TRAVELS WITH PHETSARATH, 1959

Joel Halpern
The Last Century of Lao Royalty
A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY

GRANT EVANS
This book is dedicated to my late father and mother, an Australian and a South African who met in London during World War II, which, in their words, they fought for King, Queen, and Country.

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King Sisavang Vong and Prince Phetsarath grew up in similar circumstances but had opposite personalities. While the late King remained closely associated with the French and appeared to be content with a predominantly ceremonial role, Prince Phetsarath was a rather dynamic individual who traveled widely and took a lead in his country's fight for independence from France.

In addition to his political role, Phetsarath was a renowned hunter and was interested also in writing a history of his country. During his lifetime he produced two books (both published in Thai), one on hunting techniques and the other on the Lao methods of reckoning time. After his return from Thailand in 1957, instead of participating actively in government he played the role of elder statesman, spending considerable time consulting with many of the senior government officials, including his brother Souvanna Phouma, who was at that time prime minister. He also took an interest in the local villagers and tribal groups. His family had acted as intermediary for certain tribal peoples in their contacts with the government, and his ancestors had resettled some Lu (tribal Tai) people in the area of Luang Phrabang. In addition he assumed responsibility for the villagers near his own estate, some of whom served as household servants and others as laborers on his land. With his own funds he bought seed potatoes, Leghorn chickens, and Hampshire hogs and bred these on his homestead, later distributing them to villagers. For mountain people who wished to resettle on the plains, he provided funds to buy buffalo and plows. Some of these people he met on his frequent tours; others came in delegations to his home. The effectiveness of some of these measures is questionable, but they are significant in that they indicate a type of traditional benevolence which continued to motivate him until the end of his life.

In the autumn of 1957 the author made a four-day trip with Prince Phetsarath. This tour combined ceremonial, economic, and religious functions in a unique way characteristic not only of Lao culture and relationships between villagers and the royal elite, but also reflecting quite clearly the personality of the Prince himself. The trip began at sunrise with our departure from the Prince's estate on the outskirts of Luang Phrabang. We were accompanied by various local officials, some of whom were relatives, plus several servants and his personal police bodyguard. The party also included fifteen Khmu tribesmen recruited as coolies.

We set off up the Mekong in a traditional Lao pirogue (dugout canoe) powered by a modern outboard motor. Our first stop was at a village where a landing platform and a bamboo and palm frond arch had been especially prepared for his welcome. The villagers, all in their best clothes, were lined up along the embankment. The young girls held up silver bowls with floral offerings which they presented in the traditional squatting posture of respect to the Prince. He accepted the offerings, handing them over to an aide who carried them on a large tray and afterward presented them to the local pagoda.

The brief village visit concluded, the trek through the jungle began at the edge of the rice fields. Paddy fields lay fallow, the Prince explained, because the villagers had no dam to provide water for irrigation. He said he intended to help them build one.

After an hour's walk the Prince called a halt and rested on a foam rubber cushion carried by one of the porters. The trail became fairly steep in places, although it had obviously been prepared for this trip, as evidenced by small bamboo bridges over several streams. The entourage stopped frequently to allow the Prince to make notes for a route map he was preparing. He carried a compass and pedometer, noted the readings and sketched the terrain.

After several hours we arrived at the village that was our destination, where the Prince received the same traditional welcome. A special house had been constructed for him to sleep in. It had a tin roof, bamboo sides, and a raised
sleeping platform, the Prince's quarters being screened off by curtains. Another section was supplied for the officials, including the *chao muong* or district chief. Protocol was not an involved procedure: the Prince made all decisions and his retinue followed accordingly, whether it was a question of time of departure or food for dinner. Anyone wishing to speak to the Prince did so on bended knee. This included his relatives and the provincial officials as well as the villagers. The district chief and the Deputy Inspector of Schools (also his cousin) ate at the same table as the Prince and the writer, all of us sharing a common bowl in customary Lao style. In almost all cases it was left to the Prince to initiate the conversation.

