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Ethnic Groups in the Valley of the Nam Song and the Nam Lik

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LAOS PROJECT

Paper No. 15

ETHNIC GROUPS IN THE VALLEY OF THE NAM SONG AND THE NAM LIK -
their geographical distribution and some aspects of social change

by

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A Preliminary Report

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From September, 1957 to April, 1958, as a member of the Committee of South East Asian Culture Studies, I did research on the cultures in the valley of the Mekong River. This article is a report on the results of our investigations made from January to April, 1958. This is a preliminary report. Some time in the future after I have checked the data from Ban Pha Tang, where our main investigation was made, I will present a more complete analysis.

The areas covered during our investigation for this article were Ban Pha Tang and its surrounding districts, located midway between Vientiane and Luang Prabang. These areas are included in the 1:100,000 map of Vang-Vieng published by the Service Geographique de l'Indochine, 1950.¹

Automobiles are available for transportation from Vientiane to this district. In some of the areas pirogues (dugouts) are also used but, of course, it is not a popular means of transportation. However, boats are not used in areas north of Ban Pha Tang. Automobiles travel the Luang Prabang Highway northward from Vientiane, formerly known as Route #13 during the colonial period in Laos. Construction has been continuously in progress on this highway, and since February, 1958, it has been greatly improved, but the bridges are still unfinished and during the rainy season it is difficult and sometimes impossible to use. For instance, the bridge which is located on the southern edge of Ban Pha Tang on the Nam Song, is taken down from June to November. The small bridges which are upstream on the Nam Song are not useable at times even during the dry season and, therefore, the people have to wade across the river.

Ban Pha Tang is located just a short distance from the highway.

Starting from Vientiane we first pass the low, hilly area at the west end of the plain and then into the mountainous districts. Crossing the Nam Lik at Ban Hin Houp the road then climbs as it turns and twists along the Nam Song at the foot of the mountainous district. There are dense forests on either side of the road, with bamboo in great abundance. Cultivated lands are also found here and there. Passing through Ban Van Khy and Ban Na Mone we arrive at Vang Vieng, which is located in the southern part of the area which we investigated. In Vang Vieng proper there are 320 houses (with an average of 3-4 persons per house, and the population is estimated to be between 1,000 to 1,200). There is a town office, soldiers' barracks, medical clinic, and the head man of the county (Chao Muong) also has his headquarters there. The people living in Vang Vieng are all Lao, and there are 5-6 shops, but there are no Chinese merchants. Vang Vieng is on the Nam Song and it is located in the center of a long narrow valley. To the east are low mountains called Phu Houei Padouk, and further east is a group of mountains ranging from 1,000 - 1,600 meters above sea level, all covered with forests. To the west are several rocky limestone mountains called Pha Phouc, Pha Lay, Pha Nam Theme, etc. The height of these mountains is 1,000 meters above sea level, and the relative height is 800 meters above the plain. The mountains are steep. The lands surrounding the town are all wet-rice fields. The distance from Vientiane to Vang Vieng is 180 kilometers and it takes 6-7 hours by automobile.

The road north from Vang Vieng is a gradual upward grade, and there is a view of the whole valley; the villages, wet-rice fields, slash and burn (hai) fields, sparse forests and bamboo forests can all be seen alternately. Most of the villages are situated on terraced land near the river and surrounded by wet-rice fields. Pha Tang village is located 17 kilometers from Vang Vieng, and it takes 30 minutes by automobile. There are 99 houses in Ban Pha Tang, which is the center of Tasseng Pha Tang² (the head man of the Tasseng is in Ban Lang Mao). This is the commercial and highway center of the district north of Vang Vieng.

The outlying areas of Ban Pha Tang are similar to Vang Vieng but on a smaller scale due to its being situated upstream on the Nam Song. Ban Pha Tang is at the junction of the Nam Song and the Nam Pha Moine, the valley of the latter river being long and narrow with wet-rice fields. To the east of Ban Pha Tang are a group of limestone mountains called Pha Louang, 1,500-1,800 meters above sea level, and the Yao village Ban Pha Louang is also situated here. Further north is the Pha Tong Ching Mountain and Ban Kaisou, another Yao village. To the west are the Pha Nam Pin, Pha Vie and the Pha Xang Mountains, with the Yao village Ban Pha Nam Pin.

Twenty kilometers northwest of Ban Pha Tang is Den Din. It is a ridge on a mountain which is 675 meters above sea level and surrounded by a dense forest of tall trees with large roots. There are also many vine-like plants, unedible bananas, Pha:Kua-j and bamboo. In the vicinity of Den Din are many Phou Theng (Kha Mou) villages. There are hai fields but no wet-rice fields. Some of the

villages have tried to cultivate poppies but have not as yet succeeded. Fifteen kilometers from Den Din on the highway, and 2 kilometers northwest is Ban Thieng. This village is incorporated with the next village called Ban Chieng, and there are two temples but only one elementary school. These two villages are the traffic and commercial centers of the area along the Nam Lik. There are shifting fields near these two Lao villages. Two kilometers south is Ban Sam Poun, populated by the Thai Deng. There are also some other Thai Deng villages³ but I did not investigate them.

