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Tribal people of Laos

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TRIBAL PEOPLE OF LAOS

By

1967

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LAOS - INTRODUCTION

By

Joel Halpern and Peter Kunstadter

Laos is a land in the middle. Her heterogeneous population reflects her position on an ethnic watershed, and her history tells repeatedly of struggles to control the land which lies south of China, northeast of Burma, east of Thailand, and west of Annam. The struggle continues today, more or less openly, despite the "neutralization" of Laos following the 1962 Geneva agreements.

On the one side Thailand gives aid to her allies in the Royal Lao Government (Chalermnit 1961; Murphy 1965: 122 ff.), with considerable assistance from the United States. And on the other side, beginning as early as 1951 (Burchett 1959: 89-91) the Communists of North Vietnam, the Chinese and for a time the Russians, have given aid to their allies, the Pathet Lao (e. g. Le Kham 1961; Sheehan 1965; broadcast of Radio Pathet Lao 26 July 1965, 26 Oct. 1965; Radio Peking 22 Dec. 1965).

The Chinese have also had a long interest in Laos. Chinese Hô (Yunnanese) invaders or raiders repeatedly sacked the north of Laos. The successors to the Nationalist Chinese are reported to have troops in the area near Luang Prabang (Radio Pathet Lao, 26 July 1965). Communist Chinese are reported to have supplied advisors to the Pathet Lao and to have sent construction crews to build a road from China to Phong

Saly and to Ban Houei Sai on the border with Thailand (Sutherland 1963; Fall 1965: 193; Radio Pathet Lao broadcast 5 Aug. 1965; New York Times 17 December 1965). Fall even claims that Laos now has better road communications with China and North Vietnam than with its non-communist neighbors (1965: 193). The Chinese have also supplied economic and cultural missions in Xieng Khouang Province (report of Radio Pathet Lao 27 July 1965).

Likewise, though they have been required by the Geneva agreements of 1962 to withdraw their troops, the Americans are involved in backing their Thai allies and in providing continued support to the Royal Lao Government in the form of economic aid and refugee aid programs (Ward's paper) which have allowed the Royal government to retain some control over the mountainous areas where the Pathet Lao have had some of their greatest military and political successes (cf. Fall 1965). Laos also figures importantly in the Vietnamese war, since the Ho Chi Minh trail from North Vietnam passes through Pathet Lao-controlled southeastern Laos, through an area populated predominantly by "Kha" tribesmen (New York Times, 17 December 1965, p. 2; 9 January 1966, pp. 1-3).

The present boundaries of the Kingdom of Laos are the result of the French colonial period; in particular their form was set as the result of contests between France, Britain, and Thailand for the territory which lay between Burma and the French interests on the Indochina coast, as well as conflicts over access to China.

Laos was not a unified state when France intervened in 1893. A Laotian kingdom, Lan Xang, with its seat at Luang Prabang, had once ruled over much of the lowlands of what was to become Laos, and also over much of Northern Thailand. The power of Lan Xang had long since declined, as the country was caught in a series of wars, and was invaded repeatedly by Burma, Thailand, and Annam. There were also wars among the three principalities into which Lan Xang had split: Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Champassak. Xieng Khouang has had a somewhat different history. This principedom was annexed by Annam in 1832 (Dommen 1965: 8, and Mathieu 1959: 40).

The French were seen as protectors from the incursions of the Siamese and Annamese, at least initially when they established their Protectorate of Luang Prabang in 1893.¹ The princely family of Champassak, in southern Laos, was under Siamese influence. These old principalities retained political significance: Prince Boun Oum of Champassak was Prime Minister at the time of the ascendancy of the Rightist General Phoumi Nosavan between 1960 and 1962 (see Dommen 1965: 29, et seq. for information on Boun Oum's career). In Xieng Khouang the descendant of the princely family serves as governor under the Royal Lao Government. Evidently he still retains some thoughts of autonomy and his relations to tribal minorities (specifically Meo) reflect this position (see Barney's paper).

Nominal independence from France was regained after the Second World War, and the conditions of foreign intervention were set at the Geneva Convention which ended the French-Indochina War in 1954, and the Geneva Agreements of 1962.

