

A scenic view of the Ou River in Northern Laos. In the foreground, several children are playing in the water, splashing and splashing. The water is a muddy brown color. In the background, there are lush green mountains under a clear blue sky. A large tree with green leaves is on the right side of the frame.

# The Loss of the Ou River

By Saimok

“Talaeng taeng talam bam!” Sounds of warning: “I am coming to get you!” Khmu children play hide and seek along the banks of the Ou River in Northern Laos. Ngoi district, Luangprabang province.

November 2019. photo by author

The first time I saw the Ou River I was mesmerized by its beauty: the high karst mountains, the dense jungle, the structure of the river and the flow of its waters. The majority of the people along the Ou River are Khmu, like me. We understand one another. Our Khmu people belong to specific clans, and my Sim Oam family name ensures the protection and care of each Sim Oam clan member I meet along my journey.

Sim Oam is similar to a kingfisher, and as members of the Sim Oam clan, we must protect this animal, and not hunt it. If a member of our clan breaks the taboo and hunts a sim oam, his teeth will fall out and his eyesight will become cloudy. Other families have specific tree species as clan names, and must not cut down that tree. As Khmu, our world is populated by the spirits of nature- trees and animals in the mountains and along the river. Our cemeteries are full of mature trees, and outsiders fear the powerful spirits of the old trees in these sacred places. I am not afraid, though. These places remind me of my grandparents' stories of life deep in the forest, when humans and animals could communicate freely. When I see the Ou River, the mystery of the place compels me to explore it, to know it more deeply, and to immerse myself in its atmosphere and history.

"In Khmu language, ou means to contain: to contain rice, to contain food and water, to contain silver and gold," a 99-year old grandmother told me. Having spent much time over the years visiting Khmu communities along the Ou, I longed to see the birthplace of the River, and set out on a journey.

With its source near the Lao-Chinese border, the Ou River, or Nam Ou, is 485 km long and flows north to south through three Lao provinces: Phongsaly, Oudomxay, and Luang Prabang. It meets the Mekong River just upstream of Luang Prabang town.

Arriving in the northern province of Phongsaly province by truck, I was surprised that this remote corner of the land of a million elephants felt like a new province of China. Chinese luxury cars sped along the bumpy road, posing a danger to the children playing along the dusty roadside. In nearly every village I passed, the newer concrete homes featured tiles bearing Mao Zedong's image. "I've seen this image in many homes in this area. May I ask who he is?" I asked the village leader at a local truck stop.

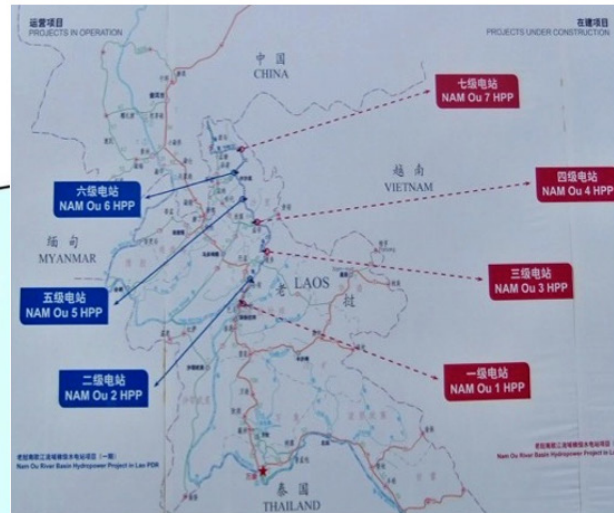


*Long Tang village, Yoth Ou District, Phongsaly province, October 2018. Photo by author*

He considered the image for a while and replied with a smile, "I don't know who he is! I bought these tiles for our new house, and his image was on one of them."

I checked into a simple guesthouse in Boun Nua district, close to the Chinese border. "Are you here to work on the Nam Ou 7 dam?" the guesthouse owner asked. "Those guys are working on Nam Ou 7," she gestured to five men having a smoke in the lobby. "Anytime they travel up to Nam Ou 7, they stay here for a night."

