

Infrastructures of Ethnicity: Knowledge, Vision, and Development in the Lao Nation-State

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ABSTRAK

Artikel ini menganalisis bagaimana etnisitas berfungsi sebagai infrastruktur kekuasaan negara di Laos masa kini. Melalui analisis literatur berbasis meta-metodologis, penelitian ini memanfaatkan tiga kerangka teori—legibility administratif Scott, exhibitionary complex Bennett, dan symbolic violence Bourdieu—untuk menelusuri bagaimana pengetahuan, visualitas, dan pembangunan membentuk keberagaman yang dapat diatur. Dengan perbandingan frontal dan pembacaan etnografi kritis, artikel ini menunjukkan bahwa logika klasifikasi kolonial berlanjut dalam pemerintahan sosialis dan membentuk hierarki Lao Loum–Lao Theung–Lao Sung. Museum dan festival budaya menghidupkan kategori tersebut dalam bentuk estetis yang menormalkan ketimpangan, sementara ekspansi bendungan, konsesi lahan, dan relokasi dataran tinggi menerjemahkan hierarki simbolik menjadi perampasan material. Temuan penelitian memperlihatkan bahwa klasifikasi, representasi, dan pembangunan beroperasi sebagai modalitas kekuasaan yang saling menopang untuk menjadikan perbedaan etnis terlihat, indah, dan dapat diatur, sekaligus menyembunyikan marginalisasi struktural.

Kata kunci: etnisitas, Laos, *legibility*, *exhibitionary complex*, *symbolic violence*

ABSTRACT

This article examines how ethnicity functions as an infrastructure of state power in contemporary Laos. Drawing on a meta-methodological literature analysis, the study mobilizes three interlinked theoretical frameworks—Scott’s administrative legibility, Bennett’s exhibitionary complex, and Bourdieu’s symbolic violence—to trace how knowledge, vision, and development shape governable diversity. Through frontal comparison and critical ethnographic reading, the article demonstrates that colonial classificatory logics persist in socialist governance, structuring the Lao Loum–Lao Theung–Lao Sung hierarchy. Museums and cultural festivals materialize these categories into aesthetic forms that normalize inequality, while hydropower expansion, land concessions, and upland relocation translate symbolic hierarchies into material dispossession. The findings show that classification, representation, and development operate as mutually reinforcing modalities of rule that render ethnic difference visible, beautiful, and governable, while concealing structural marginalization.

Keywords: ethnicity, Laos, *legibility*, *exhibitionary complex*, *symbolic violence*

A. INTRODUCTION

Laos frequently presents an official image of itself as a harmonious multiethnic nation. In national publications and tourism promotions, ethnic diversity is framed as a shared cultural heritage, encapsulated in the slogan “Laos Simply Beautiful,” used since 2012. The government asserts that all Lao citizens, regardless of background, are members of a single national family rooted in the values of socialism and Theravada Buddhism (Stuart-Fox, 1996, p.84). Yet behind this imagery, social structures and state policies reveal that ethnicity in Laos functions not merely as cultural expression but as an instrument of power. Through administrative practices, cultural projects, and development interventions, the state shapes, regulates, and directs how ethnicity is understood, displayed, and lived by its citizens.

Research on ethnic classification in Laos has demonstrated that systems of social grouping serve as critical mechanisms in the formation of state power. Grant Evans (2002, p.135) explains that the official categories Lao Loum, Lao Theung, and Lao Soung used in the post-independence period were abstracted from early twentieth-century French colonial classifications. This continuity illustrates a persistence of colonial logics within socialist administration. These typologies—originally crafted by colonial ethnographers to arrange the populations of Indochina along an evolutionary ladder from backward to civilized—now operate as bureaucratic devices that determine who is considered an “unbuilt” or “undeveloped” citizen. The categories “Lao Lum,” “Lao Theung,” and “Lao Sung” refer precisely to the same major ethnic groupings (“Lao and Tai,” “Kha,” and “Meo-Yao,” respectively) as defined under colonial administration (Schlemmer 2017, pp.155–156). Their arbitrariness mirrors earlier classificatory regimes, yet they endure because they align with a colonial “truth” produced and legitimized during French rule. Those living in the mountains (phu dōi) and forests (pa) are associated with the term “ethnic,” connoting communities imagined as ancient, traditional, and close to nature—positioned in contrast to lowland modernity (Schlemmer 2017, p.252). Within this framework, lowland groups (Lao Loum) are portrayed as rational and progressive, whereas upland (Lao Theung) and highland (Lao Soung) communities are represented as traditional and in need of guidance. Ethnic classification thus functions not as a scientific effort to recognize diversity but as an administrative tool for governing and evaluating populations, thereby producing a form of epistemic colonialism—the continuity of colonial modes of knowing within modern state policy.

These administrative classifications subsequently acquire visual and moral form through cultural campaigns and systems of ethnic representation in museums and national exhibitions. If ethnic classification serves as the state’s linguistic apparatus for recognizing its subjects, museums function as the stage on which these subjects are displayed. In Laos, this practice is evident in the exhibitions of the Lao National Museum and the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre, where upland communities are portrayed as “guardians of tradition,” while Lao Buddhist culture is positioned as the emblem of national identity and progress. Cultural representation thus transforms ethnic diversity into an aesthetic of unity, concealing social hierarchies beneath narratives of harmony (Schlemmer 2017, p.270; Pholsena 2006, pp.16, 49; Pholsena 2002, p.194; Gladney 1996, p.93).