Going from Pha Tang village along the Nam Song over a small road at the foot of the mountains and through a limestone tunnel, we find villages in the valley of the Nam Noi. These are mainly Lao villages a few Phou Theng villages, and in the mountains, some Meo villages. The Lao villages are all very small, and the standard of living is lower than in the villages along the Nam Song.

From the latter part of December, 1957, to January 10, 1958, we made preparations for our investigation in Vientiane. We left Vientiane on January 11, and that night arrived in Vang Vieng where we stayed two nights in a bungalow, and were given a briefing on the surrounding villages by the Chao Muong. On January 13, 1957, we departed from Vang Vieng with the Chao Muong, and visited the villages in the valley. We decided to investigate the valley village of Pha Tang. We remained in Pha Tang village until April 13, returning to Vientiane three times. On January 24-25 and from February 14-16, we visited the Yao villages; from March 17-19, we visited the village of Thieng and the villages of the Thai Deng; from March 24-

26, we visited villages in the valley of Nam Noi. Again on April 12, we visited a village of the Phou Theng near Den Din to collect data. Excepting the dates mentioned, we stayed in Pha Tang, and visited the adjacent villages such as Ban Suan O:i, Ban Na Tane, Ban Pha Home, and Ban Na Dao.

In the beginning, Sisouphan, a bank clerk at the Lao-Vieng Bank was our interpreter. He left us on January 18 to return to his work but we continued in spite of our insufficient knowledge of the Lao language. Mr. Kom, also known as Pô Boua of Pha Tang village, became our field assistant. He was not only an excellent informant for me, but he also had many acquaintances because he used to be the Tasseng of Ban Thieng.⁴ He accompanied us on our short trips. Mr. Kom, Mr. Ton Chan, Mr. Toui, Mr. Sieng Kam and Mr. Tondi also worked as able informants.

As to language, Kwam Thai Neua and Kwam Thai Pouan, which are dialects of the Lao language, are spoken in Pha Tang. Of course, the villagers understand perfectly the Lao dialect of Vientiane but they are more familiar with the Luang Prabang dialect. They also understand the Thai language but do not have much of a vocabulary. The Yao understand, in addition to Yao, Lao of the Luang Prabang dialect (this applies only to the older Yao people). On the other hand, the Lao do not understand Yao at all; only a few people know a couple of Yao words. Many Yao people also know Chinese characters.

The Phou Theng speak the Kwam Phou Theng and understand Lao perfectly. They also use Lao numerals. Most Lao do not understand

Phou Theng, except for some people who know a few words. The Meo also know Lao.

Tribal Distribution

Before we examine the tribal distribution in the Vang Vieng region, we want to make a rough sketch of the whole of northern Laos in relation to this area. There are several maps of the racial and tribal distribution, the most detailed among them published by the Service Geographique de l'Indochine.

This map classifies the Thai people of northern Laos as follows: Thai Lao, Thai Neua, Thai Noir (Thai Dam), Thai Rouge (Thai Deng), Thai Blanc (Thai Kao), Thai Phong, Thai Pouan, Lu and Phou Thai.

The Thai Lao are spread along the Mekong River northward from Luang Prabang and to Phong Saly along the Nam Ou. From this point on, the Thai Lao are found at intervals to Pak Tha. From here, they occur in a northeasterly direction along the Nam Tha. To the south they are distributed from Vientiane along the Nam Ngoun and along the Nam Song to Vang Vieng, and on the Nam Lik.

The Thai Noir (also known as Thai Dam) are centered in Son La and have spread out from there. The Thai Noir people are found in Nam Tha, Muong Sai and near Vang Vieng like isolated islands.

The Thai Rouge are centered south of Sam Neua. They are also found southeast of Son La.

The Thai Blanc occur east of Sam Neua, and northeast of Phong Saly.

The Thai Phong live largely southwest of Sam Neua.

The Thai Pouan are located in Muong Pouan on the Xieng Khouang

plateau. The Lu live mainly in the north, while the Phou Thai are distributed in the southwest part of northern Laos, mainly along the Annam Range. The Meo occur in isolated pockets. The Kha Mou are located mainly in the western area. The Yao (Man) live in the northwest. In short, in the northwestern section of northern Laos live the people who speak Tibeto-Burman languages. The Kha Mou, Thai and Meo tribes occur together in the western area of northern Laos. In the eastern regions, the Thai, Kha Mou, Meo and the Yao tribes are found. As for the tribal Thai groups, their center is in the northeast, and from there the Thai Noir, Thai Rouge, Thai Blanc, Thai Neua and Thai Pouan have spread to the southwest. In the southern section the whole area is occupied by the Lao. The Lao, on this map, are referred to as the Thai Lao.

