American Imperialism in Southeast Asia a Micro-Anthropological Perspective

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American Imperialism IN SE Asia, a micro anthropological perspective, a voice of the past in the present

Part II second presentation

In my first presentation I focused on an initial experience in Laos concerning my attempts to interview a servant. My second presentation is about a trip I took through the countryside with the Viceroy of Laos. In this way I am able to consider a bit about the way in which Laotian society was constructed and how I fit in as a foreigner. Thus it is in a way modestly remarkable that I made the trip at all. Perhaps a small insight into this matter is that I really did not have much experience in working for a big and highly structured bureaucracy as was the American aid program. This USOM (United States Operations Mission was, of course, was itself to the State Department which quite naturally worked with the Department of Defense from which all rationalizations for our involvement in Laos flowed along with an ocean of dollars. While it is certainly true that there is a strain in American foreign policy that seeks to do good in the world, however, you may wish to define it. It is also true that the ultimate rationale from the dominant Congressional view then and now is a political strategic one having to do with the exercise of American power. My immediate background in matters Laotian derived, quite naturally, from my former role in a DOD program, in this case the Psychological Warfare organization within the Department of the Army which was manifested in writing country orientation manuals, now available in unclassified form on the CIA Web Site.

As a Field Service Representative of the Community Development Division of what was then called the United States Operation Mission or USOM as it was formally known. It is appropriate to stress the term
Mission as in missionary as in revealed truth. As is well-known John Foster did not shake the hand of Chou En Lai. Mao’s representative at the Geneva armistice accords which had ended the First Vietnam was a very few years before I came on the scene.

The most important and fully staffed part of the Mission was the so-called Project Evaluation Office whose sole job was to "train" and support the Lao Army. They were assisted by the misnamed Public Health Division whose primary purpose was to support the medical needs of the military. Did I really care about the success of the Mission and its implicit political goals of stasis of the Lao government so it could fulfill its anti-Communist "mission" So dear to the Michenean (obsessed John Foster.

Reality check-- I was quite junior and, actually, much closer to the bottom than the top of the American aid hierarchy. I certainly did not take this hierarchy to heart and in no way was I thinking about a career path. Certainly if I had had this in mind I would have asked permission if I could approach Prince Phetsarath i.e. call on him and make his acquaintance. But that is not what happen, I don't think this idea of seeking permission ever crossed my anthropology obsessed mind.

Thus all these years later, although I certainly cannot get, as it were, into my skin and with a great degree of certainty imagine exactly what I thought some 55 years ago, nevertheless it still seems apparent to me that such thoughts of subordination did not occur to me. Maybe my family background of what I would now define as modes privilege played some role although I will not digress on that here. It should be noted that Phetsarath's recent return to Laos had made him at this time perhaps the most popular man in the Kingdom or, as the Americans in their Press briefing kit liked to call it, the Royal Kingdom of Laos, perhaps a kingdom to the second power which would perhaps have meant the Prince.

Therefore I did make a trip out to his new home- not a very long distance from where I lived in Luang Prabang and he did invite me to accompany him. Obviously, I could have in no way coerced him into that decision. What I am sure about was that I wanted to involve myself in the elite Lao world as well as
make contact with the local people on my own. In any case I was never called to account for my contacting the Prince.

I should mention at this point that there were some real crooks in the air mission and what better place for them than the Division of Highways n Public Works one of the Americans there ended up in jail after being convicted of embezzling public funds. Beyond this were the CIA folks down in Vientiane who used to fly up to Luang Prabang for a picnic and swim at the local waterfall—guess they need relaxation from their engaging spyifications.

Although it is only speculation I do think that the Prince, who was a most experienced politician, had his own agenda in mind. The Prince certainly was, I now think, not adverse to opening up what might be new channels of communications with the Americans especially after his inconclusive contacts with the American Ambassador J. Graham Parsons who was later to become Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs at the State Department.

Thus did I enter what was for me the magical world of the Prince’s entourage for a several day trek through Lao villages. The entourage, if indeed one can call if that was quite basic. There was a platoon of soldiers that accompanied us even though I cannot recall any perception of danger, rather I think it was a mark of his status. We were also accompanied by a series of local officials from the town. It is perhaps important to note that at every village we entered we were met by the local village headmen and ranks of young women and children kneeling along the path to present bouquets of flowers to the prince which he accepted them individually before passing them off to an assistant. There is much to describe in terms of the details of our ceremonial welcome but here I do want to focus on the nature of my personal interaction with the Prince.

It should be remarked that the Prince (as a royal highness, SAR Son Altesse Royal in French—in this connection one is reminded of the fuss the Duke of Windsor made over the hoped for rank he had for
his bride as he wanted her to be called HRH -Her Royal Highness, A term never granted by his brother, King George) never interacted directly with the villagers but always through an intermediary. Also it should be remarked that no one ever came too close to the Prince it was as if there was a circle of imagined distance between himself and all others. Although the Prince, at that time, seemed in relatively good health he did encounter some problems as we climbed some relatively steep trails and especially in crossing some fast mountain streams over which bridges had been built for the Prince. When the Prince had difficulty balance on the small bridges the response of the nearby officials and villagers was to bend over and he would steady himself by placing his hands on their backs. At one point I recall giving him a hand as we crossed a stream-no one overtly reacted to this apparent beach of etiquette and, at the time, I probably did not have much of a sense of self-awareness that I was doing an unusual thing.