The hidden hierarchies produced through administrative classification and cultural representation then acquire material expression in development practice. Kenny-Lazar (2018, pp.679, 688) describes this dynamic as a relational governance of dispossession, a process through which minority groups are positioned simultaneously as passive beneficiaries of development and as communities dispossessed of their ancestral lands. Village consolidation programs and land-zoning initiatives promoted since the early 2000s have relocated upland communities to lowland sites, generating social homogenization and strengthening the administrative reach of the state. These processes reveal that development is not a neutral project for welfare improvement, but a continuation of the logics of legibility and social discipline first established through classification and representation. In official Lao discourse, development has become a new idiom of civilization, replacing colonial rhetoric on enlightenment with new forms of moral surveillance (Pholsena 2006, p.91; Evans 1999, p.182; Hours & Selim 1997, p.77).

Accordingly, this article begins from the premise that classification, representation, and development form a mutually reinforcing assemblage of power. Administrative knowledge,

cultural aesthetics, and developmental ideology together structure the ways in which the state perceives, evaluates, and governs ethnic diversity in Laos. Through these intertwined processes, the state not only creates social order but also shapes citizens' consciousness, encouraging them to accept this order as natural and legitimate. From this emerges the central question: how does ethnicity function as an infrastructure of state power in Laos? Further, how do censuses, museums, and development projects discipline difference into a governable harmony?

To address these questions, the article employs a literature-based approach that integrates three interrelated theoretical concepts: James C. Scott's (1998) notion of administrative legibility to explain how states construct social readability; Tony Bennett's (1995) exhibitionary complex to analyze how public representations cultivate moral dispositions; and Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) concept of moral symbolic violence to examine the internalization of power relations within citizens' consciousness. Through these three frameworks, the article examines ethnicity as an infrastructure of power in Laos—not merely as a social or policy issue, but as a form of knowledge and symbolic practice underpinning the logics of modern governance in Southeast Asia.

B. METHOD

This article is not constructed as a neutral literature review but as a meta-methodological exercise that treats the literature itself as a professional cultural object saturated with interests (Marcus 2009, pp.2–4). In mapping ethnicity in Laos, the author employs a strategy of frontal comparison, in which the researcher's own perspective is actively mobilized as one comparative instrument to juxtapose ethnic realities in Laos with Western theoretical assumptions that are often treated as universal (Candea 2019, pp.244–245). This strategy is grounded in the principle of mobile revelation, which conceives anthropological knowledge as always in transit and oriented toward generating a shock (surprise) to North-Western social science paradigms through messages originating from other regions that have long been marginalized (Boyer & Howe 2015, p.15).

In selecting and engaging with the literature, the author adopts a pinch of salt approach to resist naïve generalizations that frequently overlook the complexities of Southeast Asia's colonial histories (Candea 2019, p.22). This method draws on the framework of critical ethnography, which begins from the recognition that social structures are often configured in ways that sustain the systematic marginalization of minority ethnic groups (Alotaibi 2018, p.29). Consequently, the literature on Laos in this study is treated as a discursive archive—a system of immanent relations that regulates how statements about ethnic identity are produced, sustained, or erased within academic space (Hewage 2020, p.183). The author reflexively performs a sideswipe against older functionalist assumptions that treat ethnic groups as static entities, thereby opening space for more fluid and contingent narratives.

As a final step, this article applies a figure/ground reversal characteristic of the ontological turn (Holbraad & Pedersen 2017, p.11). The literature on ethnicity in Laos is not treated as raw data to be fitted into preexisting theoretical schemas but is instead used as a primary resource for reconceptualizing the terms. The researcher positions himself not as an external, objective observer, but as an investigative instrument engaged in an intellectual performance to create portable analytics—mobilizing Lao local concepts to illuminate theoretical problems elsewhere (Naficy 2009, p.117; Boyer & Howe 2015, p.17). Thus, this method produces a form of

abstention, a conceptual hybrid that brings together Laos's thick ethnographic facts with incisive theoretical experimentation.

C. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

James C. Scott (1998) introduces the concept of legibility as a foundational element in understanding the logic of modern state power, arguing that legibility is a necessary precondition for any substantive state manipulation or intervention (Scott 1998, p.183). For Scott, all forms of government depend on their ability to see society through a narrowing of vision that renders the complex dimensions of social life measurable and calculable. He refers to this process as simplification—a reduction of social complexity to fit the language of administration and the requirements of governance (Scott 1998, pp.11–13). In his view, the state has no choice but to make society readable, for it cannot govern what is illegible. Legibility is therefore not simply a technical procedure; it is an epistemic mechanism through which the state constructs its own social world by seeing like a state—by looking from above with a centralized and totalizing gaze.

