



# Questioning the Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial in the Context of the Brao of Southern Laos and Northeastern Cambodia

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Many human geographers are keenly interested in colonialism, including the social, political, cultural, economic, ecological and especially spatial processes associated with European colonialism in various parts of the world (Blaut 1993; Gregory 2000; Watts 2000; Sidaway 2000; Harris 2002; Jones and Phillips 2005; Kothari 2006). Michael Watts defines colonialism as, “The establishment and maintenance of rule, for an extended period of time, by a sovereign power over a subordinate and alien people that is separate from the ruling power” (2000: 93). Colonisation, the physical settlement of people from the imperial centre to the colonial periphery, is frequently associated with colonialism (Said 1994; Watts 2000), but it is not a necessary element of it. More fundamentally, colonialism is generally constituted by political and legal domination, relations of economic and political dependence, imperial exploitation of colonies, and racially based inequality (Watts 2000). More precisely, Watts (2000: 93) understands colonialism to be “unequal territorial relationships among states based on subordination and domination... typically associated with distinct forms of contemporary capitalism such as the emergence of monopolies and transnational corporations.” Indeed, space and territory are important aspects of colonialism.

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According to Watts (2000), colonialism is generally considered to be the subjection of non-European societies as a result of European expansion, organisation and rule. However, in this paper I argue that colonialism need not only involve 'distant territories'. There is no reason why the territorial domination of those geographically closer should not be considered forms of colonialism. Illustrative of this, Watts (2000) points out that most geographers recognise Japanese colonialism in Asia. I would add that many, albeit not necessarily the same group of geographers, consider Tibet to be under the colonial yoke of China (see, for example, McClintock 1992). In that colonialism always involves one group gaining at least some control over territory apart from where one resides, it might even be expected that those geographically closer would more easily be able to mobilise different sorts of power over a place. Certainly, the geographies of power are impacted by distance (Allen 2003).

'Postcolonialism' is related to colonialism. It is most commonly perceived in geography as a "critical politico-intellectual formation that is centrally concerned with the impact of colonialism and its contestation on the cultures of both colonizing and colonized peoples in the past, and the reproduction and transformation of colonial relations, representations and practices in the present" (Gregory 2000: 612). Many, however, also use the term more normatively, to refer to places that have undergone decolonisation processes, and are thus 'postcolonial' (Sidaway 2000). Although postcolonial geographies are diverse (Blunt and Willis 2000), and the use of terminology has been contested and debated (see Sidaway 2000; Gregory 2004), scholars of postcolonialism typically emphasise the lingering impacts of European colonialism, including repercussions long after colonialism has formerly ceased to exist (Young 2003). Still, Anne McClintock (1992) has cautioned that it is important not to use the term postcolonial as though it describes a single condition. While the enduring effects of European colonialism on the past, present and future are important, postcolonial studies tend to over emphasise European colonialism without adequately considering other forms of colonial power. It is crucial for us to also pay close attention to the consequences of other forms of colonialism, as they have their own particular socio-spatial implications.

Postcolonial studies need not be centred only on European colonialism; other forms of colonialism have their own particular results and legacies, are supported by particular discursive strategies, and are equally important. Putting too much emphasis on European colonialism can sometimes obscure other forms of power relations, ones that deserve attention. This is the point of this short essay, and I will demonstrate my position through theorising, and by presenting some summary findings regarding the ethnic Brao people in northeastern Cambodia and southern Laos.

