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The Village of the Deep Pond Ban Xa Phang Meuk Laos

Fred Branfman



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BAN XA PHANG MEUK, LAOS**

By
FRED BRANFMAN

Introduction and Edited By
JAMES A. HAFNER
and
JOEL M. HALPERN

**INTERNATIONAL AREA STUDIES PROGRAMS
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AT AMHERST**

1978

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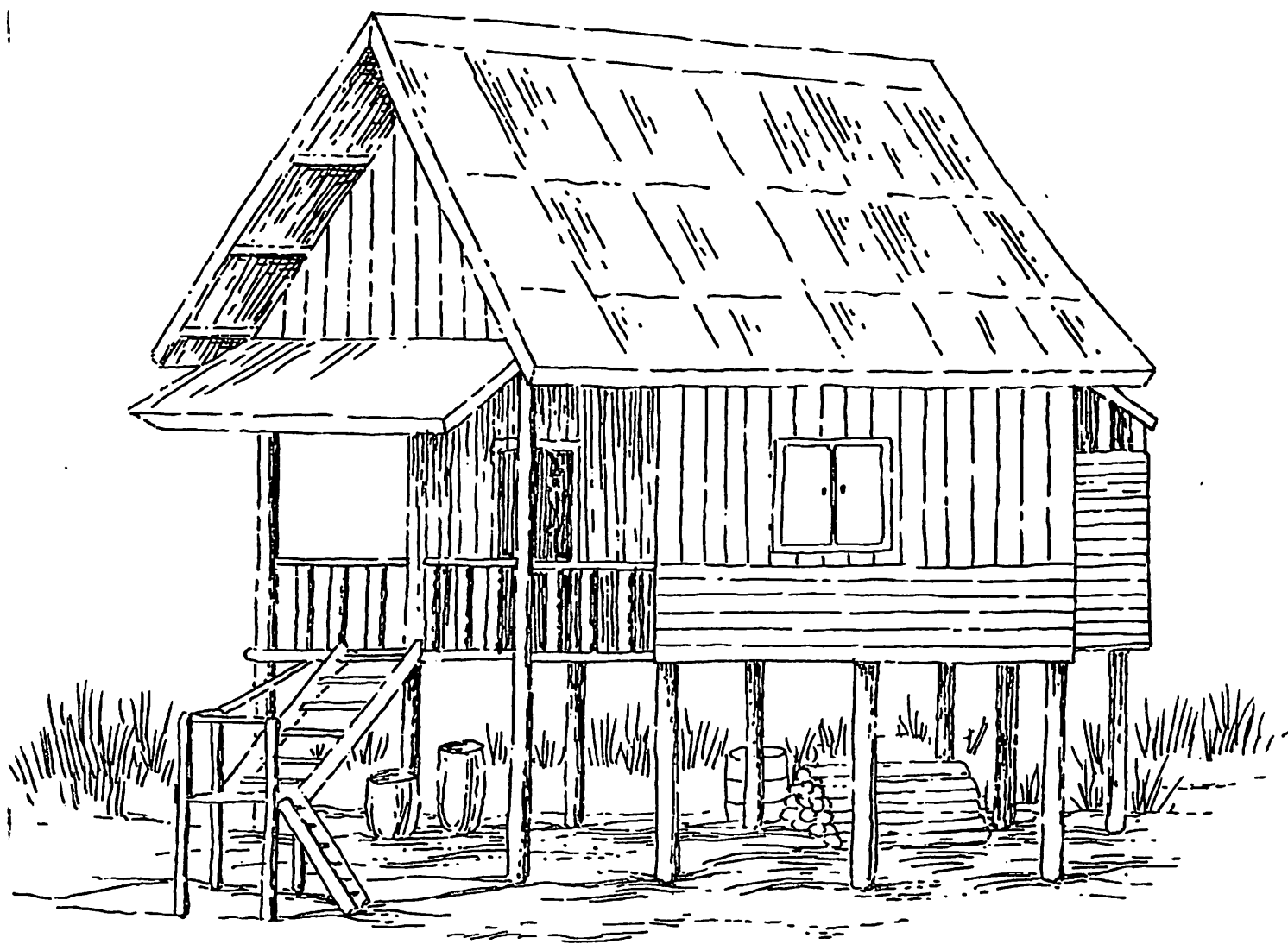
PREFATORY NOTE

Fred Branfman is one of many Americans who have been drawn to Southeast Asia over the past several decades out of a concern for understanding its people and their cultures and by the desire to aid them in some small way in their search for a better life. These dual motives took him to Laos in 1966 as a member of the International Voluntary Service (IVS) where he worked as a teacher and advisor to the Lao Ministry of Education on educational planning and rural development. In contrast to many of the more institutionalized 'aid' programs which operated at a governmental level, his work with IVS was primarily with farmers, students and teachers. Through these contacts he sought to help them in upgrading the primary educational system. One of his main goals was to develop schools and curriculum which would integrate basic educational objectives with the most fundamental needs of the rural population, improved agricultural skills. This work took him from the cosmopolitan surroundings of Vientiane to the former royal capital at Luang Prabang, and into many distant villages in Pakse and Savannakhet in the south. By the late 1960's events in Laos and the intensifying conflict in Vietnam began to limit the effectiveness of his work in rural areas. He then returned to Vientiane to teach and later work as a correspondent for the Dispatch News Service. It was during this period that he undertook the study of Ban Xa Phang Meuk - The Village of the Deep Pond - which is discussed here. This study incorporates many of his earlier experiences in working with rural villagers as well as the broad knowledge of Laos which he developed during his service with IVS.

In addition to this previously unpublished excerpt from his longer study of the village he has written numerous reports for IVS on educational problems and development in Laos. While with the Dispatch News Service he was active in reporting the human dimension of the war in Indochina. In 1972 he also edited Voices from the Plain of Jars (Harper Colophon Books), a series of original essays, translations, and drawings by villagers of a region of Laos which had been heavily bombed between 1964 and 1969.

The editors of this study, James A. Hafner and Joel M. Halpern, are Associate Professor and Professor respectively in the Departments of Geology-Geography and Anthropology at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. Both have lived, worked and conducted research in Laos beginning in the early 1950's and extending through the spring of 1975.

THE VILLAGE OF THE DEEP POND



With an Introduction and Edited by
James A. Hafner
and
Joel M. Halpern

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"I've always liked farming, I really enjoy it. During the dry season I fetch water, cut firewood, repair my tools. At the end of the dry season I look up in the sky ... ho! ... time to plant my upland rice and vegetables. So, I get out there in my paddy fields to plough them; standing behind my buffalos and pushing them along saying, 'tsk, tsk, tsk, tsk ... hey you, go straight ahead ... stop turning! Okay, stop now.' I work as I like. If I feel tired or the sun is too hot I stop for the day, come back to the house, rest and get some strength. Then, the next day I go back and soon the ploughing and transplanting is finished. Nothing to do now for a few months but rest up, fetch water, catch fish, and cut wood. Then I go harvest my rice and I'm all set for the next dry season. What I really like best about my life is that I don't have any boss to tell me what to do, I'm free! Young people today, though, are different. They want to get good jobs and make a lot of money. They want to study English so they can talk to you foreigners and travel. They want to live downtown, build nice houses, have cars. They don't like to work as hard as we do, they want an easier life.

I don't blame them. A lot of times I've wished my life was easier than it is. Having to walk so far, work so hard, .. *hwai*! It really makes me tired. And never any money. No money to get good medicine when you get sick, no money to buy nice food, not enough money to give to the *wat* and run religious festivals, no money for the poor farmer who works so hard but the big people who live downtown have all the money they need and don't do anything for it except to sign papers. Even though I enjoy farming, I wish our lives weren't so difficult, we weren't so sick and poor.

I'll tell you one thing though. Things were a lot better before. We were a lot freer. We could go anywhere we wanted to and nobody asked you, 'are you an *Issara* (Pathet Lao)?' These days...*hwai*! If you want to go anyplace people are always stopping you, wanting to check your identification card,

looking at what you have, asking you if you're an *Issara*. In the old days if they stopped you they were just being nice. They would ask, 'Yey, how are you Grandfather? What do you have there in your basket? Fish, eh? Well, that's nice. Good luck to you and go well.'

And our money these days is worth nothing. In the old days with a few *kip* you could buy a buffalo or a bicycle. These days with a few *kip* you can't even buy a glass of iced tea! In the old days if you worked for a few months you could make enough money to buy what you needed. But these days everything costs thousands and thousands of *kip*. You have to work a whole year before you can buy anything.

In the old days life was peaceful and simple. But these days ...*hwai!*"

.... *an old man of Ban Xa Phang Mewk*

Foreward: Out of Silence

The sympathies and frustrations expressed by the old man of Ban Xa Phang Meuk in the previous statement echo widely similar statements heard elsewhere in the developing world. Change is an ever relentless process whether one is a small farmer in a distant culture or a middle-class neighbor in a comfortable suburb in urban America. In many developing lands these days the fires of change are burning brightly, but they also burn black. Vast changes are occurring, but it seems that for every improvement a former advantage may be lost or a new drawback is discovered.

Ban Xa Phang Meuk is a Laotian village only 9 kilometers north of Vietiane, the administrative capital of Laos. Its residents eagerly desire basic changes in their traditional way of life yet they have found that many of these changes have brought with them more discomfort than satisfaction. The people of the village wish for even more change than what has already occurred. They wish to be richer and have more control over matters which affect their lives. They want those who rule them to be more responsive to their needs, those who rank higher socially to be more egalitarian in outlook, and those with access to wealth to distribute it in such a way that material conditions in the village can improve. For the *chaleun* or progress and civilization which these villagers seek will depend on themselves as well as changes that are beyond their reach.

I found the people of Xa Phang Meuk easy to like and admire, but difficult to feel intimate with. I enjoyed my stay in the village a great deal and found people every bit as charming, beguiling, spontaneous, and fresh as did the most romantic French anthropologists of the early 20th century. But I also found it difficult to share feelings, and establish intimacy as I was far too ungraceful, loud, and analytical to ever completely feel at home in the village. At this point in their history the people of Xa Phang Meuk are too concerned, fearful, and perhaps disoriented to place very much confidence in any outsider, let alone a white American. In a word, the truth of how villagers feel is hard to get at. What truth there is in this description derives primarily from the experience from which it resulted. Questionnaires, surveys, collection of data will never reveal very much of the deeper thoughts and more intimate concerns of the people of Xa Phang Meuk. One rarely gets glimpses of such things by asking direct questions. It is not only that in the present political and social climate direct questions are likely to make villagers uneasy but most often result in answers which it is believed the questioner or government wants to hear. But it is also that direct questioning is alien to village culture and thought patterns. In the end one learns from the villagers simply by happening to be there when they decide to talk about what is important to them. There is little use in trying to rush things. It is as if one were to try to hasten the rains, delay the setting of the sun, or alter any of the other natural phenomena which still directly govern so much of life in the village.