The one time when we did have a sense of intimacy was a night. The Prince had a separate floor of a larger bamboo village house in which a make shift bed was prepared for his use and I was allowed to sleep on the floor a bit apart from his bed. It was at that time that we had extended conversations about a number of topics including his early education in France well before World War I at a special school for children of the elite of the French Imperial colonies. We also spoke at some length about American dignitaries that he had met when he was 'in exile' in Bangkok. This specifically included the Dulles brothers, John Foster, who was President Eisenhower's Secretary of State and his brother Allen Dulles who was then in the 1950s the head of the CIA. He was obviously frustrated in his contacts with them and found them rather arrogant. Obviously, I had no recorder to tape his remarks nor did I later record what he had told me. In this context it is true that my recollections of my time in Communist Eastern Europe came first to my mind and so I didn't write anything. It was clear-no one cared in the least about my studying local culture-no one at USOM was really interested in such matters. But for me to try to be, in any way, involved in policy making or even attempting entry into that area was clearly
forbidden territory. But there is no secret concerning what was discussed by us on those evenings. My friend and colleague Seth Jacobs has written a recent book, out this year, American Foreign Policy in Laos, The Universe Unraveling, Cornell University Press. He is a specialist in US diplomatic history. In part, he relies on my field notes (see below).

As the Prince clearly did share with me some parts of the small jungle path and this made informal conversation possible. I still remember when we journeyed through a gorge not too far from the town of Luang Prabang, he showed me the cave where he had gone to meditate. A young man after his return from school in France, at the Ecole Royale, for the children of the elite in the French Empire. This was the rational side as it were to the experiences which he shared with me as I bedded down on the bamboo floor. The Prince slept in an elevated place carefully prepared by his retinue and villagers. The prince had indicated the place where I could sleep on the floor. I had brought along a sleeping bag. It helped our relationship that sometimes I was of direct help to the Prince for he was about 70 at the time of our trip, he died a few years later.

Where the streams we crossed were fast flowing and rocky the best the soldiers and villagers could do was to stand in the water bent over so he could lean on their backs. I was useful since he could take my arm or I could help him in more direct ways when a hand proved useful for him. I was very careful about this since none of the Lao were permitted to touch him. I was very careful about this since I did not want the villagers or even the Prince to think that I was in any way invading his private space.

There was also another role that he played, not as a politician and one who was born into the highest strata of Lao society as part of the Kingdom’s structure but also his achieved status as a charismatic leader. This was in contrast to the last 2 kings of Laos, especially the last one who up until his end in 1975 enacted his ceremonial roles in a conscientious but colorless way. USIS had printed large numbers
of a photo of the Crown Prince - the paper was of good consistency and was frequently used to wrap fish in the marketplace.

Village people not only venerated the Prince but attributed to him magical powers. And to this I was a witness. I was thus enveloped by the ceremonial manifestations of the mystical but very real world in which the villagers existed. One of the main villages we visited was felt by the inhabitants to be inhabited by evil spirits. A manifestation of this evil presence was the continued prevalence of disease. The Prince was prepared for this and he had brought along a large bottle of malaria tablets to distribute to the villagers. From our present day perspective one can easily say that this was a harmful idea but at this remove from events of more than a half century ago it seems possible that he thought of this act as having some marginal medicinal effect but, of course, this overt expression of concern for the villagers' welfare was very much a useful symbolic act. More to the point was they away he dealt with the evil spirits - the villagers had built a small bamboo hut to house the marauding and wandering spirits. But now that the Prince had arrived the villagers asked him to for the evil ones out of their community. Through his aide de camp he spoke harshly to them and command that they leave. This was followed by a burst of machine gun fire into the house by the soldiers into the hut and then setting it on fire. The consequences of magical acts are, of course, not susceptible to empirical investigation but the political rationale was self-evident. It was also said of the Prince that he could mysteriously absent himself from conference rooms and could also escape undesirable situations by swimming long distances underwater and was intrigued by his comments about the Dulles brothers and he particularly disliked their arrogance.

After I returned to Luang Prabang I decided that it would be a good idea to share some of my thoughts about my trip with the Prince. He had only recently returned from Thailand after a long period of exile and I thought that we should be supporting the Prince, a man who really cared about the people as
contrasted with the overtly corrupt and not very competent individuals who had recently been Prime Minister. As one of the only two official Americans who were then in Luang Prabang I did have a radio telephone for my use. So I called the Embassy and asked if I could have an appointment to speak with the Ambassador - I ended up with an invitation to lunch.

The Embassy did have its own plane, a Beechcraft and I had traveled on it several times before. Then I found out if I could be picked up in time of the luncheon appointment. This was not something I had ever done before. The lunch was a moderately large affair and, of course, I was not about to mention my idea about the Prince in a public gathering. But after lunch I asked him if I might speak with him privately - he agreed although with a bit of annoyance and asked me to be brief. I handed him a two page or so memo that my USIS colleague and I had spent days preparing. He heard me out and glanced at the memo. His reply was terse and to the point, he simply said, "We don't support Neutralists." Simply put, in my mind, we will support crooks as long as they listen to us and maintain an anti-Communist Policy.

At that moment in history, Dulles thought that he could cover a lot of territory with replicas of NATO, there was for a time MEATO (Middle Eastern Treaty Organization) and SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization). SEATO had the longer life span but here the point is that our policies with respect to "Neutralists," subsequently changed rapidly and the State Department was no long so choosy about whom it would deal with.

Good way to conclude - read p. 109 from Seth Jacobs book I would like to conclude about the activities of "outreach" that I attempted during that time one concerned my taking over the duties of USIS (showing movies in front of the palace and Dolt Droge and I visiting isolated villages and singing Old Mac Donald had a Farm.)