

Archaeology in Laos

Cultural Heritage Management in a Non-linear Context

Working with the Lao cultural heritage management in Vientiane has given archaeologist **Anna Kalström**, among other things, new perspectives on Swedish and European heritage management. This may seem a bit strange, as most of the guidelines and regulations directing heritage management in Southeast Asia are developed within an European frame of reference, i.e. through UNESCO, ICCROM, ICOMOS, etc.. In this article, she shares her experience of working in Laos, and suggests a more questioning attitude in cultural heritage management.



Map of Laos and its neighbours



Vientiane, capital of Laos, and Viengkham which is about 70 km north of, and close to, the Nam Ngum reservoir.

We see that cultural heritage is now an important part of development programmes. The new approach to development not only includes but emphasises the cultural dimension, and is based on the view that culture has to be the central concern of development. 'Cultural

diversity' and 'indigenous knowledge' are now commonly referred to as concepts that are necessary for reaching our common goal of identifying and protecting cultural heritage.

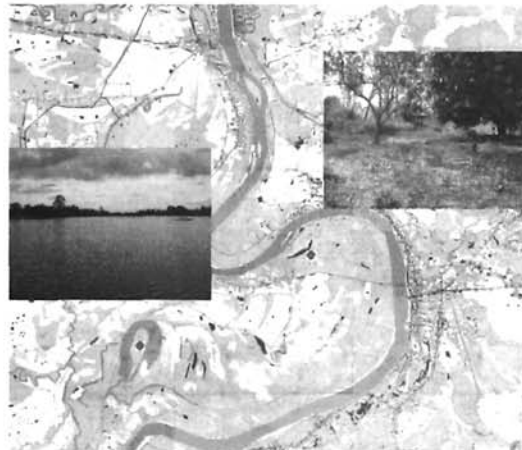
There are two aspects of cultural heritage management as it is practised today, which are of concern to me after my fieldwork experience in Laos. The first is that preservation and restoration are core concepts of heritage management. We want, by all means, to preserve the past. What makes it difficult for me to follow that strategy without questioning it is that Laos is a society where Buddhism is an essential part of the culture. And in a Buddhist context, anchored in the idea that everything is impermanent and spiritual values which are much more prioritised than material values, this preservationist idea must be challenged, or at least discussed from a more critical perspective. The second aspect concerns the way we think of the past, and of our history. In heritage management discussions today, we presume that it is *the* past and *a specific* history we have to identify as cultural heritage; it is often a specific period in the country's history or the origins of civilisation. Structures and monuments from these specific periods and events are what we choose to protect for the future to represent the cultural heritage.

I shall focus on the second aspect (the first aspect on the question of whether to preserve or not has been discussed in my article in *Journal of Social Archaeology*, vol 5(3) pp 338-355). I suggest that we cannot afford to become complacent to the set ideas about cultural heritage, but should rather question their basis, and consult the people involved in and affected by heritage management work. Indigenous knowledge is seen as valuable as long as it fits the set and taken for granted frames, which dictate that history is linear with a start and an end, and now and then along that linear development there are some focal points which we select and protect as cultural heritage. What I found very interesting during my fieldwork in Laos is that there are many more stories about the past to be told, and that this idea of a linear development from simple to complex and from primitive to civilised also has to be challenged if we want to include the varied histories of the various peoples in the country. To illustrate

my point, the following are three stories which are different versions of the very beginning of Lao history, including a version of the famous legend Nithan Khun Borom, which tells the story of the origin of all Lao/Tai people, and another about how King Fa Ngum came to establish the Lan Xang kingdom, the land that today constitutes most parts of Laos.

Story No. 1

Once upon a time, men forgot to provide offerings to Phaya Thaen, the king of heaven. He became so angry that he sent a big flood upon the earth. Three chiefs of mankind got on a boat, which floated to heaven, and pleaded with Phaya Thaen for forgiveness. After the flood, the chiefs came back to earth with a buffalo so that they could start cultivating rice, and continue to provide Phaya Thaen with offerings. Soon the buffalo died, but a plant grew out of its nose. The plant bore three enormous



Ban Viengkham is located at the bend of the Nam Ngum river, with the old temple site Vat Kao to the right and the moated site Don Kang to the left, surrounded by Nong Seun, The excavations at Vat Kao was preceded by a georadar investigation and phosphate mapping.

gourds. The monstrous plant grew vigorously until it covered the whole sky. Then, Phaya Thaen sent his own son, Khun Borom, to rule over the chaotic and earthly realm. Suddenly, cries were heard from inside the gourds, and Khun Borom decided to make holes in them, first with a hot poker and then with a knife. From the holes blackened by the hot poker came first a dark-skinned people called Kha (which is today a pejorative term used for the ethnic groups living in upland Laos), and later, from the holes cut with the knife came the Lao. After that, Khun Borom ordered his seven sons to build their own cities with people from the gourds. The oldest of his sons, Khun Lo, founded the first Lao dynasty of Luang Prabang.