The villagers tendered the Prince a *baci*, the traditional Lao ceremony designed to bring prosperity to the person in whose honor it is given. The Prince was seated on his portable camp chair with all the villagers squatting down around him. Cords were tied to his wrists and blessings given in the customary manner of the Lao *baci*. After the ceremony a few of the elders remained to discuss some of the problems of their village.

That evening we spent considerable time discussing the political future of Laos. Prince Phetsarath appeared to be quite cognizant of the Communists but also emphasized the fact that the future flexibility of the Lao government and its foreign policy was limited by the presence of China to the north and Vietnam to the northwest; he stressed the long common border Laos shares with both these Communist states. He severely criticized the corruption in the Lao government. He indicated that he would clean up corruption in short order if he were heading the government but did not think the National Assembly would permit such thorough housecleaning, implying many officials would be afraid of his direct methods. The Prince lamented the low state to which he said the moral climate in Laos had fallen. “Most of the young people in Laos now value money more than honor,” he claimed, indirectly relating this to the American aid program, but limiting his criticism of the program to the way in which it was administered, since he was definitely in favor of Laos receiving aid.

When I asked if there were any solutions to this moral decline, he frankly acknowledged that he had no answer. His hope was that Laos might become self-sufficient in several years and might not require any more foreign aid. He thought this might be done by developing both the agricultural potential as well as mineral resources which he claimed were present in the northern part of Luang Prabang province and other areas. Roads and communications, he felt, were important since some areas produce surplus rice and other products but have no way of taking their goods to market.

One of the desires of the people of the particular village in which we were staying was a school. The village leaders put their proposal to the Prince, and although he made no direct reply, later that evening after he had retired, there was a conference among the *chao muong*, *tasseng* (chief of a group of villages), *nai ban* (village chief), and the Deputy Inspector of Primary Schools, (his cousin), at which it was decided to build a school for about sixty pupils for three neighboring villages, evidently with government funds.

The following morning we were up at five o'clock. The Prince excused himself, saying he was usually up by four. By six we had breakfasted and were ready to continue our hike up the mountain. Our objective was a cave 1,300 feet above the village where a skull and other archeological remains had reportedly been found. Boards had been placed across small streams so the Prince would not wet his feet, and the villagers sometimes leaned over for him to put his hand on their backs. Although he had some difficulty in ascending the steep trail (he was sixty-seven at the time) it was evidently not permissible to touch his person directly. I alone was able to offer him a helping hand.

Unlike the previous day's march, this trail had not been prepared in advance, and it was with some difficulty that our guides picked their way through the dense brush. The trail soon became quite steep, approximating a sixty degree grade. In the course of our climb, the Prince stopped every hundred yards or so to take a compass reading as he continued with his mapping. As the ascent progressed we rested every half hour, and while the Prince calmly smoked a cigarette, I tried to catch my breath. The final 150 feet below the cave involved climbing a sheer rock face. This was no easy job for the Prince because of his short legs. Nevertheless, he set the pace for everyone. Two and a half hours after the trip had begun, we reached the cave located in a limestone outcrop. A surface collection of skeletal materials and pottery was made.

The following day we visited a second cave where the Prince had meditated as a monk upon his return from ten years of study in France some forty-two years ago. He said he had spent twenty days alone there. The cave itself was not particularly interesting except for a pool of water the Lao consider to be holy, some of which was brought back to Luang Prabang to consecrate coronations. There were, however, a number of inscriptions in the cave, which he had his cousin copy.

Unlike many of his countrymen, he had a great desire to express himself precisely. This was shown not only by his map-making, but by the fact that he would quote to me...
Above: 4.24, 4.25 Prince Phetsarath would take notes concerning villagers' problems and record aspects of village history.

