Relative Pleasures: Drugs, Development and Modern Dependencies in Asia’s Golden Triangle

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ABSTRACT

As opium cultivation is increasingly controlled in the Golden Triangle, producers and traffickers have created new markets for methamphetamines (ATS) amongst highland and lowland populations. At the same time, evolving forms of drug abuse also reflect a larger order of social change that directly shapes the consumer market. This article explores how demand for methamphetamines in mainland Southeast Asia emerges in sync with changing value systems fostered by development trajectories within a globalized commodity culture. The primary focus is on Akha highlanders in northwestern Laos for whom dual processes of opium eradication and village relocation directly encourage the currently prominent uptake of ATS. As Akha move into the lowlands to engage in modern capitalist systems of production, increased methamphetamine use emerges as a means to facilitate a greater reliance on sedentization and petty commodity trade. Rather than the uptake of heroin that took place in neighbouring countries, the transition from opium to methamphetamines is a highly charged sign of new social and material relations adopted by the Lao Akha as they enter primitive forms of capital accumulation and wage-labour.

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 (ATS¹) have

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¹. A category of synthesized drugs including amphetamine, methamphetamine, and ecstasy.

recently become the drug of choice for producers in the Golden Triangle, comprising parts of northern Thailand, northwestern Laos and northeastern Burma. 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 amongst 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).

My argument in this article is that ATS demand has emerged in sync with changing value systems fostered by specific development trajectories. In other words, 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 modernization and increased engagement in a globalized 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. At the same time, they dovetail 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, sedentization 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 amongst Thai hilltribes over the past twenty years, exploitation, heroin use and HIV/AIDS have also become prevalent in highland communities.

Across the border in socialist Lao PDR, opium eradication is a more recent initiative. It has become a key platform of the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NPEP) (GoL, 2003) which dictates that, as citizens of modern-day Lao PDR (forthwith 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 is to explain contrasting drug-use practices by examining social changes that Akha Highlanders in Northwest
Laos confront as they increasingly enter a broader commodity-based economy.2

MODERNITY AND COMPULSION

The spread of liberal capitalism, as many have documented, 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. The world over, 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. While the specific forms and sensibilities promoted by modernization 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 racialized perceptions of identity; and the development of administrative bureaucracies and modern tax systems (Scott, 2002).

Giddens suggests that a pivotal characteristic of modernity’s abstract systems is their disembeddedness, whereby they ‘propel social life away from the hold of pre-established precepts or practices’ associated with traditions (Giddens, 1991: 20). In turn, this disengagement leads to a form of compulsiveness, an emotional drive to repetition, which the modern subject seldom understands. Thus the ‘capitalist, so to speak, was primed to repetition without — once the traditional religious ethic had been discarded — having much sense of why he, or others, had to run this endless treadmill’ (Giddens, 1994: 70). Compulsion in this reading becomes irrevocably invested in various levels of modernity’s structuring of self, ranging from the reliance on abstracted expert knowledge to the emphasis on individuated decision-making and reflexive risk assessment through to hedonism associated with consumer choice. The consumption of illicit substances is a commonplace and often integral part of affective formations within (a globalizing) western popular culture with their own emotional drives to repetition, its uptake

2. The data reported in this article come from ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Laos and Thailand for ten months between 2000 and 2003, mostly in Sing District and Long District, Luang Namtha Province, Lao PDR. Data collection was facilitated with assistance from the development agencies GTZ in Sing District and Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) in Long District. In 2003 research was conducted as part of a larger project conducted with the collaboration of the Lao Institute for Research on Culture. With the help of an Akha research assistant, I conducted unstructured interviews with community leaders, government officials and with a large number of male and female addicts and non-addicts in a sample of twenty-five Akha villages in both lower and mid slopes (see Cohen and Lyttleton, 2002, for a detailed socio-demographic description of Sing District).
frequently theorized as emerging from consumer desire and/or social disaffection.

Many have questioned the emphasis on a modern ‘disengaged subject’ as an accurate reading of individual agency (Taylor, 1989: 514). Nor should we imagine that the spread of modernity produces standardized forms of subjectivity. This is nowhere more obvious than in the diverse and often unintended outcomes of development programmes introducing generic modernization strategies into third world countries. No doubt it is more appropriate to speak of ‘modernities’ when one looks at the range of effects and social transformations that markets, mass media, bureaucratization and commoditization bring about in countries under the global forces of expanding capitalism (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1993: 2). Nevertheless, as Foucault and others have shown, we can detect degrees of conformity when, at its most fundamental level, modernity introduces forms of disciplinary society and the biopolitical production of subjectivity with its articulation of social relations, bodies and minds (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 27). Acknowledging the complex permutations of late twentieth century liberalism’s key platforms of civil society and equal citizenship, and the extent to which these are variably accepted or resisted by national polities and cultural minorities (Ivison, 2002: 43), this article focuses on a more circumscribed aspect of the ways contemporary foreign and state-based development initiatives influence the social production of modern life by applying the notion of ‘modernity as compulsion’ to changing trajectories of drug use amongst the Akha in northwest Laos. Examining the role of addictive substances as the subsistent Akha enter new systems of capital accumulation (or lack of) offers a particularly resonant perspective on embodied experiences and socialized desires implicit in the transition to modernity in the Golden Triangle.

Over the past several years, everyday livelihoods of Lao Akha 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. The newly adopted National Poverty Eradication Programme (GoL, 2003) demands of the poor 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’ — is a cornerstone of modernization policies in the Golden Triangle. 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

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3. Approximately 60 per cent of the Lao population primarily practise subsistence agriculture and roughly 280,000 families use slash and burn techniques — mostly minority ethnic groups who comprise 45 per cent of the national population (UNDP, 2001: 4.1).
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 therefore 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 amongst 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.