The problems of building a modern nation in Laos are complicated not only historically and politically, as already indicated, but also by features of economy, geography, and demography. Laos is landlocked. Her route to the sea via the Mekong River must pass through both Cambodia and South Vietnam, and the way is blocked by the Khone Falls on the border with Cambodia. Goods shipped through Thailand, by rail from the port of Bangkok, must be ferried across the river, since no bridges cross the Mekong into Laos. All other routes to the south are overland across rough country and poor roads. Thus Laos is entirely dependent upon her neighbors for contact with the outside world.

Since Laos has no major industries she is dependent on foreign sources for almost all manufactured goods, and depends on foreign aid for most of the money with which to purchase them. Laos is even dependent on Thailand for much of the food to supply her capital, Vientiane, which is the largest town in the country. This is not to say that Laos has no potential for economic growth. With proper development of transportation, for example, some areas could become rice exporters, and forests could be exploited. (The prospect of a dam to be constructed

near Vientiane which would supply hydroelectric power under the Mekong River Development Program holds future promise for Vientiane and ultimately other areas of Laos as well.)

Added to these problems is a great ethnic diversity. The ethnic Lao may well be a minority in their own country, and most of the major ethnic groups, including the Lao themselves, are but parts of much larger populations found across the borders in Thailand, China, and Vietnam.

Although no good census materials are available (see population table below, and Halpern 1961A; 1964B, table 9), about half the population of Laos can be considered "minority" or "tribal." The Lao officials like to speak of four different groups: the Lao, the tribal Tai, the Lao Theng, and the Lao Xung.²

The Lao are the politically dominant group, and are found primarily in the valley of the Mekong and its major tributaries, and in northeastern Thailand. Most Lao are subsistence growers of wet rice. They are Buddhists, and, though princely families exist in the towns, the rural villages do not contain hereditary classes. Their social structure is generally bilateral, and thus they characteristically have no widespread lineages nor clans, nor any large-scale social organizations based on kinship.

The tribal Tai, including the Neua, Lue, Red, Black, and Phu Tai are generally found in the higher valleys, and also in adjacent parts of northwestern Vietnam, southwestern China, and northern Thailand. The Black Tai are generally considered to be "typical" in that they have preserved much of what was apparently the traditional Tai way of life prior to the expansion of the Tai-speaking peoples in Indochina. They live in narrow upland valleys, where they cultivate rice, making use of irrigation and terraces. They also do some swidden farming on mountainsides, and grow some opium as a cash crop. In Laos, as in northern Vietnam (see McAlister's paper), the Black Tai have organized themselves into muongs or principalities. These principalities are generally limited to a single valley, and though some of the Tai groups in Laos were nominally involved in the Sip Song Chao Tai (Twelve Tai Principalities) of northwestern Vietnam, this loose federation had little effect on the groups in Laos.

The Black Tai social system has three hereditary classes. The princely class is formed of the members of two large families, the Lo and the Cam, who apparently retain title to all the irrigated land within the muong. Use-rights to swiddens are owned by the people who clear the land. The princely families have ritual functions at the commencement of the planting season, and in worshipping the chief god of the muong. Members of the Luong and Ka families comprise the priestly class, which enjoys

high prestige. Priests, of whom there are three ranks, are in charge of other communal rites, and individual ceremonies. The other Black Tai families form the commoner class, from which are drawn the farmers, artisans, and soldiers. Commoners who use irrigated land must pay a tax, in labor, to village or muong officials. Most of the Black Tai population lives in small villages which are under the control of the chao muong, or prince.

The Black Tai are largely self-sufficient, making for themselves most of what they consume. There are Chinese shops in market towns and itinerant Chinese merchants who visit the villages, but the Black Tai have had little cash to spend on manufactured goods.

Hickey (1958) argues that the location of the Black Tai in upland valleys, away from the Vietnamese and lowland Lao, has allowed them to preserve much of their traditional Tai culture and to develop the fragmented principalities which are their characteristic socio-political structure (1958: 206, 210). The isolation of the Black Tai from the centers of civilization should not be over-emphasized; in spite of the fact that they are not Buddhist, they do have their own Indian-derived script (see Hickey 1958, Izikowitz 1962 for further information on the Black Tai).

Although in many respects the Black Tai may be typical of the tribal Tai, there are a number of important exceptions. The Tai Lue, for example, are Buddhists in addition to worshipping a number of typical Tai

spirits (see Moerman's paper and the summary of Lue culture in Le Bar, et al. 1964: 206-213). The Lue in Laos are descendants of what was once a fairly highly organized Chinese-influenced state in the Sip Song Pan Na of southwestern Yunnan, and this ancient political structure still has relevance for relations between the Lue and other groups (see Moerman 1965). Though most of the tribal Tai are predominantly subsistence agriculturalists, some have specialized in other occupations. Whole villages of Tai P'ouen (Phuan) in the Tran Ninh Plateau (Xieng Khouang Province) have specialized in blacksmithing. Their villages are located on main trade routes, and they travel widely to sell their wares (Izikowitz 1962: 83).

