 2001).

We can meaningfully distinguish milieux in Laos within three dimensions: on the basis of those habitus and resources that are rooted in sociocultures, on the basis of habitus and resources valuable within the contemporary Lao nation state, and on the basis of habitus and resources valuable within transnational and global settings. One might subsume these latter under the concept "global capital", e.g., Internet, English language competence, and relatives sending remittances. If we consider the many families abroad, we could estimate that at least half of the Lao population has a significant amount of global capital.² Global capital is a valuable resource for practices in global and transnational settings, including global capitalism. However, capitalism remains largely a national affair. This is especially true for a one-party state like Laos. While many national elites (not just in Laos) have comparatively little global capital, they dominate the national economy and often are excessively rich. They also reproduce their status nationally, within the nation state, and not in a transnational or global setting (cf. Hartmann 2007). At the same time, managers of transnational corporations or the international aid community are highly globalized milieux and relevant agents in global capitalism, but their influence on a nation state like Laos is limited by the national

elites. Finally, transnational links as between the Hmong or Pentecostal Christians may result in the establishment of new — transnational or even global — milieux, whose power in global capitalism or in a nation state is limited.

To reduce complexity I will restrict the following analysis of milieux to the nation state, even though this picture is incomplete.³ In the framework of the Lao nation state I wish to distinguish between three milieux mainly rooted in the *baan*, two rooted in the *muang*, four in socialism, and four in capitalism (cf. Table 2). In the layer of *baan-muang* we can distinguish between non-*muang* milieux (which are non-Tai mountain dwellers), a subsistence milieu with little or poor land, a subsistence milieu with good and abundant land, the patrimonial urban groups, and the patrimonial elite. The *baan* milieux easily comprise half of the population, while the patrimonial groups account for no more than five per cent. In the layer of socialism we may distinguish the rural party structure from the lower officials, the established party representatives, and the political elite. This entire socioculture would comprise ten per cent of the population at the very most. In the layer of capitalism we should distinguish between farmers, migrant labourers (including informal labourers), the urban middle class (small entrepreneurs, self-employed people, returnees, urban adolescents, and students), and the economic elite (mostly Chinese and returned exiles). In Table 2 the global and transnational dimension should be added as a third dimension but has been omitted due to practical reasons.

Table 2
Milieux in Laos

	<i>Baan-muang</i>	Socialism	Capitalism
Elites	Patrimonial elite	Leadership	Rich
Established milieux	Urban patrimonialism	High officials	Middle class
Rural milieux	Wealthy subsistence	Lower officials	Farmers
Marginalized milieux	Poor subsistence Non-muang	Rural party	Migrant workers

Peasants largely retain subsistence ethics, while the numerically small urban elites either retain or revive patrimonialism. Within the party, egalitarianism and a hierarchical bureaucracy go hand in hand. At the same time, the influence of global capitalism generates new cultures of action. In the classic urban setting of capital and labour, a competitive market culture emerges. This is only the case where capital and labour are not part of older patrimonial structures, i.e., in the framework of transnational business. In other social environments, capitalism is reinterpreted according to older cultures. For example, peasants enter the market as and when they need money. Most city dwellers interpret capitalism in a patrimonial way, while corruption emerges where patrimonialism and global capitalism meet; as foreigners have no rank in the *muang*-structure, there are no obligations linked to them. Patrimonialism (or *phu-yai* culture) should be distinguished from corruption. While the former is a specific way of distributing resources and activities hierarchically including all segments of society, corruption just means taking all one can get.

Symbolic Differentiation

Social differentiation partly works through symbols, especially language. Each society, each socioculture, and each milieu has its own language or sociolect. Each linguistic variety has its own way of classifying “us” and “them”, higher status and lower status, social functions, activities, and resources. Foucault’s (1991) concept of “discourse” aimed at this dimension of society. While Foucault focused on the dominating discourse of a nation state, I will include discourses of milieux and transnational structures in the following analyses. I will speak of social classification and symbolic differentiation instead of discourses in order to link the following analysis to the preceding section and the theoretical framework drawing on Bourdieu (1984).