**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. 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. Following patterns installed in China and Burma by the British monopoly, both the Thai Government and the French Administration in Indochina attempted to control and profit from opium production during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the aftermath of the Chinese Revolution and during the Vietnamese War new brokers emerged, including the KMT (Chinese Nationalist Army) and the CIA, and networks of international distribution improved (McCoy, 1991). While most local use amongst 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.

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 and use. 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 modernization. In 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 (Feingold, 2000; Kammerer, 1988; McCaskill, 1997; Pinkaew, 2001). Many writers have documented emergent difficulties facing assimilationist development policies that target ethnic minorities as perpetrators of wilful environmental and social damage (Chupinit, 1994; MacCaskill and Kampe, 1997; McKinnon and Viene, 1989; Tapp, 1989).

Throughout the region, State forces demand more than the halting of swidden agriculture and opium production. Socio-economic changes under the guise of instilling new systems of food and cash-crop production inevitably intrude within complex realms of cultural value. Such manoeuvres create conflicts over ethnic identity and consensual belonging within a nationalist imaginary and over the extent to which modernity discursively produces difference, exclusion and marginalization (Nagengast, 1994). Tapp (1989: 69), for example, details how for Hmong in North Thailand the ‘clash over deforestation and poppy cultivation does, unfortunately, express a more fundamental conflict between two very different kinds of social organization’. As nationalist policies create the need for new social competencies, their uneasy adoption has many consequences. 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 hilltribes’ (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). As I will describe, 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 modernization 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.

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 centralized 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 (in numbers of approximately 180,000), southern China (150,000), northern Thailand (33,000) and Vietnam (12,000) (Kammerer, 2000). Within the past 150 years nearly half of the 60,000 Akha in Laos have settled in Sing and Long Districts of Luang Namtha Province which borders China and Burma. Until recently, the majority had populated hills surrounding lowland valleys, practising dry rice farming.
Elsewhere, together with Paul Cohen, I have documented opium’s prominent role in everyday Akha life and the consequences of demand reduction programmes that are part of integrated development initiatives in Luang Namtha (Cohen and Lyttleton, 2002; Lyttleton and Cohen, 2003). Here, rehabilitation projects create complex consequences for Akha addicts whose identity becomes linked to notions of redemption and failure within an idealized (and moralized) development trajectory.

**Drugs and Consumer Demand**

My concern in this article is not with the subjective notions of addiction per se but with how the broader currents of modernity and its stress on individuation and a cash economy set in place a progression to forms of drug use with physical and psychological effects diametrically opposed to those of opium. The shift has concrete implications for drug policies and harm reduction strategies which aim to minimize ‘the adverse consequences of drug use for the society’ and simultaneously the ‘unintended harms of the strategy itself’ (Lenton and Single, 1998: 218). This double-sided approach requires a framework that carefully examines the social production of subjectivities that embrace new forms of drug use. Importantly, illicit drug use is never simply a product of availability. Evolving drug abuse epidemics also require demand. Certainly, it is logical to focus on insurgent ethnic groups, warlords and drug syndicates as perpetuating drug problems in Southeast Asia. Production bases and distribution networks may be clandestine but their existence is obvious both in product seizure and the growing addict population. Forces motivating a growing consumer demand are less simple 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 industrialization and regimented production. Trocki (1999: 156) argues that nineteenth century opium farms were archetypal commodity-producing settlements that brought local peasant farmers into a cash economy, simultaneously creating ‘Southeast Asia’s first class of wage earners’ and demonstrating the ‘close connection between the mass marketing of addictive drugs and the creation of a consumer consciousness’. More than a century later, levels of modernization and degrees of market penetration and commodity culture vary tremendously across the region. For two decades prior to 1997, Thailand had one of the fastest growing economies in the world leading to rapid modernization in most sectors. Neighbouring Laos, on the other hand, has only recently

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4. Thailand has a population of 60 million, Laos 5.7 million; they share 1835 km of border. Thai and Lao languages are to varying degrees mutually comprehensible.
and partially entered the global capitalist market and the socialist government is proceeding slowly into the world of liberalized trade and industrialization. But despite quite different positions on a scale of capitalist development, ATS traffickers are finding ready markets in both countries. There is a notable shift underway in the types of drugs being consumed in rural and urban settings. Explaining this transition allows us to trace further consequences of the nascent capitalist processes Trocki identifies. These days ATS production and consumption emerge as a contemporary element of a global commodity culture. The specific mechanisms encouraging ATS use in the early capitalist hinterlands of Laos and the ritzy nightclubs of late capitalist Bangkok (or Singapore or Hong Kong) differ tremendously. Nonetheless, underlying forces are similar. Across the region, 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.

Giddens suggests that changing social practices underlying the increased penetration of modernity and consumerism demonstrate a concurrent loosening in the emotional component of ritualized knowledge that is always (repetitively) connected to the ‘truth’ of tradition. In this sense, the modern subject can become addicted to almost anything in the compulsive search for an object of pleasure (Giddens, 1994: 71). Clearly, various factors determine which objects or practices become stepping stones within this ‘progress of addiction’. In villages and cities of Southeast Asia we detect both the uptake and shift from one addictive substance to another as markers of this trajectory through an expanding realm of objects to which desire and thereby pleasure attaches. 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 for our purposes to consider how politicized formations 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.