The Lao Theng label is applied to a diverse group of people who are descendants of the indigenous proto-Indochinese. They are Mon-Khmer speakers and include the Khmu', T'in, Lamet, and Loven. The majority of them are animists, and they are predominantly dependent on swidden rice agriculture, but some practice irrigated agriculture (e.g. Smalley 1961: 8). Though ordinarily they are not organized politically above the village level, some groups, especially in the south, were able to mount large-scale resistance against the French colonial forces.

The Lao Xung include the Meo and Yao. They are generally mountaintop dwellers, dependent on swidden rice agriculture for subsistence, and on opium for cash income and livestock production for sale as well as for prestige and sacrifice. They are recent migrants from the

north. The Meo who have remained in China have evidently become quite acculturated to Han Chinese culture (see Ruey 1960 for a brief account of the Meo in China, and Ruey 1962 for a discussion of their southward migration). Those who have moved to Southeast Asia reflect Chinese influence in many aspects of their culture. They may even hire Chinese tutors to live in their villages. The patrilineal social system of the Meo, with its supra-village proliferation, is described in Barney's paper, and the somewhat similar system of the Yao (Iu Mien) is described by Kandre in the Thailand section of the book (see also Iwata 1960).

The lines between the cultures of the various groups are not always sharply drawn. The Lao Theng have frequently "become Lao" in different degrees. For example, Izikowitz (1951: 24) refers to Khmu' who are "identical with the Khmu' [but] have adopted Buddhism," and Smalley (1961: 4, 8) refers to Khmu' who have become Buddhists and adopted the Lao language. Smalley also believes that thousands of fully assimilated Lao are of Khmu' descent. The Laotian social system is not closed, and official policy encourages all inhabitants to consider themselves to be Laotian. As Barney suggests, many Meo seem to prefer to maintain their distinct identity, though some individual Meo have also become culturally Lao. Though Laos does not have a unified and cohesive national society, the ethnic groups are by no means independent entities. Historically they have been related economically and politically with lowland markets and

political-administrative systems, and are bound by ritual ties to the lowlanders; and they are increasingly involved in the international and internal struggles within Laos.

The Lao population is not evenly distributed throughout the country. The elite Lao are concentrated in the civil capital (Vientiane), in the royal capital (Luang Prabang), and in a few old towns along the Mekong. In addition to the ubiquitous urban Chinese shopkeepers (see Halpern 1961), many merchants and businessmen are Siamese Thai, or Vietnamese. The Siamese Thai are relative newcomers in this role, and have taken advantage of the departure of some of the Vietnamese since 1954, plus the intensification of trade which has come with increased foreign aid (see Chalermnit 1961: 55). The fact that the urban population is small indicates the limited economic development of Laos; the fact that the urban population is largely non-Lao is a further indication that the fate of the Lao is not completely in their own hands (see Halpern 1964B: 15-19 for a discussion of urban patterns).

There is a great gap in Laos between the few wealthy urbanized French-educated elite and the mass of the people who are subsistence agriculturalists (see Halpern 1964B: Table 29 for an exposition of rural-urban differences). The separation is reinforced by poor communication systems, lack of education in rural areas,³ and lack of economic development.⁴ Buddhism and the symbolic presence of royalty have helped give a feeling

of nationhood to the Laotians,⁵ but obviously the country is not a well integrated unit. Despite a degree of ritual interaction with the lowland Lao, common religion does not serve as a bond for the tribal people, most of whom are animists (see Barney's paper for the role of religion as a symbol of ethnic difference). The Luang Prabang princes fight among themselves, and the ruling family of Champassak contests with them for the allegiance of at least the southern Laotians.

