



Stephanie Phetsamay Stobbe

Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding in Laos: Perspective for Today's World

London: Routledge, 2015, ISBN 978 1 138 774766, 180p.

Over the last two decades, locally-driven peacebuilding activity has been promoted in many post-conflict societies as an alternative to mainstream liberal peacebuilding models. Yet, although local ownership has been extensively advocated and justified from normative and ethical perspectives, few empirical studies have been conducted on the nature of these local forms of conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Many fundamental questions about local models have therefore remained virtually unexplored. These include questions about what traditional resources might be available for peaceful conflict resolution and how they might differ from Western peacebuilding models in terms of their forms, operational principles, and methods of facilitation. Questions need to be asked about whether traditional strategies are really more effective than existing liberal models, and about how grassroots actors in conflict-affected societies can develop their own peacebuilding models when they may be subject to substantial international intervention and influences.

Given that these questions have been neglected, Stephanie Phetsamay Stobbe's *Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding in Laos* represents a welcome addition to the ongoing debate about local models of peacebuilding. As far as I am aware, this is the first publication that extensively describes and analyses traditional or indigenous forms of conflict resolution in Laos. Drawing on the author's own experience as well as primary data collected during Phetsamay Stobbe's field research, this book provides a significant amount of original data that has not yet been disseminated in published form.

The volume consists of two distinct sections. The first five chapters describe the concepts, forms, procedures, and key actors involved in traditional modes of conflict resolution in local areas of Laos. An overview of the relevant social, cultural, and historical backgrounds is provided in Chapter One. Chapter Two then explains the significance of two metaphorical concepts—*face* and *eyes*—which underpin how conflicts (*bunha*) are dealt with in Laos. Whereas “face” denotes a person's public self-image, “eyes” express inner shame or guilt. It becomes clear that the various forms of conflict resolution used in Laos are focused on ensuring that people do not lose either face or eyes.

The volume's third and fourth chapters explain the specific forms and procedures of Lao conflict resolution. *Op-lom* is described as a type of dialogue which offers “a place for educating, advising, talking, discussing, questioning, [and] clarifying” (p. 101) things that relate to the conflict under review, and it emerges as the fundamental form of the Lao conflict resolution system. The system consists of five levels of mediation that are facilitated at different levels by parents and relatives, community elders, village leaders, *Neoy Gai Geer* (an official mediation committee), and the courts. Two traditional rituals are also used to celebrate and reconfirm reconciliation between individuals, families, or communities. *Soukhouan* is a public ceremony which involves the participation of a large number of families, relatives, and community residents, whereas *soumma* is a smaller, private, and family-oriented ritual. In Chapter Five, Phetsamay Stobbe describes how these conflict resolution practices are applied in cross-cultural contexts; she also notes that many microcultures which contribute to the creation of mutual respect between different cultural groups are being developed under existing conflict resolution mechanisms like *soukhouan*.

The highly interesting and insightful discussions in Section One clarify the ways in which key features of the Laotian conflict resolution system are distinct from liberal forms of mediation in Western societies; the book also shows how these distinctive strategies are being utilised to achieve local-level conflict resolution. Phetsamay Stobbe's discussion about avoidance as a means for conflict resolution is particularly insightful. In many previous discussions, conflict avoidance has gone unrecognised as a type of “action” or has featured in negative ways.



Here, the author asserts that avoidance is a “powerful force” in the Lao context because it helps prevent any “further loss of face and eyes” and helps maintain “social harmony” (p. 39).

The volume’s final two chapters, which form Section Two, attempt to re-examine and understand Lao conflict resolution mechanisms by drawing on comparative and theoretical perspectives. Whereas Chapter Six revisits the features of Laos’ conflict resolution systems by redefining them as bottom-up initiatives generated from the grassroots, Chapter Seven highlights ten tenets or virtues that enable the Lao people to facilitate more effective conflict resolution processes. These chapters are slightly less effective than earlier ones for several reasons. The comparative analysis in Chapter Six could have been presented in a slightly more organised way, for example. The author compares post-conflict social conditions in Laos and Lebanon in order to make the case that sustainable and consolidated peace can best be facilitated by grass-roots actors in a conflict-affected society, but she fails to offer any substantial explanation as to how or why grass-roots groups can facilitate such mechanisms more effectively than other groups. The book also fails to identify the key factors that enable Lao people to develop bottom-up initiatives for conflict resolution while their counterparts in the Lebanon struggle to do the same. Although highly interesting examples are introduced that show how indigenous traditions are being used for conflict resolution in New Zealand and Canada, it is not made clear what these case studies can teach us about Laos or vice versa.

Chapter Seven develops its arguments by assuming that the Lao conflict resolution mechanism proves that a local, community-oriented conflict resolution system can be both robust and resilient and can make a solid contribution to consolidating peace in conflict-affected societies. However, no substantial evidence is provided to show that Laotian society has become more peaceful as a result of the conflict resolution systems that exist in that country. The value of this new publication is not compromised by these minor issues, however.

An outstanding feature of Phetsamay Stobbe’s volume is its originality. It presents many features of the Laotian conflict resolution system that have not previously been analysed by academics. These include the country’s multi-layered local mediation structure, the constructive roles it gives to biased mediation and non-verbal forms of conflict resolution, and the arbitrational nature of mediators’ roles. The volume provides invaluable data about Laotian cultural resources and practices, and it will also serve as an important foundation for further comparative studies. Conflict resolution processes in other Indo-Chinese countries like Cambodia, Myanmar, and Thailand share many similarities and precepts with those outlined here, but there are significant differences in the detail of their forms and procedures which might be fruitfully explored further.

Another strength of this volume is the effective presentation of the rich data that Phetsamay Stobbe has collected. The cultural nuances that lie behind different forms and rituals of conflict resolution are often difficult to explain logically, and many researchers struggle to capture important subtleties. This volume successfully overcomes many of the limitations of academic studies by drawing on real examples and folktales from local communities in Laos. The book is highly effective in the way it explores concepts by first presenting a story or real example of a dispute, then analysing relevant features of the Laotian conflict resolution process, and finally explaining how such features are reflected in the example. A highly valuable body of research is presented here in clear and insightful ways, and Phetsamay Stobbe’s book is sure to be widely used as a significant resource for both academics and practitioners in the field of conflict resolution.

SungYong Lee

*National Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies
University of Otago,
New Zealand*