**Social Production of Drug Use in Southeast Asia**

Globalization and the ‘drug problem’ are deeply entwined, as what were ‘once relatively straightforward diagrams of opium and heroin transit routes have become complex interlinking networks’ (Lewis, 2001: 108; Laniel, 1999: 239). So too, regional upsurge in ATS use has evolved from earlier patterns of drug commerce and addiction and further complicated neat distinctions between third world producer and first world consumer countries. In a provocative argument, Trocki (1999: 172) suggests that opium was the first mass-produced commodity in Asia and by acting as a catalyst of the consumer market was vital to capitalist transformation of local
economies. Once a drug-as-commodity system of production was locally established, drug addiction became a key precursor to mass consumption. Over the past two decades heroin has somewhat replaced opium in Thailand (and Vietnam and Burma) but in either case opiate addicts are marginalized economically and socially. Conversely, 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. Data from Thai treatment centres suggest that in recent years ATS (locally termed *ya ba* — the crazy drug) has widely overshadowed heroin and ‘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). ATS’s growing popularity is based both on its performance-enhancing characteristics (perfect for capitalist production), and a growing demand for ‘designer drugs’ amongst urban club-goers (perfect for conspicuous consumption). Produce and display — and feel pleasure while you are doing it — two basic tenets of a consumer capitalism that has become such a paramount symbol of the (once) 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. Although seldom considered in drug policy debates, Jay (1999) reminds us that a primary motive underlying all illicit drug use is precisely this quest for pleasure, although it can be imagined and sought in diverse ways. At heart, the notion of pleasure through greater consumption is an unspoken cornerstone of modernization and underpins many development policies at either the national or local level. As economic growth directly promotes greater consumerism, drug use frequently increases in line with other forms of ‘pleasure-based’ consumption through what Jay terms ‘consumer exoticism’. Alternatively, programmes at the local level can promote forms of ‘pleasure-seeking’ drug behaviour that are based not on consumption per se, but on ameliorating the hardships caused by lifestyle changes in the name of ‘development’.

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5. Grinspoon and Hedblom (1975: 176) note similarly that in the US amphetamine users are typically considered more ‘normal’ than opiate users, hence wider uptake of the drug.
Romanticized theories of pleasure and consumer hedonism notwithstanding, the relevant issue from a harm-reduction perspective is to identify specific circumstances in which the quest for pleasure via drug use becomes a problem, which is to say damaging, for individuals and society. Jay (1999: 7) cites two contexts. The first is when it is linked to ‘ignorance’, and here we might think of youth, students or labourers ignoring dangers of incipient ATS dependence and psychosis fuelled by excessive consumption. High-pitched unease over potential damage from the scale of this form of ‘pleasure-seeking’ is reflected in rampant sensationalism of daily media items on the ‘new’ ATS threat in Thailand (and less often Laos), which run the gamut from commonplace misgivings over hyper-materialist urban youth, fear of drug-pushers targeting schools, anxiety that factory employers lace drinking water with ATS to accelerate production, through to national security concerns over State disintegration.

Pursuing pleasure becomes problematic in a second important way. Echoing Bentham’s philosophy that pleasure and pain are sovereign motivations governing human behaviour (Mercer, 1983), Jay suggests it ‘depends on the situation of the subject before they begin to take drugs’ (1999: 7). Pleasure, more obviously politicized in this second instance, is a relative concept — the pursuit of something better than that which currently holds. Relative pleasure comes, therefore, from the use of drugs to actively avoid an existing unpleasant or intolerable situation and dependency begins as a product of this enforced escapism. Labourers, for example, who are pressured to increase productivity, can be considered to be attempting to avoid ‘a worse situation’ through increased drug use. A Thai Farmers Research Centre survey found that 20 per cent of labourers surveyed in Bangkok in 2000 used methamphetamines as a response to stringent quota demands incurred by the 1997 economic crash (ABC, 2000); significantly, pleasure is further embellished as they are regarded as ‘social heroes’ for their endeavour (Bezziccheri, 2003: 8). In a similar vein, we can also link ‘problematic’ drug-taking specifically to the intersection of development policies and highland minorities whose lives are radically changed, not always for the better. Frequently these mandates come under the guise of seeking to eradicate the ‘drug problem’ in the first place. For example, enforced lifestyle changes amongst the Akha in Thailand suggest that ‘a growing sense

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6. As well as provoking sometimes violent social and psychological destabilization, ATS abuse can be a public health threat. There are conflicting arguments as to how ‘contained’ HIV is amongst injecting drug-using populations (Reid and Crofts, 2000). Because (to date) it is seldom injected in Southeast Asian countries, ATS use promotes different forms of risk for HIV transmission particularly given its large adolescent constituency and the potential of greater bridging mechanisms between drug users and non-users. Although debated, amphetamine use is believed by many to increase libidinal drive and heighten sexual performance and pleasure (Grinspoon and Hedblom, 1975: 103). See Vichai (1999) for data on increased sexual activity of Thai ATS users.
of despair’ had direct links to heightened drug abuse (Kammerer, 2000: 47). In each instance, the affective structures promoting drug use and abuse cannot be separated from a changing moral and political economy of illicit substances within a larger framework of disciplinary modernization.

The Shift from Opiates to Methamphetamines

Increasing criminalization of opium use throughout the world from the late nineteenth century onwards emerged from concern with the moral implications of addiction (Renard, 1997: 317). At the same time, drug production, trafficking and consumption — and attempts to control these — both cement and complicate links to development policies. The global ‘war on drugs’ is used to justify huge budgets geared to international interdiction and local control. Conversely, earnings from drug production finance insurgencies, which threaten national security and create unholy alliances between drug lords, terrorists, insurrectionist groups, rogue governments and corrupt officials at all levels (Steinburg, 2000). Widespread drug trafficking and consumption also create pronounced social and personal consequences subject to complex moral and political adjudications. The panic that ATS is provoking in Southeast Asia today has its basis directly in the lack of control, which is to say delinquency, that drug addiction, in particular ATS, promotes. On the one hand, its performance-oriented effects maximize individualized achievement (and are implicitly rewarded); on the other hand, once personal control is lost and excess is transfigured into psychosocial and material damage, then what was applauded becomes a threat to the very structures that promote its use in the first place.