The distribution of ethnic groups of Laos does not correspond to international boundaries. The Laos-Thailand border has been subject to change for centuries, reflecting the relative strengths of the Laotian and Thai princes. The Lao and northeastern Thai dialects are indistinguishable across the border (in fact there are nine times as many Lao-speakers in Thailand as there are in Laos); trade and kinship connections are maintained except as internal and international conditions prohibit them (see Chalermnit 1961: 44-45). Indeed, in the last three or four generations, people have found themselves living in Laos or Thailand depending on international events of no immediate concern to themselves (i. e., modifications of the border as a result of agreements between the British and French in the 1880's, the subsequent readjustment with the aid of the Japanese in World War Two, and a return to the earlier border at the end of the war). As is demonstrated elsewhere in this volume (Kandre's paper), until recently the borders have not proved any barrier to the movement of tribal

and minority people (such as Yao, Meo, Khmu', and various Tai groups), and they too maintain kinship and other connections across the boundaries. The same situation has existed along the Chinese and Vietnamese borders, which everywhere cut across ethnic distributions. This is significant when one considers North Vietnamese presence in Laos and influence among the Pathet Lao. Historically there appears to have been a consistent trend of migration by both Lao and tribal groups southward, particularly to the southeast, as a result of recurrent wars as well as population pressures emanating from Yunnan. The Yao and Meo provide perhaps the most dramatic example of this movement, a trend that continues with current warfare.

The connection between tribe and nation in Laos has varied considerably between different tribes. The prior ownership of the land by the "Kha" tribes is still recognized in its symbolization in royal ceremonies, as is the story of the subjection of these autochthones by the Lao (Smalley 1961: 6; Archaimbault 1964). "Kha" means "slave" in the Lao language, and "Kha" people, such as the Khmu', have been liable for corvée labor. But other than ritual recognition there is little or no participation by the unassimilated "Kha" in the Royal Lao Government above the level of district chief (tasseng), the next to lowest level of rural administration. By contrast, the Meo of Xieng Khouang have had representatives and even ministers in the Royal government (Barney's paper).

The French did not go out of their way to develop or reinforce tribal units by setting up separate administrative devices for them as they did in the Vietnamese Central Plateau (where the French attempted direct administration of the tribal people) or in Tonkin (where they encountered strongly organized Tai minorities and preserved traditional political appearances while trying to manipulate elected or appointed leaders). Because of their opium production, tribesmen (in distinction to the Lao lowlanders) were offered some concessions--but these were in the form of relief from taxes, not recognition of tribal sovereignty.⁶

The reactions of various groups to the problems of assimilation have often been quite different. Typically the Khmu' have been rather passive and submissive, whereas the Meo have been aggressive in their relations with the Lao.⁷ Differences in Khmu' and Meo reactions are reflected in their recent messianic cults, which are supposed to lead them to a better life. Among the Khmu' the messiah is depicted as an omnipotent king for whom they should show respect by stopping all work and consuming all their resources in feasts. The messiah will then appear among them, or they will visit him in his cave, and he will make available to them all the material trappings of Western civilization which are presently denied them. By contrast the Meo messianic myth foresees Jesus Christ as the messiah, appearing among them in a jeep, giving them arms and summon-

ing them to action. According to this myth the Meo will depose the local Lao officials, and then will take over the national capital (Halpern 1960: 63).

We can also compare Khmu' and Meo economic and political integration. Though the Khmu' occasionally produce agricultural surpluses for sale, they are primarily subsistence farmers. Their economic relations with the Lao are as subjects for corvée labor, sometimes as hired agricultural workers or servants, and as participants in markets for basic commodities and tools (Izikowitz 1951; Smalley 1961). Apparently some of their economic relations were mediated through the institution of the lam, a Lao middleman (Halpern 1964B: 94-95). By contrast the Meo are producers of an important cash crop, opium, and are relatively prosperous. One may guess that the original basis of the special Meo relationship with the Lao Governor of Xieng Khouang may have been control of opium production and trade, since Xieng Khouang was the only province in Laos where production of opium was legalized by the French.

The tribal groups do not appear to be unified political entities in Laos, as some groups in Burma and Annam have been. There is evidently some supra-village organization among some of the groups such as the Meo and Yao (see Barney's and Kandre's papers), who are relative newcomers to Laos, but nothing on the level of the Shan principalities seems to have existed to rival even the limited power of the Lao princes. The

minority Tai in Laos seem not to have been organized so well as were the Sip Song Chao Tai of northern Vietnam (see McAlister's paper and Hickey 1958). Nonetheless, some of the tribal peoples were able to resist French control fiercely during the colonial period (see Halpern 1964: 80 ff.). The tribal peoples of Laos historically appear to have been involved in a shifting series of extra-village alliances dependent in large measure on the waxing and waning of local petty states. It is only in this century that unitary state control has begun to be imposed. (The same type of situation has existed in ethnically similar northern Thailand, where only in the last fifty years has the Bangkok-based Thai government attempted to regulate comprehensively the lives of the tribal peoples.) The preceding period was hardly one of autonomy of individual tribal units, however; such interpretations are founded on lack of historical knowledge, admittedly difficult to obtain when documents were lacking, fragmentary, or hard to come by (for historical data on a specific group see, e. g., Kunstadter 1965: 1-7).

