Special Section Article

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'Before others': construction pioneers in the uplands of northwestern Laos

Given that houses have become a key signifier of an orientation towards the future, several villagers in Pliya can be regarded or regard themselves as pioneers of the construction of a new type of house. I will suggest here that the construction of new concrete houses is not to be understood merely as an adoption of lowland styles but as a self-conscious and selective use of a style of building. Those who are pioneering these houses also discuss their efforts in terms of pioneering acts, emphasising the self-taught nature of their appropriation of new aspects of craftsmanship. Drawing on long-term fieldwork among the Khmu of Pliya, and especially on more recent fieldwork in 2019 and 2020, I wish to argue that the way in which new houses have entered the local cosmos and are materialised by pioneering builders highlights a pioneering ethos that infuses local attempts at future-making, from wet rice cultivation to concrete villas.

Key words houses, concrete, Laos, Khmu, construction pioneers

Introduction

When I returned to Pliya, a Khmu Yuan village in northwestern Laos, I had in mind a comment of Ma Khwaay[1], who had joked that when I came back to the village in the future, I would not recognise it anymore, as by then hotels and villas would make it unrecognisable to me (Stolz 2019). The funny thing was that this image played with the contrast between a rural upland village where villas and hotels seemed out of place, on the one hand, and the image of an urban, lowland space, in which these kinds of building seemed to be taken for granted. Only she herself, she added, would still live in a broken timber house when all others were already living in 'good' (read: concrete) houses. These comments were actually quite prescient, as I found out when I returned in 2019, and once again in early 2020. I did not exactly miss the village, nor could I no longer recognise it, but its outward appearance had changed tremendously. Now, approaching the village from the dirt road, various houses with concrete elements in different states of completion, from unplastered to painted, can be seen. In addition to the first two houses with elements of concrete, many more have come into being: while, in February 2015, two out of 95 houses had been constructed with elements of concrete (thus slightly more than 2%), in February 2020, five years later, the number

[1] Please note that all names are pseudonyms.

Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale (2021) **29**, 3 718–732. © 2021 The Authors. *Social Anthropology* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of European Association of Social Anthropologists
doi:10.1111/1469-8676.13091
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Figure 1 New concrete houses are now changing the appearance of the village Source: Photograph taken by the author, 2020 [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

had risen to 21 out of 113 houses (or 18.6%). On one point, however, her joking statement was misleading: the conspicuous concrete house shown in Figure 1 is hers.[2]

In the context of the rising popularity of concrete, this article will highlight the role of the local lay builders who are regarded and/or present themselves as breaking new ground in the construction of houses in the village. Based on recent fieldwork, during which I participated in a construction project that was executed by one of the 'pioneers' of the construction of concrete buildings, the self-representation of the latter – including his emphasis on skills, the connection with his temporary labour migration, and his sense of having been initiated into something before others – will be explored. While the prominence of concrete will certainly present a major and long-lasting shift in the built landscape in Pliya, it is not the first large-scale change in housing design, as will be shown below.

This article's emphasis on the pioneers of the new housing design seems to be at odds with classical representations of the Khmu, upland dwellers in northern Laos. In the literature on their political and economic integration, there is an emphasis on their interactions with lowland areas, their involvement in trade and labour migration, and concerns over assimilation and cultural disintegration (Dang 1973: 133f.; Halpern

[2] The house, however, was not initially built for her. Her husband's elder brother's son had built it – with some professional help – for his fiancée, his brother and his family. Most tragically, he died following a road accident shortly before he would have finished the house and married his fiancée.

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1958; LeBar 1965: 13; cf. Évrard 2008: 534ff.). In scholarly accounts, Olivier Évrard notes that the Khmu 'usually appear as a marginalised people whose traditions and ways of life represent a kind of coarser version of the Tai-speaking groups and who are on the road to complete assimilation by the latter' (2019: 230). The adoption of concrete might cater to this pessimistic view; however, as this article will show, this perspective does not allow us to capture the pioneering atmosphere and the local inventiveness. Before we turn to the construction pioneers, a few words about Khmu houses are in order.

