Opiates to amphetamines: Development and change in the Golden Triangle

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Introduction

Amphetamine use results to a large extent from the pressure many people feel to keep up the increasingly hectic pace of modern life, to cope with a world in which nothing seems predictable but change — constantly accelerating change ... To put it quite simply: our culture influences, encourages, and sometimes causes people to use amphetamines; and their behaviour under the influence of these drugs often constitutes a caricature of the very society that produced it (Grinspoon and Hedblom 1975:288, 291).

Although opiates retain a substantial production and consumption base in mainland Southeast Asia, amphetamine type stimulants (ATS) have recently become the drug of choice for producers in the Golden Triangle. This transition can be linked to quick and substantial financial returns, ease and flexibility in production, and lack of comprehensive control over precursor chemicals (primarily ephedrine). As a result, ATS trafficking dramatically increased in the region during the late 1990s and its consumer base swiftly expanded among urban and rural youth, students, labourers, sex workers, farmers and fishermen. Its recent and rapid uptake means that in most countries of Southeast Asia, 'ATS dependence is not widely understood and recognition of the growing problem of ATS abuse is only beginning' (Richards et al. 2003:1).

In Southeast and East Asia, ATS demand has emerged in sync with changing value systems fostered by specific development trajectories, which is to say that there are specific reasons why ATS consumption in the region at present vastly overshadows that of heroin or opium. Patterns of drug use and abuse evolve as socio-economic modernisation and increased engagement in a globalised commodity culture create new markets for synthetic drugs in lowland and highland populations. These changing patterns bear the clear imprint of trafficking and marketing strategies, dovetailing neatly with a larger order of social change and the ongoing production of a modern subjectivity.

In the highlands of the Golden Triangle, development policies inadvertently encourage changing forms of drug abuse even as specific projects focus on opium reduction as a primary goal. Although there are improvements in livelihood strategies and road networks that provide access to markets, schools and health clinics, in most cases development over the past several decades has been a mixed blessing for highland populations and minority ethnic groups. The emphasis on cash-crop production that serves as a push for market expansion at the national level, sedentarisation at the community level and removal of opium cultivation at the household level has proved highly problematic for highland villagers throughout the Golden Triangle. For example, as opium cultivation has been successfully controlled among Thai hill tribes over the past twenty years, exploitation, heroin use and HIV/AIDS have also become prevalent in highland communities.

Across the border in Laos, opium eradication is a more recent initiative. It has become a key platform of the National Poverty Eradication Programme (GoL 2003) which dictates that, as citizens of modern-day socialist Laos, highland villagers are expected to actively engage in a newly embraced capitalist mode of life. ATS consumption is accompanying this transition for reasons that are implicit, but unplanned for, in the shift from subsistence to the market economy. My intention here is to explain differing drug-use practices by examining social changes that confront Akha highlanders living in northwest Laos as they increasingly enter a broader commodity-based economy to make the point that problems of illicit drug use are not the simple product of availability.

While it is possible to identify clandestine production networks, forces motivating a growing consumer demand are more difficult to isolate. The consumption of different forms of drugs has been embedded in social change and economic development for centuries and probably longer. Widespread sugar, coffee and tea uptake, for example, occurred in the West with the shift from circadian rhythms required by industrialisation and regimented production. Nowadays, in much of the world, ATS is a thoroughly effective symbol of a social ethos geared to increased production, cash income and a consumer culture oriented to the pursuit of pleasure through purchase. Leaving to one side the growing range of items through which desire is manifest in the highly consumerist cultures of urban Southeast Asia, it is important to consider how politicalisations of pleasure and social subjectivity underpin the transition in drug-taking practices in the first place. In turn this helps to explain why Lao Akha are not currently replicating the heroin uptake of their Thai counterparts.
Minorities, drugs and assimilation

Drug cultivation and development strategies have long been entwined in the Golden Triangle, an area whose ecology of cool hills and poor soils make it well-suited to be one of the largest opiate-producing regions in the world (see Boonwaat, this issue). Large-scale opium cultivation was introduced to Southeast Asia by minority ethnic groups (primarily Yao and Hmong, to a lesser extent Akha, Lisu and Lahu) fleeing the Opium Wars and constant fighting between warlords and bandits in southern China in the mid-nineteenth century. Once established within national borders, governments soon pressured highlanders to grow opium for national and colonial excises. While most local use among minority groups has typically been medicinal and social, the economic value of opium as a valuable trading commodity has been an adequate incentive for highlanders to cultivate poppy regardless, and at times in defiance, of warlord and state controls.

