Political Geography 46 (2015) 54–64

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Political Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/polgeo

Translocal assemblages and the circulation of the concept of "indigenous peoples" in Laos

Ian G. Baird*

Department of Geography, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 550 North Park St., Madison, WI 53706-1493, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online

Keywords:
Indigeneity
Indigenous peoples
Ethnicity
Laos
Translocal
Assemblages

ABSTRACT

Laos has long been recognized as a country with a high level of ethnic diversity. At present, the government of Laos recognizes 49 ethnic groups and over 160 sub-groups. Over the last couple of decades the modern concept of "indigenous peoples" has been introduced in Laos, albeit unevenly, partially, and in a quite limited way. The three broadly defined groups that have played important roles in variously promoting the concept of indigenous peoples (*xon phao pheun meuang*) in Laos are non-governmental organizations (NGOs), multilateral banks (the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank), and United Nations organizations. In this article I employ the analytic of translocal assemblages to examine the ways that the concept of indigeneity is circulating in Laos, and drawing on international and local influences. I briefly examine two issues frequently linked to the indigenous politics: communal land titling and bilingual education, and assess the extent to which new indigenous identities are being adopted in Laos. I present an example of how a Hmong group in the USA with links to Laos is constructing translocal assemblages through an indigenous peoples framework in order to resist the government in Laos. Unlike some other countries in Southeast Asia, which have increasingly embraced the concept, the government of Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) has not, preferring instead to acknowledge ethnic diversity, but within a framework that recognizes all ethnic groups as equal.

Introduction

Europeans started using the term "indigenous" to refer to people in Laos long ago. After the takeover of what would become French Laos at the end of the 19th century, the French called local soldiers recruited to the colonial military *La Garde indigène de l'Indochine*.[1] The French applied the term to divide the colonizers from the colonized, a particular variety of racialization well-known from postcolonial studies (Sidaway, Woon, & Jacobs, 2014). However, not all of the colonized peoples of Indochina were referred to as indigenous by the French. Indeed, over time there were various other categories developed for different groups of people, depending on their origin, place of residence, and position (Goscha, 2009).

When the Americans took a significant role in Laos, from the mid-1950s until 1975, the term indigenous continued to be applied. A former employee of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) who worked in Laos up until 1975 told me that he was responsible for assisting "key indigenous people" to leave Laos at the time the government was falling to the communist Pathet Lao. The term referred to all people originally from Laos, regardless of ethnicity. The important thing was separating those originating in Laos from Americans or people from other countries.[2]

Over the last few decades, however, since the 1970s and 1980s, new concepts of indigeneity have emerged and become popularized in Asia, ones that differentiate based on ethnicity, are frequently associated with "first" or "original" peoples (and thus with space), and are linked to emancipatory political objectives associated with assisting oppressed peoples; not only those colonized by Europeans, but also others subjected to various forms of domination by Asians living in close proximity. This new kind of indigeneity has made in-roads, with some governments in Asia having adopted the concept since the 1990s, including the Philippines, Japan, Taiwan and Cambodia (Baird, 2011b; Erni, 2008; IWGIA, 2013; Theriault, 2011). Social movements advocating for indigenous rights have also gained varying degrees of momentum in other countries in Asia, including Indonesia, Thailand, Bangladesh, Nepal and India (Bertrand, 2011; Gerharz, 2012; Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009; Leepreecha, McCaskill, & Buadaeng, 2008; Li, 2000; Shah, 2010). The concept of indigeneity has also gained increased traction elsewhere, including parts of Africa

* Tel.: +1 608 265 0012; fax: +1 608 265 3991.
E-mail address: ibaird@wisc.edu.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2014.12.001
0962-6298/

(Niezen, 2003; Pelican, 2009, 2013). Anthropologist Francesca Merlan (2009: 304) has made a significant contribution through writing about what she calls the "internationalization of indigeneity", demonstrating its increasing importance, and arguing that its impetus has come from liberal democratic "political cultures".

Although neither the present government of Laos (GoL) nor any previous government in the country has ever recognized this new idea of "indigenous peoples", the concept has, nonetheless, spread, albeit unevenly and in limited ways. Although being indigenous certainly does not mean the same thing to everyone in Laos, it is generally understood by scholars as not simply ontologically separating people originating within the territorial boundaries of Laos from others; but with dividing them in particular ways within the territorial confines of the nation state based on ethnicity. This new identity conceptualization also challenges the state's own ways of categorizing its citizens by presenting an alternative vision based on the principle of self-identification; people are supposed to be able to take control of the power of categorization, of the political geography. At least that is the spirit of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), adopted by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly on 13 September2007[3] (Crawhall, 2011; Erni, 2008; Marschke, Szablowski, & Vandergeest, 2008), with the GoL as a signatory. Although the UN has not come up with an official definition for "indigenous peoples"—thus leading to various interpretations—the main criteria used for consideration are self-determination, having a long and frequently pre-colonial history of occupying a particular space, and being from a "non-dominant" group (United Nations, n.d.).

