Remote, separate, and evading integration into societal cores—this is a common image of the peripheries of Southeast Asia. Such ideas are especially potent in Laos. The entire country was relatively disconnected from the capitalist world for more than a decade after the Communist assumption of power in 1975. Ethnic diversity, mountainous terrain, and limited infrastructure were—and in many rural areas still are—obstacles that magnify perceptions of isolation and seclusion. Today, Laos is governed by an authoritarian, one-party state, with the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (hereafter the Party) still maintaining its monopoly on political power. International discussions of Laos—especially of hydropower projects—often depict unfettered development replacing and displacing traditional lives. So while physical barriers are being removed through infrastructure development that links national, regional, and global markets, significant social and political challenges persist. All aspects of life in Laos—livelihoods, development, personal histories, national history, ethnicity, religion, and, of course, national politics—are sensitized and politicized by shifting state ideologies. Civil society is virtually nonexistent, only state-controlled media is permitted, and Lao people cannot publicly criticize the state and its policies. Given this national unity by dictate and the marginal status of the ‘backward’ countryside, it is not surprising that the rural peripheries of Laos are seen as disconnected and excluded from politics. As the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nation’s *State of the World’s Forests* report (2005, 117) notes, “Governments have tended to see forested regions as peripheral places with few people and little political
importance”; they can be sources of valuable resources but see limited socio-political integration into the modern nation-state.

Yet, this book challenges these images by revealing the vibrancy of political discussions in a context where it is often assumed to be effectively suppressed. I show how Lao people make indirect political statements in their commentary on social and environmental changes taking place throughout the country. Political debate is stifled and muted in post-socialist Laos, but it is not completely absent. Forests frequently feature in politicized discourses because of their symbolic potency in Lao worldviews, as well as their material importance for national development and for the livelihoods of the largely rural populace. In Lao worldviews, forests can speak of identity, aspirations, and authority, which in turn speak of governance and the legitimacy of the Lao state. The social values encouraged by Lao worldviews can support state claims to rightful authority, but the inherent ambiguity of forests means that they are always open to alternative meanings that can be used to question the legitimacy of the state. It is in this context that I see discussions about forests as a means to understand Lao ideas about the state. The Lao state is further implicated in commentary on forests through its role as the owner and regulator of native forest resources on behalf of the nation. As Peluso (1992, 16) concludes, “In essence, all rural classes oppose a common powerful competitor for the forest: the state.” While state-society relations are delimited by authoritarianism in Laos, this book demonstrates how popular ideas about forests can carry highly politicized connotations. By granting more attention to local perspectives, the rural periphery is shown to be an important feature in contemporary social and political debates in Laos.

The ethnographic fieldwork on which this book is based was mainly conducted in Laos’ capital city of Vientiane and in Nakai District, Khammouane Province. The latter is an upland area of central Laos that evokes a range of associations: an area historically tributary to Lao, Vietnamese, and Siamese polities; part of the heavily bombed Ho Chi Minh Trail and a Communist stronghold during the Indochina wars; site of a reeducation camp after the 1975 Lao revolution; and later the exemplar of tensions between rampant logging and efforts to protect one of Southeast Asia’s biodiversity hotspots (fig. 1.1). Nakai also became emblematic of a controversial World Bank–supported hydropower project, Nam Theun 2 (NT2). While NT2 is not my focus here, its significance for Nakai, and indeed the entire nation, means that the project is frequently mentioned in relation to forests, development, and state authority. The fieldwork in Nakai and Vientiane is used as a basis for rural-urban comparisons of popular discourses about forests. These discourses were especially important in rural areas where people usually did not talk much
about the state or politics—due to fear, disinterest, mistrust, and concern about NT2. But forest discourses are by no means restricted to rural areas. Thus, the forested frontier forms a symbolic connection between rural and urban imaginations and experiences. This shared understanding enables a conversation that does not negate the repressive power of the state apparatus but does enable discussion about it.