Story No. 2

In the early 14th century, the area of Vientiane was governed by a man called Thao Xieng-Mung. He had a son, Phragna Pao, who ruled the area north of Vientiane, which was called Muang Viengkham. King Fa Ngum approached from the south, with an attempt to unify the area as the Lan Xang kingdom. There was a struggle but finally Vientiane was conquered. Fa Ngum sent his strongest men to also put Viengkham under his rule. But they came back without success, as a high earthen rampart strengthened by a natural thick bamboo wall, which defended the city, had been impossible to break through. To defeat Phragna Pao, and include his city in the Lan Xang kingdom, the wall first had to be destroyed. Fa Ngum's army started to produce arrows from silver and gold. They shot them against the bamboo wall, retreated and waited. In the city, people started to discover the valuable arrows lodged in the bamboo. After a while, large parts of the wall were cut by the inhabitants, so that they could reach those precious objects. The army of Fa Ngum could finally invade the city, and easily conquered its men. As the area was inhabited by the primitive Kha people, Fa Ngum decided to send a Buddhist mission there, to stop the spirit cults that were practised. The mission brought a golden Buddha statue, the Phra Bang, and arrived in the year 1359. When the mission went on to Xieng Thong, they had to leave the Phra Bang in Viengkham as it was impossible to move the image from there. A temple, Vat Phra Bang, was built to host the Buddha image for a while. After 150 years, the Phra Bang finally arrived in Xieng Thong and, in connection to that, the name of the city changed to Luang Prabang.

Story No. 3

The area around Vientiane has always been occupied by people. Hunter-gatherers gathered in rock-shelters in the northern and eastern parts of the province; Neolithic stone adzes were produced and used; rice were grown as a result of agricultural innovation; people buried their dead together with or inside beautiful jars; and metal and textile in different compositions and forms were produced and used. All these developments have been verified through archaeological evidence unearthed during recent investigations, which were not many, and not thoroughly verified, but nevertheless archaeological evidence. As we approach the historic

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period in this short story about Laos, we focus on Viengkham, an area 70 km north of Vientiane. This is one of more than 20 sites in Vientiane province, which were related to the Dvaravati sites south and west of this area. Brief surveys in the province have resulted in a database in which hundreds of bai sema, stones with designs and inscriptions, Buddha images, Buddhist structures, etc. are registered. A moated site outside Viengkham is the most probable place for the earliest settlement, which later expanded and continuously developed into the city that was defended from Fa Ngum by a huge earthen wall surrounded by the river and moats. At Vat Kao, the old temple site, Vat Phra Bang was built to host the Buddha image. Earthenware and stoneware shards, pieces of bronze and glass, hearths, sema stones and brick structures were unearthed during excavation at the old temple site in Viengkham in 2004. Preliminary dating places the temple site in a time between the 12th and 16th century. Today, two villages are situated in this area: Ban Viengkham and Ban Thinjoung, with a population of approximately 1000 inhabitants each.

These are three different narratives, telling different histories of Laos. The first two mythical tales about the creation of the country are the most important stories that are frequently narrated everywhere in Laos today. This is what you find in the history books, and what most people tell you if you ask about the history and the origins of Laos. The first one concerns the creation of the Lao people from an ethnical point of view, and lacks definitions of time and space. The second informs us of the foundations on which the country Laos today is built, including geographical and temporal as well as ethnical and religious perspectives. The third is shaped to fit into an archaeological frame, where technical, social, economic, political and cultural dynamics and developments are organised in temporal and spatial ways. Aiming at the same thing, namely the explanation of the origins of Laos, the approaches are different, and consequently the explanations and the stories become different. But what is the origin of a country: when does its history start? With what? Is it all of a sudden there or must there be a particular event as the starting point? A gigantic gourd falling down on the earth or a mighty king that establishes a united kingdom with a united people, believing

in a united religion? Or do we need things, artefacts, archaeological objects and dating that can function as evidence for that particular starting point that we by all means want to find?

We often strive as archaeologists to look for the origins of things. Research projects have titles including terms such as 'the origins of' or 'the development of' this and that, aiming at discovering the very beginning of a certain event. My own research project started under the heading 'urban development in Vientiane' when I was awarded my PhD research grant in 2001. The focus on development is a result of the fact that in the part of the world where archaeology was born as a science, the perception of time is linear. It has its roots in the evolutionist idea of a beginning, a development and an end, from simple to complex, from Stone Age to Modern times, from Africa to Europe. Very well recognized today is the fact that the archaeological discipline has its roots in an imperial world with Europe as its uncontested centre and with the other, the exotic, out there to reflect and confirm the 'civilised' and developed West. Aware of this, today's archaeologists are of course much more nuanced, even though the study of origins are still directing much of the work; nevertheless, the study of prehistory is difficult to justify without some recourse to evolutionary thought.