It both reconfirms and amends the somewhat speculative construction presented in the previous section, that each unit in the sociocultures corresponds to a specific symbolic universe, which

is particularly evident in language. Each socioculture has its own sociolect. The division of sociolects according to sociocultures is not an arbitrary exercise but explains actual linguistic behaviour to a significant degree (Rehbein and Sayaseng 2004).⁴ Social classification largely takes place in language. Each socioculture classifies others in its own language and is classified by them in their languages. The state seeks to monopolize classification as well as language but has to share this power with the other sociocultures. Therefore, social structure and the evaluation of milieux and forms of life are not uniform for a given society. They differ according to social position and socioculture.

Relative social positions and classifications are reflected in terms of address. Lao has very clear and explicit registers of address for each socioculture. Terms of address vary with the relative social positions of the speakers, while each speaker's sociolect is rooted in a specific socioculture that largely determines his or her linguistic behaviour. A look at the configuration of terms of address tells us a lot about sociocultures and relative social positions.

The personal social structure and subsistence ethics of the Lao *baan* are reflected in the language of the village (cf. Enfield 2005). Complex verbal definitions are unnecessary as the semantic universe is defined culturally, practically, and socially. The everyday language of the village is simple and straightforward. Nouns, names, polite words, and specifications are superfluous. Even in complex village interaction, people use one-word utterances. Social structure is directly reflected and expressed in terms of address. The register for forms of address used in the village setting is that of kinship terms, and the relation to be expressed in terms of address is based on age and sex. The register can be extended to relations of honour. This reflects the personal social structure.

The layers of the *muang* had their own and relational sociolects. Each register referred to sociolects of the other layers and called for specific responses from these other layers. The language of the court has strongly influenced all forms of polite language up to the present, and the court had its own forms of address. More precisely, there

were various registers for different types of relations. Characteristic of the language of the court are words of politeness and a special sense for euphony. Whereas a member of the court seems to have been obliged to follow the rules of euphony in any case, regular persons would confine euphony to special occasions of poetry and ceremony (Koret 2000). The “courteous” language is one of the roots of the modernized polite languages. Various principalities with their own dialects existed side by side and were populated not only by speakers of Lao, but by a host of ethnolinguistic groups with their own languages. The linguistic map would look very similar to Figure 1 presented in the first section of the paper.

The language of the Buddhist order was mainly confined to the monasteries. However, laypeople meeting with monks had to apply a specific register of language, especially terms of address. This is even true today (Ladwig 2008). Monks studied Pali, the sacred language of Buddhism, which they used for their chants and prayers, and also used a specific script called *tham* for documents created in the monastery (containing stories and Buddhist writings). The amount, importance, and correctness of Pali and *tham* were closely linked to the rank a specific monastery had in the hierarchy of the order, which in turn corresponded closely (but not entirely) to the location of the monastery in the *baan-muang* structure.

The French created a colony called Laos with French as the language of the administration and civilization. A blend of the written courteous language with Buddhist vocabulary and the language of the *muang* became the model for *the* correct Lao language. This language in turn followed the grammatical model of French (and ultimately Latin). The early grammars of Lao (Viravong 1935; Hospitalier 1937) tried to fit Lao into the categories of French morpho-syntax. For this enterprise they took the languages of the court, the monastery, and the market as material and model. Their aim was to determine characteristics that distinguished Lao from neighbouring languages, especially Thai.

In the setting of a nation state and a market economy, people meet who do not share the same semantic horizon, i.e., the same

knowledge about their common linguistic topic. In contrast to the *baan* and the *muang*, a lot of everyday interaction takes place between people who do not know each other. Apart from this, the pace of life accelerates. Everything has to be transmitted quickly without much shared knowledge. Therefore, language has to become less contextual and more precise at the same time. There also is a different system of address in the new market language: in rural language people address each other with kinship terms; in the new market language — and very slowly even in the national language — personal pronouns have started to become the predominant address. The personal pronoun is socially anonymous and, more importantly, reciprocal (“I” and “you” are interchangeable but “father” and “son” are not). Along with kinship terms and the most general courteous terms, personal pronouns form the basic possibilities for addressing one another. The three possibilities happen to be related to the three main sociocultural units, i.e., village, patrimonialism, and market.