STATE AUTHORITY AND FORESTS IN LAOS

I suggest that the possibilities for a critical ethnographic approach to contribute to understanding the symbolism of the state have yet to be fully tapped, especially in the realm of environmental studies. Understanding state authority in Laos is greatly aided by the work of Evans (1998) on the post-socialist state’s attempts to utilize and restrain ritual and symbolic structures to support its legitimacy. This and other studies of symbolism and authority in Laos focus on the state’s production of nationalism, particularly the

FIGURE 1.1 | The rural periphery in Bulapha District, Khammouane Province. Under construction in 2004 was Route 12, which heads to the Vietnam border a few kilometers away. This marks the southeastern boundary of the Nakai–Nam Theun National Protected Area (NPA) seen in the background.
importance of religion and ethnic identity (Evans 1999; Goudineau and Lorrillard 2008; Pholsena 2006; Pholsena and Lockhart 2006; Stuart-Fox 1996, 2004). This book also attends to the social construction of Lao identity, aspirations, and state authority. However, this is through a focus on people’s ideas about forest resources. Symbolism is regularly overlooked or discounted in studies of the environment and the state. A key instance is Agrawal’s (2005, 197) account of the creation of environmental subjects in India, which mentions “symbolic systems” and “cultural forms” only in order to briefly critique them as “abstract, static categories of social classification . . . [that are] distant from the process of subject making.” This implies that ‘symbols’ or ‘culture’ inevitably lead to rigid assumptions of causality that ‘subjectivities’ somehow avoid. Other informative works on forests and state-making in Asia acknowledge the importance of the symbolic meanings of forests but maintain an analytical focus on institutions, policy, and management (e.g., Peluso 1992; Sivaramakrishnan 1999). The study of symbolic meanings in environmental studies is often perceived to be—and at times is—associated with romanticism rather than analytical rigor. Similar concerns about reification and essentialization have also become apparent in cultural and historical studies of the state. Yet social categories like the ‘state’ and ‘culture’ do have ongoing analytical relevance, so long as there is a firm grounding in specific social, political, and historical contexts (Day 2002).

A significant feature of this book is its attention to ideas about wildlife and forests as they contribute in different ways to social and political debates in Laos. This approach recognizes that the intersection between studies of the state and anthropological studies of the social meanings of animals is largely unexplored territory. Wildlife, as emblematic of the wild forest, has been a focus for internationally driven conservation efforts that are usually seen by Lao people as challenging their desires for development (chapter 2). The use of wild animals can also be a marker of Lao identity, and some are potent signifiers of powerful elites (chapter 3). Of all wildlife, elephants are the most politically challenging, as they are symbolic of the former royalty, claimed as national icons by the post-socialist regime, and also used by rural villagers as a means to reflect on the state (chapter 4). These ideas about wildlife intersect and overlap with ideas about forests as resources that support the development of the nation and the authority of the state (chapters 5 and 6). While regional and international influences are important, my emphasis is on the domestic implications. These have received less attention due to difficulties of studying local perceptions of an authoritarian state.

In short, the key argument of this book is that people in Laos explore ideas about identity, aspirations, and authority through discussions of forest
resources in the rural periphery—areas that are distant from historical and contemporary centers of power. Forests and state authority are interlinked by explicit features of governance, as well as by more implicit connotations of Lao worldviews that can be used to support or question the legitimacy of social inequities. Hence, even in the face of considerable marginality, the rural periphery is still a site for social and political engagement. This argument positions the book less as a study on the institutions and practices of the “state-system” and more on the popular discourses that constitute the “state-idea” (Abrams 1988, 58; see also Sangren 1995, 5). In order to contextualize this position, this introductory chapter examines, first, governance in post-socialist Laos; second, different perspectives on the Lao state; and third, forests as social symbols in Laos.