I have doubts as to the reliability of this map regarding the names of the groups. I wonder how the researcher who drew this map selected the names of the groups. There are two names -- one by which the people refer to themselves, and the other name which is used by other people. For instance, the Yao refer to themselves as Mien, but the Lao refer to them as Phou Yao. "Mien" corresponds to Man on this map. Kha Mou is the tribal name by which the Phou Theng people refer to themselves; Phou Theng (meaning people of the high-lands), and Thai Theng are names applied to them by other people. Therefore, "Mou" and "Phoutheng" as shown on the above-mentioned map designate the same tribe. The name of the group depends on one's point of reference. Mien (Yao) is used only within their own society, but when speaking to the Lao, they refer to themselves as

Thai Yao, which is the Lao term. They refer to the Lao as Thai-Lao; therefore, the term Thai-Lao is on the same level as Thai Yao, Thai Theng, etc., but not the same as Thai Neua because the latter, as well as Thai Dam and Thai Deng are all sub-groups of the Thai Lao. I wonder, therefore, if the use of the term Thai-Lao for the Thai groups (in the southern regions) as a whole, on this map, is correct. Thai Dam and Thai Deng are called Phou Thai, and are clearly distinguished from the other Thai groups. Therefore, the correct name of Thai Deng is Phou Thai Deng, but ordinarily "Deng" is omitted.

McFarland mentions in the Thai-English dictionary, 3rd edition, 1956, that "Thai" means freedom and Thai groups. Here, freedom seems to mean the opposite of slavery, and I think "Thai" means people, among the Lao.

In Laos, as in other places, the people in the remote, mountainous districts are apt to strictly define their ancestral lineage and their places of origin, and emphasize their differences from the other tribes. On the contrary, the Lao in the southern plains roughly refer to themselves as Lao or Thai Lao and are satisfied with it, but in reality there are many sub-groups. According to their degree of modernization and contact with Europeans, the tribal names become obsolete and only Thai-Lao is used to refer to the people as a whole.

The vicinity of Vang Vieng is one of the most interesting areas from the viewpoint of the tribal distribution: namely, the Thai-Lao extend from the south along the Nam Song, and Thai Neua are distributed on both sides of the Thai-Lao. A few Thai Dam extend to the north of the Thai Neua. The Thai-Lao extend beyond these areas northward to Ban Thieng. Besides these areas, including Pha Tang village, all the other areas are occupied by Kha Mou (Khamu) and Phou Theng, while Meo are found sporadically near Phou Khoun.

Among the Meo villages, sometimes the name of the headman is used for the name of the village; for example, Mun, Sen, Koun, Phia and Panya, which are titles conferred by the King of Laos, and are used as a part of village names such as Ban Phia Luang, Ban Sen Lat Nua and Ban Sen Hine. Therefore, as the village heads change, so do the names of the villages. There are two Meo tribes in the mountain area -- Meo Khao and Meo Lei -- but the villagers themselves do not know to which group they belong.

The tribal composition of the villages along the main part of the Nam Song was extremely complex. In Pha Tang there was a tendency not to discuss tribal group affiliations, especially among those villagers with a comparatively high education. On the other hand, villagers in the remote regions were willing to report their tribal origin.

The following sub-divisions are found among the Laotians:

Thai Souei, Thai Neua, Thai Pouan, Thai Poua, Thai Deng, Thai Dai, Thai Nouan, Thai Porong, Thai E', Thai Soun, Thai O', Thai Sot Ban, and also Meo, Yao Khao and Phou Theng. It is surprising that the Lao know their ancestral lineage and place of origin so well, and are able to distinguish the twelve groups within the boundary of Vang Vieng. There are many questions about the Thai Neua, or "northern Thai." Sometimes people are called Thai Neua when their exact classification is unknown; this is inevitable because at the present time group classification makes little sense to them.

Meo villages are found between 600 to 1,800 meters above sea level, in most cases about 1,000 meters.⁵ There are a very few Yao villages, and these are located in the mountains 700 meters above sea level, about the same altitude as the Meo. Villages of the Phou Theng are scattered at sites between 300 to 1,600 meters above sea level, but are not found in the lowlands where wet-rice cultivation is possible. Lao villages are located 200 to 400 meters above sea level, and those at 500 meters above sea level are exceptions.

Migration of the Thai Groups

According to the villagers stories, their place of origin is the northeastern part of Laos. For instance, the place of origin of the Thai Neua is near Sam Neua; that of the Thai Soun, Thai E' and

Thai Souei is Muong Hian (Sam Neua); that of the Thai Pouan is Muong Pouan in Xieng Khouang, and that of the Thai Deng is in the eastern part of Sam Neua. Even now they maintain a close relationship with the people in their place of origin and some still maintain kinship relations with them. Some still possess clothing worn by their grandparents who lived in Sam Neua. One of their songs is the Sam Neua "Kap Aam Neua."

However, we do not have any data on the route they took from northeastern Laos to Nam Song or Nam Lik. If we suppose that the people in the southernmost part left first, then the order is Thai Lao, Thai Neua, Thai Pouan and Thai Deng. We can only conjecture that their culture was first formed in the vicinity of Sam Neua, later stagnated, and this forced them to migrate to the south at an opportune time. It took the Thai Neua about 300 years to move from Sam Neua to the Nam Song valley. These ideas are based on the recollections of local villagers.