Words are not used the same way in the village as in the West. Silences often tell more than conversations. Lack of activity is frequently more meaningful than action. And a shrug of the shoulder or inflection often tells far more than a 15 minute monologue. It is out of such perceptions that this study has grown.

Introduction

Fred Branfman has a long and unique perspective on the people and events which have overtaken Laos. His residence in the country has spanned some of the most turbulent and enigmatic years this small land-locked nation in mainland Southeast Asia has probably ever experienced. Since he first lived in Xa Phang Meuk between late 1967 and mid 1969 a long period of political instability and conflict has ended, at least temporarily. In the summer of 1975, just months after the fall of South Vietnam and Cambodia, Laos became the last of these three former colonial states of French Indochina to enter a new period of political rule under Communist governments. For at least a quarter-century leading up to this transition, Laos had undergone frequent political and military conflicts involving factions within the country, from within the region, and major world powers. During this period both the lowland and upland Laotian populations had been regularly buffeted by warfare, disruption of traditional life-styles, dislocation from their homes, and by a growing influx of Western values and influences. The confrontation of these forces and traditional Lao culture was probably nowhere more evident nor traumatic than in the Vientiane plain.

The Village of the Deep Pond and its people are in many ways representative of traditional Lao society and the effects which change have had on these communities. Ban Xa Phang Meuk also represents the most recent if not the last general community study to have been conducted in Laos prior to the recent political changes in that country. Earlier studies of community life on the Vientiane plain done in the 1950's and early 1960's by Ayabe(1959), Kaufman(1956,1961) and Condominas(1959,1961,1962) bear testimony to the stability of the community even as signs of change were beginning to be observed. Ayabe's(1959) work is particularly useful in that it focused on the village of Pha Khao, a few kilometers

from Xa Phang Meuk but some ten years earlier than Branfman's study. The wider survey of villages within the Vientiane plain made by Kaufman also provides another basis for comparison and measurement of the process of change. Of particular note in the Village of the Deep Pond is the effect which 'westernization' and 'modernization' have wrought on community social organization, economy, and values. Whether the wishes of the villagers of Xa Phang Meuk for a more responsive government, a more egalitarian society, and more equitable distribution of wealth will be realized is unclear at this point. And yet, it may well be that the villagers' desire for progress will result from changes effected in this new chapter in their lives.

The material which follows is based on an extensive and selective condensation and editing of a longer manuscript prepared by Fred Branfman. An effort has been made to retain as much of the author's informal style and grasp of the nuances of village attitudes and behavior as possible. The main focus in this brief monograph is on the economic structure and activities of the village and its residents and their links to the nearby administrative and market center of Vientiane. While the Village of the Deep Pond is not a pioneering nor highly empirical study it does provide an important reference point needed to gain some grasp of the processes of change and modernization as they have been expressed in Laos. And, it may in the future serve as a yardstick against which changes produced under the latest government can be measured.

James A. Hafner
Amherst, Massachusetts
April 1, 1978

I. THE VILLAGE AND ITS PEOPLE

Ban Xa Phang Meuk is a Laotian farming village located 9 kilometers north of Vientiane, the capital of Laos. It is composed of 66 households comprising 309 people. In general the people of Xa Phang Meuk are tradition-oriented, near-subsistence level paddy farmers. They believe deeply in their religion, a particular blend of Buddhist and animist influences. They practice traditional ceremonies and rituals, listen to traditional music and poetry. Farming is done much as it has been carried out for centuries with 60 of the 66 households either farming their own land or farming for others. Only two households use fertilizer and improved seeds and none use commercial insecticides. The villagers also consume far more of what they produce than they sell.

For all that, the way of life in the village is in the midst of a period of rapid change which might be dated from around 1940. The village has grown rapidly and young people are leaving many of the traditions of their fathers. All villagers are far more aware of the world outside -- politically, socially, and economically -- than they ever were. In general, however, the villagers encounter with the outside world has not proved satisfactory to them. They claim to be far more troubled than they ever were and they have little confidence in their government or future prospects.

Their problems with the outside world are symbolized in the name of the village itself; Ban Xa Phang Meuk means, "Village of the Deep Pond". The site of the village was chosen in large part because of its proximity to a rather large pond which traditionally served as a focal point for the village, both physically and psychologically. It was a place to catch fish, water one's buffalo, meet one's friends, and rest in the shade of its trees. Village spirits were said to reside there. But twenty-five years ago an outsider came into the village and seized the pond. He erected a barbed-wire fence around

it and villagers were forbidden to set foot in it. The outsider's brother was a high-ranking official and he bribed local functionaries to gain control of the pond. Villagers claim that they were both afraid and unable to take action against the seizure of their pond.

Thus the inhabitants of the "Village of the Deep Pond" have been deprived of its use for the last 25 years by outside forces essentially beyond their control. Such interference by the outside has been all too frequent in village eyes and they have come to distrust and fear the world outside as much as they desire to be a part of it.

The Village

The inhabited portion of the village consists of village households, a temple (wat) and a village school. Each household generally consists of a home and a rice storehouse, both mounted on stilts. Buffaloes, cows, pigs, and chickens are generally penned in under the house although they are sometimes kept in pens or tied to trees a bit away from the home. Most households are fenced off by bamboo or barbed wire.

The village is bounded to the north and west by forested and cleared upland areas. Ban Don Nouné, the district capital, lies 2 kilometers to the north (Fig. 1). Just west of the village is one of Laos' first and largest veterinary stations and Laos' largest teacher training college called Dong Doc after the area in which it is located 1 kilometer further west. To the south a paved road leading to the teacher training college defines the southern limits of the village.

Ban Xa Phang Meuk was originally hacked out of a deep forest which surrounded the village on all sides. Today the village landscape includes low-land paddy fields, upland cleared and forested areas all of which the villagers consider part of their village. Many of the village paddy fields lie directly east of the village and upland cleared and forested areas are to the north

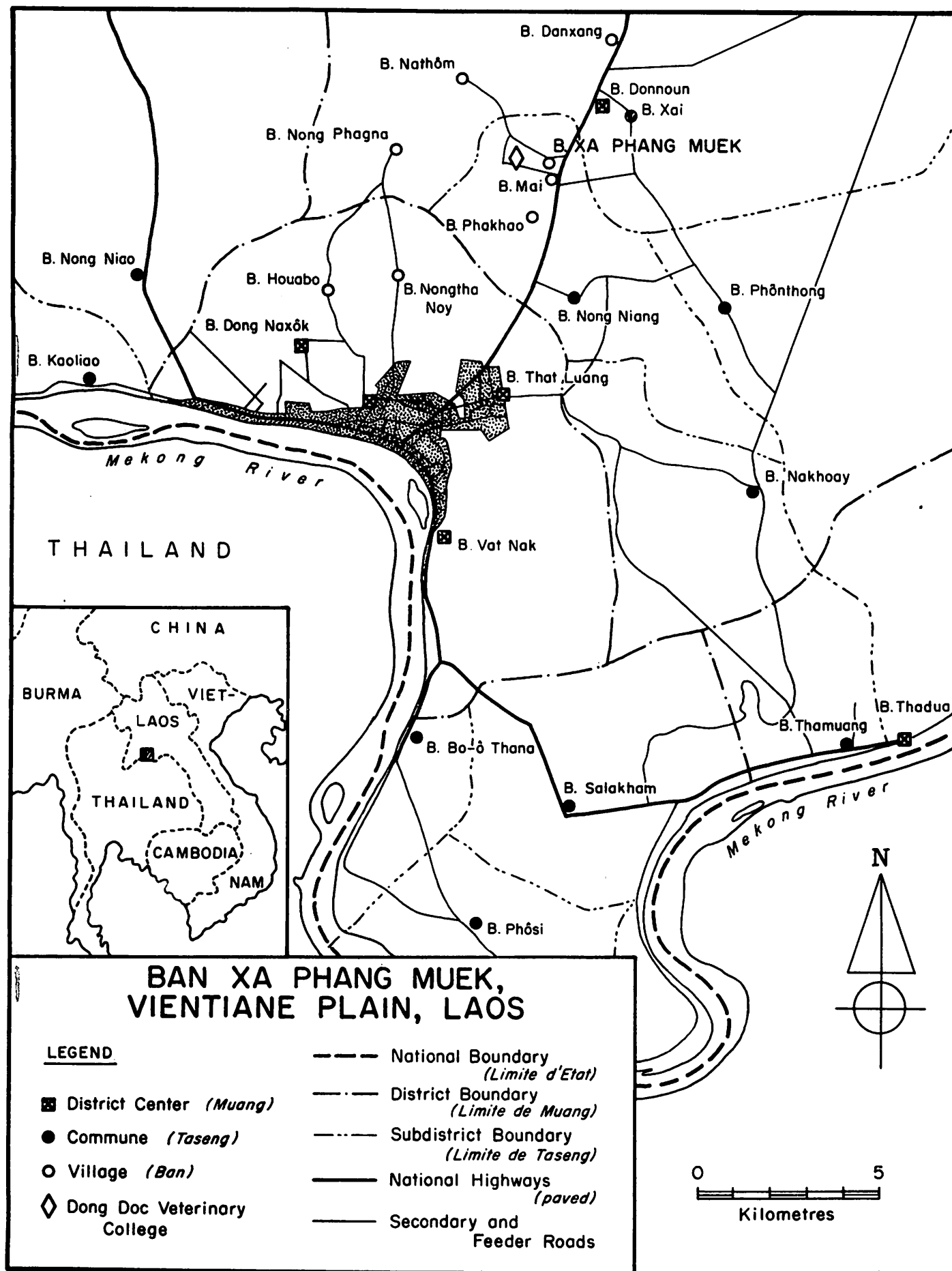


Figure 1

and northwest. A few villagers also have upland fields south of the village. In addition, 17 households hold some land in two villages near Ban Xa Phang Meuk called Ban Na Thom and Ban Nong Veng, an area about 5 kilometers northwest of the village. Two dirt roads run east-west and north-south through the village and the pond lies in the northeastern portion of the village.

The Villagers

The village was originally founded by three men from Xieng Khouang province in northeastern Laos around 1890. The site was chosen because of the flat land nearby which was suitable for paddy growing and the pond. As late as 1940 the village consisted of no more than 20 households inhabited almost entirely by the descendents of the original founders. Life in Ban Xa Phang Meuk at the beginning of the 20th century was much the same as it had been for centuries before. Old men in the village recall that during their early years fire was made by striking a piece of metal against a rock to which a piece of cotton was attached. A spark would start the cotton burning and it would then be used to start a fire or light a torch. A narrow path led through the forest to downtown Vientiane although villagers did not go to the 'city' much in those days. They grew enough rice to eat, caught fish and cut wood as their forefathers had done. There were no western-style schools near the village and those who studied did so in the wat. Contact was limited with the French colonialists and old men do not recall ever having seen Frenchmen in the village, though they sometimes saw them when as young men they were called to participate in road-building projects or other forms of corvée. The men grew cotton and the women wove cloth from it to make clothing, pillows and mattresses.