GOVERNANCE IN POST-SOCIALIST LAOS

The following outline of the practices of the modern Lao state highlights that governance is less about the extension of political doctrine or a rationalizing bureaucracy and more about the regularized social practices that personalize and localize the state. In this context, a useful conceptualization of the state is provided by Day and Reynolds (2000, 2), who draw on Foucault’s insights on power to posit the state as “a complex process of agencies and struggles for domination.” Such social processes are often directed toward legitimacy, since the state is “an ideological project. It is first and foremost an exercise in legitimation” (Abrams 1988, 76). Drawing further on Foucault’s work on strategies of government, Rose (1999, 27) argues that “To govern . . . is to be condemned to seek an authority for one’s authority.” Government cannot take place in the total absence of any moralized justification. Regulation is not a system of absolute and undisputed control; it is a site of contestation where “regimes of truth” are confounded by “moments of critique” (Rose 1999, 19, 278). Hence, self-regulation can be an effective strategy of government—as indicated below for Laos—but this does not negate the importance of other legitimizing and delegitimating social processes.

Crucial in Laos’ recent history is the shift from socialist ideology and a centrally planned economy, introduced after the 1975 revolution, to market liberalization and varied economic reforms. These began a decade later, with the decline in support from the former Soviet Union and the introduction of the New Economic Mechanism (Bourdet 2000). Reengagement with the global economy was a long-held ideal promoted by nonsocialist donors. Market liberalization was posited as providing the means for Laos to move out of the ranks of the world’s least-developed countries. While nonsocialist donor resources
are crucial in supporting public investments and the extension of state programs, the degree to which liberalizing policies see any implementation is largely dependent on the interests and priorities of Lao authorities (see also chapter 2). Indeed, Lao policy and practices are often more responsive to the lead of Vietnam, reflecting its important historical role as socialist mentor for Laos. In post-socialist Laos, moves toward economic liberalization have coincided with shifts away from official assertions of ‘communism’ and ‘socialism.’ Development is now the dominant rhetoric and vision of the Lao state, and harnessing natural resources for export through hydropower, mining, forestry, and agribusiness is central to state development plans (GOL 2003, 2005).

Understanding this contemporary commitment to development is aided by Stuart-Fox’s (2004) valuable study of reform in Laos. He highlights the overriding importance of the Party and argues that “Laos is now best seen as an authoritarian one-party state, in which the Party presides over a relatively free market economy” (Stuart-Fox 2004, 8). St. John (2006, 186) concludes similarly: “The Lao approach to reform could best be characterized as perestroika without glasnost, or economic change without political reform.” Lintner (2008, 172) asserts that “‘Marxism-Leninism’ as an ideology guiding economic policy is dead in Laos, but it remains a powerful tool to discipline civil servants and others.” Hence, the commonly displayed flag of the Party—the yellow hammer and sickle crossed over a red background—seems more an assertion of the Party’s authority over the Lao nation than a commitment to Communist doctrine. Pholsena (2006, 121) aptly remarks on the “amnesia” leaders must demonstrate in order to justify shifts and reversals in official policy in the move from socialism to developmentalism. These scholars and others highlight other key political features in contemporary Laos, including the considerable overlap between the Party, bureaucracy, and military that together constitute the Lao state; the importance of friendly socialist neighbors, Vietnam and China; connections and tensions with Thailand; varying relations between the central and provincial governments; limited opportunities for local participation in government; limited civil society; a weak rule of law; and top-down decision making and a lack of transparency in most aspects of governance. Recent changes in the upper echelons of the Party—most especially, the retirement in 2006 of the former president, Party secretary, and revolutionary veteran, Khamtai Siphandon—have not resulted in any major changes to the general dynamics of national politics (Gunn 2007, 185). The enduring public unity of the Lao state limits the space for organized opposition and also enhances its position as the only legitimate leader for the Lao nation.

