
**A Woman of Merit:
Building the Silk Road of Lao Peoples Democratic Republic through
Space and Time**

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ABSTRACT

A long silk road travels through both time and space in Lao Peoples Democratic Republic (PDR). It is not a road of camels and sand, rather it winds through the open planes of Phongsavan and finds its way to Vientiane and Luang Prabang where the Lao silks are brought to market. The road also spans the life of a little known Lao heroine by the name of Mrs. Kommaly Chanthavong. It has been said that her life is the story of Lao, holding a turbulent past and an emerging more hopeful future. Mrs. Kommaly Chanthavong's story offers something new for socioeconomic development, specifically the concept of solicitude. Solicitude is the mutual exchange of self-esteem and self-respect among human beings. The challenge of this exchange is to bring together the elements of personal and collaborative identity, relationship, and a commercial market in the practical expression of a just livelihood. The process of development within this orientation takes into account the availability of current resources—both human and material. In such an account resides the most powerful resource, namely the human imagination. Over time and in a space of imagination, Mrs. Kommaly Chanthavong brought forth, with her workers, a silk farm that produces high quality products that find their way to the tourist markets in Lao PDR and into the United States (U.S.). Mrs. Kommaly Chanthavong stands as one pristine example of ways development can bring both local Lao communities and, in turn, local communities of other nations, into new relationships. In this case, exquisite silks pave a road that moves beyond the borders of Lao PDR.

Key Words: *Lao PDR solicitude, socioeconomic development, identity, imagination*

Introduction: Lao's Silk Road

A long and winding silk road travels through both through time and space in Lao Peoples Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). It is not a road of camels and sand like the old road that goes from ancient Levant across central Asia and winds its way to China. Rather the Lao silk road is an imaginary road that finds its way across the open planes of Phongsavan, travels to Ziengkhouang, where a unique silk farm is located, and eventually goes to Vientiane and Luang Prabang, where the Lao silks are brought to market. Moreover, this silk road traverses the history of Lao PDR spanning the life of a little known Lao heroine by the name of Mrs. Kommaly Chanthavong.

It is said that her life is the story of Lao PDR, holding both a turbulent past and an emerging, more hopeful, future. Understanding Mrs. Kommaly Chanthavong's story offers something new for the analysis of socioeconomic development, specifically the concept of solicitude. Solicitude is the mutual exchange of self-esteem and self-respect among human beings (Ricoeur 1992 p.171). The challenge of this exchange is to bring together the elements of both a personal and collaborative identity, relationship, and a commercial market in the practical expression of a just livelihood. To achieve this just livelihood we can consider the words of Paul Ricoeur (1992 p.180) who describes the ethical aim of life as living a good life or "living by and for others in just institutions". Paul Ricoeur goes on to explain in his "little ethic" entitled "*Oneself as Another*" that it is friendship that guides the relations between persons who know each other, solicitude that guides relations between oneself and another, and just institutions that guide human societies. The process of socioeconomic development within this orientation takes into account the availability of current resources—both human and material. In such an account resides the most powerful resource, namely the human imagination. Over time and in a space of imagination, Mrs. Kommaly Chanthavong brought forth with her workers a silk farm that produces high quality products that find their way to the tourist markets in Lao PDR and into international markets as far ranging as the United States, Canada, and Australia. Mrs. Kommaly Chanthavong stands as one pristine example of a way development can bring both local Lao communities and, in turn, local communities of other nations into new relationships. In this case, exquisite Lao silks and Hmong handicrafts pave a road that moves beyond the borders of Lao PDR and teach a lesson about socioeconomic development linked to identity that is pertinent to all involved in the Development act (Herda 2010 p.129).