I learned that Nam Ou 7 is the highest in a seven-dam cascade being built on the Ou River by



Ou River dams 6, 5, and 2 (blue) are in operation, and 7, 4, 3 and 1 (red) are currently under construction (International Rivers, Nam Ou Power Company Ltd).

China's Sinohydro Corporation in a joint venture with the Lao state electricity corporation Electricite Du Laos (EDL), which holds a 15 per cent stake in the project. All electricity generated by the Ou River dams will be sold to EDL. As a key part of China's Belt and Road Initiative in Laos, the Lao government has granted the Chinese enterprise planning and development rights over the entire Ou River basin. Although the dams will permanently alter the ecosystem of our country's longest Mekong tributary, limited information is publicly available, and few Lao citizens know the details of this project.

### Nam Ou 7

The next day, I arrived in Ban Lantoui, home to a colorful array of ethnic groups: Khmu, Thai Dam, Thai Daeng, Yao, Leu, Hmong, Akha, Lah, and Lolo. This was the Laos of my grandparents' time. A cold wind blew down from the mountains. Nearby is a recently opened international checkpoint opposite Jiangcheng town in Yunnan province, China. I approached a group of men who were sitting and chatting over a pot of tea. "Brother, do you know where the Ou River is born?" I waited for the answer but instead got

laughter. "Even though we were born here, we've never seen the birthplace of the Ou River. We've only heard our grandparents talk about it. The source of the Ou is very small, and the path leading to it is tiny. You're going to need a big motorbike."

"First you need to go to Yod Ou, the closest village to the Ou River's source," an old man from the next table over joined our conversation. "I'll draw you a map."

I crossed a simple wooden bridge at the entrance to Yod Ou, a small ethnic Lah village on a hill overlooking the Ou River. High mountains and forest surrounded the community. I spotted a few traditional houses made of earth mixed with straw and buffalo dung, along with the more common concrete and wooden homes. A young village leader named Saykeo walked with me through his tea plantation alongside the river. "Before, my friends and I often went fishing on the Ou River, and we would catch all different kinds of fish. Now that they've blocked the river, we mainly just catch Golden Asian Carp and Nile Tilapia that have been released by the government." Saykeo forced a smile for his guest. "I



don't want to talk about this. It hurts my heart that we cannot do anything about it. We should not speak so loud, it's dangerous."

People here have until recently relied on fish for their daily meals, supplemented by both cultivated and wild vegetables, and large and small forest animals. Construction of the Nam Ou 7 hydropower station began in 2016, and local residents are already feeling the impacts. "Since they blocked the river, fish have become difficult to catch, and people have started to use electricity to shock fish and dynamite to blow them out of the water. Now the price of fish in the market is very expensive," Pinseng, a young ethnic Lue man joined our conversation in the tea fields.

Located in Phongsali County, about 520 kilometers upstream of Luang Prabang town, the US \$656 million Nam Ou 7 hydropower project has an installed capacity of 210 MW, and is scheduled to begin generating electricity in 2020. The

dam will create a reservoir backing up into the Phou Den Din National Protected Area, affecting critical habitats of Asian elephants, Indochinese tigers, white-cheeked gibbons and large antlered muntjac. <sup>1</sup>

On the way back to Phongsali town, I stopped in Muang Hath Hin village, just below the Nam Ou 7 dam. Father Xieng, an ethnic Lue elder, led me up a steep path to an ancient temple of mysterious origin that had been in existence before the area was settled. As we sat overlooking the village, he told me, "We are afraid of flooding from the Nam Ou 7, as our village is directly downstream of the dam. Since the project's completion, the flow of the river has become erratic. During the rainy season, the water level is very high. We requested two times to relocate our village to higher ground, but the government ignored our requests. We don't want to be like Hat Sa," Father Xieng referred to the next town downstream, severely damaged by floodwater in



Entrance to the Nam Ou 7 Dam, Muang Hath Hin village, Phongsaly district, Phongsaly province. Oct 2018 (photo by author)

the last rainy season. “If Nam Ou 7 breaks, I’m afraid we’ll be washed away.”