Importantly, detailed information on the functioning of the Lao state is scarce, which is an outcome of the global geopolitical insignificance of Laos
in today’s post–Cold War era, as well as the deliberate secrecy of the post-socialist state (e.g., Gunn 2007, 183). While donor-sponsored reports provide overviews of public administration and governance issues, a focus on legal frameworks and the need for diplomacy constrains discussions of actual practices. Scholars seeking permission for long-term research in Laos are privately warned off sensitive topics by helpful officials and others. Even influential organizations at times employ surreptitious means to conduct research on politically sensitive topics. For example, the World Bank supported Stuart-Fox’s 2004 study of political reform mentioned above, but they deliberately hid their involvement to avoid tension with the government (World Bank 2006b, xxix). This situation precluded formal research on politics during my own fieldwork in Laos. Nonetheless, my interest in forest resources in Nakai was unavoidably political because of the national significance of NT2 and officials’ suspicion of research relating to conservation and forestry (chapters 2 and 6). Furthermore, I spent some months living in a dormitory with district forestry officials in Nakai, which provided valuable insider perspectives on the Lao state. I examine this work in detail elsewhere and draw upon it here to take into account the political economy at the margins of the bureaucracy, the aspirations of officials, and their perspectives of the state (Singh 2009a, 2011).

The remainder of this section will briefly outline certain features that are of critical importance for the exercise of authority in Laos. The three inter-related features of governance that I consider are the policy-practice divide, patronage politics, and practices that rely on and perpetuate secrecy, fear, and uncertainty. First, as many have noted of Laos, the gap between policy and practice is often substantial: “Rule of law is honoured more in the breach than the observance” (Stuart-Fox 2009, 370). National policy does not necessarily dictate unified action or correspond to a coherent ideology. As noted of Southeast Asia more generally, governance tends to be personalized and follow the dictates of those in positions of authority (Day 2002, 24). Thus, a former official in the Department of Forestry in Vientiane told me, “The hard thing with the government is that there are no clear rules. So much depends on who your superiors are.” Policy does not necessarily correspond to written laws but rather follows the advice and directions received from senior officials. The Lao term for ‘policy’ (nanyobai) can refer to laws and regulations as well as being used informally to request assistance from a person with authority to bend the rules (kbo nanyobai dae). Officials often refer to ‘policy,’ ‘laws’ (kotmai), and ‘rules’ (labiap) to justify their actions, but these statements do not necessarily correspond to relevant documentation. Some of the most significant state programs—such as the resettlement of ethnic minorities—are those that are
not articulated in written policy and only become apparent via the implementation of development programs (Evrard and Goudineau 2004). Policy is negotiable for those in positions of authority. Governance is not rule driven but rather socialized, personalized, and localized through selective implementation that differentiates the ‘Party-government’ (phak lat) from the ‘people’ (pasason) and ‘elites’ (phu nyai, literally ‘big people’) from the ‘juniors’ (dek noi, literally ‘children’). For instance, low-ranking officials in Nakai championed inequitable political processes where only elites go to important district meetings and take part in decision making. One official told me, “We juniors do not know, we do not know anything until it is already decided. It is comfortable, easy.” This comment was made when talking about electoral violence in Thailand, and the Lao official equated a lack of elections in Laos with an absence of violence. We were watching news on a Thai television channel, since Lao and Thai languages are similar and most Lao people prefer watching the more sophisticated Thai channels. This comparison draws on a “politics of alikeness” between these culturally similar but politically and economically distinct countries (Harrison 2006, 134–147). In addition, it shows that the way to advance one’s interests in Laos is often less through initiative, skills, and experience than through obedience to one’s superiors. This official’s statement also conveys an expectation that elites will act according to their status; if elites are benevolent patrons, then their dominance is not a denial of democratic freedoms or rights. In this context, invocations of government policy relate less to a rule of law and more to an assertion of the authority of the state as well as one’s social position in relation to the state.