As the 20th century wore on this traditional way of life began changing. Perhaps the most rapid period of social change occurred from the end of World War II until the present moment. Fire is now made by matches and most of the

villagers have lighters. Lamps are common. A paved road links the village with Vientiane which has grown a hundredfold. People listen to radios at night and they send their children to western-style schools, at least for a few years. They occasionally sell some of their rice, grow livestock for cash and often work in part-time salaried employment. The Frenchmen have been replaced by Americans, and they have had relatively frequent contact with them. Villagers are more and more caught-up in political cross-currents in Laos. They buy and sell in the morning market in Vientiane and many of them ride bicycles and taxis along with their ox-carts. The villagers no longer weave their own clothing, buying it and many other household needs in Vientiane. Formal religious observance is less than it once was.

World War II and the growth of Vientiane brought a sizeable influx of outsiders into the village. Many of these people were ethnic Laotians from northeastern Thailand and others were Laotians attracted by the nearness of the village to Vientiane and the availability of land. There are today 309 villagers, grouped into 66 households. Each household generally finds itself aligned with one of two groups. The first is a loose kinship group made up of the descendents of the original founders and comprising from 30-40% of the total households. The other is made up of more recent arrivals which make up the balance of village population.

About three-quarters (48) of the households are composed of husband, wife, and children and in some cases one or more grandparents as well. The remaining households are primarily composed of older couples whose children are living elsewhere. This pattern of a predominantly nuclear family structure within the village is consistent with that found by Ayabe (1959) in Ban Pha Khao some ten years earlier. He noted that over 80% of the 88 households surveyed were nuclear units and less than 12.5% were extended families;

"Very seldom does a family take the form of a extended household. Pha Khao is no exception in this regard and the percentage of extended families is very low"(Ayabe, 1959, 13)

Both the ethnic and locational origins of household heads within the village are predominantly Lao. In the case of Xa Phang Meuk slightly over half of village household heads were born in the village and somewhat more than a third each in Thailand and elsewhere in Laos, Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of Married Village Household Heads by Place of Birth, Ban Xa Phang Meuk, 1969.

Place of Birth	Village Household Heads		
	Male	Female	Total
Northeast Thailand	19 (15.3%)	16 (12.9%)	35 (28.2%)
Laos	24 (19.4%)	14 (11.3%)	38 (30.7%)
Village	20 (16.1%)	31 (25.0%)	51 (41.1%)
Total	63 (50.8%)	61 (49.2%)	124(100.0%)

The only notable exception is one Thai from Bangkok who has been living in the village some 20 years and is married to a village woman. This pattern is somewhat more diversified, however, than that found by Ayabe in Pha Khao. He indicates that 77% of marriage partners came from within the village itself, less than 7% from within the district or Vientiane city, and only 6.8% were outside Laos. Other provinces within Laos accounted for only 2.3% of village marriage partners (Ayabe, 1959; Table 5, 52). The evident increase in marriages between village residents and non-Lao citizens suggested by these two studies may well be the result of population movements and the general expansion of Vientiane city over the past several decades as Ayabe suggested.

As is the custom in the village and in Laos residence is matrilocal or matri local to neolocal. That is, men move into the households of their wives and therefore, in Xa Phang Meuk most of the men born in the village have moved

into the villages of their wives. Of the 20 men who were village-born and have remained in the village, 11 have taken wives from the village and 9 have taken wives from outside of the village. This latter group has remained in the village by and large because they owned a good deal more land in Xa Phang Meuk than did their wives.

The villagers for the most part consider themselves farmers and of the 63 male household heads, 54 (85%) were considered as farmers. This number includes three retired men who no longer farm. Of the remaining nine who were employed permanently in salaried jobs, four owned land which was farmed by their families and/or hired labor. The family of a fifth farmed as hired laborers for other villagers. Of 66 households in the village, 60 are involved in farming in some way; as self-employed farmers, agricultural laborers and/or proprietors hiring labor. There are also 17 adults who have permanent work in non-farming occupations. These include 3 drivers, 3 laborers, 3 village store-keepers, 2 employees of USAID (the United States Agency for International Development), 2 girls who sell food in the morning market in Vientiane, the village school teacher, the head of the livestock station, a soldier and a military policeman. A comparison of occupational distribution for Xa Phang Meuk and Pha Khao is shown in Table 2.

Considering the proximity of both villages to Vientiane, the elapsed time between the studies, and the marked growth of the capital in this period the occupational data suggest certain increases in urban related employment among villagers. The most notable examples are the increases in Taxi drivers, merchants and produce vendors in the urban market, and employment for the large American AID program.

Most of the villagers are young; 58% are under 20 years of age, 66% below 30, and 85% less than 40 years of age. There is a striking lack of

young men in the village between the ages of 20 and 30; in total only 6 and they are outnumbered by women in this age group 3 to 1. In most other age groups the numbers are fairly equal between men and women.¹

Table 2. - Occupational Distribution for Household Heads and Adults in Non-agricultural Activities for Ban Xa Phang Meuk and Ban Pha Khao

Occupation	B. Pha Khao ^a (n = 88)	B. Xa Phang Meuk (n = 72)
Farmers	74 (84%)	55 (76.4%)
Laborers, road workers	3 (3.4%)	3 (4.2%)
Policeman	2 (2.3%)	1 (1.4%)
Taxi drivers	2 (2.3%)	3 (4.2%)
Prison Guard	2 (2.3%)	-
Merchant, market vendor	1 (1.1%)	5 (6.9%)
Soldier	1 (1.1%)	1 (1.4%)
Civil Servant	1 (1.1%)	1 (1.4%)
Teacher	1 (1.1%)	1 (1.4%)
USAID employee	-	2 (2.8%)
Rice Mill Manager	1 (1.1%)	-

^aAyabe, T., 1961, The Village of Ban Pha Khao, Vientiane Province, Laos Project Paper No. 14, Los Angeles: Department of Anthropology, University of California (Table 9, p. 53).

In speaking of the villager of Ban Xa Phang Meuk it should be noted that we have included 17 households which own some land in Ban Na Thom and Ban Nong Veng. Eleven of these families sleep part or all of the year in Ban Xa Phang Meuk and six sleep most of the year in either of the other two villages. But all have homes and close relatives in Xa Phang Meuk and they both consider themselves and are considered residents of the village. There are numerous other villagers in Na Thom and Nong Veng who are not considered a part of Xa Phang Meuk. We have also excluded from this study the people of

¹Similar age distributions for Ban Pha Khao for 1959 were: 50% less than 20 years of age; 69% less than 30; and 79% less than 40 years of age (Ayabe, 1961;4). The male-female ratio of the 20-30 year age group was 1.4 to 1. To the extent that both villages are comparable, the data for Ban Pha Khao bear out the marked shift in age distribution for males noted by Branfman.

Ban Mai, a settlement just south of Xa Phang Meuk made up of 11 households comprising 102 people. It was founded about 20 years ago and most of its inhabitants have been living there about 10 years. While it is legally considered a part of Xa Phang Meuk and its population is listed in the census book as inhabitants of this village the people of Xa Phang Meuk do not consider it a part of their own village. Ninety percent of Ban Mai's residents are ethnic Lao from Thailand, quite poor, and do not own any land. The residents of Xa Phang Meuk are quite disdainful in their attitudes toward them, saying for example, "all the people of Ban Mai know how to do is have children" or "you can hire them to do anything". There is relatively little contact between the two settlements and the *nai ban* (village chief) and his secretaries know little about them. Thus we have elected to keep the same distinction between Ban Xa Phang Meuk and Ban Mai kept by the people involved.

A Typical Household

If there was one household in the village which could be entirely typical of the rest it might have the following characteristics. It would be composed of 5 people; a husband and wife under 40 years of age, and three children of which two were less than ten years of age and one in his teens. The wife would be a village resident by birth, the husband having come from outside of the village and both being ethnic Lao. The family would practice a religion which is a combination of Buddhist and animistic influences. They would live in a wooden house on stilts with a corrugated iron roof at the back of which would be a rice storehouse. They would have two buffalo, one cow, ten chickens, and perhaps a pig or two.

During the rainy season the parents and older children would grow paddy rice on either their own field or for someone else. If they worked for another they would probably keep 50 percent of their harvest, but in either case they would probably consume and/or store most of the rice they grew. During the

dry season the husband would probably seek temporary employment as a salaried laborer outside the village and/or cut firewood for sale. His wife would tend a home garden and work around the house while one of his sons would look after the buffalo and cows.

The parents of this household would probably not have studied in the formal school system, though the husband would have studied while serving as a monk. He is likely to have served as a novice for a few years and perhaps as a monk for at least one more. The children, however, are likely to average about three years of education each. Visits to Vientiane by the parents would be made three or four times a month and the most important items of consumer goods owned would be a bicycle and a radio. Other than these two items they probably would not own any 'luxury' goods. Cash earned would be saved or else spent on buffalo, clothing, health, and food needs. Such a typical household leads a way of life that is both highly traditional and changing rapidly. Some aspects of this change will be considered in the following chapter.

II. NEAR SUBSISTENCE: A WAY OF LIFE

The villagers of Ban Xa Phang Meuk lead a way of life at once typical of and distinctive from similar communities of rural farmers throughout the developing world. The kinds of activities village residents engage in and many of their attitudes are common to near-subsistence villagers anywhere. Like them, the people of Xa Phang Meuk spend most of the working hours cultivating crops, taking care of livestock, cutting wood, catching fish, cooking and cleaning. And like them they talk mostly about sex, farming, religion, and health, and other people. Typically, they put great stress on religion, a combination of formal creed and animistic beliefs. Characteristically, infant mortality is high, life expectancy is low, and villagers suffer from an inadequate diet and a variety of ailments most of their lives. As is common, villagers spend a good deal of time with friends and families, making parties, and just enjoying themselves. They tend to be more fatalistic than their more technically advanced neighbors, seemingly shrugging off many of life's misfortunes with an attitude called *manyana* in Spanish, *hapana kitu* in Swahili, and *bo pen nyang* in Laotian. As in many small communities, they tend to both distrust and dislike many of their fellow villagers and yet engage in a good deal of functional cooperation. And like villagers in many places they aspire to far greater wealth and comfort but seem incapable and often unwilling to make the kind of effort necessary to achieve it.

Outside observers have evolved various explanations as to why Laotian villagers seem so unusually content and at peace. It is argued, for example, that land pressure has never been a problem in Laos. There has always been far more land than people and the land available has been rich in wood, teeming with game and fish, sufficiently rich to grow upland and paddy rice, and plentiful in plants. It is theorized that this has led to the lack of anxiety, independence, and sense of equilibrium which seems to characterize so many Laotian

peasants. Another explanation has to do with the peacefulness and gentleness of the villagers. It is pointed out that Laos has been surrounded by more powerful foreigners and has lost every war it has fought. Its people thus had to learn to stifle hostile and aggressive instincts they may once have had, develop the ability to charm and flatter more powerful foreigners, simply to survive as a people. There is, of course, some truth in such speculations. It is just as obvious, however, that they are incomplete. In any event, such theories will not concern us overly much here. We will be more interested in describing how people live rather than searching for historical origins.