Tribesmen are considered to be citizens of Laos, but most of them have no special representation in the government. A few Meo (for example, Touby Lyfong and General Vang Pao) have reached high office under the Royal Lao Government, but it is unclear whether they have done so as individuals, or because they were selected as representatives of minority interests (see Barney's paper). It is clear, however, that the

Royal Lao Government has not attempted to organize minority interests; it appears that they do not want the minorities to become organized as such. Tribesmen were not systematically recruited into the Royal Lao Army until 1961, when United States Army Special Forces detachments arrived in Laos; simultaneously the United States was supporting a national army composed largely of ethnic Lao (Dommen 1964: 272). Likewise, the government has in the past ruled against the publication of tribal languages, apparently out of fear that this would reduce the possibility of assimilation of tribal populations. More recently, however, a Meo language newspaper has been published (see Barney's paper), and broadcasts are being made in Meo (see Osborn's paper).

Fall (1965: 173 ff.) has pointed out that the split between the Pathet Lao and the Rightists follows lines of very old ethnically-based antagonisms. Most of the Pathet Lao-controlled areas (generally areas away from the Mekong valley) have traditionally been inhabited by minority Tai and tribal peoples (Fall 1965: 191). The Pathet Lao control Phong Saly and Sam Neua Provinces. In part this is due to geography--these provinces adjoin China and North Vietnam. In part the Pathet Lao control is due to politics--they were forced to withdraw from other provinces but were allowed to stay in Phong Saly and Sam Neua as a result of the 1954 Geneva Accords (Fall 1965: 179-180). But their strength also lies in the ethnic composition of the two provinces--about two thirds of the population of Sam Neua is minority Tai,

and over one half of the population of Phong Saly is "Kha" (see Halpern 1964B: 11, and sources listed for Table 9). In fact the Lao appear to be in the majority only in Vientiane, Khammouane, Savannakhet, and Champassak Provinces (ibid.). It is in the areas where the ethnic Lao are in the minority that the Pathet Lao have been most successful in creating a communist administrative structure parallel to that of the Royal Lao Government. The Pathet Lao claimed in 1965 to control two-thirds of the territory of Laos and nearly half of the population (Fall 1965: 183).

As in North Vietnam (see McAlister's paper) the Communists have generally been quite successful in their appeals to the minority and tribal peoples, who have been mobilized in aiding the revolutionary struggle. Where the Pathet Lao have failed to gain the support of tribal people (e.g., among the followers of Touby Lyfong) it apparently has been due in part to pre-existing alliances and antagonisms among the Meo themselves (see Barney's paper).

By contrast with the Royal Lao Government, the Pathet Lao, from the time of their founding, consciously incorporated minority interests, and have continued to emphasize appeals to ethnic groups.⁸ Whereas the Royal Lao Government officially does not recognize tribal languages, the Pathet Lao have developed a Meo script presumably closely related to that developed for the Meo in adjacent areas of North Vietnam (Vietnam Courier 37:6, Oct. 7, 1965). The Pathet Lao have sent specialists from

the Meo and other tribal groups to school in North Vietnam, Peking, and Moscow, as well as to their own schools in the communist-controlled provinces of Laos (Fall 1965: 183).

Faydang, a Meo leader who was one of the original founders of the Pathet Lao movement along with Prince Souvannavong, seems to have been used precisely for the purpose of winning Meo support and organizing Meo military units (Burchett 1959: 216 ff.).⁹ Although the differences between Faydang's and Touby's followers are often referred to in terms of ideology and morality (Burchett describes Faydang's burning commitment to the Communist cause; Le Kham [1961] characterizes Touby's followers as "pirates"), Barney informs us that the split between Faydang and Touby is of long standing. Touby's clan had traditionally been allied with the princely family of Xieng Khouang, and Faydang's clan (which is generally located further to the north) had been left out of this arrangement.