To these we have to add the historically intermediate sociocultural layer, which is socialism. The party seeks to monopolize the control over language and linguistic norms, with its main instrument being the national language. The socialist leadership tried to introduce a language reform and its own register of forms of address, and while the forms of address have disappeared, many components of the language reform are still valid. Socialist language is not readily evident in Laos any more, but it informs much of any official discourse, including the media. It is a rather wooden, dry, and formal language. Most Lao try to emulate it when speaking in public, with officials, or in an unfamiliar setting. And it is evident that they do not enjoy it — even for the officials and television speakers themselves.

The leadership of the party controls the media and most of the public sphere. However, the elite of Laos does not exclusively consist of the socialist leadership any more but partly of members of the old royal elite (cf. the names in Halpern 1961). The third section of the elite is the capitalist group. All three have begun to intermarry but they still retain somewhat different realms of influence. While patrimonial and capitalist elites influence the language of the market, the official

language is largely shaped by the socialist leadership. The elite is not a homogeneous ruling class with a uniform principle of vision and division of the social world. It rather pursues divergent aims because it is heterogeneous in itself: social control through egalitarianism, personal wealth through the market economy, and construction of a national identity through the evocation of the past (Tappe 2008).

Laos is still in the process of national integration against the external forces of globalization and the internal forces of ethnic diversity (Evans 1998). Many inhabitants of Laos are not Lao and some of them are strongly opposed to the Lao leadership. They express their opposition in their own languages and by cherishing their own languages. However, the non-*muang* milieux have little influence on the official language or on any market language.

The development of a market economy implies an increased division of work and the appearance of new milieux. Economics, politics, and law have been subject to international advice and influence. Their languages become more technical and less intelligible for outsiders and comprise plenty of loanwords. The new sociolects do not evolve in a uniform pattern. Some are influenced by English, others by Thai, yet others by the nationalist agenda. Whereas in popular culture, tourism, and cross-border trade the influence of Thai is strong, the influence of other languages (not only English but also Pali and Sanskrit) is much stronger in politics, law, and finance. Even the standardization of the national language does not follow a uniform pattern. On the one hand, the political field can control language much more efficiently than ever before — through national integration, infrastructure, the education system, the media, and party structures. The norms of language use, which were first developed under the French, have become familiar to a large percentage of the population — through practice (especially the media) and education. On the other hand, the differentiation of sociolects renders complete control impossible. It is very difficult to instruct electricians and financial experts how to use a language only they understand.

This argument should now be extended to social classification: how does each sociolect (and each milieu) classify speakers and others

in terms of social hierarchy? Which practices and which forms of life does each sociolect value and devalue? What relations does each sociolect establish between classification and values? And how do these relations relate to milieux, social structure, and division of work? In what follows I will approach some of these questions through offering some preliminary results concerning a few milieux and their ideas of a good life. It seems likely that the model of social differentiation elaborated above is of great use in explaining ideas and practices of a good life in Laos. Some of these ideas are formed in a sociolect that corresponds to the respective milieu, while others are formed and expressed in the national language, which is largely the language of the state and partly the language of the market but very little the language of the *baan-muang* structure.

Lives and Ideas of the Good Life

By studying how people classify themselves and others, we can — to some degree — establish the socioculture in which their habitus is rooted and their relative social position. The habitus is formed in a rather homogeneous environment — which certainly has been the case for Lao in the past. Language is an indicator of this. People can emulate other ways of speaking, such as the “high language”, but one can easily detect the social and geographical origin of most people even when they try very hard. And when they feel comfortable they will resort to the language with which they grew up — which is embedded in their habitus. In their relation to the national language, one may even discern their active and passive relation to the official system of social classification. This allows us to draw some conclusions about their chances to lead socially cherished lives.

In contemporary Laos two factors seem to determine both social classification and the ideas and practices of a good life more than others: the socioculture and the state. Whereas the socioculture determines the habitus and subjective evaluation, the state tries to monopolize the symbolic universe (cf. Tappe in this volume). As a first, tentative hypothesis, it seems that people whose sociocultural

background corresponds to their practice can lead the life they “have reason to value” (Sen 2006, p. 35). More precisely, if social position, sociocultural background, access to the division of work, and symbolic interpretation correspond, people seem to value the life they are leading. They do not have to be at the top of the social structure or be economically rich, but they have to be in a certain state of harmony. This is almost a logical tautology, but it is also reconfirmed by my empirical findings. Interestingly, harmony does not mean living on one level, in one socioculture. People acting on differing levels — one might even want to say living in different historical times — may consider their life good if ideas and practices meet.