Among the Khmu, houses are built on stilts; their walls and floors are made either of woven bamboo mats or, more recently, of wooden boards; they are roofed with either leaves, bamboo mesh, corrugated iron or, recently, modern roof panels. They consist of one large, sparsely furnished room and a kitchen, which is either included in the main room, as is reported to have been the norm in Khmu houses of the past (Évrard 2006: 128; Tayanin 1994: 36f.), or is connected to the main house by a veranda. The interior space is ordered according to the directionals uphill and downhill, which determines the accessibility of the house to strangers and to the places of ancestor worship. A Khmu house can be said to be an architectural object, a space of co-living and co-consumption, a social entity embracing its residents, putting them into a relationship with other houses and connecting them with ancestor and house spirits (Stolz 2021: 66; for the neighbouring Rmeet, see also Sprenger 2006). Accordingly, the local word for house (*kaaŋ*)[3] denotes the physical object as well as the house group it shelters.

Concrete and changes in Khmu housing

Concrete houses have come to be regarded as manifesting the house owner's aspirations of belonging to modernity, success and future-orientation, and not only in upland Laos. While bamboo is celebrated by scholars of vernacular architecture as a possible 'sustainable building resource for the future' (Vellinga *et al*. 2007: 33), for my Khmu interlocutors, bamboo houses are largely associated with the past and have become an index of poverty (Stolz 2019); however, bamboo houses will continue to exist as long as the house owners lack the means to replace them. Since cement is associated with modernity (Archambault 2019: 692; Forty 2016: 14ff.), it creates a contrast with local, now backward-appearing building materials (Gowlland 2020: 127). Discussing the change in rural Isan, Thailand, Claudio Sopranzetti states that the Isan villagers are now coming to see their wooden houses as 'incomplete houses, waiting to be contained by cement walls' (2018: 94). Indeed, the inclusion of concrete parts is a trend to be observed in Laos as well (High 2014: 75; Petit 2020: 177ff; Sprenger 2021; Stolz 2019). While, in some areas, such as in the Khmu case presented here, this is certainly the most pertinent present-day change in the built upland environment, it is not the first profound change.

Before cement entered the stage in the uplands of Laos, it was timber that became a new building material and replaced or was often added to bamboo (see Zuckerman and Enfield forthcoming; Sprenger 2021). While both timber and bamboo might count

[3] Foreign-language terms in italics are Khmu terms, if not indicated otherwise. The transcription of Khmu mainly follows Svantesson *et al*. (2014).

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as natural and biodegradable building materials (in contrast to cement), their implications and processing vary considerably: processing timber requires suitable technology, saws, nowadays often also chainsaws, grinding machines, or even circular saws, and a pool of porters. While porters might just be served food and granted help in return, for tools, loan fees apply. In general, building a timber house takes much longer than building a bamboo house and requires a larger group of helpers – helpers who of course legitimately expect to be served stews and soups rich with fresh meat and with the typical stimulants served during work feasts and rituals, such as fermented tea leaves, (home-grown) tobacco and (packaged) cigarettes.

However, timber also comes at a ritual cost. The relative durability and value of timber houses in contrast to bamboo has been or is a new consideration to be weighed up when it comes to decisions related to mobility or ritually prescribed house-rebuilding. 'Now that the materials of a home have become valuable and durable, what is one to do with the need to discard a home in response to tragedy?', Charles Zuckerman and Nick Enfield (forthcoming: 36) ask. They show how Kri views about the pollution of houses after the death of one of their inhabitants or after the spilling of blood are now influenced by a strong hesitation to move and rebuild a wooden house in comparison to a bamboo one. Instead of discarding the material, some owners of new wooden houses, for instance, decided to soak the timber planks in the river bed for days to get rid of the blood and to avoid the misfortunes they have seen come over other owners of wooden houses who have ignored ritual prescriptions. Among the Khmu, the potentially precarious cosmological issue is not so much blood but rather the fact that larger tree species are often the abode of spirits. These spirits have to be driven away so as to make the wood habitable. A necessary part of this process – much cherished by local youth – is dancing on the timber floor over the course of several nights by older girls and boys (*khon nɨm*). *Hɔɔl kaaŋ*, the smearing of the house with blood from a pig that has been sacrificed in the kitchen, is another recent way of domesticating the wood so that it can host an important social body, the house group.