Sithone Komadam is another tribal leader in the Pathet Lao, whose influence is largely with the "Kha" peoples in southern Laos. He is the son of a "Kha" chief who led a revolt against the French in the early 1900's. Like Faydang, he is a vice-chairman of the Central Committee of the Neo Lao Hak Sat (see Burchett 1959: 208 ff.). It is interesting to note that Prince Boun Oum of Champassak, the Rightist leader, allegedly aided the French in suppressing the rebellion of Sithone's father (Fall 1965: 174).

Because most of the recent fighting in Laos has occurred in the hill areas, the minority and tribal people who live there have been deeply affected. Some of the problems of the tribal people in the northern part of Laos are dealt with in the papers that follow. The people in the southeastern part of Laos through which supplies pass from North into South Vietnam must also have been affected. One can easily imagine the massive recruitment of local (tribal) labor required by the Ho Chi Minh trail. Long-term effects of the building of roads in tribal areas will almost certainly reorient trade patterns, make government services more accessible and control more effective, and will doubtless involve the permanent relocation of many tribal villages. (Recent Japanese films shown on American television depict classrooms and workshops located in caves in southeastern Laos where tribal peoples are trained and work. This is cited as the Pathet Lao response to American bombing). Such effects have already been noted in past years along the Vientiane - Luang Prabang road. Roads will come to serve the same needs as the Mekong and its tributaries have done for the ethnic Lao. These effects will surely endure after peace has returned.

Paradoxically it may be in Laos, the least developed of Southeast Asian countries, where the problems of tribal-minority-lowland relations will have to be worked out most rapidly. In the past minority and tribal populations could solve the problems of pressure from lowland forces simply by fleeing higher into the mountains or further into the jungle. But

modern military technology means that today there is nowhere to hide, and recent political developments mean that wherever they go the tribesmen and minorities will be the target for political influence from one or the other side of the Laotian struggle. Thus the tribal and minority people will have to develop some sort of lasting adjustment to more continuous contact with the lowlanders of Laos and their outside allies.

Simultaneously the lowlanders will have to take a more realistic approach than simply denying the existence of minority problems or conceiving of a slowly and informally evolving Laotianization through adoption of Buddhism and increased education. The refugee relief programs are at best a temporary solution to the problems of the displaced minority and tribal populations.

Though Osborn and Ward speak optimistically about the accomplishments of the refugee relief programs, these programs are obviously dependent on foreign aid not only for material and financial support, but also for the formation of their underlying policies. Similarly the Pathet Lao have called for outside help: "We hail and stand ready to receive specialists and technicians of all countries who, for the sake of justice and peace, would volunteer to help us build and develop our economy and culture in the liberated areas" (Pathet Lao Radio, Oct. 28, 1965). Meanwhile they boast of their new irrigation projects and schools, and denounce United States-supported programs of the Royal Lao Government as ruses to fool the people.

The recognition now being given to tribal and minority peoples in these programs--for the first time many are receiving government-sponsored health, education, and welfare services--the incorporation of some of these people into military and political organizations, and the deliberate cultivation of minorities by the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese means that formal relations between central government and minorities can never again be simply ignored. The tribes and minorities are increasingly literate, increasingly aware of the outside world, and (with modern military training and weapons) increasingly able to exert real influence.¹⁰ Laotian attitudes and policies toward tribesmen do seem to be changing, at least with respect to the Meo. Touby Lyfong and General Vang Pao hold important positions; in spite of a law against the printing of tribal languages, a Meo newspaper is being distributed, and broadcasts are being made in tribal languages over government radios.

We cannot stress too strongly that as far back as records exist the tribal people of Laos have never lived in isolated static communities. Villages moved every few decades, and longer term stability was the exception. But, although they were not isolated in the past, the contacts were largely limited to the borders of the tribal communities. Much of the trade took place outside of the community, and was either mediated through an agent such as the lam (in the case of the Khmu'), or was car-

ried out by Chinese traders who brought their goods to the mountain villages. Tribesmen such as the Khmu' or Lamet worked for wages among the lowland Lao, or even crossed into Thailand for work--the locus of this work was outside the tribal communities, and the wages were used for traditional purchases of prestige goods or tools which did not disrupt tribal community patterns. Ritually the Khmu' played an important part in lowland Lao state ceremonies, but again this was outside of the sphere of Khmu' communal religion. If missionaries came to the tribes they were as representatives of completely alien (Western) societies. Politically the village headmen of the Yao and Meo functioned as intermediaries between the lowland government and the villagers, most of whom had little or no direct contact with the government. Such assimilation as took place (and much did take place both on an individual and a community level) was not the result of deliberate policy on the part of the lowlanders.