The concept of legibility is applied by attending to practices of social arrangement and standardization that make state control possible. Scott (1998, p.6) asserts that legibility is achieved not by discovering order but by imposing it. Social readability is never naturally given; it is produced deliberately through classificatory systems and administrative policies. The theoretical application of this concept thus requires an examination of the state's knowledge instruments—censuses, archives, statistics, maps, and development policies—that render populations readable while simultaneously revealing what such a gaze obscures. Every act of legibility, as has been noted, contains a corresponding blindness; what becomes visible to the state necessarily conceals alternative ways of knowing. Legibility therefore also serves as an epistemological reflection on how power manifests itself through forms of knowledge that appear neutral.

In his later work, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (2009), Scott emphasizes that attempts to render populations legible always confront strategies of refusal. He designates the uplands of Southeast Asia as “Zomia,” where various communities have consciously refused to be governed (Scott 2009, p.ix). In these regions, opacity becomes a political stance—people cultivate mobility, non-taxable agricultural practices, and oral languages as means of evading state surveillance. Thus, legibility and illegibility are not merely administrative categories but mutually constitutive political positions: one reflects the state's drive to impose social order, while the other marks citizens' efforts to preserve autonomy from domination. Every act of legibility is an act of power, for it contains the ambition to conquer complexity and subordinate social life to governmental logic.

If Scott situates “seeing” as the primary mechanism through which the state creates social order, Bennett extends this inquiry by arguing that once the state “sees” the population through administrative legibility, citizens are subsequently taught to “see themselves” in a manner aligned with the state's vision. In *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (1995), Tony Bennett introduces the concept of the exhibitionary complex—a social technology that organizes the relationship between knowledge, visibility, and power. He explains that the exhibitionary complex is designed to enable the public to know, rather than to be known, transforming individuals into subjects who observe and regulate themselves (Bennett 1995, pp.62–63). Museums, exhibitions, and public parks operate as spaces through which the state presents itself as a moral and pedagogical force. Unlike Michel Foucault's panopticon—in which a single

observer watches many—Bennett demonstrates that in the exhibitionary complex, many are invited to look at a few objects; and through the act of looking, they learn to become disciplined, civilized citizens aligned with the social order. These institutions speak to the eye, and through the eye to the soul, instilling a new moral and social order.

In his article *The Exhibitionary Complex* (1988), Bennett further argues that nineteenth-century museums, galleries, and industrial exhibitions did more than display technological progress: they constituted arenas for the reform of manners and morals, where the public learned to embody the virtues of modern citizenship (Bennett 1988, p.86). Through spatial organization, object classification, and hierarchical historical narratives, the state projected an image of progress that was aesthetically and morally acceptable. The exhibitionary complex thus extends Scott's notion of legibility. If legibility represents the state's view of its population, the exhibitionary complex represents the population's view of itself through the eyes of the state. Here, power no longer operates primarily through direct surveillance but through the construction of a visual order—an architecture of perception that shapes how citizens understand the world and their position within it.

The concept of the exhibitionary complex can therefore be applied by examining the visual, material, and narrative mechanisms through which citizens come to perceive themselves and their society. Exhibitionary apparatuses operate by arranging bodies and objects to be seen and to see, signaling that power works through spatial design and visual regimes that train individuals to recognize their place within a moral order. Analyses grounded in this theory require attention to curatorial strategies, spatial layouts, visual classifications, and the narratives of progress and morality embedded within public representation. The focus is not merely on the content of exhibitions but on the modes of seeing produced by representational institutions. Museums and exhibitions function as technologies of the self and of the social—devices that structure how individuals understand themselves as part of a wider social formation.

Bennett's framework expands the analytical horizon from the state's gaze (Scott) to the formation of public consciousness, paving the way for Pierre Bourdieu's account of how such structures of knowledge and perception become internalized. While Scott and Bennett emphasize visual and representational dimensions of power, Bourdieu adds that modern power also operates through invisible mechanisms—symbolic power and symbolic violence. In *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991), Bourdieu argues that power operates through the ability to make people see and believe, to affirm or reshape their perception of the world (Bourdieu 1991, p.170). Symbolic power does not function through physical coercion but by embedding meaning systems that are accepted as natural and true. It is a form of power not recognized as such—precisely why it is acknowledged as legitimate (Bourdieu 1991, pp.23–24).

The application of symbolic violence involves tracing the processes by which social hierarchies become internalized and accepted as natural. Symbolic power is effective only insofar as it operates through the complicity of those who do not wish to recognize that they are subject to it, showing that domination works through a consciousness shaped to misrecognize power as imposition. This theoretical approach requires attention to language, education, ritual, and social habit as arenas in which domination is institutionalized and repeated until it becomes doxa—an unquestioned worldview (Bourdieu 2013, pp.164–171). Analytically, symbolic violence directs attention to the mechanisms of social reproduction: the ways discourse, moral norms, and value systems generate acceptance of existing hierarchies. As Bourdieu (1991, p.51) notes, the most successful ideological effects are those that require no words and demand only

silence as participation. Thus, the theory provides a framework for understanding power as something that works within consciousness, through habituation and belief, rather than merely through coercive structures.

Symbolic power manifests in the interaction among field, capital, and habitus. Each field or social arena possesses its own rules of the game, in which various forms of capital—economic, social, cultural, and symbolic—are mobilized to maintain or challenge dominant positions (Bourdieu 1991, p.14). When symbolic orders are continuously repeated and legitimized by institutions such as education, media, and culture, they form habitus—internalized dispositions that guide individuals to act in accordance with social order without coercion. Habitus functions as a structured structure predisposed to function as a structuring structure—a product of history that simultaneously reproduces that history. Symbolic violence thereby sustains social hierarchies by making them appear natural, even desirable.