Bamboo, however, remains an important building material: the first house into which a couple moves after leaving the husband's parental home is often a small quadrangular bamboo house with either an integrated hearth or a small kitchen room sharing the veranda with the main living room. House groups lacking monetary resources might continue to live in such houses – this holds true in particular for 'women's' houses' (*kaaŋ cmkɨn*), houses without male adult house group members. Bamboo houses, especially when they are thatched with leaves, can be quickly made with the help of men and women. Splitting, flattening and weaving bamboo is done by women just as much as by men. A bamboo house does not require a lot of technology; for example, it can be built completely without nails; fastening is done with bamboo strip bindings (*hrnɔɔm*). With bamboo being ready at hand and quickly processed, bamboo houses are still a viable option for transitory phases, such as after moving out of the parental house. Yet when a temporary bamboo hut becomes a permanent shelter, it indicates poverty. While, around the time of the resettlement of the village of Pliya in 1985, the majority of houses were built with bamboo, according to my interlocutors' accounts, today timber is the first choice – albeit increasingly being replaced by cement. How can we understand these drastic changes in the built environment?

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Approaching modern vernacular houses

Social anthropological studies of houses have emphasised their multifaceted character and the entanglements of the physical entity and the social processes of the house (Carsten and Hugh Jones 1995; Howell 2003; Sparkes and Howell 2003; Waterson 2009 [1990]). It has been shown how far house lives and personal biographies intersect (Carsten 2018; Telle 2007); how houses embrace processes of relatedness (Carsten 1997; Janowski 1995); and how their materiality shapes the experience of living in them (Allerton 2013; Helliwell 1996). Local building traditions have been investigated, with a more or, often, less detailed mention of the new forms of modern houses that are increasingly entering the scene (Clément-Charpentier and Clément 1990; Schefold *et al*. 2003, 2008; Vellinga 2004). Yet the identification and separation of a category of 'traditional' buildings and materials is far from a straightforward move: Roxana Waterson comments that the popularity of zinc roofing among the Minangkabau since the beginning of the 20th century 'certainly raises a question in the mind about when an item may properly be considered to have become "traditional", if the word has any meaning at all' (2009 [1990]: 87).[4]

The increase in 'modern' concrete houses away from urban spaces is noteworthy, not only with regard to Southeast Asia (see, for instance, Archambault 2018; Leinaweaver 2009; Pauli and Bedorf 2018; Thomas 1998). Among the influential strands of thought regarding modern vernacular houses is a consumption-related approach. This approach highlights the consumption of market-based materials and items that are associated with 'modernity' and the ways in which global, de-localised commodities are 're-localised' by locally specific forms of consumption (Thomas 1998: 426). Seen from this angle, the element of status-display involved in the 'conspicuous construction' (Thomas 1998) can be explored, the economic ramifications (notably the integration into markets and money economies) can be highlighted and light can be shed on the aspirations of house owners.

Another, related approach focuses on the intersection of house construction and migration and studies the emerging 'remittance houses' (Pauli and Bedorf 2018), which are modern vernacular houses built with the help of remittances in the context of migration. The political dimension of belonging, citizenship and land rights is discussed by Eli Elinoff (2016: 614), who speaks of 'aesthetic politics' in order to show how the choice of house materials and designs is a political resource for residents to avoid eviction, and to be acknowledged as proper political actors. Geoffrey Gowlland (2020) discusses the use of concrete among the indigenous Paiwan in Taiwan in the context of governmental assimilative policies towards indigenous peoples. Amid superficially drastic societal changes, the vitality and continuing importance of houses across these case studies remain striking.