### Nam Ou 6

The next day, I took a speedboat on the Ou River from Phongsali downstream to the town of Hat Sa. Arriving in Hat Sa, I stopped at a small noodle shop to get out of the cold rain. As I waited for my soup, I noticed six small rooms behind the sitting area. Two fancy lights hung from the ceiling. A few moments later, a girl came out of one of the small rooms. She looked too young to work there, perhaps 13 or 14 years old. More girls joined her. Although it was noon, they appeared sleepy, with messy hair. Raindrops continued falling on the roof. The girls slowly took turns washing their faces and putting on new makeup for the night.

The shop had only one other customer, who introduced himself as Daeng. He was 30 years old and worked as a laborer at the dam site. “Sex workers can be found around all seven Ou River dam stations, and many of them are young Khmu women. There are three women who travel up and down the river. These women are brokers, looking for fresh young girls from local communities. At first, they invite the girls to work at a small restaurant serving beer. Then they invite them to earn extra money from the customers. Older Chinese guys pay the most, young Chinese guys pay less, and Lao guys pay even less. Many young village girls marry Chinese men even though they don’t speak a word of the language.”

Hat Sa is now a ghost ferry station. The Nam Ou 6 dam is located about 10 km. from here. Construction of the Nam Ou 6 dam started in 2012, and commercial operation began in 2018, with an installed capacity of 180 MW. <sup>2</sup>

“Are you going to stay the night here in Hat Sa?” asked Noy, the daughter of my boat driver and a former onion seller in the local market. “You’d better hope it doesn’t flood while you’re asleep!” she joked. She had lost much of her property when the Hat Sa market flooded several months ago. She didn’t receive any compensation because the dam company said they had given a warning, but the warning was late, and the floodwaters came in the middle of the night. Warning signs have been placed downstream of each dam, but the Lao language on the Chinese-made signs is poorly translated and incomprehensible.

“There is no more community market here in Hat Sa because it was destroyed when they released water from the Nam Ou 6 dam in July of 2018,” explained Noy’s father. “The community market used to be held every 10 days. Now we have to travel one hour by motorbike to buy food from the market in Phongsali town, and the cost of petrol cuts into our food budget.”



*Khua district, Phongsaly province, October 2018. Few passenger boats remain on the Ou River (photo by author)*



Noy's mother, Yai, walked with me along the Nam Ou 6 dam reservoir several kilometers above Hat Sa town as the sun set. "This is where we used to collect edible riverweed in the dry season. We'd dry it and grill it over the fire. Now the riverweed is gone. I used to buy fish from fishermen in this area and sell them to restaurants here and in Phongsali town. The fish were as large as 6 kg, and I earned enough money to send my two children to college. These days it's rare to find fish."

### Nam Ou 5

After spending the night with Noy and her parents in Hat Sa, I continued my journey by boat to Samphanh district, Phongsali province, site of the Nam Ou 5 dam. Construction of the Nam Ou 5 dam began in 2012 and commercial operation began in 2018. According to Nam Ou Power Company Ltd., Nam Ou 5 has a total installed capacity of 240 MW, and was built at a cost of 415.8 million US dollars.

As it is no longer possible to travel downstream from Nam Ou 5 by boat, I jumped in a truck owned by Mr. Duansy, who took me up to the dam station. A passenger truck driver, he had seen me taking photos and asked if I wanted a closer look. On the way, we passed a large resettlement village. "At first, the dam company said that this village wouldn't flood so the residents wouldn't have to relocate. But it ended up flooding, and the company moved them to that resettlement site uphill." He took out a six-pack of Lao beer and opened a can. "Let's drink. I don't want to talk about this shitty business."