If Scott's notion of legibility explains how states create order through a top-down gaze, and Bennett shows how citizens learn to see themselves within a state-organized visual order, Bourdieu clarifies how those structures of sight and knowledge are ultimately inhabited and internalized as social truth. Together, these frameworks outline a trajectory of modern power: from the production of administrative knowledge (legibility), to the shaping of public consciousness through aesthetics and morality (exhibitionary complex), to the reproduction of beliefs that sustain the existing order (symbolic violence). Through this combination, power emerges not only in laws or policies but in the ways people see, understand, and believe the world.

D. OVERVIEW OF LAOS

Laos is the only landlocked country in Southeast Asia and is characterized by low population density and highly uneven demographic distribution (Oktapia et al. 2024, pp.152–153; Kislenko 2009, p.5). Nearly one-third of its inhabitants reside along the Mekong River valley, particularly in major urban centers such as Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Savannakhet, and Pakse. The population is strikingly young, with approximately 45 percent under the age of fifteen, and the economy remains heavily dependent on agriculture, where most citizens engage in subsistence farming in small rural villages (LeBar & Suddard 1960, p.2; Rehbein 2007, p.5). Despite its relatively small population of around eight million, Laos is often misunderstood as a socially homogeneous nation. In reality, it is a deeply layered “anthropological mosaic,” shaped by uneven demographic settlement, diverse ecological zones, and long histories of interaction between lowland polities and upland communities.

The complexity of this mosaic is reflected in the extraordinary ethnic diversity of Laos, which scholars estimate to range from 47 to more than 160 ethnic groups (Kislenko 2009, pp.5–6; Schlemmer 2017, p.251). The government formally organizes this diversity into four major ethnolinguistic families: Lao-Tai (which includes the dominant Lao group), Mon-Khmer (such as the Khmu and Katang), Hmong-Mien (Miao-Yao), and Sino-Tibetan (such as the Akha and Lahu). Small non-indigenous communities—Chinese, Vietnamese, and Muslims—constitute a tiny fraction of the population, roughly 0.01 percent (Schlemmer 2017, p.253; Rehbein 2007, p.3). Yet such classification systems do not fully capture the dynamic processes through which ethnic identities evolve and interact. Unlike neighboring Vietnam with its strong Kinh dominance or Thailand under the Thai majority, “Laos” as an identity is a political construction continually negotiated among dozens of ethnic groups. Understanding Laos therefore requires

attention not only to who its people are, but where they live, for geography is central to the organization of ethnic life.