Yet, especially when considering rural areas, the shift to concrete is often portrayed in critical terms as an 'impossible chase' after modern house and life styles by rural residents who will never really catch up with their urban models (Sopranzetti 2018: 97). Furthermore, as holds true for vernacular architecture more widely, any transformation of what is deemed tradition is clad by some agents in a language of

[4] Vellinga *et al*. present corrugated iron as a vernacular building material, albeit a manufactured one. They add that it 'embodies to many observers the perceived contamination and decline of vernacular architecture' (2007: 38).

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loss – which is most markedly pronounced with regard to houses as cultural heritage (Allerton 2003; Berliner 2012). Especially in the context of the discourse on development that is ubiquitous in Laos, the adoption of concrete appears to be tied to overarching processes of becoming legible and developed citizens of the Lao state. Yet, interestingly, the current house-building projects are not regarded by my Khmu interlocutors as unfinished second-rate copies of lowland originals or as attempts to connect to the state, nor is there currently any nostalgia for 'traditional' houses.[5] The new building materials and possible design options are rather enthusiastically embraced by local lay builders who emphasise their agency and innovativeness.

Construction pioneers

The shift to concrete often appears to be an impersonal 'emergence', a 'rise' or 'spread', an emergent phenomenon of wider socio-economic change – shedding little light on *who is making* these buildings. Yet, in contexts where the separation of the building process between the planning work done by architects and the manual execution by builders does not apply, lay builders do creatively engage with both materials and design (Marchand 2009). Building, here, requires 'the creativity of the "messy practices"' (Ingold 2013: 59). The 'adoption' of new building materials, such as concrete, like other artisanal innovations, requires 'situational improvisation and experimentation' (Marchand 2009: 81). Gowlland quotes a Paiwan villager who related to him that it was his father who was 'the first to introduce cement to the village. … He was drawn to experiment with cement as a building material in part to continue to be recognized as one of the best builders in the village' (2020: 135). Something quite similar is also the case for local attitudes towards the 'introduction of cement' into Pliya.

Given that houses among the Khmu are self-made by the inhabitants and their kin without professional assistance, those locals who are currently coming to be regarded as specialists in building concrete houses are self-taught pioneers of the new modes of house design and construction. This advent of quasi part-time specialists in building houses is a fairly new development and stands in marked contrast to the ways in which wooden houses are erected (Figure 2). The latter involve large groups of helpers who are by and large skilled to the same degree and who work over only a couple of days each, as can be seen in Figure 3. All able-bodied men, and to a lesser extent women as well, have the baseline of building skills necessary for the frequent building, rebuilding and repairing of houses, workhouses, barns and field huts. The cooperative building of houses follows widely known procedures and rhythms and entails communal meals and, in general, a social dimension that is not to be underestimated (Stolz 2021).

The new concrete houses, by way of contrast, require fewer but more committed helpers experienced in using cement, who work continuously and in relative loneliness on the erection site. One of the main reasons for the loneliness of this work is that it takes a specific carefulness, for mistakes cannot be easily corrected. This is not to say that work on bamboo or timber houses is not done in a careful manner. But machetes, the core multi-purpose tools, always ready at hand, help to correct any not so well-fitting parts. The possibility of adjustments, which of course also requires carefulness

[5] Elsewhere, where wood is in short supply and has to be bought and transported at high costs, lavishly decorated neo-traditional timber houses are a new item of prestige (Vellinga 2004: 177).

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Figure 2 The erection of a wooden house in Pliya in 2015 Source: Photograph taken by the author [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

and is by no means an invitation for sloppiness, allows a large group of people to work simultaneously. The relative plasticity, or better, correctability, of the material suits the technical equipment and the sociality of cooperative house-building work. Concrete, by way of contrast, does not 'forgive' the lack of exact preparation and execution. Building with concrete requires a new set of skills, tools, infrastructures and means of transportation – and, first and foremost, persons who are able to meet these requirements.