It is therefore noteworthy that in a contemporary world characterized by small-scale ethnic separatist insurgencies intent on destabilization of a contested nation/state, at a global level opium cultivation and heroin production levelled off during the 1990s, whereas ATS use soared and now exceeds that of cocaine and heroin combined (Dupont, 1999). I have no evidence to suggest that the shift from heroin production to ATS manufacture and intra-regional marketing attributed to Burmese ethnic minorities, primarily the United Wa State Army, is anything more than a practical decision based on profits and desire for the preservation of power that large amounts of money allows. But if we consider the consumer market, there is much at stake in a widespread move from forms of depressant abuse to stimulant addiction. Addicts high on ATS potentially create far more violent forms

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7. While the effects of ecstasy and methamphetamines differ, I refer primarily to the latter which are more common and found in both club situations and amongst larger rural, labourer and student populations. ATS is marketed in a number of different coloured pills (denoting potency) that are most commonly crushed and smoked. Some pills reportedly combine both ATS and heroin.
of disorder and social upheaval than do heroin addicts. It has been well documented that the acute paranoia and psychosis associated with high levels of amphetamine use leads to greater outbursts of violence as a direct consequence of intoxication than those provoked by withdrawal or the unavailability of a drug, which can occur with opiates. It follows that while opiates have long been a pronounced presence in the Golden Triangle, it is this new threat of ATS abuse that has created far more popular and State alarm.

Throughout the region, containment strategies and media panics respond to underlying apprehension that it is not coincidental that ATS has a much larger local consumer base than heroin.8 While it is tempting to pursue connections between ATS use and the fractured, schizoid production of social desiring ‘machines’ that Deleuze and Guattari (1984) identify within trajectories of advanced capitalism, my concern is with highland communities where subjectivities are not yet subsumed by regimented and mechanized modes of production. But even where the impact of capitalist practices remains nascent, embodied structures of affect play a key role in changing drug abuse epidemics. Continued drug use amongst highland populations emerges from the constant intersection of poverty and lack of access to services. This is where drugs and development remain tandem facets of the fraught modernization trajectory taking place in both Thailand and Laos, with similar outcomes in terms of an enforced transition of drug abuse but marked differences in types of drugs being used. In Thailand, heroin largely replaced opium as a consequence of eradication programmes (although drug-use patterns are still evolving). In Laos, heroin is rarely encountered; ATS on the other hand is widespread. Why then, at the start of the new millennium, are Lao Akha more inclined to take ATS rather than heroin? The answer, at least in part, lies in different historical trajectories of drug control and different mechanisms encouraging capital penetration as part of nationalist integration.

Drug Control and its Consequences

Overt government support of poppy cultivation ended in Thailand when production, sale and use of opiates was banned in 1959 (Renard, 2000: 11). As opium production was being eradicated from Thailand in the late 1980s, ethnic groups expanded its cultivation inside Burma and the warlords who controlled trade in opium established heroin refineries close to Thai and Chinese borders to promote and capitalize on evolving forms of drug abuse amongst those who were easily reached through existing networks — a process supported by Haw Chinese and remnants of KMT groups resident

8. Southeast Asia accounted for 41 per cent of global ATS seizures in 1998 (UNDCP, 2000).
in the area (McCoy, 1991). A significant switch from (smoked) opium to (injected) heroin took place amongst highland addicts (Gray, 1998).\footnote{Heroin made its first epidemic appearance in Thailand when opium was banned in 1959; it reappeared in the late 1960s amongst young and urban opiate users (Vichai, 1999: 3). In the mid- to late 1980s, heroin spread to highlanders. By 1994, 150 highland villages in North Thailand had heroin addicts; in 1997 Drug Abuse Programmes were authorized for 1,145 villages identified as having severe drug problems (Renard, 2000: 32, 54).} Nowadays, amidst the recent massive increase in ATS use amongst lowlanders,\footnote{The predominance of ATS in Thailand is demonstrated by a growing number of addicts. From the mid-1990s, ATS users started to outnumber heroin addicts and are now estimated at 1.1 per cent of the population aged 15 and above, compared to 0.6 per cent for heroin (UNDCP, 2001: 52). The overall number treated for ATS addiction in Thailand rose from 1,187 in 1995 to 23,121 in 2001 (Bezziccheri, 2003: 22). At Bangkok’s Thanayarak Institute for Drug Abuse, the percentage of patients treated for ATS addiction rose from 14 per cent in 1996 to 75 per cent in 2002; during the same period, the percentage of heroin addicts dropped from 75 per cent to 10 per cent (Bezziccheri, 2003: 4). North Thailand shows similar trends. In 1995, amphetamine addicts coming to the Chiang Mai Drug Dependence Treatment Centre were less than one tenth the numbers of heroin addicts (142 and 1,558 respectively). In 1999 and 2000, amphetamine addicts outnumbered heroin addicts, although only about 9 per cent of these ATS users are highlanders.} a sequential transition from opium use to heroin to combinations of heroin and amphetamines is appearing in many highland Thai villages. Some younger Thai highlanders now eschew opiates entirely and use only amphetamines, primarily to assist with long hunting trips or farm labour. Unsurprisingly, throughout the 1990s an explosive transmission of HIV/AIDS through injecting drug use took place in Thailand,\footnote{An epidemiological survey in 1994 found that 52 per cent of Thai highland intravenous drug users (IDU) were HIV positive (Barrett and de Palo, 1999: 1842).} Burma, Vietnam and Southern China (UNAIDS, 2000). So far, in the absence of heroin, needle-based HIV transmission has not yet emerged in Laos.