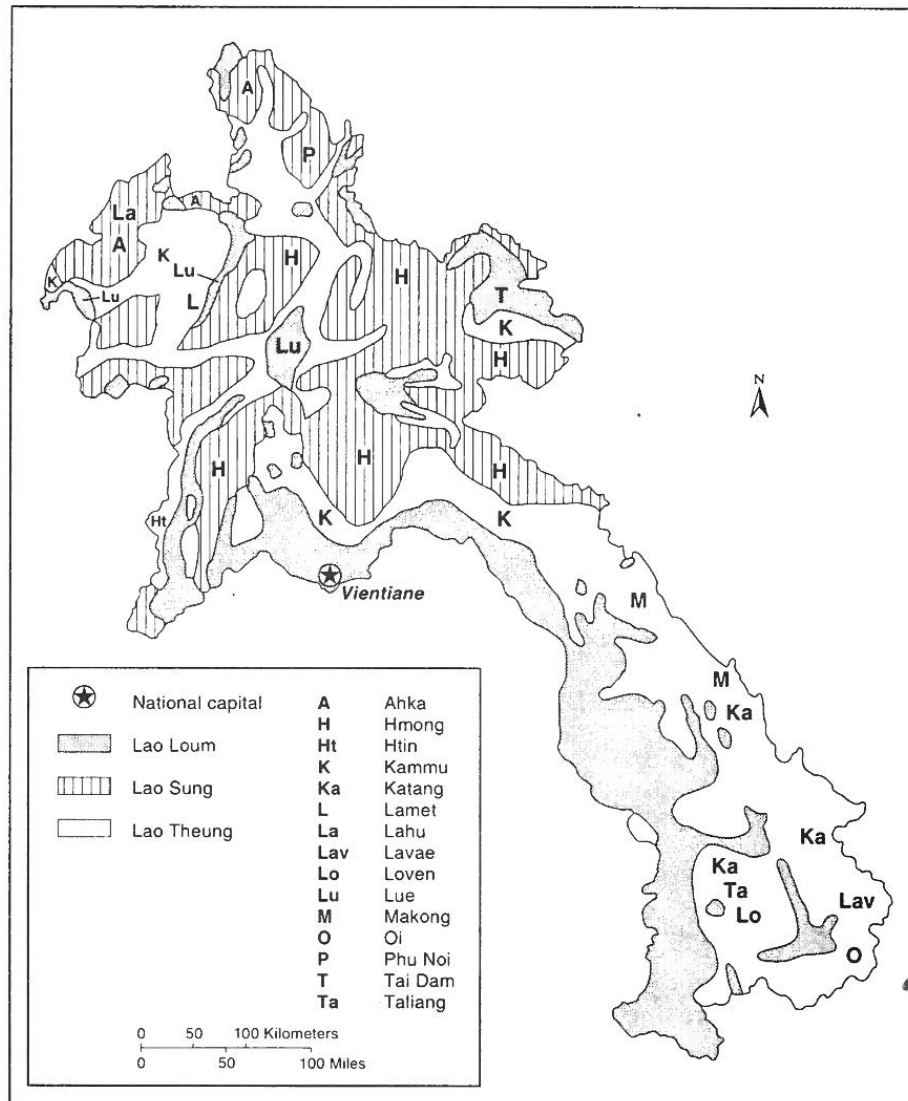


Figure 1. Map of the Distribution of Lao Loum, Lao Sung, and Lao Theung
Source: Ireson, 1995

This geographical dimension is crystallized in the tripartite administrative and political classification of Lao Loum (lowland Lao), Lao Theung (midland Lao), and Lao Sung (highland Lao) (Hours & Selim 1997, pp.53–54). Lao Loum constitute roughly 50–68 percent of the population and occupy the political and economic centers of the lowlands (Jusoh 2021, p.3). By contrast, Lao Theung and Lao Sung communities inhabit interior and mountainous regions, where geographical isolation has historically constrained their access to infrastructure and state services. As Martin Stuart-Fox notes, the history of Laos is fundamentally a history of relations between lowland societies that control the state and upland societies that control forest resources

(Stuart-Fox 1997, pp.6–9). The lowland–highland divide, corresponding to Lao Loum on one side and Lao Theung and Lao Soung on the other, thus forms the foundation—if not the political construction—of Lao national identity.

Religious life in Laos is dominated by Theravada Buddhism, practiced by about 60 percent of the population and deeply embedded in national identity (LeBar & Suddard 1960, p.5). Yet Lao Buddhism is inseparable from pre-Buddhist animistic cosmologies centered on spirits (*phi*). Core concepts such as the 32 body-protecting spirits (*khwan*) and ritual soul-calling ceremonies (*baci/soukhwan*) create a shared cultural repertoire that cuts across ethnic lines (Kislenko 2009, pp.57–58). Although the state formally recognizes religious freedom for Christian, Muslim, and Baha'i communities, religious activity remains closely monitored under the rubric of maintaining national stability (Oktapia et al. 2024, p.150). This fusion of Buddhist morality, animistic practices, and state oversight forms a key cultural and political axis of Lao social life.

Social hierarchy in Laos remains pronounced despite the country's socialist orientation. Status continues to be shaped by age, rank, and political influence. Historically, a significant social distance has existed between lowland Lao elites in urban centers and upland minority groups who often occupy the lower rungs of the social scale (Evans 2002, p.21). The term “Kha” (slave), traditionally used by lowlanders to refer to Lao Theung, reflects older hierarchies that the contemporary state seeks to erase through official narratives of multiethnic equality. Yet such discourses often obscure persistent inequalities rooted in geography, labor systems, and political authority.

Livelihood systems further highlight the ecological and cultural distinctions between lowland and upland populations. Lao-Tai communities in the lowlands typically practice wet-rice paddy agriculture, whereas upland groups have historically relied on swidden cultivation (slash-and-burn/hay), foraging, and hunting (Enfield 2024, p.280; Kenny-Lazar 2018, p.688). These ecological differences produced longstanding economic interdependencies: forest products from upland communities circulated through exchange with lowland market goods. However, this pattern has shifted sharply following state bans on swidden agriculture in the name of forest conservation and national development (Bouté 2017, pp.223–224). Such policies reveal how ecological diversity becomes entangled with governance, often at the expense of upland autonomy.

Cultural heritage in Laos is rich and materially expressive. Handicrafts and textiles—predominantly produced by women—serve as markers of status and ethnic identity (Ketavong 2003, pp.111–112; Lefferts Jr. 2003, p.90). Traditional music featuring the khene, as well as village festival cycles (*bun*), remain integral to rural communal life (Condominas 2003, p.21; Rattavong 2003, p.30; Pholsena 2006, pp.47–48). In northern regions, ancient bronze drums continue to symbolize high status among groups such as the Khmu (Simana & Preisig 2003, p.129). Yet cultural expression is increasingly shaped by development pressures and shifting economic landscapes, revealing tensions between heritage preservation and state-driven modernization.

Today, Laos is undergoing profound transformation as a result of aggressive development policies and foreign investment. The government has allocated more than one million hectares—approximately five percent of national territory—for rubber and timber concessions granted primarily to Vietnamese and Chinese investors (Kenny-Lazar 2018, p.680). This shift reflects a broader state vision to transform Laos into the “Battery of Southeast Asia,” a strategy based on hydropower expansion and industrial plantations (Baird & Shoemaker 2007). Such policies have

altered how the state perceives its rivers and tropical forests—not merely as sources of livelihood, spirituality, and social protection for local communities, but as reservoirs for national developmental ambition. The relocation of upland villages to roadside areas and lowlands for market integration (Schlemmer 2017, pp.273–274) is emblematic of this transformation. Beneath the gleaming narrative of modernization lies a darker reality: the systematic erosion of upland life-worlds, where the resources needed to sustain the state’s grand developmental vision—if not its aspirations—are extracted. As a result, many subsistence farmers are transformed into wage laborers, with severe consequences for the social structures and cultural resilience of minority communities.