What strikes us most about the way of life of the villagers is simply that so much of it has survived to the present day. Few people who have been so weak vis a vis their neighbors, and who have so often been conquered by outside powers, have retained so much of their indigenous culture in this third quarter of the twentieth century. This way of life is changing rapidly and no doubt will continue to do so. But it is striking how many of the ways in which the people of Xa Phang Meuk live resemble those of their ancestors over the centuries. It should always be remembered, however, that the village we are discussing lies only 9 kilometers outside of a capital city which has absorbed as much western influence as any city in Southeast Asia over the last two decades.

A Near-Subsistence Economy

The economy of the village is still largely subsistence in nature. That is to say, the majority of the work done in the village goes to meet basic needs of food and shelter. At the same time, the village has definitely begun the transition into a cash economy. Almost every household has a cash income of one sort or another. Most of this cash income, however, still goes toward meeting religious needs. Relatively little goes toward purchasing "luxury" consumer goods or productive investment. Villagers engage in a great deal of

village-level work which reaps no cash income. This includes growing paddy and upland rice, raising chickens, catching fish, and growing vegetables for home consumption; cutting firewood for home use; repairing tools and one's home, particularly if one has a thatch roof; and raising ploughing water buffalo and cart-drawing cows.

Cash income is realized in a variety of ways: from selling paddy rice and vegetables; raising and selling pigs, surplus water buffaloes and cows; temporary employment as agricultural laborers ; and temporary employment outside the village as laborers, drivers, or whatever. There are also 18 people who hold either permanently salaried jobs or work permanently as sellers of goods. Villagers frequently state that their village is a rather poor one, not only in comparison with downtown Vientiane but a number of other villages in the area. They lack electricity and running water and most of the houses are on rather low stilts, made from a poor grade of wood. There are few means of transportation other than bicycles and material possessions are generally limited to clothing, livestock, tools, and household goods. They are not satisfied with their diet or health situation and in general they feel they lack enough money to meet a wide variety of needs and desires.

Landholding Patterns

The land which villagers claim extends in all directions from the village. Ten to fifteen years ago, however, much of this land to the west was seized by the government to build *Dong Doc* Teacher training college (see Fig. 1). Most of the paddy land farmed by villagers lies to the east of the village and most of the upland areas lie to the North and Northwest. There is a limited farming area to the South. Villagers make a basic distinction in this land. The term *naa* applies to paddy land. The term *hai* applies to upland areas, either cleared or forested and much of the *hai* lying to the north and northwest of the village is forested. Much of this land is owned by outsiders and cer-

tain villagers farm it for them on a cash or kind basis. It is most difficult to ascertain exactly how much land is owned by which outsiders. In a conversation with the *naibang* and his assistants, 22 different absentee landlords were mentioned. It was stressed, however, that this did not complete the list and that a substantial number remained. Many of these absentee landlords have held this land for many years, often receiving it from their fathers, but at least half were said to have bought the land during the last ten years. A number of education officials have also begun to use part of the land taken by the teacher training college for their own personal use. The seizure of lands by the teacher training college was particularly resented, for villagers are generally reluctant to give up their land.

In a survey of the 60 households engaged in farming activities in the village, we found the following: 35 families owned both *hai* and *naa*; 17 families owned just *hai*; 1 family owned just *naa*; and 7 families are landless. Villagers do not generally know how much land they hold, thus without a full-scale land survey it is most difficult to ascertain the size of holdings. In general, however, the size of the *naa* for each household seems relatively uniform, from 1-2 hectares. There are only two villagers who are generally considered to own a great deal of land and a clear distinction is made between them and the rest of the villagers. Nor are they pleased about outsiders obtaining land in or near the village. Twenty-five years ago things were different. At that time the village consisted of only about 20 households and much of the land claimed by villagers was unused by them. They were willing to part with it for rather low fees in order to obtain some cash. But land pressure today is far greater. In general, villagers only part willingly with their land when forced to by economic necessity. One such case occurred in 1968. A village boy of about 23 was about to be married. A few days before his marriage he got into an automobile accident and was thrown into prison pending his payment

of over 100,000 kip (U.S. \$5,000) damages.¹ The father was forced to sell his land in the village, two houses, and paddy fields in order to raise the money to pay for the wedding and the release of his son. It was sold to a French professor at the teacher training college who wished to acquire land in the village for his Lao wife's family. Over the last 10 years he has acquired various holdings in the village and is widely resented as a result.

There is some speculation by Laotians familiar with the village that villagers sometimes part with their land out of fear. They claim that high ranking military officers or government officials have demanded to buy it, offering a price either fair or unfair, and threatened villagers with reprisals if they refused. I was unable to ascertain the truth of this statement as villagers are highly reluctant to even discuss the topic. In any case, outsiders own a good deal of the land around Xa Phang Meuk. Exact figures were not obtainable, but it seems clear that perhaps a majority of the *naa* surrounding the village is owned by absentee landlords, but a majority of the *hai* is owned by villagers.

Rainy Season Rice Growing

The core economic activity of the village is farming paddy rice during the rainy season; 86% (57) of the village households engage in it in one form or another. All of those who do not farm paddy rice are employed and have a cash income; 3 of them farm *hai* fields. Of the 57 households engaged in farming *naa*, 63% (36) own their own *naa* and 37% (21) do not. The 36 households who own their own *naa* generally farm it themselves, although 18 families do so entirely without hiring additional non-family labor. Some of those who own *naa* have only small amounts and will farm both their own field(s) and work

¹In 1969, Kip 500 = U.S. \$1.00

on other people's fields for 50% of the yield. Two households headed by elderly couples who are formally retired have no members engaged in farming and must rely entirely on hired labor. The 18 families who hire labor generally do so from the non-landholding population among the villagers of Xa Phang Meuk or Ban Mai. In some cases, however, they hire young boys who come looking for work from Northeastern Thailand. The arrangement is for a Northeast Thai youth to sleep and eat in the hiring villager's home, work as a member of the family, and receive an agreed-upon amount of rice after the harvest. The number of such cases varies considerably from year to year. Last year there were a half dozen such cases in Xa Phang Meuk. Villagers will also from time to time hire laborers from other parts of Laos. Kaufman (1961) in a study of 16 villages throughout the Vientiane Plain conducted in 1956-57 indicated that wages paid to labor used in paddy production were 36 lbs of rice per day or 1,500 lbs per season (May-October). Affluent farmers also preferred to hire Thai (Lao) laborers from northeast Thailand who were paid Kip 1,000 for the harvest season and Kip 600 for the transplanting season. If they worked during the entire agricultural period they were also given free room and board (Kaufman, 1961; 11).

Twenty-one households work as agricultural laborers on paddy rice fields during the rainy season. The pattern of this work varies considerably, in some cases they are paid 50% of the yield with the other 50% going to the landowner, and in others they are paid a rate of 3,400 kip (U.S. \$0.60-0.80) per day of labor. This is the case particularly during transplanting and harvesting. In some cases, these people are tenant farmers, living and working on an absentee landlord's property year after year. In others, they change fields from season or work on a number of different fields during a given season.

The farming cycle usually begins with the first rains in May. Most villagers who own *naa* also grew some vegetables and/or rice on their *hai* fields, and will begin by planting this. They then proceed to farm their paddies.

The first step is ploughing the seedbed and sowing the seeds. Ploughing is done with the aid of water buffaloes and seeds are measured in terms of *meun* (12 kilo baskets of seed). A farmer often measures his land in terms of the number of *meun* he uses in his seedbed. Seedbeds are often at some distance from the actual paddy fields, and are usually in level, fertile areas where seeds will grow most quickly and best. Farmers use almost entirely local brands of glutinous rice which are photosensitive and take from 158 to 180 days to mature. One farmer uses an improved Thai variety of glutinous rice. After getting his seedbed in the farmer then begins work on his paddy fields. He generally ploughs once and harrows once or twice, before repairing the dikes between his paddies, finishing all of this by the end of June. Seedlings are generally ready for transplanting about 30 days after sowing. The farmer usually waits until there are a few inches of water in his paddy fields before transplanting. Transplanting and harvesting are the two most labor intensive periods. A family of four will generally take about a month to transplant one hectare (2.4 acres) and most of the paddy fields of Xa Phang Meuk are transplanted by the end of July. The next three months are spent in a variety of ways. Many of the villagers sleep in little huts over their transplanted rice fields, guarding them against animals and possible thieves. During the day they may continue work on their *hai*, catch fish, or repair and make tools. A number of villagers say that they weed their fields during this period, though I do not believe that this is the general practice. Harvesting begins sometime in November and demands somewhat less time than transplanting. Villagers claim that it would take a labor force of four about 20-25 days to harvest one hectare. While harvesting farmers usually stack their rice next to the field where it is later threshed and then carried back to the rice storehouse. In general farmers devote a good deal of care and attention to their paddy. They generally plough and harrow their fields, repair dikes, transplant using proper spacing, and thresh rather carefully.

However, they use few modern techniques and only one man employs improved seeds and fertilizer and the other 56 households used neither. None of the farmers report using insecticides, though insect damage is fairly common.

It is difficult to compute yields since farmers are unsure of the size of the area they own. This fact would seem to be related to the farmers' habit of measuring area planted in terms of *meun* of seed he uses in planting. Given the fact that the farmer uses neither improved seeds, fertilizer or insecticide and does not have the means of supplementing irrigation it seems likely to assume that one ton per hectare might well be an average yield for the village. Some comparative rice yields for villages in the plain and the plain as a whole are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. - Rice Yields per Capita in the Vientiane Plain

Location	Date	Yield in lbs/capita	Source
Plain (avg.)	1955-57	1,200 - 1,600	Kaufman, 1961
Ban Pha Khao	1959	1,700	Ayabe, 1961
Xa Phang Meuk	1969	851	Branfman, 1978
Hat Don Kouat	1973	1,700	Schaap, 1974 ^a

^aSchaap, B., 1974, Report on a Household Survey of Nam Ngum Reservoir Evacuees Bangkok: U.N. Mekong Committee, Resettlement Study and Planning Project (mimeo)

The one man in the village who does use improved seeds and fertilizers reports yields of two to three tons per hectare (2.4 acres). To date few other villagers have been copying him, but he has only begun these practices two years ago and it seems likely that his influence may spread.