While exact timelines are murky, the Akha (of the Tibeto-Burman language group) are thought to have gradually moved southwards for several hundred years. Typically, before programmes to integrate them into centralised forms of state governance, the Akha have lived, alongside other minority groups, scattered through mountainous forested zones of the upper Mekong, practising subsistence swidden (including poppy cultivation). They reside in Burma (approximately 180,000), southern China (150,000), northern Thailand (33,000) and Vietnam (12,000). Within the past 150 years nearly half of the 60,000 Akha in Laos have settled in Luang Namtha Province which borders China and Burma. Until recently, the majority had populated hills surrounding lowland valleys, practising dry rice farming. Accompanying widespread opium production among Lao Akha communities, levels of addiction have been significant, prompting recent development programmes to focus specifically on drug rehabilitation initiatives alongside national policies of drug eradication.

Following UN prohibitionist models, in recent decades the region's highland populations have been subject to numerous state and international interventions to reverse reliance on opium production. With varying commitment from local governments, foreign development aid has supported national mandates that prohibit poppy production, which together with shifting cultivation is depicted as inherently antithetical to modernisation.

In the face of these non-negotiable components, punitive action from the State is often built around a politics of ethnic difference premised on threats that traditional minority-group practices pose to both the environment and national security through migration, potential rebellion and illicit drug production (McCaskill 1997).

The Akha, like other highland ethnic groups in the region, have been historically associated with traditional practices that are now seen as inappropriate in modern state functioning. In Thailand, lowlanders consider the Akha to be the 'most "primitive" of the hill tribes' (Kammerer 2000:47). The confrontation between cultural difference and national development has fostered social disjunctions that cause large-scale Akha movement to towns and cities, widespread uptake of heroin, commonplace female prostitution, and epidemics of HIV/AIDS and malnutrition (Geusau 1992; Toyota 1996).

State forces seeking to control the Akha's semi-sedentary lifestyle in Laos are more recent; the impacts of crop substitution, relocation and village consolidation are still being determined. One constant is the central role that drugs play for the Akha both prior to and as a result of modernisation in Thailand and Laos. The rapid increase of ATS usage in highlands and lowlands in both countries adds a further chapter to this complex history.

Drugs and development

Examining processes of assimilation and culture change among ethnic groups also highlights the importance of understanding the intersection of development policies and evolving drug use patterns. In very general terms, it is possible to broadly characterise four different levels of approach to drug problems: firstly, the clinical or biomedical approach that might consider (among other things) neurological effects, detox treatments and the chemical toxicity of different drugs; secondly, the public health approach that examines and seeks to intervene in the specific risk practices such as mode of intake, shared paraphernalia and the use (non-use) of clean needles. The third level looks more broadly at how development and larger social forces create individual and communal vulnerability to drug use in the first place. Lastly, we have the geopolitical level that focuses on the nation-state as its unit of regulation and seeks to mobilise policies and interdiction strategies. This is not a comprehensive breakdown but the point is to highlight that a development focus looks not just at individual practices or national polices but the impact of a range of socio-cultural and economic variables of communities and how drug use emerges as a product of forces beyond simple individual 'delinquency'.

Focusing at the development level we see that the spread of liberal capitalism has played a fundamental role in the gradual (and not so gradual) evolution of social and material practices into a so-called post-traditional society in much of the world. Modernity and capitalist networks of production and control have introduced new political, economic and social relations and accompanying subjective identity formations. Contemporary Laos is no exception since it has gradually opened up to a wider world of liberalised trade and investment. While the specific forms and sensibilities promoted by modernisation are never entirely fixed, modernity's emergent generic structures and ideologies are usually considered to include: the birth of
consumer society; the spread of market relations and wage-labour along with the growth of instrumental rationality and an individualistic sensibility; the rise of national sentiment, the nation-state and racialised perceptions of identity; and the development of administrative bureaucracies and modern tax systems (Scott 2002).

These characteristics are becoming evident throughout Laos including the highlands where over the past several years, everyday livelihoods of Lao Akha (and other ethnic groups) have been radically altered by national mandates facilitated, in turn, by international aid. The Lao Government is increasingly insistent that pioneer swidden agriculture and opium cultivation be halted. Thus, the newly adopted National Poverty Eradication Programme (GoL 2003) demands of the highland population a dramatic shift from subsistence to engagement in a market economy through sedentary cash-crop production and wage-labour relations (often accompanied by movement out of the highlands). Removal of economic and psychological reliance on opium — commonly termed 'alternative development' — has been a cornerstone of modernisation policies in the Golden Triangle for decades, and Laos is not a new story. However, the history of supply and demand reduction is not one of judicious substitution that cleanly removes need or compulsion. Rather, development-induced changes also demand new social competencies, the fraught achievement or demonstration of which frequently implicate new forms of drug use, as rising levels of illicit substance abuse throughout the region (and the world) testify.