In any case, even amongst those who have long understood the term indigenous as being fundamentally associated with dividing people based on ethnicity, new conceptualizations have emerged. While it is not infrequent for people to understand indigenous as referring to first peoples, indigenous rights activists are increasingly envisioning indigenous peoples as colonized peoples, in the sense that they have historically been dominated by other ethnic groups (Anaya, 2004; Baird, 2008, 2011b; Erni, 2008; Gray, 1995; Niezen, 2003). This makes it possible for relatively recent migrants to particular nation states—such as the Hmong in Thailand and Laos—to detach themselves from spatial essentialisms and claim to be indigenous, since they can argue that they came to Laos and Thailand within the last 200 years due to being oppressed by the Han in China (see CWHP, 2008). They have always been under the control of others, thus meeting the criteria for this mode of defining indigeneity.

Mark Jackson (2014) has cautioned that attempts to decolonize categories often unwittingly (re)produce Eurocentric and colonialist ontologies of culture and nature. While this is true, indigenous activism continues to take place-based claims seriously, and in certain ways struggles are intensely local. Although this might seem like a contradiction, Noel Castree (2004) has pointed out that indigenous movements are frequently both extroverted, in the sense of their global advocacy reach and increasingly mobility, and also introverted in so far as special value is often put on particular places.

Although the question of indigeneity has most frequently been addressed by anthropologists, geographers—especially political geographers—have much to contribute to understanding the ways indigeneity is developing and proliferating in particular times and spaces, and how multiple struggles at different locations are linking up politically. As Castree (2004: 152) observes,

> "[W]hat is interesting about indigenism from a geographical perspective is that the project to (re)appropriate certain places is being pursued through a set of *translocal* [my emphasis] initiatives that involve both indigenous and non-indigenous peoples and institutions."

Some geographers, such as Eudaily and Smith (2008), Coombes, Johnson, and Howitt (2012a, b), Anthias and Radcliffe (2013), Egan and Place (2013), and Zimmerer (2013) have examined "indigenous geographies". Not surprisingly, these authors have focused on the intersection between indigenous identities, rights and nature-society relations, including indigenous environmentalism, natural resource management, political ecology, environmental governance, and land claims. Some have considered the strategies and approaches that particular indigenous peoples have adopted, being attentive to postcolonial approaches. Another group of geographers have recently investigated "indigeneity and ontology", focusing on forms of knowledge and decolonization processes within geography (see Blaser, 2014; Cameron, de Leeuw, & Desbiens, 2014; Hunt, 2014). While the above work is valuable, I contend that there are other important aspects of indigenous geographies that remain relatively unexamined. Crucially, the above research comes from the perspectives of scholars working primarily with indigenous peoples in spaces with high levels of European settler colonization, namely in North, Central and South America and Australia and New Zealand. It remains easier—albeit certainly not uncomplicated—in those European colonized spaces to conceptualize who is "indigenous", since the term essentially divides European settlers and their descendants from those who lived on the land before their arrival.

Asia, however, requires that we shift approaches, as European settler colonization was not nearly as prevalent there, thus creating different dynamics and divergent indigenous geographies. My perspective is well-aligned with Sidaway et al.'s (2014) recent engagement with what they call "planetary indigeneity", which focuses more on the international proliferation of the concept of indigeneity, and conceptually links indigeneity to postcolonial studies. In line with this, it should be of little surprise that it is frequently impossible to identify someone as indigenous in Asia based on 'race' (physical characteristics or skin color). In Asia, the fundamental question that governments, civil society organizations, and activists ask is "Who is Indigenous, and how can we determine who is?"[4] Even if the UN emphasizes self-determination, governments want to establish boundaries for defining who is indigenous and who is not, since the whole political concept of indigeneity is based on ethnic difference and division (Baird, 2011b; 2013).

When trying to strengthen their position, indigenous activists often apply 'strategic essentialisms'—many with geography at their core—in order to protect threatened lands and resources (Castree, 2004). However, the question of who is indigenous and how we determine this, within an Asian context, has been referred to by Kingsbury (1999) as the "Asian controversy", since such categorization is frequently difficult to negotiate. The circumstances in Asia coincide well with what is unfolding in parts of Africa, where there has also been controversy in determining who is indigenous, and what the significance of being indigenous should be (Cornwell & Atia, 2012; Crawhall, 2011; Niezen, 2003; Pelican, 2009, 2013; Watts, 1999). Kuper (2003) has also challenged the adoption of indigenous identities globally, including in North America, questioning the desirability of the types of representations and Othering processes inevitably linked to indigenous movements. These ideas are important for my own work, as I too believe that we need to be cognizant of the potentially unintended consequences associated with constructing new essentialized categories to replace old ones.

I am particularly interested in considering how indigeneity—conceptualized as a variously translocal movement (see Castree, 2004; Dirlik, 2003; Gerharz, 2012; McFarlane, 2009, 2011),