The Thai Soun are located in the Nam Noi valley, the Thai Pouan on the upper Nam Song, and the Thai Poua are in the valley of Nam Noi near Vang Vieng. There are twelve villages composed of five ethnic groups between Vang Vieng and Pha Theng. On the main part of the Nam Lik, the Thai Deng and five other ethnic groups occupy their own areas. Some villages such as Pha Teng consist of just two groups -- Thai Neua and Thai Pouan. In brief, the people migrated along the valleys and tributaries of the river with one group occupying a whole valley; but on the main part of the river, many groups share the area.

The groups first occupied the valleys of the river branches and later grouped together in the valley of the main part of the river. Their nomadism is limited. Evidently migration was accomplished by repetitive division of villages. For instance, the three villages of Thai Pouan -- namely, Ban Souang, Ban Wat Keo and Ban Thin One were formed by immigrants from Pouan in Xieng Khouang. They have a 100-year history from the time of their first settlement, while three other villages -- Ban Pha Home (which has a history of 60 years), Ban Kho (50 years), and Ban Suan O:i (6 years), originated from Ban Pha Tang which is 150 years old. Ban Oumong separated from Ban Kho ten years ago, Ban Na Gne (10 years) branched off from Ban Soum Phai established for seventy years; Ban Koksane (15 years) from 100-year old Ban Na Tane; from the same place in the same year Ban Na Hoi and Ban Nam Pat were founded. Ban Na Dao (50 years) originated from Ban Na Boua (100 years); Ban Phou Kok (50 years) from Ban Na Phong (90 years); Ban Phoua Ha (50 years) from Ban Lang Mao (100 years) and a hundred years ago Ban Nam Po originated from Ban Pak Po which was the same age itself. In the area of the Nam Lik valley, the Thai Deng village of Ban Pouan Pouk was derived from Ban Sam Poun of the same group. The Thai Porong village of Kiou San Si divided from Ban Song; Ban Na Then from Ban Houei Pouan; Muong Kassy from Ban Hai Yong which itself originated from Ban Khamso and Ban Na Ving from Ban Na Mon Noi.

In brief, in the favorable places where there are no floods and where the wet-rice fields are abundant, many old villages are located. From these, new villages originated along the upper and low-

er parts of the river. The exact ages of the villages indicated above are not entirely reliable because there are no written documents; however, they are approximately correct. In general, all the old villages are located near rivers while the new ones are located alongside the highways.

Let us now consider the development of these villages. First we will discuss their decline. Ban Kiou San Si was a small Thai Porong village of 2 or 3 houses; now it has been absorbed into Ban Sang from which it had originated. Ban Na Kout which was due west of Ban Sang, vanished 15 years ago. Ban Phou which was located between Ban Thieng and Muong Kassy does not exist now although we do not know the exact date the village was abandoned. In the valley of Nam Song, Ban Hin Kana of the Thai Pouan disappeared ten years ago, and Ban Na Hoi was absorbed into the village next to it, Ban Nam Pat. Ban Nam Kai of the Thai Neua which was to the east of Ban Pha Tang no longer exists. There are many reasons for the disappearance of these villages, but specific data is lacking. In Ban Soum Phai on the upper Nam Noi the rice fields are no longer worked due to a shortage of labor. Even though the temples in the village still stand, there are no priests remaining, so it is not possible for the villages themselves to hold festivals.

When people of the different groups migrated together, they encountered many difficulties and inconveniences. However, these were solved by forming a type of mixed culture when they settled on the main part of the river.

One of the characteristics of the mixed culture is represented

in their languages. The Thai Neua dialect is slightly different from the Thai Pouan; one is called A:n Thai Neua and the other A:n Thai Pouan. However, we cannot today recognize these differences among the groups living in the main valley of the Nam Song (although in the valley of the Nam Noi some differences still remain).

Marriages have taken place between different Thai groups. It is therefore difficult to trace the peoples' original groups. /In many areas/ differences between groups do not matter now, although in the villages of the Nam Noi Valley, people still discuss whether they are Thai Neua, Thai Pouan or Thai Deng. In spite of reports that marriage between Thai peoples and the Phou Theng has not occurred, a number of such cases were found. This situation is more frequent in villages situated on tributaries of the rivers, while in Pha Tang village there was but a single case. No marriages /were found in this area/ between the Thai on one hand, and the Yao or Meo on the other.

The material culture of main river villages is mixed. Regarding architecture, in the valley of Ban Thin One the houses of the Thai Pouan are similar to those of the Thai Dam; in the vicinity of Ban Pha Tang there are no differences between houses of the Thai Pouan and those of the Thai Neua. We cannot distinguish ethnic differences in the villages of the Nam Song valley by household architecture. Here, hatchets are from Vientiane, sickles are made in Vang Vieng, plows and "siam" (digging sticks) originate in Xieng Khouang, shoulder baskets, mats and other items made by the Phou Theng tribe are found. There are many materials of European or Japanese

manufacture. Their costumes are rapidly losing their traditional style.