Villagers generally consume most of what they grow and what they do not consume they often store away in case of emergency. They are also not strangers to either drought or flood. There was a serious flood in 1966 and a serious drought in 1967. Had villagers not been in the habit of storing their rice, problems would have been more serious than they were. With all that, a number of villagers do sell varying amounts of rice for cash. This is another area which villagers are reluctant to talk about and hard figures are difficult to obtain. Some villagers

sell their rice to ricemills downtown and others dehusk their own paddi by means of a hand-operated device or use the small village ricemill operated by fellow villagers, selling the dehusked rice in the market. In December 1969, eight farmers sold rice to the USAID operated Agricultural Development Organization (ADO). They claim that since ADO sent a truck out to the village to collect their rice and paid them in the village, this encouraged them to grow and sell more. Rice was sold by the *meun* and villagers were paid 300 *Kip* per *meun*. The amounts sold per villager were 100,20,250,200,300,400,50, and 100 *meun* respectively, for a grand total of 1,550 *meun*. This figure is significant since a few years ago all rice was sold piecemeal in Vientiane. But it is still only a small fraction , at most 15%, of the rice produced by the village. Few houses sell much more than a small portion of what they produce.

Other Village Work Activities

As important as it is, paddy farming is only a portion of the work done within the village. Eighty percent(52) of the households possess *hai* which are mainly forested, though much of the *hai* area has been cleared. The most productive activity carried out on the cleared *hai* is the growing of vegetables. Twenty-one households, about 40% of those with *hai*, regularly sell vegetables. In general, they grow vegetables such as stringbeans, cabbage,lettuce, and peppers which are sold retail in the morning market by villagers' wives, sold to Chinese or other merchants in the Vientiane market, or sold to other village women who in turn take them downtown for sale in the morning market. Twelve of the villagers are grouped into a small association of vegetable growers. They grow their vegetables together in one large area during the dry season and rainy season. During the dry season they water their fields from wells and although each household works on its own fields, there is a good deal of cooperative action in work and marketing. These 12 people report a cash profit of from \$60 to \$80 per household per year.

As mentioned above, cleared *hai* is also used for growing rice during the rainy season. The five households which possess *hai* but no *naa* regularly use it for this purpose. Perhaps half a dozen other households also grow upland rice. The uncleared *hai* are also important sources of wood. In the past villagers made a good deal of money by cutting down trees and selling the wood to sawmills and private individuals. This activity has been cut down somewhat since the land west of the village was appropriated for the teacher training college, but perhaps a dozen households still make a good deal of money this way, particularly during the dry season. One cart load of wood sells for 600 kip (U.S. \$1.20). In addition, farmers regularly cut wood from uncleared *hai* for firewood. The uncleared *hai* also serves as an important source of bamboo shoots and other wild plants for eating and bark, tree roots, and plants are used for locally-made medicines. Each family also possesses a small home garden, usually quite near their home. They generally grow a wide variety of vegetables including peppers, tomatoes, lettuce, cabbage, and string beans, as well as flowers. The vegetables are generally consumed in the home and the flowers used for religious purposes.

Fishing is one of the major village-level work activities. This is usually done most during the rainy season when villagers fish in rice paddies and ditches around the village which fill up with water. Fishing is done with a variety of locally-made implements, the most common of which are the *kadoung*, a fish net on a pole, and the *kheung son pa*, a kind of hand basket. Villagers generally fish for a few hours every day for the four to five months that fish are available. This work is often done by the younger daughters, although boys will often participate as well. The fish which are caught are generally consumed at home. Only one man, the farmer who seized the village pond, is said to sell fish consistently. A part of the fish catch is consumed immediately and another part is customarily used to make *pa dek*, (fermented fish), a major Laotian food used primarily as a condiment. *Pa dek* is made from

fish, rice husks, salt, and ideally, dried peppers. These ingredients are all chopped up, mixed together, and placed in large jars under the house to ferment. The *pa dek* is eaten largely during the dry season and so fish constitute a major portion of villagers' diets throughout the year. The custom of storing *pa dek* is also tied to the villagers' desire to have a steady supply of food right near their house should they ever be unable to obtain food from the outside due to natural or political misfortune.

Raising livestock is another major village-level activity. Among the village households 53% (35) possess water buffalo. These 35 households own about 128 water buffalo or an average of about 4 per household. Distribution among houses possessing water buffalo is fairly even and the most any one household has is eight. Water buffalo are primarily used for ploughing the paddy field. In general, a given household will use a team of two to plough and villagers do not raise water buffalo to sell. A given family may rent out any extra ones during the rainy season and if there is a particular economic need they may sell them. But in general, families with more than two water buffalo regard them as a kind of insurance. A few villagers will, however, either buy or take care of small water buffalo, raise them, and then sell them or return them to their owners in exchange for cash. Farmers of the village often complain that they, since their pond was seized, have to walk a few kilometers during the dry season to the nearest other large ponds in order to water their buffalo. During the rainy season they are watered nearer the village, a job customarily entrusted to small boys.

Villagers generally make their own *pa dek* baskets, *meun* (rice baskets), rice steamer baskets, fishing implements, ax handles, water buckets, and a variety of the other bamboo and wood objects. Though most of them do not make their wagons which are used for hauling, they must often repair the ones they do have. Straw roofs are also often in need of repair. A number of villagers go

out in teams every few years to a spot 10 kilometers away where they stay for a few weeks cutting straw suitable for repairing roofs. These materials are used to repair their own roofs, and surplus materials are sold to other villagers.

Women, of course, engage in household chores such as washing clothes and cooking. A major activity for women is going out into the forested area around the village each day or two to bring back wild plants for food. Women also spend much time threshing and winnowing rice. Although weaving clothing has largely died out in the village, a number of village women spend some time during the dry season weaving some items they particularly need or desire. There are four small village stalls which are operated by village families throughout the year. They sell such things as kerosene, dried buffalo meat, *lao lao* (local alcohol), cigarettes, matches, candy, cakes, and from time to time vegetables and fruits. Usually during the dry season, two or three women will open up small stalls specializing in *lao lao*, *khao phoune* (a noodle and meat dish), candies and cigarettes. These latter stalls are not notably successful and a given woman does not usually operate in every dry season. One such stall reported grossing 12,000 kip (\$24) in one dry season period, operating for months, (15 days a month). In addition to these individual activities, there are periodic occasions for community work, including helping neighbors build houses, furnishing work gangs for the army or government, and working on improving the *wat* or school.

Almost every village male adult and many village women have worked at one time or another in non-agricultural work outside the village for which they have earned cash. For most villagers salaried employment is temporary which they seek out during the dry season when they are not farming paddy. We surveyed 55 adult male farmers who farm paddy during the rainy season. Of this number, 43% (24) are presently regarded as individuals who regularly seek dry season salaried

employment outside of the village. The other 31 carry on village-level activities during this period, however most of them have held temporary salaried jobs in the past. These 24 village residents work at a wide variety of jobs during the dry season. The most usual is as common laborers at building sites, the teacher training college, nearby sawmills, etc. Salaries for such jobs are on the order of 10,000 kip (U.S. \$20) a month. A number of village youths find work for a few weeks a year digging wells, pits, or small fish ponds and they generally receive from 300 to 500 kip for one day's labor. Some of these men also find jobs as drivers, gardeners for the American community three kilometers away, and carpenters. Some of the more specialized jobs which villagers have filled are as a rocket-maker for the government and a keeper at a downtown zoo.

The pattern of temporary salaried employment outside the village varies tremendously from year to year. Off-season employment is regarded by villagers as supplementary to their main jobs of running a household and farming paddy rice. Although most of those who seek employment outside would ideally wish to work every dry season, they often do not succeed. Looking for a job takes time and money and one is not at all assured that one's efforts will be rewarded. The jobs found are often temporary or they are forced to give them up when the rainy season approaches and so are not rehired. Moreover, wages are quite low in proportion to the 40-50 hour weeks and the transportation and food expenses involved. Villagers are often sick or beset by family problems during a given dry season or they may be unable to work out transportation or lodging problems involved in taking on a job. Thus, a given villager wishing work will often go out and not look for a job, hoping to hear of a sure one available. However, other villagers, of course, make a great effort to find a job every dry season. As a result, a given villager who is available for employment outside the village generally winds up taking a job about one dry season in two. He will generally work in this job from three to five months.

Village women do not in general seek temporary salaried employment. Most

of them, however, have at one time or another worked as saleswomen outside the village. The most common way in which this is done is by selling at the morning market. Periodically, village women will take vegetables and rice they have grown and sell them downtown in the market. The frequency of these efforts varies considerably according to season and amount of produce grown and sold. A number of younger girls regularly buy rice from other villagers after the rainy season harvest and go each day during the beginning of the dry season to sell it.

Many village women also periodically set up stalls during wat religious festivals called *boun* outside the village. These *boun* are attended by many hundreds of people and village women will sell beer, coca cola, cakes, chicken and other foods at them.

Full Time Non-Farm Employment

There are presently eighteen people living in Ban Xa Phang Meuk who have a regular cash income. Eleven of these have salaried jobs and seven are self-employed. Those with salaried jobs include the following: the village school teacher; a USAID rural development employee; a soldier; a military policeman; a gardener for an American household; a driver for the Materials Production Center of the Ministry of Education; a taxi driver who keeps the taxi in the village and drives it for its downtown owner; a taxi driver who rents the vehicle from a downtown resident; the director of the livestock station near the village; a secretary employed by International Voluntary Services, Inc. for the English section at the teacher training college; and, a laborer at the teaching training college. These eleven sleep in the village, all are married and their salaries vary from the \$15-\$25 a month earned by the military men, civil servant, and laborer to the \$50-\$100 a month earned by the USAID man and taxi drivers. Although the cash income of these eleven men is considerably higher than most of the villagers, many of them do not live on their salaries alone since their households farm paddy rice and/or upland crops as well.

Their families work on the fields and they supplement this by hired labor. On occasion, a few of them will stop work during the intensive periods of transplanting and harvesting to help out. Only four of these households, those of the USAID employee, soldier, laborer, and one of the taxi drivers, do not farm parry or upland areas. The seven villagers who are self-employed are all vendors. They include a couple in their forties who operate a small village stall and do not farm at all; a couple in their fifties who are in the same position; a 45 year old woman who also operates a village stall and does not farm; and two sisters in their early twenties who travel each day to the morning market to sell vegetables which they either purchase from villagers, farmers from Northesast Thailand, or Chinese merchants. Their mother owns *naa* and *hai* which she farms together with her third husband and hired labor.

There is an important group of people whom we have not yet discussed. These are the nineteen people listed in the Xa Phang Meuk census book who have salaried jobs and sleep outside the village. All of these people have relatives and often homes in the village and visit it regularly. They might well have been included as village residents in this paper, but since they have all been living outside the village since I arrived there and have set up home elsewhere, I decided not to do so. For the purposes of this study, this group is not regarded as included among "the villagers of Xa Phang Meuk."

Although not considered village residents for this study, this group is of some relevance for the village. All have maintained legal residence in the village and most may well come back to the village at some later date. They keep up their ties in the village and a part of their income finds its way back into Xa Phang Meuk. With the exception of the Travaux Publiques driver, and Dong Doc and airport laborer couples, all were born in the village and/or have parents or in-laws there. They have been kept on the residence books in large part because they stand to inherit their parents' household and land when they die.