### Nam Ou 4

Mr. Duangsy drove us past the Nam Ou 4 dam, located in Muang Khua Country, Phongsali Province, about 300 kilometers upstream of Luang Prabang town. The air felt warmer here, with fewer trees. According to the Nam Ou Power Company Ltd., the dam has an installed capacity



The Nam Ou 4 dam, currently under construction. Khua district, Phongsaly province. Oct 2018 (photo by author)



I arrived in Ngoi town just in time to visit the local market, held every ten days. Khoun and her husband Lin had begun walking down the mountains before sunrise to reach the market from their remote Khmu village. “Last July, we received a warning that the Nam Ou 6 dam was going to collapse due to the high water level,” Khoun told me. “We had already heard about the flood in Hat Sa, and were afraid that the Nam Ou 5 dam and communities downstream would be affected. On hearing the warning the people in our village got scared and ran away from their homes to the high mountains. Children and old people cried, afraid of a dam collapse. People carried bags of rice, bottles of drinking water, cooking pots, lighters, money and valuables; some people carried chickens and took their dogs with them up to mountains. Only very old people who could not walk far and a few young people stayed in the village to guard their homes. They said that if they died, they would die at home. We stayed in the mountains until sunrise. The river was still very high but the dam hadn’t collapsed, so we returned home.” Khoun paused before she continued, “Every time it rains hard, we cannot sleep.”

Khoun’s husband Lin added, “The night we fled to the mountains, we used our jackets as blankets, we used leaves as mats, and logs as pillows; some people slept against trees. Most of us could not sleep, and stayed awake talking about the river until the morning. Only the children could sleep.”

From Ngoi town, I traveled to the Khmu and Lao village of Sop Jiam, a village below the Nam Ou 3 reservoir that is slated for relocation. The residents have not yet moved to the newly built resettlement area, though the houses are all ready. I sat next to Ms. Boun, watching her weave on a traditional loom. “Since the river was

blocked for construction of the Nam Ou 3 dam, we’ve lost our fish, edible riverweed, and river-bank gardens. Our children are going hungry. I wish the government would provide us with some jobs or new skills so that we could earn income to replace the loss of our daily food. Our village has become smaller and smaller because of erosion along the Ou River banks. Our river-bank gardens are lost. We don’t know when we’ll have to move.”

### Nam Ou 2

After spending the night in Ngoi town, I continued by boat to the tourist town of Nong Khiaw, and from there took a minivan to the Nam Ou 2 dam in Luang Prabang Province. Boat service between Nong Khiaw and Luang Prabang town was stopped due to construction of the Nam Ou 2 hydropower station, the first of the series of seven Ou River dams. Construction began in 2012 and commercial operation commenced in 2017. According to the Nam Ou Power Company Ltd.,



*The Nam Ou 2 dam. Oct 2018 (photo by the author)*





*The Nam Ou 1 station in Luang Prabang Province, about 70% complete (photo by author)*

Nam Ou 2 has a total installed capacity of 120 MW and generates about 546 GWh of electricity annually for local supply. On the way, we passed by resettlement villages with rows of new houses along the highway.

### **Nam Ou 1**

The last in the seven-dam cascade, Nam Ou 1 dam is located in Pak Ou County, Luang Prabang Province, about 40 kilometers upstream of Luang Prabang town. According to the Nam Ou Power Company Ltd., the total installed capacity of the power station is 180 MW. Construction on the Nam Ou 1 dam began in 2016 and is scheduled for completion in late 2019.

I stopped in Ban Tha Hae, a community scheduled for relocation to make way for Nam Ou 1. There I met Sor, a petit dark-skinned woman who used to farm the terraced rice fields that have now been filled for construction of the new resettlement site. Most people have already moved, and their original houses have been demolished. Sor's family is one of the few that remain.