A look at socioeconomic change within developing countries, such as Lao PDR, can be viewed in terms of statistical data and in terms of how people relate to each other when they are working toward changing the economic status of themselves and others in their community. Escobar (1995), Rao and Watson (2002) and Rigg (1995) are among developers who place culture at the center of social change. Ricoeur (1995) and Herda (2007; 2010) go further than placing culture as central to development in that

they bring the concept of identity into play. In moving in this direction, an ontological orientation takes precedence over a quantitative approach, in other words, an epistemological tradition. In drawing from an ontological orientation, a primary concept is solicitude, that in turn relies on meaning, community relationships and identity to be used in the application of a model of development.

In this paper, I explore one example of development practice in Lao PDR that relies on the concept of solicitude as an essential for thinking about socioeconomic development as revealed through an ontological lens. This view will focus, as indicated above, on questions of meaning, community relationships, and identity rather than the more technical aspects of socioeconomic development. The argument that solicitude is an essential element in the development act (Herda 2010 p.129) begins with a discussion of the paradox of socioeconomic development as progress more often exemplified by modernization. The story of Mrs. Kommaly Chanthavong, and the development of three enterprises; CAMA Craft Mulberry Silks, and Sericulture Inc. shows how the idea of solicitude brings together both a personal and a collaborative identity, imagination, and material goods for exchange on an open market. Thusly, Mrs. Kommaly Chanthavang creates the conditions for a way to move the country toward a more pluristic national identity. An imagined political community (Benedict 1991) that is pluristic in nature can in turn open new possibilities for the belonging of local communities previously excluded.

Elements for this paper are taken from a larger piece of research entitled *“Interpreting the aporia of development as a community on the way: the voice of experience in Lao People’s Democratic Republic* (Dzubur 2006). This larger piece of research explored the question of what is essential to socioeconomic development from an ontological perspective by talking with people involved in the development act (Herda 2010 p.129), exploring their current thinking about the nature of poverty, governance, culture, and the ruptures of identity that can occur given the rapid pace of change that comes with modernization.

The Aporia of Socioeconomic Development

Globalization has spawned a world wide polemic concerning international socioeconomic development. People are asking what is the meaning of progress and is socioeconomic development work doing any good? I posit it is important to consider both what is created and what is lost in socioeconomic development work to more deeply explore the questions posed here.

In Lao PDR more than 25 percent of people live on less than one dollar per day and approximately two thirds of the population live without sanitary facilities or clean water. Lao PDR stands at a precipitous moment in history as the country is opening up

to socioeconomic development. My wager is that when we ask is socioeconomic development work doing any good it is important to think of development as a process or movement toward something I reference as “a community on the way” (Dzubur 2006). More specifically, a community that is “on the way” has the power to create an narrative identity that can bring together otherwise divergent groups. These excluded groups are often the poor sometimes referred to as “the little people”. Progress then becomes “moving the *wong cilik* and *khon lek*, the little people who make the world what it is” (Rigg 1997: xvii) toward a better life, rather than the more conventional definition of progress as modernization. Therefore, socioeconomic development is about someone(s), who tells a story, that reveals a narrative identity. It is this narrative identity that constitutes, remembers, and reimagines a communal story that creates the opportunity for belonging.

In addition, the research indicates that it is important that the relationship between those who are working and those who are receiving development assistance moves from a relationship of advocacy, which reflects power, to a relationship of solicitude which reflects love of another worthy human being that is capable of acting on their own behalf. Ideas of progress from this ontological view reveal an essential new understanding of socioeconomic development as a project concerned with a human being’s personal and collective identity, where both the past and the future must be successfully traversed and we understand that we make a choice to live together.

The more conventional view of socioeconomic development uses the construct of modernization. Winston Churchill (1906 p. 268) was early in noting our human development problem at the turn of the 20th century when he wrote, “The great victories had been won. All sorts of lumbering tyrannies had been toppled over. Authority was everywhere broken. Slaves were free. Conscience was free. Trade was free. But hunger and squalor were also free and people demanded something more than liberty.”

