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Research Note:

Territorial Entanglements: Ambiguities of Giving Back in Northwestern Laos

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In early 2008, I made and printed a map, and hand-delivered it to a government technician in a rural district of northern Laos. He was a behind-the-scenes-but-influential sort of person, someone called on from time to time to advise the local governor on land-related matters. He had requested the map a few weeks earlier, during one of my previous research visits. After our earlier meeting, I had laid it out and had it printed and laminated in a print shop in Laos's capital, Vientiane. When I gave it to him on my next trip north, he said it was perfect (Figure 1).

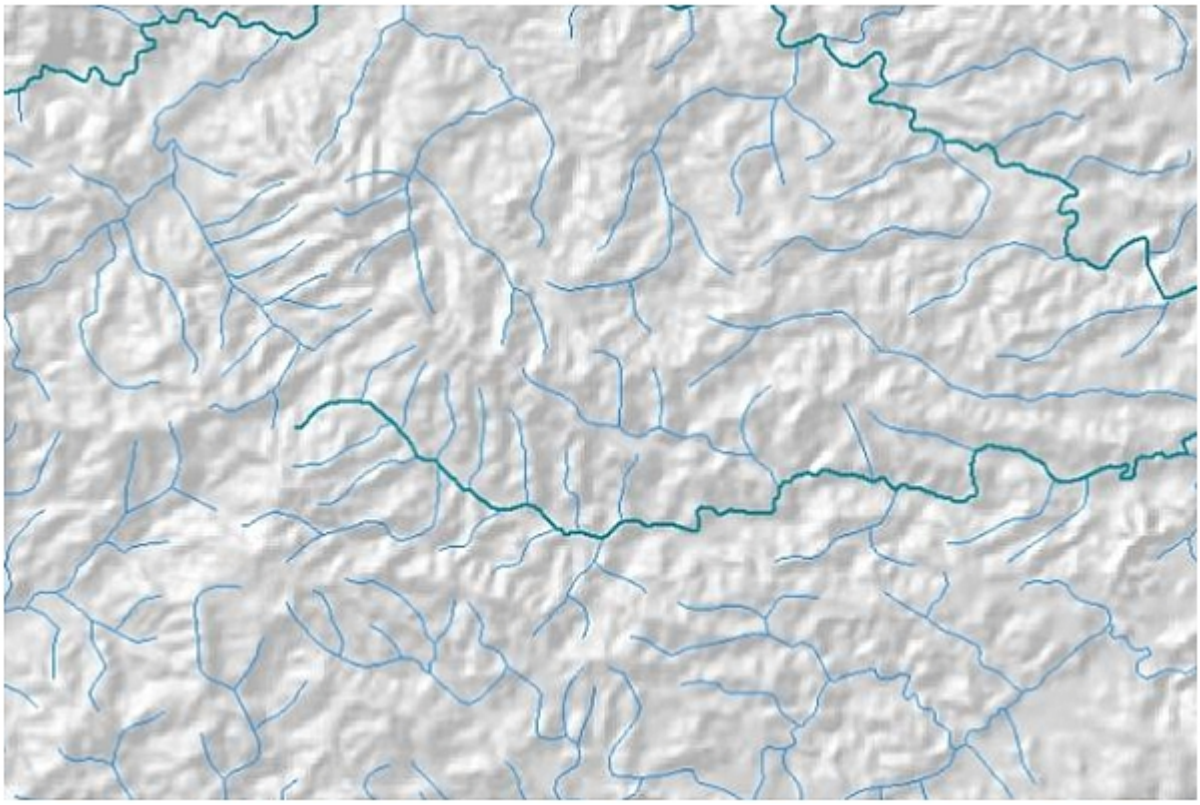

Figure 1. Map detail. (Image credit: M. B. Dwyer)

I had come to northwestern Laos to study the land rush that, between 2004 and 2008, turned the region into one of the most visible examples of the Lao government's efforts to "turn land into capital"—a catchphrase for its highly controversial, resource-concession-based approach to development. Working in and traveling through landscapes that had recently become connected to China's Yunnan province via the paving of a new highway (the so-called "Northern Economic Corridor"), I had grown increasingly accustomed to hillsides that evidenced the area's new connectivity, and the changes it was rapidly bringing (also see Diana, 2010; Shi, 2008; Tan, 2012). Throughout the northwest, newly planted patches of rubber, cassava, and maize complemented the farm-forest continuum of swidden fields, old fallows, and forest patches that typified the area until the mid-2000s (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Luang Namtha province, Laos, December 2007. (Image credit: M. B. Dwyer)