Thus, there are 37 people with regular cash incomes who have close contact with the village, 18 who sleep in it and 19 who presently live elsewhere.

To recap then, the villagers of Ban Xa Phang Meuk derive widely varying income from a combination of the following activities: selling rice; selling vegetables; selling buffaloes, cows, and pigs; selling firewood; working as agricultural laborers; doing part-time salaried work outside the village; selling goods both in and out of the village; working at full-time salaried jobs; and performing certain specialized tasks - thus one man sells fish, another officiates at religious ceremonies, a few make local medicines, and one man makes rockets. A number of households also obtain income from the 18 people listed as village residents but who live and work outside of it.

Village Income

It is most difficult to compute with any accuracy the income of a given household. A household will derive small cash incomes from a variety of activities; the combination of these activities changing from year to year as do productivity and prices. Villagers generally do not keep records of what they earn and often spend small sums as soon as they earn them. For example, village women will frequently buy things at the morning market after earning a few hundred kip earlier in the day by selling vegetables. One of the biggest problems in computing income is village reluctance to discuss such matters. In general, the greater the income the less villagers tend to give accurate figures. This seems at least in part due to fear of encouraging jealousy, thievery, or demands for loans from other villagers or outsiders. Having stated these formidable obstacles, we will hazard a personal estimate of between \$100 and \$150 per household per year. This would work out to a per capita cash income of from \$20 to \$30 annually. We base this estimate on personal observation and certain data which is available.

A farm management survey was administered to five village households selected at random. The villagers stated that their annual cash income was res-

pectively \$380, \$196, \$160, \$54, and \$6. Thus for these five households the average annual income was about \$144. Eight farmers sold rice to ADO last year for about \$930 or about \$116 per household. And of the 21 farmers who sell vegetables fairly regularly, the majority are said to average about \$60 to \$80 a year. It can also be assumed that each of these households supplements its income from village-level activities and temporary employment outside. This data serves as further indication that land-holding farmers average between \$100 and \$150 cash income per household per year. Low estimates for the income of the eleven wage-earners in the village yield the following: \$500 a year for the village school teacher; \$960 for the USAID employee; \$240 for the civil servant laborer and director of the livestock station; and \$400 for the IVS employee.. This works out to an average of \$430 a year per household for this group from their salaries alone. This figure is assumed to balance off the income of from \$5-40 a year earned by the poor and landless and bring the overall average for the village up to the range we have estimated. It is clear from the above that there is a significant degree of income differentiation in the village. We might distinguish in broad outline between three groups of farmers.

An upper income group might have an average annual income of from \$400-\$450 per household. We would estimate that this group includes about 12 families. We would include here the 11 households which have at least one wage-earner permanently employed in a salaried job. We would add to this the household of the farmer who seized the village pond. In addition to the pond he owns a great deal of land south of the village, seven buffaloes, and 22 cows. He realises his income from selling fish, livestock, and vegetables. (We might note here that the two sisters who regularly sell vegetables in the morning market are included in the household of the director of the livestock station, who is married to the older sister). A middle income group might have an average annual income of from \$100-\$150 per household. We would estimate that this group includes about 16 village households, *hai* and *naa*. They are all reported as selling rice and/or vegetables.

In all of these households, at least one member regularly seeks temporary employment during the dry season. They derive additional income from the sale of livestock and firewood. A lower income group might have an average annual income of from \$5 to \$50. We would estimate that this group includes about 38 families, 12 of which own both *hai* and *naa*. However they were reported as neither regularly selling rice nor vegetables. They also do not have in general members of their household working outside the village during the dry season. They derive what income they do have from selling firewood, operating village stalls, irregular sale of rice and/or vegetables in rather small amounts, sporadic selling of livestock, and gifts from relatives. The majority of these 12 households are older village residents whose children no longer live with them. The other twenty families in the lower income group derive most of their cash income from temporary employment outside the village during the dry season. In general most of them farm paddy rice for others during the rainy season and seven possess no land at all. The remainder have *hai* fields from which they earn sporadic income by selling firewood or vegetables. This lower income group is the most fluid of the three categories. In good years some of its members may earn as much income as middle income households. In general, however, we believe that the average annual income per household falls within the range indicated.

Cash Expenditure

Despite the varying amounts of cash income, the pattern in which village households spend their money is fairly regular. Most of the money is spent on religious needs, food, household items, clothing, shelter, health and transportation. Much of what is not spent is saved. Relatively little is devoted to productive investment, education, or purchasing "luxury" consumer items. This point is seen most clearly by observing the life-styles of the 12 upper-income families. Each of these households has a minimum annual cash income of \$200 per year and the average for this group is something over \$400. Yet by and large these households do not possess many more "non-essential" consumer items than most of those of the village. By and large they wear the same kind of clothing, eat the same kind of food, eat by the same kind of light at night, travel around on bicycles, and live in the same kind of houses as do most of the other villagers. In some cases, their houses are even smaller and more poorly built than a number of middle income and lower income villagers. But one man in this group has an old car he rarely drives. Another two households possess bicycles and a few have sewing machines. But with these exceptions, the consumer items they possess consist mainly of the bicycles and radios owned by most of the villagers.

The major difference in expenditure between most of the villagers and the twelve upper income families is that the latter tend to spend more money on religious ceremonies, purchasing livestock, and save a good deal more for possible needs. They also tend to spend more on education for their children. The spending patterns of the upper-income group therefore by and large fall within the overall pattern of expenditure for all villagers. The percentage of expenditure for each category is roughly the same. Thus in the discussion of patterns of spending which follows

we will talk mostly of the villagers as a homogenous group.

Money is spent constantly on religious and ceremonial activities, called in Laotian *bouns*. There are both individual and communal *bouns*. With individual *bouns*, the individual holding them bear the greatest expense, close relatives are expected to give fairly high sums of money, and every household in the village is expected to give at least \$.10. Contributions are also made in the form of goods as well. The most expensive *bouns* are funerals. These are usually held at the *wat*, and may run from three to as long as seven days depending on the wealth of the individuals involved, and hundreds of people may come, from miles around. Food, drink, entertainment, and all the expenses involved in cremation must be paid for. Villagers estimate that a proper funeral cost at least \$200. Weddings and annual *bouns* held to propitiate the evil spirits of one's home are also expensive affairs. As many as 50 or 60 people may be invited and food and drink must be provided for them. In addition, for the *boun* to bless one's house, as many as a dozen monks may be brought from other wats, and money for transporting them and contributions to their wats must also be made. One such *boun* held by the old man with whom I lived cost him about \$60. Of course, only those villagers who can afford it give such annual *bouns* and the number of guests depends on one's wealth. But, most of the middle and upper income households hold such *bouns* annually, and all would like to do so if they could. Smaller individual *bouns* are also being held constantly. They are given for such reasons as celebrating recovery from an illness, sending someone off on a long journey, celebrating a birth or propitiating the *phi* (spirits) at the time of the rice harvest. Such *bouns* involve inviting a smaller number of monk to one's house with attendant expenses, and providing food

and drink for a smaller number of guests. Expenses for such a *boun* are on the order of \$10. Another important ceremonial expense is for the ordination ceremony. Every family expects that all of its sons will be ordained as monks for a period of time. In the old days it was for a period of years, but these days it may be for as little as one or two weeks if the son in question is a student, engaged in particularly productive work, or refuses to stay for a long period of time. In addition, families with enough money may sponsor someone to become a monk, often an older man. Ordination expenses include a contribution to the wat, buying the proper clothing and such basic needs as a mosquito net, and mat and a party thrown the night before. Villagers estimate that a typical ordination ceremony may cost about \$60 (see Table 4, pp. 34).

In addition to such individual ceremonial expenses, there are a wide variety of communal expenses related to village religion. There are nine major religious festivals a year; Makhabouxa, Pimay, Visakhabouxa, Bang Fai, Khato Vatsa, Hokhaopadapdin, Khao Salack, Ok Vatsa, That Louang. Each of these festivals includes a variety of expenses for the villagers, including direct cash gifts to the wat of at least \$60, expensive foods for the monks, gifts to the monks or wat, and personal merit-gaining gifts such as orange robes. Once a year the village raises money to improve the wat by holding a large *boun* to which hundreds of people come from all over Vientiane. This *boun* runs for three days and involves inviting from ten to twenty monks to sleep in the wat, holding movies, inviting a theater group, inviting minstrels, gambling, and various other expenses. The villagers all contribute equally to this *boun*; about 500 kip per household. There is also a yearly ceremony in front of the spirit house designed to propitiate the village *phi* to which all contribute. Other

religious expenses include the daily food offering to the monks, special food and cash offerings on the Buddhist sabbaths, and individual contributions. An example of the latter occurred earlier this year when about five individuals paid \$3.00 each for the cost of transporting five truck loads of sand and gravel to the wat to be used in building a monk's dormitory.

In the old days the villager was almost entirely self-sufficient in terms of food, clothing, household items, and housing. Over the years, however, an increasingly greater number of such items have begun to be purchased from outside. Every family's possessions today are a mixture of things made and things purchased. The extent to which a family buys things instead of making them varies not only according to income but to personal predilection as well. Most of the diet today remains self-sufficient. People eat basically the rice and vegetables they grow, the fish they catch, and the plants they pick out of the forest. Money will, however, be spent on such items as fish oil, salt, and pig oil for cooking. It may also be spent at times on such items as condensed milk for babies, buffalo meat, and bread. About half the villagers smoke cigarettes produced by the Lao tobacco monopoly, the other half cigarettes made from locally-grown tobacco. *Lao lao* (rice alcohol) is usually purchased. Purchased household items include small lamps, usually unglassed, kerosene, matches, pots, plates, glasses, chairs and tables. A good many villagers still make such items from bamboo as rice baskets, rice steamers, food trays, and buckets for carrying water, both for their own use and sale to other villagers. Weaving is disappearing from the village. In the old days the women would make everything from pants to shirts, blouses, skirts, mattresses, pillows themselves from locally-grown cotton and kapok. But

women complain that this is one of the most time consuming of tasks, and most of these items are now purchased downtown. There are one or two sewing machines in the village, although villagers have mostly repairs done on it and do not buy ready-made clothes.

A major expense these days is for building. The major structures built by the villagers are houses and rice storehouses. Rice storehouses are considered quite important, and a number of them are of better quality than a majority of the houses in the village. Expenses for house-building involve both materials and labor. Labor is usually provided during 1-2 days by all the males in the village who are paid with food and drink. After that the villager usually works alone, aided by members of his family. A house built of bamboo and a straw roof, a poorer kind of house, will cost about \$100. A more substantial house, built with cement supports, wooden walls, and tin roofing runs about \$400-\$600. The cost of feeding the villagers who come to help one to build is about one cow and 120 kilos of rice per day.