E. ETHNIC CENSUSES AND CARTOGRAPHIES OF POWER: READING POPULATIONS, ORDERING THE NATION

From the French colonial period to the socialist era and into the present, the census has functioned as the most consequential instrument through which the state defines who counts as “the Lao people” and who is relegated to second-class or marginalized status. Drawing on colonial archives, Vathana Pholsena (2002, pp.172–176) demonstrates that the census served as a classificatory mechanism through which the French sought to render Lao populations legible. In this system, ethnic “Lao” and “Tai” were placed above the “Kha”—a term historically associated with slavery. Conducted between 1893 and 1953, colonial censuses organized the population according to topography, race, and moral hierarchies within a unified matrix of knowledge. Those inhabiting the mountains (the so-called Kha) were represented as uncivilized, while the Lao and Tai in the lowlands were imagined—through an evolutionary lens—as civilized and therefore more governable.

These hierarchical and unfounded classifications did not disappear after the end of French rule; instead, they were reformulated under the Royal Laos Government (RLG). Ethnic divisions were reorganized into the tripartite categories of Lao Loum (lowland Lao), Lao Theung (midland Lao), and Lao Soung (highland Lao), with Lao Loum portrayed as “civilized” and Buddhist, while highland groups were depicted as “wild” and “animist” (Pholsena 2002, pp.170–171). As Pholsena argues, this system was not merely a cultural taxonomy but a technology of power that “renders ethnic diversity readable and therefore governable.” Although the classification used from 1954 to 1975 underwent cosmetic changes, its substantive content continued to reproduce discriminatory logics inherited from the colonial period.

The transition from monarchy to socialism did little to transform these underlying structures. While the socialist state explicitly rejected the tripartite classification of the RLG and claimed to identify more than 820 ethnic groups later simplified into 49 official categories, this shift did not disrupt prior inequalities. Instead, modern Lao census practices reinforced ethnic marginalization by elevating Lao Loum as the “national” ethnicity—the normative standard of Lao identity. In the enumeration of 49+ ethnicities, “Lao” (Loum) effectively disappears through its transformation into a neutral national category, while the remaining 48+ groups are marked as “ethnic,” requiring management, guidance, or civilization.

James C. Scott’s concept of legibility in *Seeing Like a State* (1998, p.13) illuminates the workings of this dynamic. Scott argues that modern state power depends fundamentally on the capacity to “read” populations. Simplification, legibility, and manipulation operate in concert to make society visible to administrative authority. In Laos—a landlocked nation composed of vast upland and mountainous regions—this imperative becomes even more pronounced, for

populations residing in these areas have historically been difficult for the state to monitor. The uplands constitute an administrative “dark zone,” raising vernacular questions that challenge the reach of modern governance: Where do particular groups live? How many are they? Which languages do they speak? How can they be taxed? Such questions point to the epistemic burdens faced by the state, to which the census emerges as the primary solution—an attempt to render upland communities legible before they can be governed.

Scott contends that the central dilemma of all modern states is that social realities on the ground are excessively complex, chaotic, diverse, and “illegible” (quotation). In response, states produce categories, maps, and statistics that simplify the social world. Scott identifies two key strategies: first, the creation of simple, rigid, standardized administrative “grids”; and second, the imposition of these grids onto the messiness of lived reality. In Laos, the colonial triad of Lao Loum–Theung–Soung was not an ethnographic discovery but rather a deliberate racial hierarchy derived from nineteenth-century European pseudoscience designed to legitimize control and extraction. Postcolonial governance maintained this logic by reducing rich ethnolinguistic diversity into three ecological strata.

The same logic is evident when census officials reportedly identified over 820 ethnic groups in a single province (Pholsena 2006, p.161). Such vernacular complexity constituted an “unreadable” reality—820+ categories were not considered data but administrative chaos. Consequently, the state launched a project of radical simplification, reducing hundreds of ethnolinguistic groups to a list of 49. The elevation of Lao as the “national” standard was likewise not neutral; it reflected an alignment with lowland populations already deemed legible and “easier” for the state to engage. This illustrates Scott’s broader argument: when the state does not “find” facts that fit its grid, it will “create” facts that do.

The census, then, is not merely a technical or statistical tool; it is a moral device. By categorizing lowland Lao Loum as “civilized” and highland Lao Theung and Lao Soung as “backward,” census practices inscribe cultural hierarchies into the administrative order. Censuses do not simply count people; they organize them into frameworks of value, difference, and governability.

F. MUSEUMS, CULTURAL DISPLAY, AND THE VISUAL POLITICS OF NATIONAL BELONGING

Since the establishment of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic in 1975, the state has sought to craft a national identity capable of reconciling its colonial past and immense ethnic diversity. One of the most important instruments in this nation-building project has been the museum—a space through which the state can display the image of the nation, arrange ethnic difference, and shape national consciousness. In Laos, museums operate as part of what Tony Bennett (1995, pp.59–60) calls the exhibitionary complex: institutions that relocate objects from private domains into public space in order to broadcast the moral authority of the state. Whereas monarchical power once expressed itself through the grandeur of royal courts accessible only to a few, the modern Lao state employs museums to produce a visual infrastructure in which citizens become both spectators and subjects. Through spatial arrangements and curated narratives, museums do not merely present historical artifacts; they regulate public comportment in accordance with national morality and the pedagogical goals of the socialist regime.