Globalization is linked to theories of development as modernization and emphasizes the importance of economic development as something that is more than liberty. Bhagwati (2004 p.54) writes, “In short, my advice - what I might call with some immodesty the Bhagwati hypothesis and prescription - was that growth had to be the principal strategy.” Paradoxically, many experts across disciplines describe the record of development as modernization or economic growth as mixed (Rigg 1997; Sharma 2003; Sen 1999). Sharma (2003 p.64) notes that despite recent increases in foreign aid, monetary aid levels remain low relative to need, and current trade barriers actually discourage development.

Yet the international development community’s call to end poverty represents one of the most important challenges of the new century (Sachs 2005 p.24). Complicating the fact that more than 40 percent of the world’s population lives in

extreme poverty is that people who live a more traditional life now also have the opportunity to interpret their life as poor. The world is global not just from an economic perspective but from a communications standpoint as well. Satellite communication systems, televisions, cell phones, and computers with social networking transmit ideas to the most isolated communities. Bhagwati (2004 p.53) writes “What the Internet and CNN have done is to take Hume’s outermost circle and turn it into the innermost.” In my own travels in Lao PDR I have met people who are without clean water but share a car battery attached to a television, and together the people watch modern Thai television broadcasts. To conclude this discussion of the puzzle of socioeconomic development, I would point out that although it is difficult to identify even one human indicator that has not improved during the course of modernization (Rigg 1997 p.279), it is also important to recognize the many complex social problems that result from rapid modernization such as: destruction of the environment, the exploitation of vulnerable groups, the trafficking in human beings, the abuse of power, and the potential for the loss of culture. Even Bhagwati, a leading proponent of free trade, agrees that it is important to “give globalization a human face” (Bhagwati 2004 p. 31).

In September of 2000 an international summit was held in Monterrey, Mexico. Their participants developed the Millennium Declaration which was later broken down into seven and then eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The promise of Monterrey was to reduce extreme poverty by 50 percent by the year 2015. To date globalization has not kept pace with the promise of Monterrey (Stiglitz 2002 p.23), and Jonathan Rigg (Rigg 1997 p.3) correctly state that despite the billions of dollars spent on development by international aid organizations, non-governmental organizations, the International Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), socioeconomic development continues to be for many as if, “chasing the wind”.

Lao PDR Today

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) list Lao PDR as the eleventh poorest country in the world. Life expectancy is between 50 and 55 years, and approximately 50 percent of the children in Lao are reported to suffer from some degree of malnutrition. Lao is approximately the size of the state of Oregon and is dominated by the Mekong River, also called “the mother of waters.” It is commonly noted that Lao PDR does not have a seaport. However, it is a crossroads country, bordered by China and Burma in the north, Vietnam to the east, Thailand to the west, and Cambodia to the south (Jerndal and Rigg 1999 p.35). Lao PDR is in a unique position to capitalize on its geography at the crossroads of Southeast Asia.

The Lao PDR government’s goal is to move from the UNDP category of underdeveloped to developing by the year 2020. From a development-as-modernization perspective it might be better to think of Lao PDR as moving from a pre-market to a

market-based economy or from a pre-industrial to an industrial economy which also includes simultaneously entering the information age.

Close to 80 percent of the countryside in Lao PDR is mountainous, and the majority of the people work in agriculture, fishing, farming, and tourism. The Annamite Mountains run parallel to the Mekong River for almost half of the length of the country which gives the terrain a dramatic appearance. Luang Prabang, the ancient capital of Lanna Kingdom and world heritage site is home to many ancient Buddhist temples, mysterious caves, and a luscious tropical landscape. It is also home to the famous Lao night market where beautiful hand-woven Lao silks and other goods are sold. More importantly for this paper is that Luang Prabang is home to Mulberry Silks, a small elegant store, where Mrs. Kommaly Chanthavong, brings the weavers products to market.

Lao has many distinctive ethnic groups (Savada 1995 p. xxix) each with its own culture, language, and art. Lao's location at the crossroads of Southeast Asia, the beauty of the landscape, its ancient Buddhist history, ethnic diversity, and natural resources set the stage for socioeconomic development. However, along with development come the risks of adopting unhealthy lifestyles, the spread of disease, exploitation of vulnerable people groups, pollution, and environmental decline. Without careful consideration of these risks from modernization Stuart-Fox (1997 p.4) warns that "Lao's very cultural and national identity is threatened".