The changing epidemiology of drug abuse has prompted escalating levels of government response. Regional drug summits agree that stringent interdiction is needed to prevent refined drugs (and precursor chemicals) moving across borders. Governments have ambitiously proclaimed that by 2015 ASEAN nations will be drug free. Following suit, national initiatives have been ratcheted up several notches. In December 2000, combined with harsher penalties for drug trafficking, the Lao Prime Minister ordered the total removal of opium by 2005. In northern Laos, agriculture staff told villagers that 2001 was the last year that poppy growing would be tolerated, and in late 2002 much of the opium crop was summarily destroyed just before it flowered. Across the border, the flow of opium, heroin and ATS into Thailand from Burma remains a constant element in the uneasy relations between the two countries that periodically erupt into the closure of crossing points and military clashes across the northern borders. While the exact scale of amphetamine production remains contentious, factories flanking
the Burma border with Northern Thailand and China\textsuperscript{12} are producing large quantities for distribution within Southeast Asia, to the extent that the Thai Government has declared ATS abuse the ‘number one security and social threat’ (US Department of State, 2001). In 2003, a police and military led ‘war on drugs’ throughout Thailand reportedly claimed close to 2,000 lives in shoot-outs during the ensuing clampdowns on petty traders, traffickers and users. The Thai Justice Minister warned all drug dealers that as a consequence of the anti-drug campaign ‘you have only two choices: be arrested or be killed’ (\textit{Bangkok Post} 9 February 2003). In socialist Laos, public discussion of control manoeuvres is more subdued; nevertheless increased numbers of drug traffickers have been executed and there is widespread concern that the drug problem is spilling over the porous borders and increasingly affecting Lao adolescents who emulate much of Thai youth culture.

Against a background of frequent failure of drug eradication and alternative development projects in the region (Farrell, 1998), coupled with the explosive upsurge of ATS consumption, it is important to note that opium eradication is only one of a number of structural and psychological adjustments required of highlanders as they are increasingly integrated within nationalist projects of modernist development. In Thailand many of the State-based drug control initiatives come under the rubric of State security and ‘the minority problem’ (Elawat, 1997). While international politics underpin such strategies, Lao opium eradication policies form part of broader policy concern with rural poverty. Forefront in its mission to elevate the country from its current place in the ranks of the least developed countries, the Lao NPEP aims to ‘eliminate opium production by 2005 and put an end to pioneering slash and burn cultivation by 2010’ (GoL, 2003: 8). The national distinctions in emphasis have major implications. As drug programmes take hold, it remains an open question whether Lao highland groups will follow the same path of shifting drug abuse epidemics, alienation and poverty where ‘in most cases drug abuse problems in [Thai] highland villages have been introduced or worsened by outsiders’ (Dirksen, 1997: 355). The uptake of ATS rather than heroin suggests that the specifics will not be the same.

In Thailand, it has been argued that widespread heroin uptake took place in the highlands after opium cultivation was prohibited due to highly aggressive and effective marketing by traffickers, alongside a generalized sense of hopelessness and oppression amongst highlanders (Choupah and

\textsuperscript{12} While a majority of ATS is currently produced in Burma there are also many small, mobile refineries in Thailand, especially in and around Bangkok (Vichai, 2000: 390), and possibly also in Laos. Although such figures must be treated with caution and are difficult to verify, studies suggest there are up to 6 million ATS users in Thailand and by 2003 the number of ATS pills entering Thailand was believed to have reached almost 1 billion (Bezziccheri, 2003: 4 and 22). The recent Thai ‘war on drugs’ has significantly lowered these figures; by how much and for how long remains to be seen.
Naess, 1997; Gebert and Chupinit, 1997; Kammerer, 2000). ATS traffickers subsequently found an additional nationwide market in students, labourers and youth. 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 centralized 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 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 encouraging village consolidation and wet rice production. While such relocation has a diverse range of positive and negative consequences (Lyttleton, 2005; Evrard and Goudineau, 2004, this issue), it can at this point be suggested that even though ethnic discrimination is hardly non-existent, a more integrationist State ethnic policy implies that the experience of Lao Akha communities will differ from their Thai counterparts in terms of (degrees of) social and market alienation and its links to widespread disease and prostitution.

It can also be argued, therefore, that rather than heroin uptake fostered by a sense of social malaise (to whatever extent this holds), ATS becomes a more viable substitute for opium because the social emphasis for highlanders in Laos is on production in both a symbolic and experiential sense. This then is where the compulsiveness of the modern subject and the pleasure behind drug-taking intersect. Accompanying social, geographic and economic integration with lowlanders prompted in large part by recent opium prohibition, ATS use amongst Lao highlanders follows a logic defined by performance of key criteria expected of the modern subject, criteria determined by the micro-politics of development projects, and while acting as a buffer against heroin uptake, it simultaneously introduces other forms of physical and psychic damage. Significantly, as Akha embrace lowland lifestyles ATS provides a more direct entry into forms of subjectivity shared by those engaging in global commodity exchange than does heroin which, due to its more exclusive use, harshly reinforces stereotyped criteria of ethnic division.

Opium and Amphetamines in Northwest Laos

For the past several years Akha opium addicts in Luang Namtha have voluntarily (and under subtle forms of pressure) joined rehabilitation programmes where they ‘cold turkey’ with assistance from government and development agency workers. Addicts from a number of villages spend two
weeks together in specially constructed bamboo detox huts. Above their sleeping mats is a prominent sign that states their name, their age and how many years they have smoked opium. These defining characteristics of the addict’s identity are publicized within a (Foucaultian) disciplinary project targeting deviant behaviour. My intention is not to show the effects of increased governmentality on individual bodies required to renounce drug addiction under the guise of social development so much as to demonstrate how alternative value systems set in place alternative strategies of social adaptation. Insofar as development is nowadays considered synonymous with capitalism (Cammack, 2002: 178), targeted manoeuvres to remove drug abuse amongst highlanders inevitably do so by imposing new value systems meant to take the place of drugs not just in terms of specific crops (or prior socialist models of enforced re-education) but through capitalist modalities that must also operate in the realm of substituted symbolic and experiential pleasure. In so doing, new material and social relations foster changing subjectivities. In Laos, opium rehabilitation is embedded in a larger modernist project which, intentionally or not, reframes the pursuit of happiness through forms of commodity exchange that are the basis of contemporary capitalism (De Rivero, 2001: 139). In this respect such programmes confront lifestyles where drugs have played a key symbolic and material role for hundreds of years. As mentioned, 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.