The situation has changed radically since the Second World War. Tribal communities are much more directly penetrated by lowlanders, and tribesmen have begun to take a much more direct role in lowland society. The tribesmen have been deeply involved in the civil wars of Laos. Their economies, especially in the refugee areas, have been extensively modified--many have become completely dependent on airlifts for subsistence. Politically they have become involved at the top levels

of the Pathet Lao, and at least a few Meo have reached high positions in the Royal Lao Government. Even small rural communities have become the targets for direct attempts at political influence by both sides.

Apparently the Meo will play a key role in any future developments. It seems to have been recognized by all sides that the Meo are the tribal people most suitable for organization into military and political units, and have received aid and attention to a much greater extent than have other minority and tribal peoples. In this respect the Pathet Lao have a built-in advantage in their close alliance with North Vietnam, where there are some 220,000 Meo, several times the number in Laos, concentrated in the formally recognized Meo districts of Thua-Chua and Mu Cang Chai in the Tay Bac Autonomous Zone which borders on the Pathet Lao controlled parts of Laos (Fall 1963: 150-151).

The question remains how much either the Royal Lao Government or the Pathet Lao will be willing to accommodate the tribes and minorities in attempting to build national unity when the immediate political-military problems are resolved and massive foreign aid is withdrawn.

If the two opposing governments continue to control their respective territories, contrasting social systems may develop, as has happened for example in North and South Korea or North and South Vietnam. One major contrast which might be expected to develop would be in local governmental

institutions which would deeply affect tribal and minority peoples. If, after the present struggle, one side attains a monopoly of power in Laos, that side will have secured for itself the major rights to grapple with the problems of state formation. In this they will be influenced in large measure by the evolving patterns of their patrons. If Laos manages to avoid incorporation by North Vietnam and/or Thailand, neither the pattern of autonomous zones of the former, nor the basically traditional structures of the latter will suffice as a model for national unity in Laos. This is true because of the preponderance in the population of Laos of ethnic groups without traditions of centralized administration. Looking beyond the contemporary deep involvement in Southeast Asia of Western powers (now mainly the United States) hopefully some lasting form of regional integration may develop, perhaps based on the most positive program in the area to date, the Lower Mekong development scheme (Schaaf and Fifield 1963).

FOOTNOTES

1. The Chinese Hô had recently burned Luang Prabang, which had also been threatened by the Black Flags of the tribal Tai from north-western Vietnam, when the French established the Protectorate. The Siamese, who had earlier promised protection, had taken hostages to Bangkok, and had failed to give the Laotians relief from the raiders (Dommen 1964: 9-10; a detailed account of this period is found in Pavie's journal). Thus it is understandable why the elite among the valley Lao considered themselves "Children of the French Peace."

In view of the past relationships and present military realities it is not surprising that the Vietnamese on one side and the Siamese Thai on the other hold Laos in rather low esteem, as an underdeveloped rural hinterland which needs assistance in throwing off the yoke of its self-appointed protectors. Examples of these attitudes are found in the writing of the North Vietnamese correspondent, Le Kham (1961: 2 ff.) who speaks of the "simple" Pathet Lao in the Xieng Khouang "cow country" which lacks paved roads. The editor of the Thai Chalermnit Press in introducing a book by his Laos correspondent (1961) writes of the humble food, poor accommodations, and poor roads with which the correspondent must cope. Later in the book the correspondent goes on to describe how easily

the Thai could make money in Laos. "The Thai people...crossed over in big numbers...to Vientiane...where they found no competition since the Lao were not commercial-minded and Laos still lacked technical men. It was easy therefore for Thai nationals to come and earn a much higher income in Laos.... The Lao did not even know how to grow rice and vegetables or raise stock properly..." (Chalermnit 1961: 71).

2. As used in this paper the term Lao refers to the valley Lao, who are also called Lao Lum. The tribal Tai are sometimes called the Lao Tai. The Lao Theng (or Thenh, or Theung), meaning "mountainside people" are sometimes referred to by the pejorative term "Kha," meaning "slave." Lao Xung (or Sung) means "mountaintop people," and includes the Meo and Yao (or Man).