Lao PDR has approximately six million people and it is argued that there are between 48 and 200 distinct ethnic groups in the literature. Populations of Lao PDR live in three distinct geographical locations. The Lao Loum, or lowland Lao, represent 40 - 50 percent of the population, live in the Mekong River valley, and subsist on wet rice farming. The Lao Loum represent the official Lao national identity. The Lao Theung represent 20 - 30 percent of the population, consist of more than 35 different ethnic groups, live in the mid-elevation mountain slopes, and suffer the poorest standard of living. The Lao Theung are sometimes referred to as "*Kha*", a derogatory term meaning slave, reflecting their low socioeconomic status. The Lao Theung were the people that aligned themselves with the Pathet Lao and helped to fight against the Americans during the war. The third geographical group are the Lao Soung or highland people who represent about 20 percent of the population. The Lao Soung are also comprised of many different ethnic groups including the Hmong (Miao), Mon, and Mien peoples. The Lao Soung live above 1,000 meters, and traditionally subsist on dry rice farming. They are sometimes considered to be a threat to Lao nationally identity and a security risk to the national government because they live in the borderlands often crossing national borders. The ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese complete the ethnic picture of Lao, and dominate the business community in the cities.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union Lao PDR lost its prime benefactor and is now almost entirely dependent on foreign aide. The U.S., Thailand, Japan, and Australia are important foreign investors in Lao PDR (Rigg 1997; Dakin 2003; Than and Tan 1997 p.3). The Lao government is officially a Communist State with a Permanent Secretariat. President Kaysone Phomvihane is considered to be the father of the country and was the head of all three governmental bodies from 1975 until his death in 1992. Today power is consolidated in the hands of a few powerful elites that control the National Assembly, which meets once a year to rubber-stamp decisions made by the Central Committee. There is no free press in Lao and the main newspaper, *The Vientiane Times*, is printed in English for the benefit of foreign visitors. Mrs.

Kommaly Chanthavong told me that prior to the revolution in 1975, she spent many hours talking with President Kaysone Phomvihane about her dream to create a silk farm, and to use Lao traditional weaving patterns to help villages create local businesses to supplement their incomes from fishing and farming. She said he would drive up to her house in a 4-wheel drive jeep with a couple of military guards, sit on her dirt floor and listen to her story. Apparently, President Kaysone Phomvihane was impressed by her tenacity because he was known to refer to Mrs. Kommaly Chanthavong as one of the best story tellers in Lao PDR. It was this story, kept alive in her imagination, that withstood the many obstacles and provided the impetus and resource for the development of the Lao silk road.

CAMA Craft/Mulberry Silks/ and Sericulture in Solicitude

During the research process of 2005 - 2006 I talked with more than 35 different project directors and other people involved in working in socioeconomic development work in Lao PDR. A personal journal and tape recorder were used to document conversations and personal reflections, while I traveled in Lao PDR. I had the honor of visiting many interesting projects; however, when I visited Mrs. Kommaly Chanthavong, CAMA Craft, Sericulture Inc., and Mulberry Silks I knew I had found what I was looking for.

But this story really begins when I met Dr. Steven Bailey while sitting in the Swedish coffee house in Vientiane, the capital city of Lao PDR, sipping a cappuccino. Dr. Bailey, having worked in Lao with CAMA Craft for more than 15 years, was now on a return visit to check-in with Mrs. Kommaly Chanthavong and other friends. He briefly explained the project and told me he thought it worked out well because it was “not his idea”.

