

# Studying leadership in non-Anglophone contexts: An ethnographic account of leadership practices in Lao People's Democratic Republic

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## **Abstract**

Concerned about the ethnocentric assumptions of much Western dominated and corporatist-oriented theories of leadership, there is a growing body of literature that calls for anthropologically-informed empirical research on leadership phenomena in non-Western and non-Anglophone settings. In this seminar, I take up this challenge by exploring conceptions, expressions and enactments of authority in a non-Anglophone context. I offer an (auto)ethnographic account of a personal journey toward 'passing' as a leader (*phu nam*) whilst working in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. The study covers the period 2011-2019 during which I acted as a foreigner advisor in Laos, employed to run a series of international development initiatives designed to improve agricultural productivity and assist the Government of Lao meet Millennium Development Goals with respect to food security and poverty reduction. A Leadership-As-Practice lens is employed to reveal processes of learning with respect to the politics, sociomateriality and embodied enactment of leadership in Laos. Three phases of 'becoming *phu nam*' are identified and illustrated using (auto)ethnographic data. The presentation thus aims to offer anthropological insight into leadership practices *as indigenously understood* in a non-Anglophone context. It will also attempt to demonstrate that, by attending to sociomaterial and spatial aspects of the phenomenon, our *practical* understanding of how we learn about leadership can be improved. Intentional efforts to exercise authority in any setting raises ethical concerns that demand close consideration. I shall conclude by offering some reflections on such issues based on my experiences of working in international development and global health spaces.

## **Biographical Note for Peter Case**

Peter Case is Professor of Organization Studies at the University of the West of England. He also holds a part-time position as Professor of Management and Organization Studies at James Cook University, Australia. His research interests encompass leadership studies, organization theory and philosophy, international development and global healthcare. He has eight years' experience of running rural development projects in Lao People's Democratic Republic and serves as a consultant to the Malaria Elimination Initiative (MEI) based at the University of California, San Francisco, advising on malaria programme management issues in the Greater Mekong Sub-region and southern Africa. He is currently co-leading a project in Zimbabwe to assist the Ministry of Health and Child Care improve HIV prevention services nationally. Peter has published widely in academic journals and his books include: *Worldly Leadership, Belief and Organizations* and *Origins of Organizing*. He holds editorial board positions on several journals, including: *Leadership*, *Leadership & the Humanities* and the *Leadership & Organizational Development Journal*.

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