Health needs also involve a significant expense over the course of the year. Although expenditure at any one time is rather low, villagers are frequently ill and over the year money spent on health adds up. A cure for a simple stomach ailment can run from \$.20 in the village to \$1.00 for a downtown private clinic. Anything more serious costs more. When a person is sick enough to either have to seek help or be hospitalized downtown an included expense is transportation back and forth. A round-trip for one person is \$.28. Transportation in general is an important part of the household budget. Although most households have bicycles, many villagers - particularly the older ones - generally use taxi's to go downtown. Trips are taken downtown and to ther villages to visit friends and relatives, sell things at the morning market or *bouns*, participate

in *bouns* look for work, visits to government offices, and visits to clinics or hospitals. I would imagine that the average visits to Vientiane per household per week are at least two or three.

Many villagers spend a fair amount of money on gambling. Most of them participate religiously in the version of the Thai lottery popular all over Vientiane. This is based on the last three numbers of the national Thai lottery. It is controlled by downtown Chinese businessmen who have built up a large organization over the years. There is a local resident in Ban Pha Khao, 1 kilometer to the south, who visits the village regularly selling tickets. He is well known to the villagers, has been at his job for years, and is considered completely trustworthy. Drawing takes place every 10 days and tickets cost \$.16 and a winning one fetches \$12.00. Many villagers buy several tickets every drawing. In addition, villagers gamble a good deal at *bouns* in village level dice games, and private card games.

Perhaps the largest single item on any household's annual budget is money saved. Villagers are deathly afraid of being caught in an emergency, personal, natural or political. They have had ample experience with all over the years. Serious illness, which is fairly common in the village, can bring long, drawn-out medical expenses. Death demands a large expenditure for the funeral. Drought or flood can mean that one's rice crop is ruined and one is forced to buy rice. Fire or theft can mean replacing livestock, household goods, or one's house. In addition, periodically villagers are called upon to expend large sums of money for a son's marriage or new house. It is the custom for the groom's family to pay a dowry to the bride's family. Although this sum varies widely, a rather typical village marriage was arranged last year with the groom giving his bride sixty dollars in cash and forty dollars in gold. In addition it is the

obligation of the groom's family to pay for the part which is held to celebrate the marriage, which generally runs to at least \$60.00. It is also customary for the new couple to build a house of their own a few years after marriage. Although it is largely up to the son-in-law to provide the money, the wife's family is also expected to help share the cost of the new house.

Over the past several decades since Kaufmans' study in 1956-57 a series of economic forces have imposed new burdens on the villager. Even under substantial U.S. monetary support for the Lao economy, prices for most basic staples have risen two, three, four-fold. Inflation has also been fueled by frequent devaluations of the kip which has eroded the villagers buying power in the local market. Some indication of the impact of inflation on average household expenditures and the pattern of expenditure is suggested in table 4.

Table 4. - Comparative Annual Household Expenditures, 1956/57 and 1972

Category	$\frac{1956-1957^a}{\text{(Kip 35 = US \$1.00)}}$		$\frac{1972^b}{\text{(Kip 600 = US \$1.00)}}$	
	Kip	US\$	Kip	US\$
GENERAL EXPENSES				
Gifts to wat and monks	1,500	42.85	2,740	4.56
Clothing	2,500	71.42	19,636	32.73
Tools, fish nets etc.	1,000	28.57	4,381	7.30
Food	5,900	168.57	47,076	78.46
Gambling at <i>bouns</i>	1,000	28.57	--	--
Transportation	300	8.57	19,800	33.00
SPECIAL EXPENSES				
Ordination ceremony	1,500	42.85	30,000	60.00
Funeral	1,000	28.57	100,000	200.00
Marriage and Bride Price	3,500	100.00	80,000	160.00

Source: a) Kaufman, 1961, Village Life in Vientiane Province

b) Wulff, R.M., 1972, A Comparative Study of Refugee and Non-refugee Villages, Part 1: Survey of Long-established Villages on the Vientiane Plain, Vientiane: USAID Mission to Laos, n.p.

There are many other occasions upon which large sums of money are needed, particularly for villagers who are more involved with the world outside. We have already mentioned the case of the villager whose son needed over \$200 to get out of jail after an automobile accident. It is usually also necessary to pay \$60 in bribes to obtain a driving license, and indeed money for bribes is generally necessary in dealing with the

government. For all of these reasons, therefore, villagers save a good deal of their money. This money is generally kept in the form of notes or gold in one's home. Relatively little money is spent on "luxury" consumer items. The *naiban* and his assistants estimated that 90% of the homes had a bicycle and a radio. With these exceptions, however, there are relatively few items in the village not related directly to immediate, religious, or productive needs.

Only a limited amount of money finds its way into productive investment. Most of the tools ~~are~~ made locally, with parts being purchased downtown if necessary. For example, the village axe is typically made of iron axe-head bought downtown and a locally made axe handle. Money for tools usually goes into repairing or replacing old ones which have been damaged. There are few modern, labor-saving devices in the village. The only two which come to mind are the rice mill already mentioned and a small irrigation pump owned by one man. The main areas in which villagers have shown some willingness to invest is in livestock and small shops. Villagers estimate that they need 2-4 water buffalo to plough their fields and 1-2 cows to pull their ox-carts. About one quarter of the households have more than this number of buffaloes and cows, however. Generally, villagers will buy these animals when they are young, raise them, and then sell them at a profit. An adult water buffalo which is usable for ploughing will sell for about \$60-80. Cows suitable for pulling carts cost from \$120-160. This activity is seen not so much as a productive one as a traditional means of security. Numbers of livestock have been traditionally seen as signs of status and wealth. Given the relatively small number of livestock involved (buffalo-owning households average 4 per house, and cow-owning households 5; the overall average for the village is about 2 buffalo per

household and 1 1/2 cows), the time and energy that goes into feeding the livestock, and the depreciation in buying power that takes place in Laos over any 2-4 year period, it is clear that this form of investment yields at best marginal returns.

Relatively little money is spent on education. It costs under a dollar a year to send a child to primary school. Since most village children do not get beyond this level expenses for education are on this order. The few children studying at the secondary level demand more money, but as they are generally members of upper income families, this still remains a rather small portion of the household budget. The most significant cost to a family of having children in school is in terms of labor lost. Many families hire labor who might not otherwise were their children not in school. Only one villager spends a high proportion of his income on his children's education. This is the USAID employee who sends his child to the American school three kilometers away.

Villagers say that the main reason they do not divert more money into productive investment is lack of capital. They say they do not have enough money to tide them over should they wish to launch a new money-making venture. Simple provision of credit does not appear to guarantee that the money will be used for productive investment:

"A great deal of borrowing occurs within the village. Sums of 500 kip or less are usually borrowed from relatives. Larger amounts are obtained from merchantsand must be repaid within six months at interest rates ranging from 10 to 15 percent monthly" (Kaufman, 1961:15).

Last year about seven people took loans from ADO. Villagers claim that this money was mostly used for food, clothing, and other basic needs during the rainy season. Villagers were afraid that they would not be able to repay these loans, but in most cases did from their rice harvests.

A Near-Subsistence Economy?

It may perhaps seem strange at first glance that we have described the economy of Xa Phang Meuk as "near subsistence". We have suggested that the average annual cash income per household is from \$100 to \$150. Since villagers by and large grow their own rice, obtain much of their other food by themselves, and live in their own houses, their overall income is a good deal higher. With the cash they do have they could conceivably be participants in a full-fledged cash economy. The fact is, however, that the villagers are only beginning to move into the normal processes of a market economy. Much of the money they make is saved, - and not in a bank but in a hole in the ground. Most of the rest is spent on basic needs - religious, food, clothing and household. Little money is spent on non-essential consumer items. And even less is ploughed back into productive investment. This is the result of attitudes toward cash income which are far closer to a subsistence-level economy than a market one. But however one wishes to characterize the economy of Ban Xa Phang Meuk, it is clear that for the villagers themselves it is far from satisfactory. They complain constantly of their poverty. They claim that as a result they are ill-clothed, ill-fed, sick and leading a life far too difficult for their tastes. At first glance, this may also seem strange. With an annual cash income of \$100-150, access to an all-weather road, proximity to the largest city in Laos, with its hospitals, schools and cinemas, and relatively ample opportunities for salaried employment, it is clear that the villagers of Xa Phang Meuk are far better off materially than a majority of their fellow citizens. But on closer inspection it is evident that the villagers feel poor precisely because they are so close to Vientiane and what it represents, and that indeed they are poor in terms of the society they know best. Their village is much poorer than the villages closest

to it, as well as many other villages around Vientiane. Ban Don Noune, 1 kilometer north and the district capital, Ban Pha Khao, 1 kilometer south, and Ban Nong Ngieng, 2 kilometers southeast and the sub-district center, are all much better off than Xa Phang Meuk. Being so near Vientiane they have had long exposure to the working of a cash economy. Their material desires have increased, yet inflation has eaten up the buying power of their money;

"Steady inflation has been the concern of the rural population. The chart below indicates increasing prices of several commonly used articles and reflects those within a 25 mile radius of Vientiane town. Prices increase sharply as one goes further north and south, due to poor roads and high cost of transport."

	<u>1955</u>	<u>1956</u>	<u>1957</u>
kerosene (1 tin)	110 kip	200 kip	260 kip
1 chicken	20	40	80
polished rice, 100 kgs	450	600	950
Machete	35	60	100
Ready made shirt	60	150	250
Raw white cotton (10 pai)	90	160	250

(Kaufman, 1961:15)

They may have an average annual income of from 50,000 to 75,000 Kip (US\$100-150), but a new bicycle now costs as much as 25,000 Kip. Income was a lot smaller 25 years ago or even 10 years ago, but one could buy a lot more with it then.

And, finally, as paddy rice farmers who consume most of what they grow they are at the bottom rung of the society they know best. It is not so much that they are somewhat poorer than people in nearby villages, but that they are so incomparably poorer than the thousands of urban dwellers 9 kilometers away with whom they have had frequent contact. The 58% of the villagers who make up the lower income group are perhaps the most unsure and dissatisfied. For they not only lead relatively uncomfortable lives materially, but they lack the saving and land which provide security in case of possible

emergency. The 24% in the middle-income group are perhaps the most assured group of villagers. They own both *hai* and *naa* livestock, and solid houses, they earn income from a wide variety of sources, and will not in general be too hurt materially should they fail to find temporary employment during the dry season. And, they have fairly substantial savings, at least enough to tide them through most foreseeable difficulties. But though they tend to complain less than the other two groups, they are still far from happy with the economics of their situation. It does not seem very probable that villagers' economic position will improve very rapidly in the near future. They do not use modern techniques when farming. There is little capital made available for productive investment. And there is even less likelihood that it would be used effectively even if it was.

In general, the villagers of Xa Phang Meuk have sufficient money to meet their most basic needs, but not their desires. They are not likely to die of starvation or exposure in the near future. But they are unlikely as well soon to obtain the kind of food and medical care they need to correct dietary deficiencies and health problems. Infant mortality is likely to remain high, life expectancy low, and desires for basic comforts such as motorized transport, electricity, running water unmet.