3. Until recently secular public and private school education above the primary level has been confined to urban areas, and has been available to only a small portion of the population. U. S. aid programs have brought schools to some rural, tribal, and refugee areas. See Halpern (1964A: Table 8) for an indication of the geographic limitations of the school system. See Schanche (1962) for a popular account of one of the American aid programs to tribal schools. See Barney's paper for a discussion of Meo schools. The communists have also been active in promoting education in

their "liberated" areas, and have paid special attention to Meo schools and the schooling of other minorities. A recent North Vietnamese publication claims that in 1964 36,200 children were enrolled in schools in "liberated areas," with an additional 250 in secondary schools. Presumably most of these are tribal people. Secular schools have been scarce in this area, and these are impressive figures even if exaggerated (Fall 1965: 183; Vietnam Courier 37: 6, October 7 1965).

4. The elite of Laos is by no means a completely closed kinship group, but kinship connections may be used to cement other social ties. Position in the elite may be achieved with money, education, and good fortune or power (on structure of the elite see Halpern 1964A: 5-7, 28 ff.). Social mobility through the military has become increasingly important. Kong Le, a "Kha" by birth, achieved his meteoric rise through the army. At first he was trained by the French and fought against the Viet Minh. Later he received training from the Americans. He reinforced his social position in 1959 by his third marriage, to the niece of socially prominent Laotian General Ouan Ratikon. Kong Le's base of influence is in the army, not particularly among the southern tribal people (see Dommen 1964: 143 ff. for the story of Kong Le's career).

5. Even the Pathet Lao continue to appeal to the King as a symbol of national unity (e. g. , broadcast of Radio Hanoi reporting Pathet Lao manifesto, 28 October 1965).

6. See Halpern (1964B: 115-118) regarding current features of the opium trade, and Reinach (1901: 310) for an example of early French interests in expanding opium production. See Barney's paper regarding influence of opium on Meo-Lao relations in Xieng Khouang Province.

7. The Meo messianic myth may also be a reflection of their instrumental attitude toward the Christian religion, and their identification of Christianity with modern Western technology and power.

8. The following is a section of the Action Program adopted at the Second National Congress of the Neo Lao Hak Sat (the political branch of the Pathet Lao) in Sam Neua Province, April 6-11, 1964, as reported by the Vietnam News Agency, Hanoi, April 13, 1964 (cited in Dommen 1964: 319):

1. To unite all the people, unite various nationalities (tribal groups), strata, religious communities, political parties, patriotic personalities, and intellectuals, including individuals in the Royal Family and Buddhist monks and nuns who favor peace and neutrality, regardless of their political tendencies, beliefs and religion...

The closest analogous appeal of the Royal government seems to be the following statement by Prime Minister Prince Souvanna Phouma, on January 1, 1965, published in a news release of the Royal Embassy of Laos, Washington, February 8, 1965:

We must remember also that a large segment of our rural population lacks many commodities, relief, social security services, that many who live in towns find quite natural to receive from the State. Think of our countrymen in the mountains, the countryside and the plateaus of the interior, who enjoy none of these benefits. We may guess what kind of hostile propaganda can be made of this. It certainly has other objectives, but it vividly exposes all these inequalities... we should strive to reduce or eliminate them.

9. Other tribesmen have also been recruited in large numbers by the Pathet Lao (Fall 1965: 187). But the Pathet Lao Radio (July 26, 1965) acknowledges the effectiveness of Meo fighting on the side of the Royal Lao Government: "...Meo bandits are under the direct command of U.S. officers who have trained them with weapons. The U.S. imperialists have used these Meo bandits to carry out destructive acts against the Laotian

nation... The U. S. imperialists are now planning to set up a Meo force with a view to partitioning the country and separating the Meo people, who have lived in Laos for generations, from the Laotian people. "

10. Despite these changes Barney reports that the traditional Meo social structure has survived the rigors of continuous warfare and flourishes even in the refugee camps. This may well mean that the Meo will emerge with an even stronger sense of identity and better means for inter-village social organization than they had before the war. For hundreds of years, starting in China, the Meo have had to cope with centralized governments. Apparently they gave up lowland plow agriculture as they fled Chinese persecution. In the mountainous areas of northern Indochina they have adapted themselves to contact with central governments by living in the mountains and relying on a valuable cash crop, opium, to give them a high standard of living. Now that some of them have been forced by the war into the lowlands, will they be willing to return to the mountains when the war is over?

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