In the past, one obstacle preventing intermarriage among the people of different groups was the fact that the wedding expense (Kha:Saw) differed depending on the groups. The standard amount of the wedding expenses of the Thai Neua, Thai Dam, Thai Deng, Thai Poua, Thai Dai and Thai Parong is 4,000 kip, while that of the Thai Pouan is 1,000 kip. For the Meo and Phou Theng it is 5,000 kip and the Yao, 10,000 kip. At present the differences are not great, depending more upon the economic level within the respective villages. Even now, the people of Ban Pha Tang are prohibited from marrying people of Ban Pak Po and Ban Nam Po (Thai Poua groups); it is also said that a man may marry outside his ethnic group and move out, but a woman cannot marry into the village of another group.

As people of different groups expand to the main part of the river from its branches, so does the complexity of their culture increase, and also their sphere of life widens. It seems that the Thai groups moved by this process southward along the valleys. It is clear that all this time they have been engaged in wet-rice cultivation. This is indirectly proven by the fact that there are many villages beginning with the name "Na" (meaning wet-rice field), and also "Nam" or "Sam" (river or water), and "Houei" (small stream). For instance, within the area of Vang Vieng there are by actual count twenty-three village names beginning with "Na", eight with "Nam" in the village name and three with "Houei." These names have some connection with the Chinese place-names in the provinces of

Kwangtung, Kwangsi, Szechwan, Yunnan, Kweichow, Hunan etc. This fact apparently shows their course of migration.

Changes in Kinship Organization

Among the Thai groups in Northern Laos, there is a kinship organization called sua diaw kan. Sua means lineage and diaw kan means that which unifies; thus sua diaw kan literally means "one lineage". They have several other expressions for lineage, such as po (father) me (mother) diaw kan, chum (group) diaw kan, ai (elder brother) no:n (younger brother) diaw kan, sing (thing) diaw kan, and nam (name) sakun (line) diaw kan. However, sua diaw kan is generally used. As seen from these various expressions their kinship pattern is patrilineal; thus, before marriage, girls are included in their father's sua diaw kan, and after marriage they are included in their husband's sua diaw kan. When the husband is adopted into the wife's family, the wife still retains the father's family name (namsakun). Therefore, the unit of sua diaw kan is not based on the household. According to G. P. Murdock's definition, it is a patri-clan. They are, therefore, of the same sua diaw kan regardless of where the members of the household live.

Patrilocal residence is prevalent in northern Laos. Among the Thai Dam and Thai Deng, marriage within a sua diaw kan is forbidden. In Thai Neua, Thai Pouan and Thai Soun groups, it is not forbidden, but is permissible only under certain circumstances. In the case of marriages between cousins, a man may marry his parent's younger brother's or younger sister's daughter, but he may not marry the daughter of his parent's elder brother or sister. A woman may

marry her parent's elder brother or sister's son, but may not marry the son of her parent's younger brother or sister. This regulation is strictly observed.

There are three kinds of cooperative groups (sua diaw sua j kan)-- literally 'mutual help between'-- chum diaw sua j kan (mutual help within the chum diaw kan including relatives of the mother and wife), and tan ban sua j kan (mutual assistance group composed of the entire village). Sua diaw kan is a cooperative group for rice planting and harvesting. The people within the sua diaw kan are strongly conscious of their social solidarity and help the poor families and orphans. As to religious matters -- eight men are selected as pallbearers for the deceased, from the sua diaw kan, including the brothers of the deceased. If there is a shortage of men, the males of the wife's family are called to assist. The mourning period observed by the father, mother and wife of the deceased man is one month; seven days are observed by the children; one month by the grandparents; fifteen days by the brothers and sisters of the deceased; seven days by the mother's parents, and seven days by the wife's brother. The period of mourning is longer within the sua diaw kan, than for those outside it.

At present there are no community festivities, and no ancestral deity for the sua diaw kan. However, all members of a sua diaw kan gather together in the temple for the Buddhist ceremony of commemoration for a deceased member.

The villagers say there is no special term to differentiate the ancestral from the branch families. In dividing the estate the

eldest child gets the largest share. In general, the house of the eldest son is larger than those of the second and third sons. By estate is meant the houses, rice fields, water buffalo, cattle, cash, man nui khaw (rice steamer) and hai nun khaw (container for washed rice, which some do not consider a part of the estate). In case a father dies and leaves three sons and a daughter, the estate is divided as follows: the house goes to the eldest son; the rice-field is divided -- one half to the eldest son, one-quarter each to the second and third sons; the water buffalo and cattle are divided in the same manner; the man nun khaw and the hai nun khaw are for the eldest son; hai (shifting fields) are not divided because they belong to the village; the farm implements are divided equally among the three sons. Since the daughter leaves home to marry, she gets no share of the estate except for expenses for her wedding. In short, the patrilineal principle is observed in the division of the estate. (The sua diaw kan is not a landholding unit.)

Sua diaw kan plays a very important part in village life in northern Laos but its importance was greater in the past, especially in the northern area and more pronounced in the Thai Dam and Thai Deng groups than in the Thai Neua and Thai Pouan groups.