It is quite notable that those who have been most involved in building concrete houses have extensive experience in labour migration. Yoŋ Sii, the one who built the first that I would call a hybrid house – a timber house with a concrete ground floor – looked back on a history of labour migration to Thailand. He displayed his ambition and did not hide his frowning upon certain traditions (he wished to change the inauguration rituals at first, though unsuccessfully; see Stolz 2019). Backed by his experience abroad, he is proud of doing things in a new, modern way. His connection to Yoŋ Man, his reliable helper, who set up the concrete brick walls for him, was one that was tied to kinship but also to their shared self-understanding as being innovative persons who strive for improvement and who both have long-term experience of living in Thailand.

Among the Khmu, labour migration abroad (mainly to Thailand) is a far from unusual part of the Khmu coming of age. The Khmu were involved in work on teak plantations and logging in Thailand at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries (Évrard 2016; Ongsakul 2005: 236; Sprenger 2021). Today, patterns of labour migration are changing; labour migratory stays tend to be shorter and now include work in other districts or provinces, for men as well as women, from young bachelors to middle-aged men and women (cf. Évrard 2013; see Lutz' contribution in this issue). Working on construction sites in neighbouring provinces, often run by Chinese entrepreneurs, is a source of those skills that might be of use for building concrete houses in Pliya (cf. Gowlland 2020: 137).

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Figure 3 Laaŋ Mɨaŋ, a 'construction pioneer' whose skills are in great demand Source: Photograph taken by the author, 2020 [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Yet, beyond specific skills, those who set out for labour migratory stays in the first place, and who manage to stand the test of time abroad, might be especially likely to exhibit the 'pioneering ethos' (Petit 2015) that is also involved in establishing a new local vernacular building standard. The role of migration in the transformation of the built landscape of the home villages of the (former) migrants, as mentioned above, is highlighted in the literature (Thomas 1998; Gowlland 2020). The question of wherein this connection specifically lies is answered in various ways: (former) migrants are shown to display their success and wealth through innovative and lavish house designs (Thomas 1998); they exhibit their rootedness and social commitments in the home locale despite their absence (Pauli and Bedorf 2018); or the subjectivity of migrants has changed during migration and they have become used to the building styles in the

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locale of their destinations (Gowlland 2020: 138). Gowlland (2020), especially, discusses the changing aesthetics and the impulses that returnees display by combining the local building materials with cement in connection with their personal transformations during migration and, in particular, with their becoming state subjects. Yet I wish to argue that in the case of the Khmu we should take a step back and look at their decisions to migrate, to temporarily settle as migrants, and to return, in the active and adventurous terms in which these are articulated. Many male and increasingly also female interlocutors proudly related to me how they struggled to establish themselves at first but finally succeeded in establishing ties to hosts in their migration locales and managed to secure work. Thus, the endeavour of labour migration abroad in foreign contexts is not merely the source of innovativeness but is already an expression of it.

It is not only Yoŋ Sii who has built a semi-concrete house; other well-off houses have followed – among the latter being the house groups of the priests and the local healers, and all those with promising economic and political ties (or both). There is one local lay builder, in particular, who has been asked to take the lead during many of these house-building projects, Laaŋ Mɨaŋ. He is also experienced in working abroad, but displays – much more than Yoŋ Sii – the locally appreciated features of modesty, diligence and patience, and observes the socio-ritual norms of kin-based sociality. His ability in building concrete houses is appreciated by others and he has been asked by kin to help them with building theirs. While he stressed that he is not paid for helping them, he emphasised helping each other as the basis of cooperative work-exchange (*rmpe*), and that he would receive their help in turn when he plans to build a new house. Sometimes he receives additional payments; interestingly, he did not want this to be understood as payments proper but as gifts of money. He did receive payment when he built a new school building, or a house for a Chinese entrepreneur close to a banana plantation that was established a couple of years ago on the land of the neighbouring village. Herewith he seems to maintain a boundary between work related to livelihood and exchange *within* the village, and work for money that is associated with the sphere beyond the village (note that beyond is not to be understood in geographical terms here; see Stolz 2021: 161f.).