Evolving patterns of drug use and abuse are deeply embedded in a broad array of changes in the social order and the individual's sense of identity within this. In countries flanking northern Laos, opium prohibition led directly to heroin epidemics among minority groups; under similar eradication programmes Akha highlanders in Laos are currently turning to ATS rather than heroin. Examining trajectories of drug use within the region shows that while addiction and compulsion may be nothing new to highlanders (and lowlanders), its form and associated practices, even in the context of illicit substances, evolve for reasons anchored in transformations of value systems implicit in new social and productive relations.

Social production of drug use in Southeast Asia

Though opium and heroin still have a substantial number of users in Thailand (and Vietnam, Burma and China), data from Thai treatment centres suggest that in the late 1990s the scale of ATS use (locally termed ya ba — the crazy drug) widely overshadowed heroin. Although they are only estimates, some commentators suggest there are up to six million ATS users in Thailand, and by 2003 the number of ATS pills entering Thailand was believed to have reached almost one billion (Bezziccheri 2003:4, 22). The recent Thai 'War on Drugs' has significantly lowered these figures; by how much and for how long remains to be seen (see Aramrattana and Jinawat, this issue).

Since 1997, ATS use in Laos has also become widespread — more than 1.5 million ATS tablets were destroyed in 2001-2002 (Richards et al. 2003:49). News reports indicated that in 2003, four per cent of high school students in nine provinces tested positive to ATS use (urine samples); in 2004, 11 per cent of students in six provinces showed positive test results; in 2005, the numbers of students testing positive for ATS use had risen to 28 per cent (Vientiane Times:6). It is not just the amount being consumed that is of importance; the social context is also central to its uptake: 'compared to heroin, ya ba is a social drug taken by workers to perform longer hours and by kids to have fun in groups: heroin on the contrary, is an isolationist drug taken in lone settings' (Bezziccheri 2003:5). This distinction is of major significance and highlights that ways in which pleasure is sought can also stand as a 'figure for the transformation of social relations' (Jameson 1983:14). Whereas opiate addicts are marginalised socially and economically, it can be argued that rapid ATS spread has both elevated and become symptomatic of commodity-based desire at new levels throughout mainland Southeast Asia.

ATS's growing popularity is based both on its performance-enhancing characteristics (perfect for capitalist production), and a growing demand for 'designer drugs' among urban club-goers (perfect for conspicuous consumption). Production and display and pleasure are basic tenets of a consumer capitalism that has become such a paramount symbol of the vibrant Southeast Asian economies. As Grinspoon and Hedblom (1975:180) suggest: 'Amphetamine, by its alerting effect, helps people to get on with what is regarded as the business of society — studying for examinations, driving trucks for long distances, athletic performances — so the notions of pleasure and usefulness, of feeling good and doing something right are fused'. Grinspoon and Hedblom focus on the USA of several decades ago; nevertheless, their analysis of episodic ATS epidemics is particularly relevant for present-day Southeast Asia. Here, we might usefully add to their list: labourers, women in the commercial sex industry, and highlanders, all of whom are subject to pressures to 'perform' in pursuit of money income.

Pursuing pleasure through drug use is not straightforward, however. It becomes problematic in several ways: the direct abuse and physio/psychological damage from excessive use, or in a more relative sense, where pleasure entails the pursuit of something better than that which is currently held (Jay 1999). Relative pleasure comes, in this second instance, from the use of ATS to actively avoid an existing unpleasant or intolerable situation and dependency begins as a product of this enforced...
Drug control and its consequences

In Thailand many of the state-based drug control initiatives came under the rubric of state security and 'the minority problem' in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. While international politics underpin local strategies, Lao opium eradication initiatives derive from a broader policy concern with rural poverty. In Laos, opium reduction and ATS spread are happening concurrently and it seems unlikely, for the moment at least, that heroin will gain the foothold it did in Thailand. Building on an inclusionist socialist ideology, highland villagers are being called on to become contributing Lao citizens by engaging in a more centralised market economy - opportunities unavailable to many highlanders in Thailand who have historically been denied citizenship and thereby rights to education, landholding and legal employment. In Laos, the opium reduction projects have incurred a process of substantial relocation to the lowlands in Sing and Long valleys (see Cohen, this issue) as the Akha search for alternative market opportunities, a movement which fits neatly with the Lao government's 'focal site' strategy of halting swidden and crop (or prior models of enforced re-education) but through substituted symbolic and experiential pleasure. In so doing, new material and social relations foster changing subjectivities. In this respect, such programmes confront lifestyles where drugs have played a key symbolic and material role for hundreds of years. They are part of a national policy that insists there will be no opium cultivated after 2005. They also confront a situation where ATS is increasingly considered a low-cost commodity (pills sell for around US$0.60 each) that has resonant symbolic and use value for wide sectors of the Lao population: for urban adolescents for whom it is perhaps the cheapest way to engage in a global youth market, for labourers who seek stamina, for the growing number of women in the sex industry for whom it increases the ability to converse with prospective customers (and reduces dietary consumption), and for highlanders for whom it provides a counter to the lethargy and lassitude associated with opium use.