After our conversation Dr. Bailey told me to walk over to the ancient Chinese Buddhist temple just down the street from the Mekong River and look for CAMA Craft if I wanted to know more. I thought I would never find the place and just as I was ready to stop to escape the heat I saw the store sign. I opened the door to a splash of cool air. I

asked to speak with Mrs. Kommaly Chanthavong. The store workers spoke Hmong with just enough English to reach a rough understanding of my request. I expected to be sent away; instead I was assisted in reaching Mrs. Kommaly Chanthavong by phone. Mrs. Kommaly Chanthavong, to whom I was a complete stranger, without a word or letter of introduction took my call from the store. “Yes,” she told me, “take the bus to Ziengkhouang, and ask anyone, they will show you the farm where you will find me.”

If you travel north on the north/south highway in Lao PDR, from Vientiane, and turn right at Vang Vieng toward Vietnam you will find Ziengkhouang. When I stopped to ask people walking along the road, they all knew the silk farm I was looking for. I walked up a little muddy hill, through a bamboo fence, and tapped on the door. For no other reason than human kindness, Mrs. Kommaly Chanthavong spent the day with me, sharing, as she does with others, showing, telling, touching so I could learn.

Mrs. Kommaly Chanthavong told me that when she first proposed the silk farm/weaving project to Lao officials she was greeted with universal skepticism and was told mulberry trees would not grow in Ziengkhouang. The soil is too acidic, and defoliants from the American War made it too hard to grow anything. Mrs. Kommaly Chanthavong showed me the farm, silk worm nursery, plants to make the colorful dyes, and weavers’ looms.

The silk farm and weaving project is a complex affair. She said, in answer to my questions, “Everything is hands-on learning.” I asked, “How do you decide who from the village can join the project?” and she said, “if you are the poorest.” I watched as she leaned over the weavers, meticulously correcting their technique so that the piece of silk would turn out straight and finely woven. She told me, “to see, to touch, and to do” are all important parts of learning. We walked through the mulberry tree farm. There were three areas. In the first area a group of trees were left unpruned, tall, and wild. The leaves were thick, tough, and difficult for silk worms to eat. In the second field the trees had been dramatically pruned and were only a few feet off the ground. Finally, we walked through a third field of healthy mature trees that had been properly pruned during their growing cycle. The leaves of these trees were a light - green, soft and easy for little silk worms to chew.

When we walked through each area Mrs. Kommaly Chanthavong picked leaves and then patiently demonstrated to me, placing one leaf on top of another, how mulberry trees when properly pruned grow light green tender leaves. She explained that unless the villagers see how to prune the trees correctly with their own eyes, it is not done right. She continued to explain that all the silks are dyed from natural sources, using plants and herbs also grown in the Farm’s gardens. When we visited the silk worm nursery, where extra care is required to tend the baby silkworms she said quietly, “The villagers are in my heart.” Mrs. Kommaly Chanthavong continued by discussing

the weaving patterns and the importance of using the traditional Lao “Locke and Key” pattern, but, at the same time, adding something new. I asked, “what about the village weavers’ children?” She explained that mothers bring their children and live together on the Farm until the family is ready to return to the village and open their own business.

Finally, Mrs. Kommaly Chanthavong explained, once the village weaver is ready to return home we will support her in building her business. When her business is an up and going concern she will then help the next village weaver to travel the Lao silk road. Mrs. Kommaly Chanthavong regularly returns to the villages, visiting the weavers, providing advice and supporting their independence as new silk entrepreneurs.

Mrs. Kommaly Chanthavong’s silk farm project has now grown into three related entities. First, Sericulture Inc. is a business entity that is the Farm and refers to all that is involved in raising silk worms and mulberry trees. Secondly, CAMA Crafts, established in 1990, is a self help, non-profit handicraft project where Hmong handicraft products are brought to market. There are now more than 400 Hmong and Lao women who make Hmong Handicrafts and Lao silks to earn a living. The parent organization, CAMA Services Inc. is also busy with building schools, clean water projects, teaching English as a second language, and developing Mother/Child Health Projects. Thirdly, Mulberries Silks is a not-for profit company that seeks to create income opportunities for the weavers by providing a market for the final silk products and the beautiful Hmong handicrafts. The project’s vision is to provide local people with income, preserve Lao traditional weaving as a important art form, protect the local environment through the use of local resources, and ensure that future generations in Lao PDR can benefit from the work. This work offers a viable alternative to the growing of opium, slash and burn agriculture, and destruction of the environment with the use of non-organic fertilizers, and chemical dyes. The relationship between each weaver and her family lies at the heart of the program. Success is measured by the strength of the relationships that are created through the work. Each weaver uses her own imagination to add something new and each small business owner is treated as an irreplaceable, unsubstitutable other person, worthy and capable of acting on her own behalf in the world.