In early 2020, I participated in and observed another recent construction job: Laaŋ Mɨaŋ built a new chicken barn for the Tai Lue kiosk owner, who, after the death of her husband, is now expanding her chicken husbandry with external support – connections developed by her son, who is working for governmental and iNGO projects in Laos as a freelancer. With the money that she received through one of these projects, she wanted to replace her chicken shack with a large concrete storehouse-like building. Together with three regular helpers and irregular manual but coordination help from the owner's son, Laaŋ Mɨaŋ built this chicken barn with concrete blocks, a cement floor, concrete pillars, corrugated iron roofing, and mesh wire for the upper part of the walls. The barn was built at the time when others were going into the fields to prepare and start clearing the forest to establish the swiddens for the upcoming cultivation period.

During one of the breaks, while we were sitting on the thatch for a small hut that was being built in order to have a proper resting hut, he told me how it came about that he is now so strongly involved in building with concrete. He summarised what he had told me in 2014 in the course of a census conversation. As a young man he went as a labour migrant to Thailand, that is to the northern cities of Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, Lampang, Payao and down to Uttaradit. After he returned, he became a soldier and

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was stationed in the provincial capital of Luang Namtha and in the Tai Yang village of Nam Fa for a total of three years. He returned to the village for only two or three months, with plans to marry, and conducted the bride service at his fiancée's parents' house before going once more to Thailand. In 1995, he finally returned and settled with his wife. What was not mentioned during the early census conversation was that during his early labour migratory stay, during which he cooperated with his brother Sen Mɨaŋ, he bought building materials that he carried all the way from Nam Fa to the village – when there was no dirt road yet – to build his parents what he called a proper house. The improvements in housing were immediately related to the brothers' stays abroad, from where they brought market-based building items that were otherwise beyond the reach of local villagers. In contrast to Laaŋ Mɨaŋ, Sen Mɨaŋ stayed in Thailand for around a decade, travelling around, and even reaching Malaysia, according to Laaŋ Mɨaŋ. Most of the time he was in Bangkok, working as a mechanic in a car garage.[6]

While, in his account of how his labour migration contributed to the improvement and modernisation of his parental home, consumption is stressed (relating to Thomas 1998), his present-day role he relates explicitly to the fact that, in his words, he can build houses quickly (*o əh [kaaŋ] weey*). He listed some of his former projects, proudly mentioning the house of Ya Uuy, that is the local shop, a school building and the house for a Chinese entrepreneur who wished to reside in the uplands close to the banana plantation for which he was responsible. Talking about building Ya Uuy's house, he said that he had never done this before – yet, even more, that no one else had built a house in this bungalow style before. He emphasised the self-taught nature of his skills and the experimental nature of his approach.

The economic aspect of his support during construction work was clad in conventional terms: he would not take money when helping kin, he said, knowing, however, that he would receive their help in turn. He has not yet planned to rebuild his own house; we joked about how he, who has built so many concrete houses already, still lives in his wooden house. Yet, when asked where he would build his new house, as the present-day spot is quite steep, it turned out that he already had an established plan to build the new house on the dirt road close by the house of his brother Sen, with whom he had been in Thailand. He can be sure that he will have plenty of helpers and, in fact, he had already received support during the comparatively lavish wedding of his son the year before. As already mentioned, building houses for non-Khmu, such as Ya Uuy or the Chinese entrepreneur, in contract arrangements, resembles, by way of contrast, a different kind of labour for money, commonly associated with the realm beyond the village (*pəəl kmuul*). For building the chicken farm he received 60,000 kip per day, equivalent to roughly 6 euros, together with a rich midday meal – a sum that regular plantation workers receive as well. When I asked him whether the owner would give him further money after the building is finished, he answered diplomatically that it was up to her heart whether she felt committed and would give him something. Even though he talked down the economic dimensions and motives of his new role in all modesty, he still enumerated the house-building projects he has carried out. Though still a rice cultivator like the other Khmu villagers, he could already call himself the first

[6] Originally, Sen Mɨaŋ intended to stay in Thailand. He built his fiancée a house, only to find that she had become engaged to another man during one of his absences. A similar fate was experienced by their elder brother's son, around two decades later, except that in his case, it was his father who pressured his eldest son to return home.