My map was intimately tied to these changes. The first version I had produced had shown not only the area's rivers and hills, but also boundaries of the local district. For district boundaries, I had used data from the government's National Geographic Department (NGD). But when he saw the first version, my contact had asked me to remove the boundary lines, and limit the map to natural features like rivers and hills that would be easy to recognize and uncontroversial. Administrative boundaries, he said, were a perpetual source of dispute among the area's highly interested local officials, and the NGD's database was, he claimed, still under negotiation (or worse). My map, he explained, was intended to help the district governor in his efforts to settle territorial disputes with the neighboring districts and, in particular, with a neighboring province that had designs on the forested areas along the border. The map's importance was both that it lacked boundaries, and thus created opportunities for new lines to be drawn, and that it portrayed topographic features in three dimensions. Many of the area's officials, my contact explained, were not trained in map reading; unlike the government's regular topographic maps, my map would be legible to them because it showed realistic undulations of hills and shadows using the "hill shade" feature found in many GIS programs. It would thus aid in the resolution, he said, of the lingering territorial disputes.

This explanation was both logical and unsettling. I had not harbored any illusions that I was merely an observer; I was conducting research as a guest of a newly formed and under-resourced government agency that had deliberately embroiled itself in the country's difficult land politics—I was already involved. The episode nonetheless reminded me that I was involved, even more locally, in the very territorial politics I was attempting to study. This pulled me in two directions: on the one hand, I was studying up, investigating the visualization technologies of the Lao state and the investors it was trying to recruit to the process of "turning land into capital" (cf. Haraway, 1991, chap. 9; Nader,

1972). Gaining access to these technologies required engagement with policy makers in the capital and, by extension, reciprocation with local technicians like my contact when they asked for help. On the other hand, I probably could have refused my contact's request—if not directly, then by dissembling about technical difficulties at the print shop or something like that. I did not. I was not sure if I should, but I jumped in with both feet and, in return, I got access to stories.

My contact, for example, recounted a dispute that erupted after a neighboring official had seen the survey map for a rubber project I was studying, and had claimed that the project was encroaching into his jurisdiction. Explaining to me where his district ended, my contact had pointed out the distinction between district boundaries and boundaries of the district's villages. Drawing a sketch that highlighted the areas in between the two—areas outside the district's villages that were nonetheless inside the district itself (Figure 3)—he referred to this area as "district forest," and emphasized its importance to district officials. The way he did this—quietly and with a look that said, "Do not push for details"—implied that he was treading the boundary between professional cooperation and personal favors. I had done him one, and he did the same.

Figure 3. Author's field notes, December 2007. (Image credit: M. B. Dwyer)

The episode brought home for me two distinct dimensions of the quandary of "giving back" in field research. The first and more obvious was the issue of complicity. Whether my map-making was an act of giving back—a gift outside the bounds of normal research—was a matter of interpretation; it certainly could be read that way, and it in fact worked well (in my case) because it treaded the ambiguous line between what was expected and what was extra. I do not know how the map was ultimately put to use, although I heard stories that pointed in both directions. What I do know is that I am deeply ambivalent about the kinds of population management practices used by local authorities: these authorities were a diverse bunch, and I was as impressed with their

moral-economic sensibilities about the exploding rubber boom as I was dismayed by the unevenness with which these sensibilities were operationalized from one community to the next (see Dwyer, 2014). The area along the provincial border was, at that time, soon to be implicated in the legibility politics of REDD-readiness (an international process for reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries, REDD Desk, 2011), and whatever the "solution" to the boundary dispute, it was going to be politically fraught. No matter the outcome, my work had become part of the very technologies of territory I had set out to investigate.

Second, the map episode foregrounded to me the impossibility of giving back to others who were more deserving of assistance than the local authorities who benefitted from my map. These were the residents of the villages caught up in the various concession, logging, and resettlement schemes that I was studying (Dwyer, 2011). Here my subject position—first and foremost as an American, and second, as young, white, and male—figured centrally in how I was seen by local authorities and at least some villagers, whose memories of an earlier generation of American intervention convinced me to keep my relations with villagers strictly within the lines. The legacy of Cold War interventionism (by the US and others, but especially the US) continues to haunt the uplands of northern Laos, inflecting at least some land-related episodes with the memory of anti-government activity and foreign-assisted subversion (Baird, 2004; Dwyer, 2014; Tuffin, 2011). I thought it best to keep my engagement with upland villagers to the formal, necessary minimum, limiting my efforts to give back something more to people (like my contact described above) whose association with me would not threaten either of us.

Ultimately, these decisions highlight for me the burden of making the research itself give back. My ability to give back outside of the research process was, as described above, both tightly circumscribed and, where I chose to pursue it, both ambiguous and problematic. Giving back was thus, for me, not an effort to do extra good through work, but a reminder of the difficulties of creating positive change in a place where the past weighs heavily.

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