The second feature of governance is state-sanctioned, family-based patronage. Though there is relatively little work specific to Laos, patronage and the intertwining of state and family are integral to Lao politics, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Laos has distinctive political characteristics, but there are some broad commonalities across the region. For instance, vote buying is of limited import in Laos because popular elections are not held for positions in the Party (Stuart-Fox 2004, 14; Gunn 2007, 184). At the same time, patron-client relations permeate the Lao bureaucracy in a manner similar to that in neighboring countries. Government officials are framed in official rhetoric as working for the national good and the benefit of the poor. Yet the bureaucracy is founded on a system of extremely underpaid staff who are reliant on positions, promotions, and salary supplements controlled by their superiors (Singh 2009a, 2011; UNDP and GOL 2003). This creates enormous pressure for officials to constantly be on the lookout for their personal interests—achieved through respect for hierarchy and exchange relations—while supposedly representing the concerns of the nation. In this particular context,
self-interest in the form of corruption is not necessarily the absence of a sense of duty; rather it is an outcome of personal responsibilities outweighing those to the Lao nation (see also Stuart-Fox 2006). Nominally illegal use of state funds is readily justified by familial obligations since it is family connections that mediate relationships between individuals and the state. Excessive levels of corruption may be less socially acceptable, but these are also likely to be politically sensitive and not a topic for public debate.2

The disjunction between officials as dedicated representatives of a unified Lao state and officials as personal agents acting within a hierarchical patronage system is part of a broader separation of public rhetoric and private knowledge. This separation functions as what Jackson (2004, 181), in the case of Thailand, describes as a “regime of images,” whereby maintaining superficial appearances of state policy takes precedence over putting policy into practice. Jackson may overstate the divides between different forms of power, but his analysis is useful for understanding politics in Laos, where an authoritarian state actively demarcates and polices the bounds of public debate and people regularly self-regulate their conversation and practices to avoid expressions that do not accord with official values (e.g., Mayes 2009; Pholsena 2006; Sprenger 2009). For instance, patronage is tied to the availability of funds, so state failure to deliver prosperity to its agents leads to more open complaints in private discussions as officials themselves reveal the realities of state practices (Singh 2009a). Yet such critical commentary does not enter the public domain; officials, rural villagers, and Lao and foreign consultants are most outspoken when in the privacy of dormitory bedrooms, inside homes, or when having a beer at rickety stalls set up along the banks of the Mekong River.

This relates to the third feature of governance mentioned above, which is the role of secrecy, fear, and uncertainty in Laos. As Abrams (1988, 62) highlights: “An integral element of [politically institutionalized power] is the quite straightforward ability to withhold information, deny observation and dictate the terms of knowledge.” In Laos, “non-transparent, top-down decision-making and obsessive secrecy” characterize the Party, as they did its revolutionary forerunner, the Pathet Lao (Stuart-Fox 2004, 6). Lintner (2008, 173) remarks on “the irony . . . that most Lao, thanks to the Thai media, know more about Thai politics than that of their own country.” Thus, the state media never report when the local impacts of development projects lead to more public expressions of discontent (e.g., Hodgdon 2008; IRN 2003). In many respects, the Party seems to derive a greater sense of authority from its secrecy—or ‘illegibility’ (chapter 6)—than from its propaganda. For instance, the Party “is remarkably short of charismatic figures,” despite attempts to produce an icon of national unity and Party leadership in the form of the Lao
revolutionary leader, Kaisone Phomvihane (Evans 1998, 24–40). The linking of secrecy, fear, and uncertainty was apparent in conversations with villagers in Nakai. On one occasion, after telling me a folk story—"Khampha and the Little Ghost" ("Khampa phi noi")—the storyteller told me, "Do not write in your report that I told stories. I am scared of being punished." When I asked why he was scared, the villager replied as if stating the obvious: "The government does not want us to talk about history." Yet the story he told was one I was later able to buy as a children’s book in Vientiane markets, in Lao language and fully sanctioned by the state. So there is widespread recognition of the state’s regulation of history, culture, and private conversations, yet there is also considerable uncertainty of what actually constitutes acceptable or prohibited discussion.