III. A BASIC MALAISE

The outsider senses soon after arriving in the village that all is not well. People often speak to one another in a low voice and break-off conversation when an outsider approaches. It is common in the early stages for a villager who is speaking too freely with an outsider to be told by another villager to stop talking. Direct questions about subjects which do not appear at all sensitive to the outsider are quite obviously deflected. All talk in any way related to politics or the military is avoided. Villagers complain bitterly about matters which seem quite unimportant to the outsider. Individuals will often come to gossip and carry tales about other village residents. Such behavior is of course characteristic of small communities all over the world. But, it is clear to the outsider with any basis for comparison that this behavior is far more frequent than usual. As time goes on and the outsider begins to be accepted by certain villagers, to make friends who will talk freely and frankly, it becomes clear that these are indeed the symptoms of a basic malaise. It is not simply that villagers are unhappy with their lot, the fate of men all over the globe. It is that they are so unclear about how to change it, so afraid of so much.

The winds of change have not been kind to the people of Xa Phang Meuk. They have buffeted them from all sides, confusing and bewildering them, and in the end rendered them a rather fearful and lonely group of people. Only the hopelessly sentimental would bemoan the fact that substantive change is occurring in the way of life of Ban Xa Phang Meuk. For one thing, only modernization offers them the possibility of escaping many of their very real troubles, - disease, infant mortality, inadequate diet. For another, the villagers themselves ardently desire change. And, finally, change is inevitable. Few people on earth have escaped the modernizing

influences of the twentieth century and the people of the village are no exception. Whether they are destined to be ruled by the Royal Lao Government, the Pathet Lao, the Americans, Vietnamese, Thais, Chinese, or a combination thereof, change will continue to occur. But to say this is not necessarily to accept the manner in which change is currently occurring. The fact is that the present pattern of change is perhaps unnecessarily erratic and haphazard. While change by definition supposes a certain disequilibrium in village life, the present level of disequilibrium appears clearly unacceptable. It is unacceptable to the villagers, who are fearful about the present and future, and uncertain about what direction to move. And it is no less unacceptable to those who would rule them. For they claim to offer the villagers of Ban Xa Phang Meuk something better than they now have. Unless they can deliver on this promise their position will remain as shaky as it is at present.

More villagers than ever are sending their children to public schools. Yet the great majority of these children do not study for more than a few years. When they drop out of school they are less willing and prepared to accept a productive role in the economy than their fathers who never went to school. Twenty years ago, moreover, the few who did rise in the school system were guaranteed satisfactory employment. Today, however, the minority of students who succeed are no longer assured of well paying jobs and positions. Laos's educational system is an academic and formalistic one which in fact produces a class of consumers. The national economy cannot absorb these consumers, and qualified applicants already outnumber salaried jobs at every level. This problem will undoubtedly increase in the future, catastrophically if the army is ever demobilized. Villagers today have a greater awareness of the possibilities of curing their health problems than they ever did. They are a 15 minute ride away from numerous private clinics,

pharmacies, and public hospitals. Yet they seem by and large unwilling and unable to avail themselves of these opportunities. The basic problems of dysentery, infant mortality, and early, lingering death, appear as great as ever. The place of religion in their lives is decreasing, particularly among younger villagers. Younger people do not practice religion as much as their fathers. A far smaller portion of time is spent by the young in the wat as novices or monks. But no faith has as yet appeared to compensate for the gradual loss of religion. The customary unifying creeds in other developing lands these days - nationalism, an "indigenous socialism," or communism - have little meaning to residents of the village. Villagers are thrown back upon themselves far more than they ever were. Villagers feel more of a need today for material goods than they ever did. Consumer items are available on a scale undreamed of before. Yet inflation plagues them and they claim that their purchasing power is less than it ever was. They find themselves selling their land and other possessions simply to keep up with their increased needs. And while these needs have increased geometrically, their productive capacity remains about where it always was. Villagers find themselves working harder but spending less time at leisure and their returns for labor have not increased proportionately. As prices have risen, there is a greater need than ever before for modern desires have grown, cooperation to achieve such village-level projects as improving their wat and school. Yet the influx of population into the village over the last decade has led to increased strain and friction in the village.

As the village has grown and roads have been built linking them to a newly-independent government, villagers have found the outside world making ever-increasing demands upon them. Land and a pond they considered their own has been taken from them. Their children have found themselves in the

army. Villagers have thus found themselves desiring justice, a means of redressing their grievances and coping with the outside world more than before. But villagers find themselves impotent in the face of more powerful outside forces, more frustrated than ever at their weakness. Villagers have been exposed to the material and cultural accomplishments of foreign nations far more than ever before. Their desires for things foreign have mushroomed. Yet they are no more able to obtain them on their own than they ever were. Frustration has grown apace as villagers confront their lack of understanding of foreign influences and their inability to possess those they wish. The lack of running water or electricity was never felt so much as today when villagers daily see so many others enjoying them. Villagers today feel poor as never before. In the old days villagers were far less conscious of a feeling of poverty. Indeed, with ample rice paddies, forest, and a pond of their own they were far more fortunate than many of their neighbors. The French were far better off, of course, but they were few and as members of a distant ^{and} different race their privileges meant little to the villagers. Today, however, they are surrounded by fellow Laotians living in comfort they dream of but cannot hope to obtain. Their sense of discontent has grown as fast as the wealth of the urban elite. It does little to compare the villagers of Xa Phang Meuk with the poverty-stricken Indian masses or aboriginal tribes of Australia, as is sometimes done. Villagers know nothing about them. What is relevant to them is simply that they themselves feel poor and bereft as never before. Above all, the change of pace has brought them war. Until the last 30 years, peace was the natural state of affairs. Today it is a barely-remembered way of being of which they have had only tantalizing glimpses. The fighting has kindled in them an ardent desire for peace. Yet the only realistic prospects are for more war.

The roots of the malaise affecting the village go deep. The village, a subsistence-level farming suburb of the urban capital of Vientiane, seems destined to suffer by economic comparison for a long time. As a traditional society exposed to a wide variety of foreign influences in a rather short period of time, it is inevitable that it would find assimilating them difficult. And as a community of Buddhist, peace-loving farmers it is no surprise that it would find it most difficult to accept an unending war. A basic reality facing the village is that it is only 9 kilometers from Vientiane. Vientiane is the center of a conflict which has not only involved every nation in South East Asia to one extent or another, but the world's great powers as well. This conflict has brought war, great foreign influence, inflation, and a staggering variety of social problems to the very door of the village. Laos's position is a crossroads of Southeast Asia, a meeting point of most of the political, military, economic, social and cultural disputes afflicting the area, is a basic source of many of the frustrations felt by the residents of Ban Xa Phang Meuk.

But for all the underlying causes of village problems, it is clear that the major source of many of its most immediate problems is its relation with the central government. Villagers feel that the central government has committed innumerable sins of commission and commission against them. While the basic problems of the village may prove to be ultimately insoluble, it seems clear that a more responsive government could go a long way towards alleviating them. Due to their proximity the Vientiane villagers will no doubt always feel a certain level of frustration in comparison. But it seems obvious that the present amount of discontent is neither desirable nor necessary. The central government has disturbed the villagers in many ways, great and small. It has taken land they had used for decades, and used it

for a teacher training college, golf course, and gun range. Most distressing to villagers, a good part of the land has been used for the personal profit of education officials. The central government has taken their sons to fight and die in a war in which they do not believe. It asks them to contribute their labor to help the army, police or government. It demands papers and documents and inordinate amounts of time and trouble to obtain them. Its members appropriate for their personal use large amounts of foreign aid and tax money which villagers feel rightfully belong to them and other villagers like them. Its members demand bribes for most services rendered to them. And the central government has on occasion fired shells over the village and come perilously close to hitting the village itself. The government is widely blamed for the continuation of the war. Villagers are more than willing to come to an accommodation with the Pathet Lao and they are most unhappy that the government is not. And the government is largely implicated in the loss of their pond. (Not only did some members of the government have a hand in it, but the court system was such that villagers did not even make a serious effort to have their grievance redressed). The one area where the government has reached the villagers, education, has in the end proved to be of little benefit to the majority of the village. The education is formalistic and academic of little relevance to village needs. Its one function is to provide entry in government service, but few village children have risen high enough educationally to do so.

The villagers have, of course, made substantial progress in the last twenty years in some areas. For all the complaints, they probably have more consumer goods, more access to health facilities, and more opportunities for salaried labor than they ever have. But villagers do not give the central government any credit for this. They feel that to the extent such positive things have occurred, it is due to the intervention of foreign

powers. They feel that their government has been a barrier to their receiving more such benefits.

The unsatisfactory nature of the contact between villagers and the Royal Lao Government is no coincidence. It arises from basic economic, political and social realities. The village is a largely self-contained, subsistence-level economic and political unit. The leaders of the Royal Lao government constitute a foreign-supported elite. Villagers do not have a hand in choosing them or keeping them in power. Government leaders are neither dependent on their votes nor their tax money. They remain indifferent to village needs because these needs do not affect their position in the short term. There could conceivably come a point when foreign intervention in Laos will diminish considerably or cease. The Royal Lao Government and Pathet Lao may one day compete primarily with one another. At such a time the allegiance of such villages as Xa Phang Meuk may come to be seen as crucial, and more attention may be turned toward village desires. But such a day is long off in the future at best. For the moment the government remains indifferent to the village precisely because there is little reason not to.

Members of Vientiane's ruling elite have little contact with village-level affairs. Few visit villages on any kind of a regular basis. And even fewer sleep and eat in villages and attempt to achieve serious understanding of village problems. Thus perhaps they exhibit little interest in village problems not only because there is little need to do so, but because they don't understand them. The gap in life styles has grown large enough so that only a determined effort by the government can bridge them.

I recently had a conversation in Vientiane with a general in the Royal Laotian Army, a man generally believed to be one of the two or three most powerful men in Laos. I asked him what kind of plans he envisioned for reaching Laotian villagers should there be peace in Laos and his side was to come out on top. He replied as follows. "There is really no need to make substantial changes in village life. Our Laotian villagers, you know, are peaceful, happy people. They have a form of sharing and cooperation, - village communes if you will - all of their own. They are quite satisfied with their way of life. All that will remain is for us to give them certain help with such things as roads, schools and wells. They can take care of themselves."

The villagers of Ban Xa Phang Meuk, however, do not concur with this view. Though they feel most secure and confident in their own village homes, they are still quite fearful and insecure. Though they have learned to live with injustice and favoritism, they have not accepted them. And though they derive real pleasure from many aspects of their way of life, they wish very much to change it. The key to their achieving or failing in their desires will be the central government. In the end it is only the central government which can or cannot maintain peace, clear up corruption, teach villagers to produce more, give them the means to do so, correct the export-import in balance contributing so much to inflation, redress village grievances, compensate village losses, improve village health, and carry out the host of other steps necessary to help Ban Xa Phang Meuk move in the direction it wishes to go.

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