## **The Brao**

The Brao are a Mon-Khmer language-speaking ethnic group found mainly

in Attapeu and Champasak Provinces, in the southern-most part of Laos, and Ratanakiri and Stung Treng Provinces in northeastern Cambodia. There are approximately 60,000 Brao globally, of which about 35,000 live in northeastern Cambodia, and close to another 25,000 reside in southern Laos. There is one Brao village in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. The Brao are broadly divided—by most Brao themselves—into nine sub-groups, all of which can be traced to pre-European arrival to the region, although the governments in Laos and Cambodia do not recognise all these categories (Baird 2008). As James Scott (2009) has recently emphasised—even if he was not the first to do so—that ethnic categories are socially constructed, and often emerged due to socio-political classification processes promoted by European powers. Certainly Brao ethnic categorisations are themselves interwoven within complex circumstances, but the Brao ethnic categories listed here have largely never been promoted or even used by colonial powers and appear to have been socially constructed by the Brao themselves, or in relation to Brao interactions with other peoples who they have interacted with, although I recognise that these construction processes and present-day usage patterns have undoubtedly been influenced by Europeans, albeit indirectly in some cases. Anyway, according to the Brao, the Kreung, Umba, Brao Tanap, Kavet and Lun are found in Cambodia, while the Hamong, Ka-nying, Jree, Kavet and Lun are found in southern Laos (see Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> The Brao are mainly Animists.<sup>3</sup> They have a recent history of being subsistence-oriented swidden cultivators who relied heavily on hunting, fishing and the collection of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs). Until a few decades ago, most Brao lived in upland areas. However, the livelihoods of Brao people have been variously altered over recent history (Baird 2008). Although it will not be possible to present the details of all the changes occurring amongst the Brao in this short article, it is useful to provide some general information about Brao history, based on fieldwork conducted in Laos and Cambodia since the mid-1990s.

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<sup>2</sup> I have avoided drawing territorial boundaries between ethnic sub-groups, as that sort of ethnic mapping is steeped in problems. Instead, I have roughly placed Brao ethnic labels on a map to provide a rough estimate of approximately where different Brao sub-groups, as recognised by the Brao themselves, resided in the 1940s-1950s.

<sup>3</sup> Note that I have specifically chosen to capitalise ‘Animist’, even though this goes against standard English language conventions. This is because I believe that Animism deserves equal recognition compared to other religions, such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, etc., all of which are capitalised.



Figure 1. Map of southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia that shows the approximate locations of the different ethnic Brao sub-groups in the 1940s-1950s.

### The Brao and Colonialism

For present-day Laos and northeastern Cambodia—the area historically populated by different Brao groups—the periods prior to 1893 are frequently considered to be ‘precolonial’, while those after 1954 are typically recognised as ‘postcolonial’, thus giving one the impression that French colonial domination represents the only type of ‘real colonialism’ ever to significantly affect these spaces. This perspective is understandable considering the scholarly emphasis on nation states in mainland Southeast Asia (Anderson 1991; Winichakul 1994).

During my doctoral research, which took place between 2004 and 2008, I consulted with large numbers of Brao people regarding their histories and found that the normative framework encompassing the concepts of ‘precolonial’, ‘colonial’ and ‘postcolonial’ is not particularly useful to most Brao for understanding their experiences. Instead, these terms tend to lead to an overemphasis on European colonialism, even masking other forms of domination, or making it difficult to conceptualise other forms of colonialism that lie outside of this framework. Thus, the Brao—as well as other upland peoples in mainland Southeast Asia—have been affected by a series of colonialisms, each with its own objectives and methods, and particular socio-spatial implications.

When I was working with the Brao, both as a researcher and an environmental and social justice activist working with non-governmental organisations in the 1990s and 2000s, and especially during my doctoral research more recently, I was struck by the way they often framed history. They frequently talked about the Khmer, Lao and Siamese periods, followed by the French, Japanese, Vietnamese, American, and finally the Lao and Khmer periods. The Brao did not give nearly as much emphasis to European colonial forms of control compared to most scholars of colonialism, and they certainly do not conceive of colonialism as having begun in 1893 and ended in 1954. For them, there is no ‘precolonial’ or ‘postcolonial’, but rather only a series of colonialisms, or periods in which they have been administratively controlled by various outsiders. All these actors had the overall objective of controlling the Brao and their spaces, albeit in varying ways. These forms of colonialism each had their own norms and rules, tools and practices, and peculiarities and quirks, even if none of the colonial powers were ever been totally successful in their objectives.