Of concern here is how the dual processes of opium eradication and village relocation encourage ATS uptake among the Akha. Since 2000, ATS use has increased dramatically in Namtha province. It was first introduced within enclaves of townspeople, largely comprising the lowland Tai Lue ethnic group, but its consumption is moving steadily outwards into the Akha villages in the hills. Notably ATS use is highest in villages in closer proximity to the town, but its use among the Akha is not simply a product of ready access, as local traders market ya ba in nearby villages. It is also actively purchased by those seeking its social and/or physical effects. Akha labourers at the small port on the Mekong river bordering Burma regularly consume ATS to expedite contract work loading and unloading Thai and Chinese cargo: those working as contract labourers in rice, watermelon or sugarcane fields sometimes smoke it.

Villagers undertaking new economic ventures use it to maximise their output. For example, palm fruit has recently become a valuable commodity traded to Thailand: villagers collecting and lugging the fruits to the sales points take ATS to expedite their lengthy night-time journeys through forest trails. Methods of spreading its uptake can be insidious. Landowners reportedly offer ATS on occasion instead of, or alongside, cash or opium as wages for Akha labour in lowland rice fields, or on road construction projects. As in Thailand, a primary market is young people who want to follow big city trends and labourers who want to extend their physical capabilities. To date, virtually everything Akha hear about ATS is positive — it doubles energy for work, it offers new exciting ways of thinking, it creates a good mood for hours and should a partner be available, men report that one can have sex all night.

Significantly, ATS's appeal is not limited to marginalised opium addicts; its uptake is broadly encouraged by those selling their labour regardless of prior history with opium and its marketability is reinforced as a packaged, refined commodity. Due to the pejorative association of opiates with highland traditions, heroin use by minority groups deeply inscribes the bounds of ethnicity; ATS, on the other hand, currently offers the Lao Akha the timely opportunity to consume a product associated both materially and affectively with the wider world of market enterprise and commodity exchange.
Conclusion

It might be argued that ATS is a consummate postmodern commodity: small mobile factories use imported substances to synthesise pills by the million and market them through transnational flows tailored specifically to target communities. But when we consider demand, it becomes clear that increasing ATS use among Southeast Asian highland and lowland populations is closely embedded in the social production of a modern subject. In the Golden Triangle, changing patterns of drug use offer us a clear indication of the complex interrelation of social, psychic and material relations in a changing arena of individual choice and heightened governmentality.

Laos has begun similar opium prohibition initiatives to those carried out in Thailand over the past 30 years. While there are important distinctions in the way the Lao government handles issues of ethnic politics and nation-building, there are nonetheless many similarities in drug control both in urban (clinic-based) and rural (crop eradication) sectors. But even as urban Lao youth emulate Thai youth culture’s fascination with the pleasures offered by ATS and its direct links with the wider world of accessible, cheap and fashionable commodities, Lao highland communities differ from their Thai counterparts.

Rather than heroin, highlanders in northwest Laos are at present increasingly using ATS. The distinctions can be explained by the different trajectories into capitalist markets. In Laos, with relatively low population density, opium eradication is accompanied by policies that encourage highlanders to move to the lowlands and become active members of a Lao citizenry engaging in a free market economy. In Thailand, relocation projects were rarely successful and development was more typically marked not by movement but by commercial exploitation within the highlands, and increasingly enforced legal strictures on forest protection and national security. Conversely, as the Lao highlanders move geographically and culturally into new material and social relations of production they attempt to negotiate their positions within a new capitalist order and mitigate the potential threats induced by such social upheaval. ATS is being used by the Akha, a population intimately familiar with taking drugs, as a ready-made foil to assist in the transition to new forms of subjectivity required by the adoption of sedentary market trade and wage-labour.

Markets for drugs do not exist *sui generis* — they are created. So too drug epidemics emerge as a product of social relations. Many Akha wish to embrace capitalist forms of accumulation; the opportunity to do so invests life in the lowlands, access to markets, commodities and trade with enormous appeal. Recent government policies remove a large degree of choice as traditional lifestyles are deemed unsustainable. But, as numerous studies show, the transition to (frequently) inequitable relations of production carries its own threats to integrity and well-being. Dramatic increases in ATS use are logical in the sense that they facilitate new and desirable forms of subjectivity in which the traits associated with tradition, such as opium addiction, lethargy and ‘primitiveness’, are exchanged for a new entrepreneurial labourer/trader identity. At the same time, ATS use fosters new forms of psycho/physiological damage, criminality, social exploitation and marginalisation as the Akha maintain drug dependency on the way to new life in the lowlands (Lyttleton 2005).

Note


References


