

Book Review

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

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When the book came to my hands and read the title, *Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding in Laos. Perspective for Today's World*, my mind flashed back to my first visit to the Lao National Museum (also called Lao National History Museum) in Vientiane, close to the Lao National Cultural Hall and National Stadium, one sunny August morning in 2015. During two long hours I was privileged to walk alone on the old wooden floor of this old French Governor's house, carefully and quietly examining beautiful displays of objects, artifacts, photographs and posters from ancient and recent times of Laos' PDR. The museum contains rich collections of objects and artifacts covering the areas of archaeology, history, ethnology and paleontology.

Weeks later I engaged in a series of interesting conversations with a highly educated man based in Vientiane about my trip from Houayxay (en route to Luang Namtha) to Muang Khong. I was very excited, narrating my pilgrimage to *wats* (temples) and a special remembrance was to the visit of Lao National Museum and the impact of the photographs from the Vietnam war time. He listened carefully and immediately recommended me to read about the *Secret War in Laos*. With his interesting and explicit comments about this recent period in the history of Laos' PDR, my curious mind followed his advice and I am really grateful for his insights.

Later I got a copy of the book *Conflict Resolution and Peace building in Laos. Perspective for Today's World*.

Since 1975, called officially Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao's PDR) and governed by The Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), this small landlocked country has a population of 6.99 millions (2017) and more than 100 ethnic groups (Hmong, Katang, Khmu, Lahu, Lao, Phutai, etc), what shows the diversity of the population of this mostly Buddhist country.

Born in Lao's PDR, the author of the book is *Stephanie Phetsamay Stobbe* is a faculty member in the Department of Conflict Resolution Studies at the University of Winnipeg (Canada). The book is a rich collection of chapters as the result of life experiences and visits to Laos over the last 20 years and research projects (2006-2011). It presents a collection of chapters about different topics relevant to multidisciplinary studies that will help to expand our understanding of conflict resolution in Lao's PDR and also apply this knowledge to understand conflict resolution in other places in the world. It explores how Laos balances social peace and harmony in society and conflict resolution at different levels (communities, nations and international scale) in order to bring social justice. Laos realizes

the tremendous power of traditional conflict resolution systems that do not require the use of formal court system to provide solutions to existing conflicts within and across cultural groups in the country.

In order to broaden reader's understanding of Lao cultural resolution practices, the book is structured into 7 sections: *Background and Historical Context of Laos*; *Face and Eyes - Understanding Conflict through Metaphors*; *Op-lom - The Language of Conflict Resolution*; *Rebuilding through Rituals*; *Cross-Cultural Conflict - From Micro to Macro*; *Grassroots Conflict Resolution – Building from the Ground Up* and finally *Tenets of Conflict Resolution*.

In order to understand how the peaceful people of Laos understand conflict and pursue its resolution, the book starts with a review of main issues in the 700-year history of Laos, from culture and economics, ethnic groups and national identities to “the Secret War in Laos and Vietnam War as well as the legal system, providing the reader with a clear view of the historical context to address the analysis of conflict resolution system in Laos.

The case studies, examples and stories (for example, the “Wrapped-Ash Delight”) provided in the book *Conflict Resolution and Peace building in Laos. Perspective for Today's World*, show that, in Laos, in some cases, the “grassroots” systems (versus more formal, “rule of law” systems) are better providing justice, equality and freedom than the professional systems used in Western countries. Mediation (parents, relatives, elders, village leaders, etc.), rituals and cross-cultural processes together with the concept of *op-lom* a Lao word referring to “a process of listening, discussing, educating, teaching, reminding and advising parties to resolve disputes constructively”, (p. 6) are part of the traditional conflict resolution practices of Laos. *Op-lom* and the different levels of mediation within the spectrum of conflict resolution opportunities offer creative and (many times) successful ways of conflict resolution in Laos.

The audience of the book will be academics, students, lawyers, humanitarian workers, peace-keepers and nonprofit organizations with an interest in Southeast Asian Studies, War Studies and Conflict Studies.

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