Apart from the racialising of colonialism—which is common in Brao discourses—various colonialisms have emerged based on political ideologies. Even those espousing modernising ‘development’ in the present day, including international aid agencies working through colonial governments, are considered to have particular control over the Brao and their spaces, constituting yet another form of colonialism. As Derek Gregory (2004) has shown, colonialism is not just about the past. It can continue to resonate in the present, and can take various forms. Thus, I have chosen to adopt the Brao position that colonialism has occurred as a series of dominations, of which the French era is but one. This is not the theoretical position that I held at the on-take of my doctoral research. Instead, it emerged out of the fieldwork, and Brao discourses about different periods of history in particular.

The use of the term ‘precolonial’ is also important to reassess, as it suggests that those periods are characterised by relatively less domination compared to those when Europeans held power. However, the reality is something that can be challenged in many cases, a point that has been convincingly made by Jones and Phillips (2005). To provide just one crucial example that relates to the Brao, pre-European Lao and Siamese powers attempted to territorially control Brao spaces in order to extract human slaves from highland populations so as to build up their own power. Without some territorial control, even if they did not attempt to bound it in the same ways as Europeans, capturing slaves would have been much more difficult.

Those who gained administrative control over Brao spaces before the arrival of the French—including the Khmer, Lao and the Siamese—were not ‘native’ to the areas over which they took control. They represented themselves as coming from elsewhere, and were recognised by natives as not being local. The time-

distance factor was significant, with even relatively short distances being time-consuming to pass.

Similarly, various groups—the most notable being the Lao, Khmer, Vietnamese and Americans—continued to dominate Brao spaces since the withdrawal of the French, in periods generally considered by many to be ‘postcolonial’. These post-French powers have had their own forms of colonialism, each somewhat different from the French and each other. For example, in 1960 the Cambodian government chose to forcibly resettle a large number of Brao people from the uplands to the lowlands near the Sesan River. In 1975, the Lao government also moved a large number of Brao from the uplands to the lowlands. In addition, the implementation of commercial logging operations and the construction of large hydropower dams in Brao areas in both Laos and Cambodia have required that States gain territorial control. However, as with pre-French forms of domination, post-French colonialisms can become obscured by both common and official discourses, especially those related to nation states and what constitutes colonialism and what does not.

I am not arguing that all types of colonialism should be conflated into a single category, or that it is not valuable to study European colonialism. Instead, different colonial powers have varying objectives and strategies, each with their own socio-spatial repercussions, and particular importance. However, separating European colonialism from other forms of colonialism without careful consideration is not likely to be productive, even if there are many points where comparisons of European and non-European forms of colonialism can be illuminating, just as comparing different forms of European colonialism or non-European colonialism can be useful (see, for example, Miles 1994).

The crux of my argument is that for members of ethnic groups such as the Brao, who do not demographically or politically dominate any particular nation state, and have long been under differing forms of socio-spatial control by people from varied ethnic or politico-cultural groups, are peoples whose identities and concomitant socio-spatial orientations have been fundamentally shaped by various forms of colonialism. My argument can, indeed, be extended to most of those peoples who today define themselves as ‘indigenous peoples’. As Andrew Gray (1995), the former director of the Denmark-based organisation, the International Work Group on Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), argued, the defining basis for the designation of people as being ‘indigenous’ is that despite having various experiences, they have all been subjected to colonialism.

### **Different Forms of Colonialism and Terminology**

It appears that we are presently lacking in the vocabulary required to appropriately communicate about colonialism. Some may believe, for example, that I have erred by not differentiating between standard colonialism and ‘internal

colonialism'. However, the concept of internal colonialism, which involves one group dominating another within a single nation state (Hechter 2007[1975]; Evans 1992), is not adequate for describing the processes that have affected the Brao. It may be useful for making it clearer that colonialism can occur at various scales, including within particular nation states, but it tends to contribute to privileging the concept of the nation state and national boundaries. In fact, colonialism can occur in ways that variously involve actors and spaces in one's own country, or across national borders, as is the case for the Brao who live in both southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia.