If the census functions as an epistemic instrument that maps otherwise invisible ethnicities into numbers and categories (Pholsena 2002, p.175), museums and cultural festivals materialize

these categories within the public imagination. Since 1975, the state has guided citizens to “see themselves” in the way the state desires: diverse yet unified. This visual pedagogy forms a paradox of heritage promotion. Ethnic minorities are displayed as heritage assets—multicultural ornaments useful for tourism and cultural diplomacy—yet in this process they lose political agency. They are showcased, not engaged. Museum exhibitions and official parades often aestheticize and folklorize ethnic diversity—through costumes, dances, and handicrafts that have been depoliticized and sanitized (Schlemmer 2017, p.269; Pholsena 2006, p.12). Practices deemed “superstitious” or “backward” are systematically removed from the public narrative (Stuart-Fox 1998, p.161; Evans 1993, p.135; Pholsena 2006, p.71). What remains are curated differences that conform to the moral order of Buddhist socialism.

Museums thus organize cultural objects into an evolutionary sequence, positioning minority ethnicities as the historical roots whose culmination is the modern Lao Buddhist identity (Bennett 1995, pp.95–96). The Ethnographic Museum in Vientiane exemplifies this logic, arranging its galleries from “traditional” upland groups to lowland Lao Buddhist culture as the apex of spiritual and civilizational progress. Through this visual architecture, heterogeneous and fluid cultural worlds are transformed into a neatly ordered ethnic landscape—fixed, stable, and administratively manageable. Even in national festivals, minority costumes and dances appear as cultural spectacles rather than living expressions. This process renders difference aesthetically pleasing while stripping it of political content. It converts ethnic plurality into a decorative tableau that affirms the unity of the nation without disturbing its hierarchical foundations.



Figure 2. Collections of the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre in Laos

Source: Moyo, 2025

Objectification of minority cultures within these institutions produces what has often been described as “museumification” or “touristification,” whereby ethnic identities are commodified for international tourism and state legitimacy (Bradley 2003, p.66; Trankell 1999, p.199). In such

representational regimes, minorities become neutralized cultural items that simply “add color” to the national narrative. The Lao Loum remain at the cultural center, while other groups appear as ornamental elements that embellish, but do not challenge, the national aesthetic. Representation here functions not as recognition but as containment. Through museums and festivals, the state disciplines how citizens are expected to perceive ethnic difference—what Bennett (1988, p.82; 1995, p.68) identifies as governance through vision.

Institutions such as the Lao National Museum and the Kaysone Phomvihane Memorial Museum reinforce these visual hierarchies by juxtaposing socialist iconography with traditional motifs such as stupas (Evans 2002, pp.208–209). These syntheses replace older revolutionary symbols with a new repertoire that legitimizes the state through claims to historical continuity and multiethnic harmony. This architecture of seeing encapsulates the broader political project: ethnicity becomes the visual architecture of modernity, and the nation appears plural while ensuring that diversity aligns with the image of Buddhist socialism. This is governance through sensation and perception. By making difference appear beautiful, the state converts hierarchy into harmony—though such harmony remains choreographed rather than structural, masking the material inequalities that upland communities continue to face, particularly in terms of land access and political representation.

G. DEVELOPMENT, RELOCATION, AND THE MORALITIES OF MODERNITY

Contemporary Laos has realized its long-promoted vision of becoming the region’s major energy producer, widely celebrated under the slogan “Battery of Southeast Asia.” This label is readily encountered across online sources identifying Laos as the largest electricity exporter in mainland Southeast Asia. The title derives from the country’s extensive hydropower potential, particularly along the Xekong River—one of the most significant tributaries of the Mekong and among the most powerful waterways in Southeast Asia (Baird & Shoemaker 2007, pp.1–2). Hydropower generation enables Laos to export electricity to neighboring states such as Thailand, Vietnam, and Singapore, thereby contributing substantially to national revenue. This developmental aspiration is driven by large-scale hydropower projects that position Laos as a key provider of renewable energy within ASEAN.

As this national vision has taken shape, however, the Mekong and its tributaries—such as the Xekong—are no longer viewed primarily as spiritual and ecological life-systems. Instead, they have been reframed as hydraulic infrastructures whose value lies in the volume of water that can be converted into exportable electricity. Likewise, the ancient primary forests of the uplands—long recognized as homelands of diverse ethnic minority communities—have been remapped into rubber concessions and logging zones designed to bolster state revenue. A closer look at these “development” projects, especially hydropower dams and the massive expansion of monoculture plantations, reveals that what is at stake extends far beyond the loss of physical land. Beneath these processes operates a subtler but more destructive mechanism: a systematic delegitimization, if not erasure, of upland Indigenous communities, many of whom belong to Laos’s minority ethnic groups.