What is certain is that all important decisions are the purview of elites; reasons for decisions and questioning of decisions are not for general discussion. Public questioning is limited by the state’s intolerance of criticism and fear of this intolerance. Observers refer to the "mentality of secrecy and paranoia" (Pholsena 2006, 141) as well as the institutional barriers that effectively stifle public political discussions. Memories of past wars, postrevolutionary fervor, and repressive practices are alive and well. The ongoing restraints on political discussion were made clear to me when a Lao friend, Suk, organized a picnic with a few other young Lao and foreign friends on the outskirts of Vientiane. We walked out to sit in the shade of a small grove of fruit trees in the middle of some paddy fields owned by one of their families. A couple of the Lao men had just received scholarships from the Australian government and were about to travel to Australia. I talked with them about life there and then made a critical comment about John Howard, who was then prime minister. One young man listened intently and commented, "You cannot say those things in Laos." On hearing him, Suk quickly intervened, drawing her hand in a cutting action across her throat, silently telling him to stop as she looked around us. The topic of conversation immediately changed. These young, educated, middle-class students were very cautious even when speaking English with friends in deserted paddy fields. They were also likely to have been very aware of arrests—a few years earlier in October 1999—of students who publically called for a multiparty democracy (Evans 2002, 221–223; see also Mayes 2009).

While overt violence and armed conflict is comparatively limited in Laos, fears of possible repercussions are frequently encountered. Police and security forces have been unofficially implicated in the abduction of Lao people who seriously infringe on elite interests, and this serves as a very strong warning to others (Lintner 2008, 181). This does not mean that there is a complete
absence of political debate. The perceived shortcomings of the Lao state may be talked about and acted on by Lao people—especially when one’s own livelihood is under threat—but this is only in relatively discreet and limited ways. For example, a Lao consultant who had worked on a project funded by a World Bank loan described the extensive and more than usual corruption that had undermined its progress. As we sat with a group of friends in a noisy bar, he spoke a little about how he had secretly leaked information about corruption to foreign consultants since he could not talk openly about it. He expressed his own sense of frustration that a loan, which Laos must repay, was used for the personal enrichment of a few elites and provided little if any benefit to the rural poor who were the intended recipients. He said, “There are two paths that could be taken for the country and for its development and its future. Those officials are in a position to choose but they do not really think about that. They just think about lining their own pockets.” He also described his hurried and fearful departure from the province where the project was located, even leaving behind belongings in a guesthouse, after he felt that local authorities suspected him of the leak. His friend then told me, with concern edging his voice, “He was really scared.”

Though foreigners are much less constrained by state restrictions than Lao citizens, maintaining good relations and avoiding controversy are necessary to continue working in the country. For example, a foreign consultant who had been the director of an international nongovernment organization (NGO) in Laos explained that he would never again have his visa approved by the Lao state for such a position after being too critical of NT2. Another foreign consultant told me how she was cautioned by her Lao boss when she first started working in Laos. She was told to have a Lao sarong (sinh) in the office ready to wear for any meetings with government and to be careful with officials since “they will watch what we say.” She said, “At first I thought my boss was just being paranoid, but after a few months I totally agreed!” Similarly, my early visits to Nakai—when I was still attempting to obtain formal research permission from the central government—were regularly punctuated by moments of fear and uncertainty. On one occasion, a couple of unknown soldiers were asking others about me. My host panicked, even though her husband was a senior district agricultural official. She told me, “You have to leave, you must go tomorrow morning! You have to go back to Vientiane, we cannot protect you here.” It turned out that the soldiers were just intrigued by the sight of a foreign woman staying in Nakai and wanted me to drink rice whisky with them. But, as I was told by an official who helped me stay informally in the Nakai forestry dormitory, “No one else would have helped you, they would have been too scared.” Concern emerges in indirect comments,