This is the case for the higher socialist milieux and most of the *baan-muang* milieux (cf. Table 2). To a large degree these utter the opinion that they can lead the lives they cherish. Milieux that do not share this opinion are the lower milieux and, surprisingly, the capitalist milieux. Even though the established and elite milieux in capitalism are clearly moving upwards in the social structure, they are unhappy with political restrictions (such as one-party rule and state control of the public sphere), corruption, and the slow pace of development. Almost all members of the urban middle class utter criticism of this type, which they then link to their lives. To be sure, most of these people do not oppose the communist party’s rule, but rather its relation to other sociocultures — the blend with patrimonialism, its reinterpretation of the market culture as corruption, and its attempt to control all aspects of the nation state.

In contrast, milieux of poor peasants and those farmers in urban regions wish to return to the socialist past. In remote areas it was found that all peasants consider themselves poor and socially deprived (Rehbein 2007, p. 65). In well-to-do villages more than 50 per cent of the farmers and peasants reckon their social position to be high, while in urban villages more than 50 per cent consider their social position to be in the medium range (Simmalavong 2010, Chapter 4). The poor peasants are absolutely poor and are officially classified as poor (cf. Baird and Shoemaker 2008). They are classified as underdeveloped and backward by programmes for the eradication

of poverty. Peasants in remote areas are perfectly aware that these programmes and classifications refer to them (cf. Khouangvichit 2010, p. 122). Under socialism they were praised as the heroes of the class struggle, and now they are classified as underdeveloped. This classification is not adopted by those peasants who have no problems securing their subsistence and even selling some of their surplus. They declare that the peasant incorporates the ideal Lao and produces the national food, rice (Simmalavong 2010). These villagers are mostly ethnic Lao and settle in accessible plains. However, those who are too close to urban life seem to realize their relative poverty, even if they are sufficiently well-off, because they are integrated into the money economy and can estimate their relative wealth.

Even though the rice-growing peasant may have been the hero of socialist Laos and may still epitomize the nation, other milieux do not classify him or her highly. More than 90 per cent of all adolescents declare that they do not want to be peasants or farmers — and in urban milieux, the number approaches 100 per cent (my data). Even among peasants themselves, the majority would prefer to seek a different source of income and a different way of life. Simmalavong (2010, p. 114) found that in the wealthy peasant village of Huaxiang, only 48 per cent of the farmers enjoyed their “profession”. The disrespect for farming decreases with age and increases with the level of education.

Whereas remote villages are rather homogeneous due to their personal social structure, villages near an important road or a town become more differentiated. Some of the village dwellers are professionals, some of them may be students or labourers, and others form the village elite, which mainly consists of party functionaries. This differentiation becomes evident at village festivals and religious ceremonies (cf. Evans et al. 2006). It was observed that many villagers in Ban Pha Khao near Vientiane (3,000 inhabitants) do not participate in village festivals, claiming that they had no money or were not really part of the festival community. The village “elite” is the core group at the festival, the “middle classes” join the party, and some poorer villagers come later to feast on the leftovers. On Buddhist

holidays the rich villagers form the core group because participants are expected to donate to the monastery — which poorer villagers cannot do. It can also be observed that all important decisions in the village are taken by the small elite, which comprises party functionaries and possibly a couple of rich villagers (representatives of the elders, women, and adolescents may participate — but they are party functionaries as well).