Despite increased heroin trafficking through Laos to Vietnam and China, uptake amongst the Lao is almost non-existent. Since 1997, in contrast, ATS use has become widespread — more than 1.5 million ATS tablets were destroyed in 2001–02 (Richards et al., 2003: 49). A UNDCP study in 1999 showed that 14.1 per cent of 17-year-old male students in the capital Vientiane had tried ATS. While use of synthetic drugs is a recent phenomenon in highland communities, opium cultivation and addiction amongst highland ethnic groups (10 per cent of the Lao population) has a long history. According to UNDCP (now called UNODC), over 83 per cent of ethnic highland villages grow opium in ten of the seventeen Lao provinces, making Lao PDR the third largest producer of illicit opium in the world, with

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13. National eradication programmes in 2003 have reduced this figure but by how much is not yet clear.
an estimated 167.1 tonnes in 2000. Of the total yield, more than half is consumed domestically and per capita Laos has one of the highest opiate addiction rates in the world, possibly exceeding 2 per cent (UNDCP, 1999: 23). This consumption is concentrated in the north, almost entirely amongst highlanders. Addiction is highest amongst two ethnic groups — Black Lahu (10.3 per cent) and the Akha (8.8 per cent) (ibid.). Akha villages in Sing and Long Districts are no exception to this general trend, with an average addiction rate of 9.3 per cent (Lyttleton and Cohen, 2003).

In 1996, the Lao Government revised its drug control law (Article 135) to prohibit the production of opium and increase the penalties for trafficking. Until 2002 this mandate was seldom enforced; instead alternative development strategies were encouraged with assistance from international agencies to gradually reduce dependence on opium amongst highland farmers. In Sing District, GTZ (a large German aid agency) operated a food security programme from 1994 to 2001 amongst the Akha highlanders. Opium reduction became a prominent activity due to opium’s central role in the local economy where it is a commodity with multiple uses. In GTZ’s 2000 survey, 72 of the 105 villages in Sing District grew a total of 222 ha of poppies; the growers were almost exclusively Akha, who comprise roughly 45 per cent (11,000 people in 67 villages) of the Sing district population.14

Since 1997, GTZ has offered assistance with rehabilitation to the majority of their 60 Akha target villages with both positive and negative effects. On the one hand, rehabilitation sessions have offered material and moral support for addicts and their families attempting to remove dependency on opium. On the other hand, such initiatives have forged a new framework for viewing addiction within Akha communities and have created negative consequences for those whose social identity is more systematically and pejoratively defined as an ‘addict’ than before. Despite several years of demand reduction activities, new smokers and recent in-migrants keep the addict numbers relatively constant: according to GTZ statistics there were 890 Akha addicts in Sing District in 1997; in 2001 there were 1,108. Significantly, of the 798 addicts who had taken part in detox programmes up to the end of 2001, 512 (64.16 per cent) have relapsed.15

Overall, the high demand for rehabilitation assistance makes it clear that a majority of addicts in Sing and Long Districts wish to give up smoking opium. This is not simply a product of government warnings or project activities but also emerges from the ambivalence with which Akha have traditionally viewed opium use. Unfortunately, the fact that many do not manage to quit blunts the positive impact of rehabilitation programmes in

14. In Long District opium is grown in 55 of 90 villages. In 2002 there were 1,550 opium addicts in this district.
15. There are lower rates of relapse in Long District under NCA programmes, but problems for those who do relapse are similar in both districts (Lyttleton and Cohen, 2003).
ways beyond simply maintaining high levels of addiction. The social presence of a large number of relapsees — a direct product of reduction programmes — has altered the ways drug use is integrated within Akha communities. Rather than establishing social compassion, the emphasis on individual moral attribution means that those who relapse are stigmatized and marginalized for their failure.

In other words, for those unable to quit opium, the process of having tried in the first place creates new problems. Relapsees are seen as failures who hold the village back from the fruits of modernization that development agencies and government officials are promising to ‘model’ villages which are successful in removing opium addiction. Because they are unable to take part in (project-organized) communal work activities due to the morning requirements of opium smoking, relapsees are increasingly seen as delinquent or non-contributing members of the community in ways not present prior to organized reduction activities. Through the way that opium addiction is negatively sanctioned, failed addicts are perceived as a burden to their families and village and in some cases ostracized and occasionally evicted from their village.\(^{16}\)

Opium smoking is now judged within a new value system — one that takes its shape directly from an outside source of projected development. Because detox is delivered as part of a broader modernization package, failure to conform to expectations is creating a new social identity for these individuals.\(^{17}\) Regardless of the fact that the (until recently) pervasive presence of opium and its practical and symbolic value in specific medical or social contexts has made abstinence a difficult and at times impossible task, addicts are increasingly marginalized and punished because of the imputed personal responsibility for their failure to quit and its implications for the village’s material development. Whereas in the past opium and its multiple impacts on the community were seen as indivisible from everyday Akha life in the mountains, the discursive impact of modernization programmes introduce a new emphasis on individual responsibility. Modernity’s hallmark characteristic of increased self-reflexivity is refracted through the need for addicts to now judge their own behaviour and its effects. A juridical system of control assists in this creation of the new Akha subject: individual contracts are signed wherein the addict agrees to fines and then imprisonment should he/she relapse. The fines are collected and managed by village headmen who become the synaptic bridge to State authority.

This kind of punitive atmosphere creates a sub-population of ‘degenerate addicts’ within the group of opium smokers who are optimally positioned to

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16. A similar process occurred in Thailand: see Chupinit (1994) and Gebert and Chupinit (1997) who report almost 100 per cent relapse in many detox programmes there.
17. This is mainly true of younger members of the community. Older opium addicts (50 years and over) are amongst the minority less likely to have tried to detox.
become involved in illicit forms of economic gain in order to sustain their dependency: some have already turned to selling ATS. Increasingly Akha villagers are discursively divided into smokers and non-smokers in ways that were not evident prior to programmed attempts to reduce addiction. Opium’s merciless demands on addicts’ time (several hours smoking are needed to reach adequate intoxication) is enforcing a social gaze that ensures the addicts do their best to avoid public acknowledgement and opium smoking and trade in village communities is pushed towards more clandestine practice.