Right, above: 4.26, 4.27 Villagers respectfully receive the prince.
Above: 4.28 Tiao Phetsarath and Tiao Chanthavong.
Top right: 4.29 Rural villagers honor the prince on one of his visits.
Middle right: 4.30 The prince paces out a possible irrigation channel.
Right: 4.31 Spirit shrines are set alight to chase away malevolent spirits.

the exact number of tigers or wild oxen he had shot, with the shoulder heights of the largest ones. His interest in Lao astronomy is also a reflection of this attitude. I asked him how his Buddhist belief correlated with his hobby of hunting. He acknowledged that in this respect he was not a very good Buddhist.

He claimed that it was only in recent years that he had acquired an interest in archeology. He was currently preparing a book on the history of Laos (as far as I can determine unfinished at his death) and intended to publish it in both Lao and French. He expressed regrets that his English was not adequate to the task of presenting his writings in that language as well.

That evening a villager approached the Prince on bended knees and asked him to chase the phi from his house. (This refers to a series of beliefs in animism and nature spirits, antedating Buddhism. The two religions co-exist, not only in Laos but in Thailand and Burma as well.) The villagers' family had had bad luck and his daughter was now ill. The Prince mounted the steps of the house and entered, not bothering to remove his shoes as is Lao custom. Perhaps he deemed it beneath his dignity. He took one look at the girl, diagnosed her illness as malaria, and gave the father some quinine tablets for her. Then through an intermediary, a former civil servant now retired, he addressed the phi and requested them to depart.

Previously I had heard many tales of the Prince's “magical power,” some of these told me by Western-educated government officials. One asserted that Prince Phetsarath had the power to change himself into a fish and could swim under water for long distances. It was said that bullets could not harm him. He was also reputed to have the ability to change his form, so that at a conference with the French at the time of the Free Lao Movement, he became angry with them, changed himself into a fly, and flew out the window. The Prince laughed when I related these stories. He said that for the past thirty years or so villagers have been asking him to chase away the phi. People from many parts of the Kingdom often write to him requesting his picture, and some of them place it in their rice fields to keep away malevolent spirits. (Prince Boun Oum is felt by some to have similar powers.) Although no other officials are reputed to have magical powers, some deputies of the National Assembly have told me that during the election campaigns, the villagers have asked them to exorcise the phi.

The following morning a delegation of villagers came to the Prince to ask him to drive all the phi from the village. Their request was prompted by the fact that he had asked the villagers to cut down the brush surrounding the settlement in a radius of several hundred yards, thereby destroying the breeding places of mosquitoes and at the same time providing cleared land for gardens. The people said they wanted to comply but feared that the phi of the forest would object.

Through an intermediary the Prince then addressed the phi and told them to depart, emphasizing his belief that Lord Buddha was stronger, and invoking the power of the Prince, the chao muang, and the American. A police aide went into the forest and fired a few volleys, after which the spirit shrines, in the form of miniature houses, were set on fire and villagers began to hack at the trees in a gesture of defiance of the spirits. (Enroute to the next village at which we stopped, our party paused briefly at a large rock where the phi inhabiting this boulder were literally told to move over and make room for the phi which had been ordered out of the previous village.)

The third day was spent visiting more villages and rid-ding them of spirits. At one stop the Prince was asked to bless the children. Each household gave him a roll of white cord and when a large amount was collected he placed his hands over it and blessed it. Then the cord was cut into suitable lengths and parents brought their children forward to receive a necklace of the sacred string. This was to prevent evil spirits from entering the body and so keep the child in good health.

When I last saw Prince Phetsarath in the summer of 1959 he seemed to have withdrawn almost completely from any direct interest in political affairs and did not care to comment either on Lao foreign policy or the American aid program. Most of his efforts appear to have gone toward the upkeep of his estate. He was still in the process of writing his book on Lao history and most of our discussion centered around this topic.

A few months later, in October 1959, Prince Phetsarath died in Luang Phrabang of a cerebral hemorrhage.
4.33 The cortege leaves Tiao Phetsarath's residence, Xieng Keo.

4.34 Soldiers also accompanied the bier.

4.35 The bier winds its way to the That Luang grounds.

4.36 The Phra Sangharat in the procession.

4.37 The crowd gathered at Sanam That Luang for the funeral.

4.38 Katay reads the funeral oration.