The differentiated villages cut across milieux and historical times. They transform rapidly, which means that habitus have developed under conditions that no longer exist (cf. Schopohl in this volume). This “untimely” habitus can be observed in many variations and leads to a fundamental insecurity (Rehbein 2007, p. 70; cf. Khouangvichit 2010, p. 87). Peasants I have interviewed even expressed the fear of unemployment — because they might be in this situation in the future, even though as peasants they knew they could not be unemployed. People experiencing this insecurity express a need for morality and order. Once again, the poor villagers find it in socialist slogans, while the urban middle class finds it in individualistic concepts like conscience and honesty (my data). Poor urban and suburban people believe in neither, especially if they are young. They call for the rule of law but they think that there is no justice and no rule to forms of life. According to them, some people are lucky and some people are reckless — and these are the ones who lead the best possible lives. Therefore, many adolescents in interviews cast doubt on the concept of karma.

Adolescents basically share this insecurity across the board. They know that they are the first generation in Lao history which cannot be fully prepared for life by their parents, and they are probably the first generation which turns away from the homes and customs of their parents. Western lifestyles are increasingly attractive to younger and urban Lao, while Lao lifestyles are attractive to younger rural minority members. This especially concerns clothing, music, and language. Lao adolescents are clearly stratified according to their parents’ social capabilities and milieux, but they do not reiterate their forms of life and their ideas about a good life — which is true for

most adolescents in the contemporary world. Adolescents increasingly belong to the globalized factions of their respective milieux and clearly move towards the capitalist layer.

It is significant that apart from the wealthy peasants and farmers living not too close to urban areas, the higher patrimonial and socialist groups seem to be those who are most happy with their lives. In a way their sociocultures should be outdated and they should resent or fear the future. This is not the case, at least according to their own assessments. They reckon their social position to be high and they think they lead the life “they have reason to value”. In contrast to peasants and farmers, most Lao seem to agree with this self-assessment.

Fundamentally, all Lao seem to agree on the basic idea of a good life. At its core are the concepts of having fun (*muan*), partying (*bun*), being together, and relaxing. More than 90 per cent of the villagers mention these terms and most of the other milieux tend to agree (my data). Only the capitalist milieux point toward a “protestant ethic”, i.e., morality, hard work, and the accumulation of capital coupled with ascetic lifestyles (insert reference to Weber). In these milieux the concepts of having fun, partying, being together, and relaxing are mentioned by merely 30 per cent as defining a good life (my data). One might go even further and summarize the four concepts under the term “pen kan eng” (which means something like letting go, being uninhibited, or acting according to one’s habitus). Any Lao would subscribe to cherishing this concept — except the higher urban milieux. People wish themselves back into the socioculture in which their habitus was formed — for the overwhelming majority of the Lao population, the rural setting of a peasant village. All other sociocultures represent somewhat of an alienation, which can be observed in linguistic behaviour, as well. Lao do not cherish speaking formally, courteously, in a socialist, or in an anonymous language. They cherish the language of the village. Only the higher capitalist milieux have arrived in a different world. And even in the higher capitalist milieux, 65 per cent of respondents said that life was better in the past (my data).

Conclusion

Laos is changing at an incredible pace. This is evident to any casual observer — but it is experienced reality for people living in Laos. They virtually live in multiple times and worlds that are at least partly incompatible with each other. It is surprising that the *baan-muang* is so deeply ingrained that it still informs much of contemporary Lao society, not to the same extent as Thai society, but much more than one would expect after eighty years of colonialism, more than a decade of socialism, and more than two decades of (global and national) capitalism. However, habitus and sociocultures change at a much slower pace than the observable social world, and they determine ideas and practices of a good life at least to the same degree. The simultaneous tendencies of national integration and globalization in a society, which was colonized and industrialized much later than most of Asia, partly contradict each other, affect different segments of society in different ways, and are carried out by them to differing degrees. All the papers collected in this volume show that these contradictions are not so much conflicts between tradition and modernity but different modernizing articulations of different traditions and different aspects of contemporary (local, national, transnational, and global) reality. This paper tried to show that these articulations are rooted in social structure and that they entail different interpretations of a good life and different options to lead it.

NOTES

1. For more information on methodology and data, cf. Evans et al. (2006) and Rehbein (2007).
2. As this issue has not been researched, it is difficult to give an estimate on the distribution of global capital.
3. For data and details on the following distribution of milieux, cf. Rehbein 2005; 2007.
4. Unfortunately I have to restrict the following paragraphs to Lao language because it is the only language spoken in Laos which I speak.

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