While detox is a process that Akha villagers have long understood for its clear-cut goals and procedures, opium prohibition has created far more anxiety. To date, most Akha in Luang Namtha are extremely responsive to (and respectful of) State authority and, from all accounts, co-operate wholeheartedly with official mandates. But the enforced destruction of poppy crops in late 2002 and ensuing rice shortages (opium is used in highland communities as a vital trade item for rice), rather than the timely provision of viable alternatives, has prompted two sorts of response. Firstly, illicit opium production and/or trading in alternative drugs is increasing. This trend was measured in Long District where, according to a 2001 NCA survey, after several years of decline the looming prohibition prompted a 25 per cent increase in households growing opium and 52 per cent increase in land under poppy cultivation. By late 2003, arrests of Akha planting opium were taking place for the first time, alongside occasional arrests for ATS trading. A second more overt option has been to seek market opportunities in the lowlands by migrating out of the hills to establish new villages or join those that had already switched to sedentary lowland rice production over the past fifteen years. In turn, both strategies run the risk of establishing an oppositional politics of ethnicity: on the one hand, other ethnic groups in the lowlands readily exploit the newly arrived Akha; on the other hand, persistent drug trading becomes ever more linked to stigmatized aspects of ethnic identity, a process of ‘minoritizing’ ethnic groups seen elsewhere in Southeast Asia (McCaskill, 1997).

The choice to relocate articulates directly with increased ATS use. Ostensibly, this movement dovetails neatly with State objectives to halt swidden. However, induced resettlement is a fraught manoeuvre; lowland living provides greater access to roads, markets and services but it also implies the exchange of a physical environment in which an inclement ecology provides periodic food shortages for a structural system predicated on the opposite of communality and egalitarianism. In the lowlands, recently

18. To date there has been little success with donor-funded trials of crops such as sesame or coffee in the highlands; Chinese investment in sugar and watermelon in lower slopes has been far more successful, proving an enticement for many Akha to relocate out of the hills.
relocated Akha bear the brunt of both disease epidemics that decimate huge numbers (Romagny and Daviau, 2003; see also Evrard and Goudineau, 2004, this issue) and a growing proletarianization whereby they are inexorably dragged into exploitative wage-labour relations with the Chinese, lowland Tai groups or other wealthy Akha who moved many years earlier (Cohen, 2000; Lyttleton, 2005). New economic social relations need not be negative; but modernity, as the meta-narrative of the nation-state (San Juan, 2002: 222), inevitably encourages processes of marginalization (Giddens, 1991), often along ethnic lines.

Of concern here is how the dual processes of opium eradication and village relocation encourage ATS uptake amongst the Akha. Since 2000, ATS use has increased dramatically in Sing and Long Districts. It was first introduced within enclaves of townspeople in Sing and Long District (largely comprising the lowland Tai Lue ethnic group) but its consumption is moving steadily outwards into the Akha villages in the hills. Data collected by District officials in 2003 identified 800 local ATS users throughout Sing District, of which 30 per cent were Akha (figures many feel are highly conservative). Notably ATS use is highest in villages in closer proximity to the town, but its use amongst the Akha is not simply a product of ready access, as Tai Lue 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 of Xiang Kok in Long District (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 maximize 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. I heard of one instance where Akha workers hired by the lowland Tai Lue to plant and harvest rice were given ATS-doctored drinking water to encourage greater labour, a practice similar to coerced intoxication reported in some Thai and Lao factories.

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 repeat that one can have sex all night). However, while its uptake cannot be separated from its presence as a popular commodity, there is one important distinction that still prevents it from reaching opium’s level of everyday acceptance. Following government rhetoric opium smoking might be considered regressive
(and newly illegal), but it does not yet feel morally wrong to most Akha. In contrast, ATS has always been illegal with overt sanctions demonstrated by the increasingly commonplace arrests of traffickers and users. However, the strength of moral distinctions is inherently unstable and unlikely to hold into the future. As opium cultivation and use is increasingly prosecuted, legal and conceptual differences with ATS are erased. When certain sub-groups are marginalized within their communities because they are unable to quit opium smoking, then a switch to ATS becomes a preferred choice as opium becomes difficult to obtain.

Likewise the demands of new labour regimes make its effects immediately attractive to a wider constituency. Hardt and Negri (2000: 30) argue that ‘the productivity of bodies and the value of affect’ are absolutely central to an understanding of new labouring practices in a global world order. In this light, villagers offer multiple rationales for ATS uptake. The speed with which pills are smoked appeals within the new climate of surveillance and punishment for opium use. Some villagers along the new road that bisects Sing and Long Districts and links China to Thailand and Burma via the Mekong River are becoming petty traders (and users) due its quick profits.19 Most importantly, ATS increases physical activity and showcases performance. Whereas heroin provides familiar opiate intoxication, it does nothing to remove the stigma faced by addicts unable to take part in work activities due to lethargy or lassitude. ATS, on the other hand, provides (in the short term) the sort of bodily energy and ‘normality’ that directly contrasts with the social blame directed at opium addiction. Some opium addicts therefore smoke ATS either with or after opium to provide energy to work in fields or forests. Others use ATS to wean themselves from habitual opium use. In neighbouring Bokeo Province, the GTZ rehabilitation programme confronted opium addicts who had already moved to multiple drug use — relapse in these villages meant ongoing ATS rather than opium use precisely because it was seen as a more desirable form of intoxication, with its expeditious use and overt energy boost.