There is a paradox with respect to the sua diaw kan as it relates to the villager's way of thinking. On the one hand sua diaw kan plays an important role in village life, while on the other hand the villagers are not aware of the importance of sua diaw kan. This was noticeable at least in Ban Pha Tang. The words sua diaw kan and chum diaw kan are mixed in their usage by the people. One

reason for this confusion comes from the word *chum sua diaw kan*. According to some villagers *sua diaw sua j kan* is involved in co-operative rice planting, and according to others it is the *chum diaw sua j kan*, but both opinions may be correct since the extent of participation in this collective work is not closely defined. At present it is impossible to accomplish rice planting only by *sua diaw kan*. Surprisingly, there are some villagers who do not even know the word *sua diaw kan*. In a case where a husband has left and then returns to the village, he will sometimes join the *sua diaw kan* again if it is influential. In this case, a result is that a different family name is included in the *sua diaw kan*. (It is possible that a man may take the name of his wife's *sua diaw kan* when he leaves his own village). The same result occurs when she returns to the *sua diaw kan* after the death of her husband (this happens only if the husband's *sua diaw kan* is weak). In the vicinity of Vientiane only the very influential *sua diaw kans* are known, while the others are all but forgotten. For instance, the two families of Souvannavong and Sananikone have an exceptionally strong unity. The families of other *sua diaw kans* have been broken down into individual family units.

Although this writer searched for a village with a large *sua diaw kan*, the standard size was found to be 2-3 or 4-5 families, which is surprisingly small. Even in villages on the Nam Noi, a marginal location, and those on the upper Nam Son, e.g. Ban Thin One, *sua diaw kan* consisted of only 4-5 households.

Among the families composing a sua diaw kan there are more nuclear families than extended families at present. For instance, in Ban Kho, Ban Na Tane and Ban Soum Phai, most of the families consist of two generations with four or five members. There are some families with 7-8 members, but there are many children in them. In Ban Soum Phai there are four households with only one member. This probably occurs only among the Thai groups. Although it cannot be used as data for comparison, in Ban Sam Poun there is a Thai Deng family which consists of three generations with eleven family members. Included are the family head's elder brother and his children, a younger brother and a sister. Probably, as the families migrate they tend to become smaller.

There is nothing to support the linear continuity of a sua diaw kan. There are no historical documents or genealogical records and the villagers are not so conscious of their history. They have memories only of the parent's generation and have no interest in their grandparent's generation. The houses are too small to serve as ancestral homes; they decay easily and it is no problem to build new ones. They are suitable for a pattern which involves migration. In the past they must have built large houses such as those seen in Ban Thieng (homes of the Thai E'); but at present the homes are becoming smaller. Ordinarily there are three bedrooms with two occupants to a room, and six people is the maximum for one house. Everyone has his own family name (sakun or namsakun), through which it is possible to realize a feeling of belonging to the sua diaw kan. But twenty to thirty percent of the villagers are indifferent to

to their family names; some do not even know them.

Only the criterion of age is recognized in the sua diaw kan. In general it seems that the ancestral families reside in the center of the villages and the branch families live along the highway and on the outskirts of the villages.

How is their agriculture influenced by the fact that the sua diaw kan is a comparatively small group, and the families are small in size? All the Thai villages are engaged in wet-rice cultivation; therefore rice planting, harvesting and threshing are the three most important tasks which require a great deal of labor. These tasks are accomplished cooperatively. In principle, rice planting and harvesting are done by sua diaw suaj kan, and the threshing is done by tan ban suaj kan. Whether this division of labor is always practiced is questionable. The composition of the working groups for rice planting and harvesting in Ban Pha Tang are as follows: 5 groups out of 17 consist of only the family heads and their wives; 3 groups consist of the family heads, their wives and the sua diaw kan; 2 groups consist of the family heads, their wives and the chum diaw kan; 4 groups consist of the family heads, their wives and the sua diaw kan and chum diaw kan. We have to take into consideration the size of the plot, but at any rate it is clear that the work is not always done by the sua diaw suaj kan. There are two important points: first, the family members provide the basis for the labor whenever the help of the sua diaw kan is not necessary. Second, if the sua diaw kan's assistance is insufficient for the labor or if there is no sua diaw kan within the village, the help

of the chum diaw kan is requested. In brief, the sua kiaw kan has weakened while the chum diaw kan has become stronger, and the family unit which is the basis of the chum diaw kan, has become more independent.

There are two types of regulations concerning the residence of couples after marriage -- mir ma ju nam poua (Patrilocal residence), and poua ma ju nam mia or pai su mir (matrilocal residence). The former type prevails in northern Laos, and the latter in the villages and plains in the vicinity of Vientiane (this regulation is effective for about two years or so after marriage and after that the couple looks for their own home).