However, a thread to pick up and continue from is the one on linearity which, as mentioned earlier, prevails and is taken for granted in western societies, but which becomes problematic in application outside this particular cultural setting, within which the archaeological discipline was born. In Laos, in a context where the culture is impregnated by a mix of Buddhism, animism and Brahmanism and where the perception of time is circular, the concepts of authenticity and origins also become more difficult to apply. Reuse and continuity are the obvious concepts. In this world order, everything is born, lives and dies; death and decay themselves are the prerequisites for life. In this world, small circles touch and hang on to each other inside larger circles. There is a paradox in this circular world view. A paradox that appeared together with the tradition of writing. To the time system, based on the repetition of cycles and circular movements, it was also added the linear system which fixed events on a temporal scale that

As an example of the problems of authenticity and origins, I will now mention very briefly my fieldwork experience, and what happens when myths and legends concerning the origin and history of Laos meet archaeological research, survey and excavation.

In my attempt to obtain some scientific dating and also to have the chance to evaluate and compare different sources, to construct my history, and my view on the early urban development in Vientiane province, I chose to excavate at Viengkham. We had a well-known story, an unexploited site, survey results on presumed moated sites which seemed to have developed into a city surrounded by a perimeter wall, an ancient temple site with visible brick foundations and lots of stones decorated by carved reliefs.

From my point of view, it was a site with a great research potential. I also considered that the results from such an investigation could help us create a picture of the situation in the area at different times in the past, when urban centres and early states were formed around mainland Southeast Asia. The moated sites, the stones and the brick structures were promising indications, from which I hoped to understand a continuity over centuries, rather than the exact date or event that made Viengkham an important urban centre.

Surveys, aerial photo studies, phosphate mapping and a geo-radar investigation preceded the minor test pit excavation at the ancient temple site. Just before the excavation started, we realised that this was an important place not only in historic time but even more so today. The villagers mainly use this place not because of the ancient monuments there, but because of what it is today – a place where spirits dwell; offerings and merit-making are made; and old and worn-out Buddha images are continuously replaced by new ones. It is also where the celebration of life, the present and hopes of a prosperous future is held.

During the excavation, I conducted interviews with people involved in the work; the land owner, the workers as well as other people from the village, the village chief, monks from the area, and the staff from the museum in Vientiane. We discussed the place, its history and its meanings. The artefacts found were turned upside-down

Village participation was crucial for us to better understand the different histories and explanations about the pasts of Viengkham.



and thoroughly examined. How old were they? Was it important at all, the age? And how about the value and the meaning? Was it changed because of the fact that the objects now were found during scientific circumstances and not by the rice farmers themselves, as happen usually? It soon became obvious that the age was not of great importance. Not in the sense that the older the better, but rather that every discussion concerning age related to Fa Ngum, the establishment of Lan Xang kingdom and the Phra Bang statue. If I was not given the answer 'oh, this must be from the time after Fa Ngum' or 'definitely older than Fa Ngum' an event or an object was always related to as more or less than hundred years ago.

I guess these answers and perceptions have to do with the need of establishing a national identity by highlighting the unified nation with roots far back in time. Chronological markers, such as written history, are needed if we are to relate to a distant past. As such markers are not often present in the memory of a number of the people who live in and share the land in Laos, their place in history remains in the shadow, or even altogether excluded. This is the case for practically all ethnic minorities in Laos before the 19th century, and also the case for the Lao themselves before the 14th century, before the written sources and the establishment of the Lan Xang kingdom.

To conclude, I shift attention from the specific Lao context to the general global scene. Many scholars imply that globalisation represents Westernisation or a threat to local cultural variation. Others point out that it provokes a strong local reaction; a reaction that is reflected in the growing interest in local history, traditions, and cultural identity. Governments show great interest in promoting the local traditions for a number of reasons. They often distort the collective memory; a distortion that is strategically aimed at manipulating a group of people by manipulating its history to win support for a particular set of policies or for the maintenance of hegemonic power in the present social order. The past legitimises. The past gives a more glorious background to a present that does not have much to celebrate. The invented past does it even better: myth and invention are essential to the politics of identity by which groups of people today, defining themselves by ethnicity, religion or the past or present borders of states, try to find some certainty in an uncertain and unstable world by saying 'we are different from and better than the Others'.

Archaeology, as a science, claims the right to view these reactions as nationalistic or political, etc.. In fact, the neutral and objective archaeological truth based on scientific results is as political and subjective as anything else, and should not be allowed – at all – to label the different narratives as nationalistic or political, and consequently reduce their value. Archaeology itself is highly political. 'The origins of...' can not be found through archaeology if it is not to be equally found in other stories about the past, gathered through, for example, more anthropologically and/or ethnographically oriented methods. On the other hand, these can not stand by themselves either. The past must be seen as a hybrid and fluid narrative composed of different voices, different world views and different truths.

A narrative can neither start nor end definitely; all narratives always start in the middle, and the so-called end is a temporary cut in a never-ending sequence of facts. We chose when and where the narrative starts and ends, but perhaps the most important matter is to be aware that when we create a history, we actively chose that temporary cut which we call the origins of.

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