Conclusion

The life of Mrs. Kommaly in her business venture and in her personal life represented a development motif that relies on care for the other. Simply providing technical and economic help in the name of development does not reach into the heart of development, nor do these factors find their way into the development act itself. In the example of the silk road that covers both space and time in Lao PDR, the act of development needs to represent good business ventures complemented by the human

care people rely on to keep on going, no matter the challenges. Losing site of the aim of the good life leaves people with simply a number of acres or hours spent working.

Solicitude, the care for others, is defined by Ricoeur as care of another (Ricoeur 1992 p. 219). Ricoeur writes, “the aim of the good life and its moral transposition are understood in the principle of obligation in the Golden Rule”. The Golden Rule referenced by Ricoeur as written in the Talmud, “do not do unto your neighbor what you would hate him to do to you” (Babylonian Talmud, Sabbath, 31a) describes the norm of reciprocity in a relationship constructed on solicitude. When these references are combined, the Golden Rule becomes a call to “love thy neighbor as thyself (Matthew 22: 39). When there is solicitude, there is reciprocity or symmetry in the relationship between oneself and another. Mrs. Kommaly Chanthavong is in a relationship of solicitude when she refers to the weavers and says, “they are in my heart”.

In the construct of advocacy, more commonly used in socioeconomic development as modernization, there is an asymmetry of relationship that places one person in the position of acting, and the other in the position of being acted upon. Ricoeur tells us that power is exerted by one will over another in the very act of acting (Ricoeur 1992 p.220). Ricoeur reminds us that violence resides in the power exerted over one will by another will. When people working in development work through a model of advocacy, they work in a position of power that comes from being the authority. No matter how well-intentioned, the use of authority in human relationships creates the possibility of failure. When people work for human progress in solicitude there is the possibility for power-in-common (Ricoeur 1992 p.303). In understanding the necessity of a mutual exchange, we must also understand that there is no opportunity for the developer to experience virtue without the person who is receiving.

Solicitude in relationships between human beings is the mutual exchange of identity. Each person is an unsubstitutable and irreplaceable other self. Moreover, Kearney (2004 p.2) is correct when he writes the shortest route to self-understanding is through the other. On this basis autonomy is a myth. We can take this idea further by understanding that when we love another person we are willing to do more. Mrs. Kommaly Chanthavong said the people were in her heart. She lives and works within the cultural context of Lao PDR. All too often people who work in international socioeconomic development lack this element and refer to people as counterparts or target populations. As a result they place themselves in a situation of superiority, in charge of special knowledge. Ricoeur tells us that the supreme test for solicitude is to maintain reciprocity in the face of human suffering. He writes,

for from the suffering other there comes a giving that is no longer drawn
from the power of acting and existing but precisely from weakness itself.

This is perhaps the supreme test of solicitude, when unequal power finds compensation in an authentic reciprocity in exchange, which in the hour of agony, finds refuge in the shared whisper of voices or the feeble embrace of clasped hands (Ricoeur 1992 p.191).

Mrs. Kommaly Chanthavong has directed her life work toward the benefit of those in need in her own community and as such she also belongs with them. She imagined a community of weavers, remembered Lao history and traditions, brought together Lao people from a variety of ethnic groups, and created a community of people who chose to live together in the practical expression of a just livelihood. This weaving community is just one small part of what is needed to deepen the country's sense of a plueristic identity with a national narrative that holds people together such that they can build a better life for the generations to come.

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