Significantly, ATS’s appeal is not limited to marginalized 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 (global) world of market enterprise and commodity exchange. Of course, not all Akha addicts take ATS and it has not (yet) replaced opium in Laos in any absolute sense; but already a significant

19. This 85 km road is marked on recent maps of global drug trade routes as a key ATS and heroin thoroughfare (Geopolitical Newsletter no 7, April 2002; www.geodrugs.net).
number of both opium smokers and non-smokers try it for reasons that are anchored in new social relations and productive competencies expected of them as they relocate to the lowlands.

As the Lao policy of agricultural development and modernization incorporates increasing sedentization of highland communities, petty commodity production and purchase is actively encouraged (ILO, 2000: 91). The desire for manufactured goods is hardly a new phenomenon, but increasing availability of market products and their higher profile in village life is an integral process within a growing market economy in all parts of Laos. In the highlands it is seen most clearly by the increasing adoption of lowland dress styles: as an Akha woman commented, ‘why should we make our clothes when we can more easily buy them?’. Participation in a wider regional marketplace is not necessarily negative for the Akha and I make no attempt to place them in the elaborate framework developed by Lane (2000) that suggests that increased consumerism inexorably leads to decreased happiness. But as the desire to buy goods outstrips the ability to pay for them, diverse problems readily emerge. Social stratification and indebtedness (to either private brokers or local agricultural lending institutions) have affected peasant communities the world over. As everyday livelihoods are radically altered by national development programmes, in Sing and Long Districts there remains a problematic reliance on opium as an item of exchange in the hills and a greater uptake of ATS as a strategy to increase income in the lower slopes.

The Akha have long sold and/or exchanged opium or labour to obtain goods and services but as livelihood indicators improve due to development assistance, more people desire more material goods. It is not enough that alternative crops replace opium and maintain subsistent lifestyles; rather cash-crops or wage-labour must increase income so as to keep pace with growing desire for marketed goods and services. This trend of commodity capitalism is irreversible; it motivates villagers to move to the lowlands and pressures them to increase their capacity to buy goods. A commonplace description of life in the lowlands is that: ‘unlike the highlands, to do anything here you need money’. One villager (paraphrasing Marx) described the new affective structures underpinning a modern subjectivity: ‘in the mountains life was better; we had more money [from opium] but nothing to spend it on; here in the lowlands we have less money [no opium], but more [desire for] things to buy’. The emergent compulsion that underlies the pursuit of new needs becomes obvious in strategies adopted by the relocated Akha. ATS is currently being used (by some) to assist their fraught entry into regimes of production and subject positions within a capitalist order oriented to satisfying commodity-based desire.

While it is perhaps easier to discuss the directly observable impacts of social changes implicit in removing opium and halting swidden such as new labour relations or provision of health services and so forth, subjective structures of feeling are also fundamental to the outcome of development
policies that orchestrate radical social transformation. The appeal of ATS lies precisely in the way it forges connections between structures of feeling and material relations implicit in capitalist production — pleasure and usefulness. As forced changes necessitate new livelihood strategies, material and social relations also produce new forms of social self. The Akha who use ATS are, on the one hand, performing as model citizens, providing maximum labour for maximum profit (not necessarily their own). On the other hand, this new social self is subject to psycho-physiological dangers and moral and legal adjudication. As opium addiction is gradually removed, incipient ATS abuse poses growing dilemmas for those attempting to benefit from its use. Violent crimes and thefts — often attributed to ATS users — are becoming more commonplace in Sing and Long. The perpetrators are, to date, seldom Akha. But as ATS use becomes excessive, personal and social disjunctions are inevitable for any user. Just as induced movement to the lowlands can create community disempowerment and fragmentation (Romagny and Daviau, 2003), so Akha ATS users entering capitalist modes of production run the risk of individualized pathologies while at the same time becoming criminalized and further marginalized as social deviants under newly imbricated forms of governmentality.

CONCLUSION

It might be argued that ATS is a consummate postmodern commodity: small mobile factories use imported substances to synthesize pills by the million and market them through trans-national flows tailored specifically to target communities (there are apparently over 300 different types of ATS pill available in Thailand; Bezzicherri, 2003). But when we consider demand, it becomes clear that increasing ATS use amongst 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 is beginning to enact similar opium prohibition initiatives to those carried out in Thailand over the past thirty 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. Relocation thus becomes an effective means of extending new forms of governmentality and State control. In Thailand relocation projects were rarely successful and forms of nationalist control were more strongly marked by movement into the highlands of marginalizing processes of commercial exploitation accompanied by 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 sedentized market trade and wage-labour. However, its use does not come without costs, costs that are still being measured.

Development policies that introduce sometimes gradual, sometimes radical, social change position the subject in ways wherein the search for pleasure, that rare ‘commodity’ that is forever marketable, can turn into problematic forms of drug abuse. In Southeast Asian urban contexts, ATS users ‘ignorant’ in terms of preventive caution take consumption to dangerous levels and, when intoxicated, damage themselves and/or those around them. In the highlands it is widely documented that while development has bought certain improvements to indigenous peoples, these have often been blunted by negative impacts on their way of life. As Jay (1999) suggests pleasure involved in damaging drug-taking can also emerge as a direct consequence of being in a situation one wants to avoid, or conversely, as a means of actively seeking a desired situation.

Markets for drugs do not exist *sui generis* — they are created. So too drug epidemics (re-)emerge as a product of social relations. For the Akha of Sing and Long Districts, ATS is currently a utilitarian accompaniment to a wide array of changes taking place in their everyday lives. In northwestern Laos, use of different forms of addictive substance to serve reformulated goals reflects new forms of subjectivity that accompany the shift from primarily subsistent swidden agriculturalists to active players in a capitalist modernity. 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 active entrepreneurial labourer/trader identity. At
the same time, ATS use fosters new forms of social exploitation and marginalization as the Akha maintain drug dependency on the way to new life in the lowlands.

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