"I am not satisfied with the compensation I've been offered," Sor said angrily. "I have a big two-story house with a vegetable garden in the backyard, but they said we only have a few people in our family, so we'll receive a very small resettlement house. There are 3 categories of houses: a family with 1 to 3 members gets the smallest house, a family with 4 to 6 members gets a medium-sized house, and a family with 7 to 10 family members gets a bigger house. It doesn't matter how big your original house was. My family worked very hard and we saved all our lives to build our home, and now we have to move to a much smaller one. I won't get any compensation for my vegetable garden. There's no compensation for lost fishery income or the loss of edible riverweed. Only the loss of mango trees, jack fruit trees, and banana trees are compensated, but they haven't told us how much per tree."

“We don’t know what to do. Our house is marked in red, which means we have to move. They’ve set a deadline for us. It does not matter if you don’t move, they’ll come and knock down your house anyway.”

Sor’s brother Khamxay walked over from next door to join us. “My cousin moved into her new resettlement house last month only to find that the wood used to build it is young and already being eaten by insects. Many families have complained about the new houses that the company built for them,” he said. “Some people with families in the Nam Ou 4 dam site upstream have warned their families and friends not to take the houses the project has built for them. They should take money instead of a house, even if it’s just a small amount.”

“My house is not even on the list to receive compensation, but they’ve marked it in red anyway, and we’ve been notified that we’ll have to leave next month,” Sor’s neighbor Paisy joined in.

“We reported this issue to the company and the district authorities but got no response. When I reported it to the former district governor, he said that the head of the village and the present district governor are trying to blackmail me. He suggested I report it to the company directly, and if nothing moves forward, then to go back to the provincial governor. I’ve been fighting for 2 months now, with no progress. If no-one gets back to me by the end of this month, I’ll go to the national assembly in Vientiane.”

Paisy spoke with tears, but she is definitely a fighter. “I never dreamed that I’d have to move from my home where my soul rests and my ancestors are buried. I don’t want to talk about this anymore. It makes me want to cry. This problem is buried deep in my heart.”

A man walking by overheard our conversation and shouted, “You know they will compensate you for everything. You don’t need to complain to outsiders about this!” He pulled out a smart-



*A home in old Lat Tha Hae village, demolished to make way for the Nam Ou 1 Dam*





*Muang Tha Hin resettlement village (photo by author)*

phone from his jeans pocket and snapped a photo of us. Sor explained that he was one of the village committee members.

“This is my story, and none of your business!” Paisy shouted back. “You are not me, and you will never understand how I am suffering.”

I walked a couple kilometers to Huay Loh, an ethnic Lao community. The homes along the road skirting the Ou River had already been demolished, with only seven houses on the far side of the road remaining. I met Ms. Kungsy working in her garden.

“The houses in the resettlement village are already damaged by insects. At first they said they’d give 20m x 25m of land to each family, but in reality they only gave us 15m x20m.” said Kungsy. “One day I might not be able to control myself, and I’ll bomb this dam. I don’t care if they find out and throw me in jail!”

Arriving in the hot valley of Luang Prabang town, I reflected on my journey. I had come in search of stories from old people about the land of bounty along the Ou River. I now see that they’re only stories. I found little trace of our old ways. An important source of our culture and livelihoods has been lost. Where is the beauty of this place?

The Ou River dam cascade and accompanying Belt and Road initiatives are symbols of “one thousand years of friendship” between the Lao and Chinese people. These new developments are lacking in transparency and public participation, however. What benefits do these projects offer our citizens, especially in the context of increasing floods and drought across the country? Are the Lao government and project owners prepared to secure the safety of riverside communities along the length of the Ou River?

There is an increasing sentiment that our leaders are selling our land and rivers to foreigners. Many people are leaving permanently to take their chances elsewhere. Our country has become a foreign place. I feel like a stranger in my own land.

## Endnotes

- 1 Nam Ou River. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.internationalrivers.org/campaigns/nam-ou-river>.
- 2 EDL-Generation Public Company (2018) <http://market.sec.or.th/public/ipos/IPOSGetFile.aspx?TransID=203787&TransFileSeq=37>



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