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part-time specialist in the construction of concrete houses. As his account of his labour migration and his early involvement in the innovation of local housing has shown, he relates his skills to the fact that he has appropriated concrete 'before others'.

Before others

To be the first to do something (*əh kaal priaŋ*) is not stressed only in Laaŋ Mɨaŋ's account. To do or establish something before others – 'others' including a wide array of persons ranging from co-villagers to other people in general – is a common way of expressing pioneering acts. 'Others', it should be added, are not necessarily socially distant persons. Strangers, marked by their distance or difference, by way of contrast, are locally referred to as *tmɔɔy*, yet *tmɔɔy* is also used to refer to other Khmu subgroups (Évrard 2007; Svantesson *et al.* 2014: 366f.) as well as to visitors and guests. A particular category of strangers are 'lowlanders', who are called *cɛ* (see below; see Svantesson *et al.* 2014: 14, 267, 366; on the category of the lowlanders among the neighbouring Rmeet, see Sprenger 2006: 238). The others mentioned in the phrase 'to do something before others' does not point to distant others, such as lowlanders, with whom the speaker contrasts her- or himself; it is the neighbours and kin in the village who are non-specifically denoted, or rather hinted at, with this term.

Speaking of having done or initiated something 'before others' in order to emphasise the pioneering character of one's actions comes close to the OED's definition of the pioneer as 'A person who goes before others to prepare or open up the way' (see also the introduction to this issue). But is building a (semi-)concrete house really a pioneering act? From a distant observer's point of view, cement is at the moment 'spreading' over the uplands of Laos. In some accounts, the popularity of concrete seems to arise out of its own agency, on the basis of which 'concrete mediates dreams and aspirations, in some cases inspiring hopes for a better future' (Archambault 2018: 1). The Khmu of Pliya, contrarily, lay their stress on their own agency in experimenting with new things and with the opportunities that arise. This is also stated by Charles Zuckerman and Nick Enfield, based on their observations on house transformations among Kri speakers of the central uplands of Laos: 'Even as such changes [the use of timber, for instance; R.S.] are happening across the nation under the banner of "development", Kri speakers report and rationalize their experience in terms of individual and family-level choices' (forthcoming: 45).

This emphasis on having done or started something *before others* is not confined to house-building. It is also prevalent with regard to wet rice agriculture. The cultivation of wet rice is a rather recent adoption among the Khmu of this area, who lived off swiddens, in addition to gathering, hunting, the occasional sale of non-timber forest products and, as already mentioned, temporary labour migration (Évrard 2006). The term 'adoption', however, does not fit the local perspective. Those who present themselves as having been among the first to have established wet rice fields emphasise having done so *on their own initiative*. Among our neighbours was Ta Sen, who claimed to have been among the first to establish a wet rice field at the beginning of the 2000s – an arduous pioneering work that others, he told me in 2014, then followed. Over time I have talked to several men who claim to have been the first to prepare a wet rice field, but all of them present this as their individual decision and as if this was not only their local innovation but their invention entirely.

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What is strikingly missing from their accounts is the mentioning of external incentives, though the latter are quite frequently voiced by state representatives or agricultural extension workers during official meetings. When I helped to build an irrigation dam for a wet rice field, one owner of an adjacent field emphasised that this was not a '*cɛ*' dam, a lowlander's dam, but that it was built like the Khmu build, not like 'the *cɛ*', the lowlanders.[7] I do not wish to evaluate whether the Khmu of Pliya *really* cultivate and irrigate their wet rice differently. What is crucial here is that a representation of local transformations as an adoption of lowland habits (in housing or agriculture) cannot be further off the mark from locally common forms of depiction. My Khmu interlocutors would not subscribe to the view that, in the end, it is external pressure by the late socialist Lao state, however indirect or subtle, that is exerted on them here;[8] rather, they emphasise not only their agency, but they regard lowland or state incentives and examples as sources of inspiration (at most) from which to draw in novel ways.