The following are some examples of the distribution of the sua diaw kans: The Thai Deng in Ban Sam Poun occupy 17 houses which are classified in 4 sua diaw kans of 2,4,5, and 6 houses. In this village marriage within a sua diaw kan is prohibited under any circumstances, and the people in a sua kiaw kan are strongly bound together in their village life. Here the function of the sua diaw kan is almost perfectly accomplished. Next, Ban Kho is a village of Thai E' and Thai Sot Ban consisting of 25 houses. Three groups of 2 houses each, have their own sua diaw kans within the village; 1 group of 4, 4 with 3, 1 with 2 units, and 2 single households form their own sua diaw kans including the adjacent villages. One group has its sua diaw kan with a family of Muon Hian (Sam Neua Province) which is remote from the village. The above 7 sua diaw kans extend their lines, so to speak, into the valley of the Nam Song and Ban Thin One by individual migration on a small scale. The

sua diaw kan maintains ties with its place of origin, i.e., Muon Hian. The fact that the sua diaw kans here are not strongly united within the village shows that not only have they lost some of their functions as they expanded outward, but also that they need assistance from the chum diaw kans. In this village the following two facts must be noted -- one of the sua diaw kans has connections with Ban Keokwang of the Phou Theng tribe; the sua diaw kan does not extend to the plains. In Ban Kho there are 9 houses which belong to chum diaw kan but none belong to a sua diaw kan.

Ban Koksane, Ban Na Noi and Ban Nam Pat (located along the Nam Song) all originated from the Thai Pouan village of Na Tane. Due to this division of the villages the power of the sua diaw kan within the village has become less, so that no sua diaw kan in a village has more than two houses. Four sua diaw kans consist of a single house. There are five other sua diaw kans which include houses outside the villages, and these contain 2 groups of 2 households, 2 groups of 3, and 1 of 4 households. Another group forms a sua diaw kan with a house of Muon Pouan (Xieng Khouang Province) and this again must be a remnant of their ties with their place of origin.

Finally, in Ban Pha Tang there are 17 sua diaw kans which consist of only houses within the village (9 cases of 2 houses, 3 cases of 3 houses, 3 cases of 4 houses, 1 case of 5 houses and 1 of 6 houses). Twenty-five houses do not have any sua diaw kan, and six groups form their sua diaw kan together with the adjacent villages; these consist of 4 groups of 2 households, and 2 of 3.

Two other groups form their sua diaw kan together with the houses of Muon Hian (in Sam Neua) or Muon Pouan (in Xieng Khouang), which are the places of origin of the Thai Neua and the Thai Pouan. It is worth noting that 13 other groups form their sua diaw kans together with families in the towns of Vientiane, Tourakon, Savannakhet and Thakhek, and their expansion has been marked. Originally, the sua diaw kan was formed within a valley, but it has gradually connected one valley with another, and now a valley with a plain. In relation to this, the course of the migration of the Thai Pouan people is interesting. The Thai Pouan were originally located in Muong Pouan and later some of the people moved westward to the Nam Song while others moved down to the plains near Vientiane. The Thai Pouans settled on the plains and made a sua diaw kan with the group that was in the Nam Song valley. Thus, the people in Ban Pha Tang appear to have formed sua diaw kans with the Thai Pouan people in the plains, especially near Tourakom.

In brief, there are many factors in the migration of the Thai groups, one of which is the structural changes of the sua diaw kan and its spacial expansion.

The changes made in the sua diaw kan are related to various factors. One change is the womens' social position, which has been improving. Another change is that the unit of labor for the cultivation of hai (shifting fields), even in Ban Pha Tang today, consists mainly of the men of the family. In Ban Pha Tang the shifting field is smaller than the wet-rice field, but in the villages north of Ban Thieng this proportion is reversed. In general, men's groups

in agricultural labor used to be more influential than the women's, and also the married couple was not, in most cases, a unit of labor. However, we now can find in Ban Pha Tang cases where a couple is considered a unit of labor. There is clearly some relation between this fact and the increasing influences of the chum diaw kan caused by the weakening of the sua diaw kan. This also means that the wife's social position has been gaining influence.

As to the inheritance of property, among the Thai Dam and the Thai Deng property is never divided among the girls, but in Thai Neua and Thai Pouan, in spite of this principle, there were a few cases in which the women have had a share in the property.

In a Lao village, people sit at a low, round table during meals. In the villages of the Thai Dam a man sits facing a woman, but the Thai Deng and the Thai Neua husband and wife sit side by side. This seems proof that the married couple has been acknowledged as a unit. In the past, separation of men from women was prevalent, which means that something more than the family -- such as a sua diaw kan -- used to have a stronger influence in the society. In this connection, I have noted that in the Yao villages the men and women do not usually sit at the same table during their meals. The women begin their meals after the men have finished theirs.

This report has presented only preliminary data. Much more research is needed, both in this district, and in those areas from which these Thai groups originated.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Although this is a good map, we note a few imperfections: Many names of Meo and Yao villages are erroneously recorded or omitted.

The same is true of Lao villages; thus, one of the villages of Ban Soum Phai on the Nam Noi should be Ban Na. Several have not been recorded on the map.

There is some incoherency in the mixed usage of "Pha" and "Pa", or "Yao" and "Giao", etc.
- 2 Tasseng is an administrative unit between "Ban" and "Moung", and in Tasseng Pha Tang there are fifteen Lao, seven Phou Teng, three Yao and five Meo villages. The Muong Vang Vieng consists of ten Tassengs.
- 3 In the vicinity there are 5 villages of Thai Rouge, namely: Ban Sam Poun, Ban Boun Phouk, Ban Na, Ban Na Pachet and Ban Houei Tom.
4. In the Tasseng Ban Thiang there are 9 Lao villages, 3 Thai Deng villages, one Meo village and six Phou Theng villages.
5. This fact has some bearing on their failure in cultivating poppy in Den Din, which is situated 675 meters above sea level.