Some could also argue that much of what I am calling colonialism might better be referred to as 'neocolonialism', especially for periods following European colonialism. The theoretical framework surrounding neocolonialism tends to relate to existing or past international economic and political arrangements created by capital cities and nation states, particularly former European colonial powers, in order to maintain control of former colonies and dependencies who are presently regarded as 'independent' (Lee 2000). Again, however, this framework tends to privilege European domination over other forms of colonialism.

Some may argue that 'colonialism' is not an appropriate way of describing all the forms of domination that the Brao have had to face, because colonialism represents a particular form of European domination over other parts of the world.

Others might suggest that imperialism is a better term for describing more localised forms of Brao domination by lowland Lao and Khmer. However, I believe that colonialism, at least as it is presently commonly defined by human geographers, is indeed the most appropriate way of describing the experiences as understood by the Brao because all the forms of domination described in this article include elements of territorial control, or spatial domination, and it is the spatial element of domination that is crucial for defining colonialism.

If we rescale our analysis to consider colonialism amongst the Brao, it can be seen that the situation is much more complicated and multi-faceted than suggested by the terminology generally available. The specific circumstances of individual colonial histories are key. We need to consider the details of particular situations and histories rather than simply creating a binary framework that separates European colonialism from other forms of colonial domination. We need to more carefully consider the specific roles of various powers, as well as different types of domination practiced by each.

Some may feel that the net I have cast in defining colonialism is too wide to make the term meaningful, which is not an unreasonable position to take. But if broadening the term is considered to not be useful, then what might be required is not a return to the status quo, but for geographers and other social scientists to change the ways they define colonialism so as to become more precise, so as to

avoid fetishising both the nation state and European colonialism over other forms of colonialism when different scales of power and territorial control are being considered. This is not just true for the Brao, but also for other minorities living in colonial situations, both in mainland Southeast Asia and elsewhere.

I believe that my argument is in line with recent tendencies towards expanding the definition of colonialism and not privileging the European experience. Jones and Phillips (2005), for example, have made the case for including pre-modern non-European imperialism, and Gregory (2004) has shown that colonialism still exists in present-day Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine. Here, I have simply extended the argument further.

Others have also pointed out problems with overly emphasising Europe. For example, Blaut (1993) has demonstrated how scholars have long inappropriately privileged European change, mistakenly believing in the European diffusionist model of modernisation, known to many as the 'European miracle'. As Blaut shows, the European miracle is more myth than reality. Also, it is important to mention Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* (2000), as he too usefully questions the value of always treating Europe as the centre. He does acknowledge his own intellectual debt to European thought, but points out that that does not mean that Europe should always be positioned in the centre. Like him, I too would like to move beyond what he calls 'Eurocentric histories'. For me, it is useful to try to ponder colonialism as perceived by different groups, such as the Brao.

## Conclusions

The purpose of this paper has not been to deny the usefulness of postcolonial studies, or to suggest that important work on European colonialism and its legacy should not be continued. Neither have I argued that all forms of colonialism are equal or that they should be conflated into a single category. However, I have questioned and problematised some of the key assumptions associated with colonialism and postcolonial studies. There is, indeed, nothing 'natural' about these terms. For English language speakers, they may still remain useful for categorising certain periods and events, but they should not be applied uncritically, and the categories they create should not be allowed to suppress the recognition of other forms of spatially-oriented domination that exist at different spatial scales. I am, in fact, not the first person to problematise the periodisation of the past, and European colonialism more generally, and to point out that other peoples have different perceptions of history (see Sidaway 2000; McClintock 1992). In particular, Olivia Harris (1995) has usefully illustrated such differences amongst Aymara-speaking peasants in the Bolivian Andes, who do not emphasise the arrival of the Spanish to the region in the same ways as Europeans typically do. However, despite these important insights, problems remain in relation to how we view the concept of colonialism and postcolonialism. Thus, it is useful to reinforce the types of observations made by researchers such as Harris, and to show that other social and



cultural groups, including the Brao, have similar ideas.

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