Conclusion: Pioneering concrete houses – pioneers of concrete construction

Concrete is on the rise in upland Laos (and elsewhere), where renewable building materials have formerly been used. This rise has been discussed especially in terms of consumption and, in general, with a focus on the finished product and its various implications, rather than on the construction process. Yet concrete houses do not simply 'emerge' – they are *built*. Where houses are built not by professional carpenters but by local lay builders, the ways in which the latter engage with a material that is new to the locale deserves attention. Thus, a rarely explored dimension of the transformation of vernacular architecture is that of the skills and crafts involved in building modern houses and the innovative engagements of lay housebuilders with new materials (but see Archambault 2018; Gowlland 2020). By giving attention to those who pioneer in the construction of new houses, concrete in this case, and by taking their claims to originality and innovation seriously, we can approach the local takes on agency and aspirations.

In this article, the Khmu shift to concrete as the preferred building material has been discussed with a focus on those persons who have a decisive influence on the built landscape of the village, namely the men who have the reputation of ably handling concrete building projects. Not only are concrete houses emerging on the social and imaginative horizon but with them the local lay builders, who may become self-taught part-time specialists. This focus on pioneering builders in upland Laos aims to

[7] *Cɛ* is a wide social category; it refers to a spatial area, the lowlands, to population groups associated with the lowland realm (not only in a spatial sense), including but not restricted to the ethnic Lao, and it also refers to certain features that are associated with the lowland realm, such Buddhist beliefs and wet rice agriculture, but also a plethora of other characteristics such as eating processed food. Depending on the context it can also have moral undertones: 'becoming *cɛ*' can mean adopting some of these features but also exhibiting a more materialistic outlook and a lessening commitment to the social and ritual norms identified with being Khmu. For a similar category among the neighbouring Khmu, see Sprenger (2006: 238–40).

[8] This is not to neglect the existence of external pressures; with regard to the resettlement of the village in the mid-1980s, for instance, the external enforcement is explicitly articulated by all my interlocutors without exception.

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accomplish various purposes. Ethnographically speaking, first, the aim is to highlight the agency transmitted in local conceptions of the rise of concrete and the innovativeness and skill emphasised by uplanders, which cannot be captured by a view that treats the rising popularity of concrete as a sign of the adoption of lowland styles and habits or submission to state discourses of development (see also Sprenger 2021; Zuckerman and Enfield forthcoming). Second, focusing on the anthropology of the house, this article calls for a change of perspective: rather than considering concrete as emerging somewhat miraculously and being the driver of change, more stress should be laid on the skills, workmanship and creativity involved in working with concrete.

Acknowledgements

This piece has profited greatly from discussions with Oliver Tappe and Charles Zuckerman, and the generous and thought-provoking comments of two anonymous referees. My thanks go to Mary Chambers for copy-editing the manuscript. Recent research has been funded by a grant from Fritz Thyssen Foundation. I am indebted to my hosts and interlocutors in Laos. All shortcomings remain my own.

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« Avant les autres » : les pionniers de la construction dans les hautes terres du nordouest du Laos

Dans la mesure où les maisons sont devenues un élément clé de l'orientation vers l'avenir, plusieurs villageois de Pliya peuvent être considérés ou se considèrent comme des pionniers de la construction d'un nouveau type de maison. Je suggère ici que la construction de nouvelles maisons en béton ne doit pas être comprise comme une simple adoption des styles des basses terres, mais comme une utilisation consciente et sélective d'un style de construction. Les pionniers de ces maisons parlent également de leurs efforts en termes d'actes pionniers, soulignant la nature autodidacte de leur appropriation de nouveaux aspects de l'artisanat. En m'appuyant sur un travail de terrain à long terme parmi les Khmu de Pliya (en particulier sur un travail de terrain plus récent en 2019 et 2020), je soutiens que la façon dont les nouvelles maisons sont entrées dans le cosmos local et sont matérialisées par des constructeurs pionniers souligne un « esprit du pionnier » qui infuse les tentatives locales de création d'avenir – de la culture du riz humide aux villas en béton.

Mots-clés maisons, béton, pionniers de la construction, Khmu, Laos

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