TABLE 1

VERTICAL DISTRIBUTION OF ETHNIC GROUPS

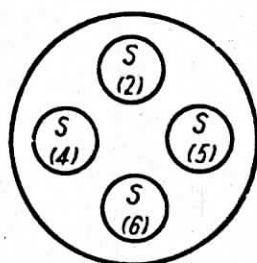
IN THE VANG VIENG AREA

Height (in meters above sea-level)	No. of Villages			
	Lao	Meo	Yao	Phou Theng
200-300	21	-	-	-
300-400	39	-	-	1
400-500	2	-	-	4
500-600	-	-	-	3
600-700	-	3	-	6
700-800	-	-	1	-
800-900	-	2	-	6
900-1,000	3	2	2	5
1000-1,100	-	2	-	2
1100-1,200	-	5	-	3
1200-1,300	1	4	-	3
1300-1,400	-	7	-	1
1400-1,500	-	5	1	1
1500-1,600	-	5	-	1
1600-1,700	-	-	-	-
1700-1,800	-	1	-	-
Totals	66	36	4	36

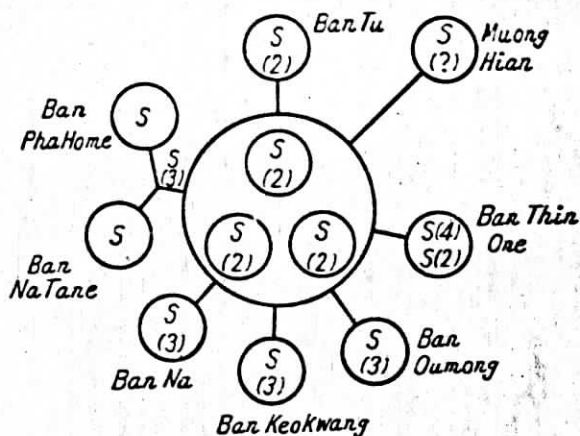
TABLE 2

CORRELATION BETWEEN THE NUMBER OF FAMILY MEMBERS
AND THE NUMBER OF GENERATIONS

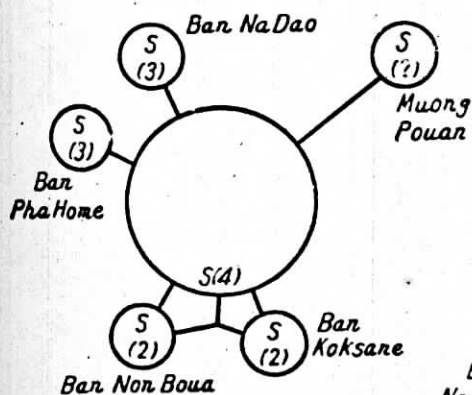
Ethnic Group Thai-Lao Villages	Generations	No. of Family Members								Total
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
BAN KHO	I		2							2
	II		1	5	2	1	7	5	1	22
	III							1		1
	Total	0	3	5	2	1	7	6	1	25
BAN NA TANE		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
	I									
	II			2	3		1	1		7
	III						1	1	1	3
	Total	0	0	2	3	0	2	2	1	10
BAN SOUN PHAI		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
	I	4								4
	II			7	1	1				9
	III					1	2			3
	Total	4	0	7	1	2	2	0	0	16



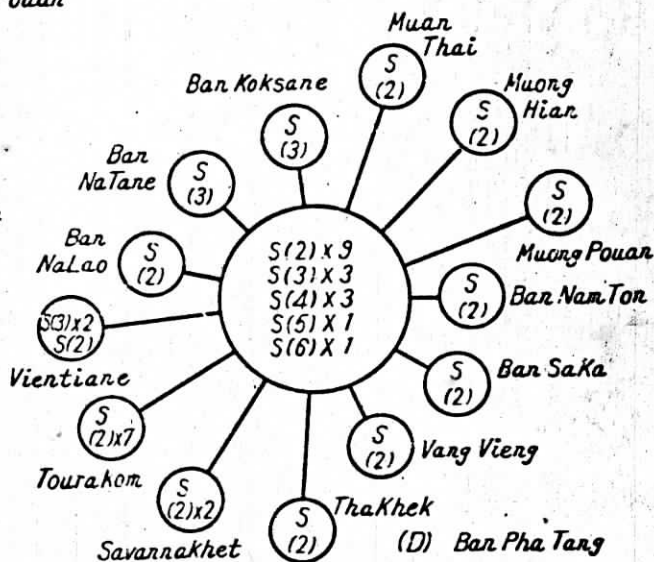
(A) Ban Sam Poun



(B) Ban Kho



(C) Ban NaTane



S - Number of constituent houses
in the Sua Diaw Kan
X - Number of cases

STRUCTURE OF SUA DIAW KAN