This delegitimization does not unfold through overt violence or direct expulsion. Instead, the state mobilizes nationalist narratives of “poverty alleviation” and “agricultural stabilization” to justify intervention (Baird & Shoemaker 2007, pp.5–6). Central to this discourse is the stigmatization of swidden agriculture—an Indigenous practice of forest stewardship—as primitive, environmentally destructive, and backward. Read through Pierre Bourdieu’s (1991)

framework, such strategies constitute symbolic violence: a subtle, invisible form of domination that operates with the consent, or at least the misrecognition, of those who are subordinated. In Laos, symbolic violence manifests through the state's monopoly over defining what counts as "progress" and what signifies "backwardness."

As Bourdieu explains in "Rethinking the State" (1994), the state possesses a kind of "magical power" to produce and impose social categories. In the Lao context, this power becomes palpable in the labeling of swidden agriculture as a social pathology. Through such classificatory mechanisms, the state transforms upland farmers—historically protectors of forested landscapes—into trespassers and encroachers. This dynamic aligns with Vandergeest & Peluso's (1995, pp.387–388) analysis of state territorialization, wherein forestry maps and zoning become instruments of symbolic violence capable of severing communities from their lifeworlds. As a result, upland ethnic groups face criminalization of practices they have sustained for centuries. Their systems of cultivation are abruptly redefined as illegal not because their behavior has changed, but because the state's political definitions have shifted. Here, to borrow Bourdieu's phrasing, the state imposes new moral categories onto land long governed by indigenous norms (Dove 1983, p.98).

Once these categories are successfully imposed, the state can orchestrate "voluntary" relocation. Such relocations facilitate hydropower megaprojects and expansive rubber concessions. Evrard & Goudineau (2004, p.942) describe these movements as responses to structural pressures engineered by the state, which renders life in the uplands increasingly untenable. The resulting "voluntariness" is an illusion generated by symbolic violence: upland communities internalize state-produced stigmas depicting their lifeworlds as backward and unproductive (Rigg 2012, p.120). Consequently, the surrender of ancestral forests for rubber plantations is often not perceived as defeat but rather as an entry point into modernity. This demonstrates that the state has mastered the psychological terrain of its citizens long before it physically transforms the terrain of the forests.

H. CONCLUSION: ETHNICITY AS STATECRAFT IN CONTEMPORARY LAOS

Across the various domains examined in this article—administrative classification, cultural representation, and developmental intervention—ethnicity in Laos emerges not as a neutral social fact but as a key infrastructure of statecraft. The enduring tripartite division of Lao Loum, Lao Theung, and Lao Sung exemplifies how classificatory regimes, inherited from the colonial era, continue to shape the epistemic and political architecture of the socialist state. These categories operate simultaneously as tools of simplification in James C. Scott's sense and as hierarchizing devices that sustain the moral distinction between civilized lowlanders and backward uplanders. In this way, ethnic classification becomes a technology of rule that enables the state to render populations governable while legitimizing unequal distributions of recognition, resources, and political authority.

The visual apparatuses of Lao nationalism—museums, exhibitions, and cultural festivals—extend this classificatory logic into aesthetic and moral domains. Through what Tony Bennett terms the exhibitionary complex, the state curates a vision of harmonious multiculturalism that masks deep structural inequalities. Museum displays and festival performances organize ethnic minorities into evolutionary sequences that culminate in Lao Buddhist modernity, producing an aesthetic of unity that is choreographed rather than organic. These visual regimes, by speaking "to the eye and through the eye to the soul," cultivate a disciplined public consciousness in which

diversity is celebrated as spectacle but neutralized as political force. Ethnicity is thus simultaneously displayed and domesticated, rendered beautiful precisely by being stripped of its contestatory potential.

Material interventions in the form of hydropower expansion, land concessions, and upland relocations give concrete expression to the symbolic hierarchies embedded in classification and representation. Developmental policies justified under the idioms of modernization, poverty alleviation, and agricultural stabilization enact what Pierre Bourdieu identifies as symbolic violence: the imposition of state-sanctioned definitions of progress and backwardness that upland communities come to internalize. Through territorialization, zoning, and the criminalization of swidden agriculture, the state transforms long-standing Indigenous land-use practices into forms of illegality, while promoting “voluntary” relocation as a gateway to national prosperity. These interventions demonstrate the continuity between administrative legibility, visual governance, and developmental dispossession. Together, they reveal a state that governs not only bodies and lands but also imaginaries, producing a political order in which the appearance of ethnic harmony rests upon invisible forms of coercion.

I. REFLECTION: TOWARD A CRITICAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF GOVERNABLE DIVERSITY

This study underscores the importance of approaching ethnic diversity in Laos not simply as social variation but as a field of political production shaped by intertwined epistemic, aesthetic, and material practices. The Lao state’s capacity to classify, display, and reorganize its populations rests on a historically sedimented interplay of colonial legacies and contemporary socialist governance, revealing how power operates through the very categories and representations that appear neutral. A reflexive anthropological stance is therefore essential—one attuned to the silences, exclusions, and forms of misrecognition that accompany state-produced narratives of harmony. By foregrounding these dynamics, the analysis invites scholars and practitioners to question not only how difference is governed, but also how alternative modes of knowledge and belonging might unsettle the moral economies of modernity that continue to shape life in upland Southeast Asia.

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